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The Urgency of Prophetic Truth

Patrick R. Anderson, editor

The gospels describe Jesus as being fully human, just like the rest of us. The great mystery is that Jesus was also God. He did things, miraculous and incredulous things, that only God could do. The human qualities the gospels ascribe to Jesus also cover the full gamut of our own human experience, specifically emotions of sorrow, affection, disappointment, frustration and joy.

When I read the accounts of the daily life of Jesus, I understand him, relate to him, and feel a kindred spirit. Jesus is most readily and most comfortably described by Christians as loving, compassionate, peace-seeking, thoughtful and empathetic.

But Jesus of the gospels shows other human characteristics too—even feelings that spring from anger. He is described sometimes as being really ticked off. We see him upending merchant tables in the temple, calling people names, pushing the hottest of buttons.

In one memorable exasperated outburst, recorded in Matthew 23, Jesus lets loose on religious leaders, the people against whom he frequently vents his strongest emotions:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!... you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness... you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets... You snakes, you brood of vipers!...How can you escape being sentenced to hell?

In John 8, Jesus is quoted on another occasion:

You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Those outbursts from Jesus reflect the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. In the gospels, we can see that Jesus sometimes takes on the mantles of Isaiah, Amos, Micah and others to exhibit verbal expressions that my mother would consider beyond the boundaries of civil discourse—not suitable for polite company. Name calling and angry words were not tolerated in my mother's house. Yet the Bible includes quite a few of those very words.

I want to be judicious in my use of prophetic language. Such expressions should not be used willy-nilly. But it seems to me that today we face a set of circumstances that cry out with an urgent need for straight talk. As Wendell Griffen reminds us, Allan Boesak says, "The time for pious words is over."

In this issue of *Christian Ethics Today*, you will see prophetic expressions on a variety of current issues we are facing. James Dunn frequently described this kind of expression as "truth with the bark on it."

Pastor Chuck Poole's sermon, "Nine Words," explicates his own spiritual growth, the teachings of the Bible, and authentic Christianity regarding the on-going struggle too many Christians have in discerning

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between human differences and spiritual sin, specifically regarding the subject of homosexuality.

Next, Pastor and Judge Wendell Griffen provides a thoughtful and thorough discussion of the on-going folly of COVID-19 vaccine refusal, too often justified by misguided understandings of the Bible and erroneous understandings of the proper role of government. He describes the dangerous hypocrisy of misinformation, the evil nature of purposeful mischaracterizations of medical policies, and the deadly results of such misbehavior. In many ways Griffen uses principles he describes in his book, *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (Judson Press, 2017).

John Fea, a professor of American history at Messiah College, demonstrates how cherry-picking verses in the Bible to bolster one's own bias has been carried out for centuries.

David Beck, a professor of Native American Studies at the University of Montana, calls for a truth and healing commission to respond in a Christian way to the horrors of church-operated, government-funded board-

ing schools which traumatized Native American communities and which have recently come to the attention of government and religious organizations.

Lewis Brogdon describes from his perspective as director of Black Church Studies and research professor at the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, the urgent crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. His thoughtful analysis is a prophetic statement of the perils of our failure to learn important lessons, a failure which gives a foreboding expectation of our inability to handle the next crises. He reminds us that the prophet Hosea said, “My people perish for a lack of knowledge.” Millions of people have died during the past two years because of mass ignorance and reckless group thinking that plays out on social media. They died because of our arrogance, Brogdon says, and notes that the Apostle Paul described the last days as “perilous times,” bemoaning

in a letter to Timothy the time when people would be “ever learning but not able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Finally, Walter B. Shurden completes his six-part series on the writings of John R. Claypool. In “Reading John Claypool,” Shurden has introduced a new generation to the extraordinary life and words of Baptist and Episcopal pastor Claypool. Readers of *Christian Ethics Today* have been blessed and challenged by both Claypool’s writings and Shurden’s authoritative historical review and analysis. I’m sorry this series comes to an end, but be assured that Walter Shurden will grace us with more of his insights as time goes by.

So, the urgent need of prophetic truth is upon us, as is the need for truth with the bark still on it. ■

GRATITUDE

We are so very grateful for the faithful support from our readers. Thank you. And, thanks to the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation which makes your individual gifts go much further to produce *Christian Ethics Today*.

We are blessed.

Nine Words

By Chuck Poole

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them asked Jesus a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:34-40).

Homosexuality is a human difference, not a spiritual sin. It has taken me a lifetime on the path to a deeper life with God to learn to say that single, simple sentence. It is nine words which, at the risk of sounding naïve and simplistic, I believe hold the answer to the religious world's long struggle concerning those who are drawn to persons of their same sex.

There isn't any spiritual difference between gay people of God and straight people of God. We all worship, sing, pray, serve, try and fail in the same manner. Whether we are straight or gay, we have the same capacity to be moral or immoral, kind or mean, careful or reckless, righteous or unjust, generous or selfish. In all those ways, we are all the same.

All of this finally came clear to me nearly two decades ago as I was sitting by the bed of a dying man in a nursing home—a man who had lived a long life of integrity and fidelity, prayer and devotion, who happened to be gay. As I sat near his bed in the last weeks of his life, it occurred to me that he and I were different from one another only in that he was a gay person; It was a human difference, not a spiritual one.

Of course, given our long history of turning to scripture to support what we believe, we are confronted with the important question: "But what about what the Bible says concerning homosexuality?"

The Bible includes several passages which are often assumed to address same sex attraction and love. There appear to be seven such passages. (I say "appear to be" because it is not clear how many of them actually address a committed relationship between two adults of the same sex.)

Take, for example, the first of those seven passages—the story of the city of Sodom in Genesis chapter 19. Often pointed to as a story about God's judge-

ment against homosexuality, Genesis 19:1-11 recalls the story of a group of men who attempted to sexually assault Lot's angelic visitors. It was an attempt at sexual violence which everyone on the planet condemns, but which had nothing to do with a committed relationship between two people of the same sex.

In the Old Testament, there are two more passages which are often invoked to condemn same sex relationships: Leviticus 18:22, *You shall not lie with a male as with a woman, it is an abomination*, and Leviticus 20:13, *If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination, they shall be put to death*. Those words belong to a Levitical "holiness code" which also prohibits the eat-

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ing of pork (Leviticus 11:7-12), forbids rough beards (Leviticus 19:27), and excludes from worship leadership anyone with blemished skin, failing eyesight or poor posture (Leviticus 21:16-20). These are verses to which no Christians I know assign any continuing authority.

That leaves the four New Testament passages which are often assumed to indict same sex relationships. One is Jude 1:7, which refers to the aforementioned passage in Genesis chapter 19. Two more are I Corinthians 6:9-10 and I Timothy 1:10, both of which are on the list of possible passages, because they contain the word "sodomite," which could be a reference to what we think of as a same sex relationship, but which also may refer to the sexual exploitation of boys by men. This is something everyone condemns, but something which has no more relation to a same sex relationship between two adults than the heterosexual exploitation of children has to sexual intimacy

between a man and a woman.

Of those seven Bible passages often assumed to be about same sex intimacy, one remains, Romans 1:25-31, which says:

Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator . . . God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another . . . And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness and malice . . . Full of envy, murder, strife . . . They are gossips, slanderers, God haters.

Because of the part of this passage which refers to those who have exchanged their natural sexual inclination for “a way of intercourse which is not natural,” this passage is sometimes assumed to be Paul’s indictment of homosexuality, which it may be. But, to read the full paragraph is to see that it also describes those of whom Paul speaks as being “God-haters,” who are full of envy, murder and malice. This does not describe any of the gay persons I have known, who are no more or less likely to be God-haters, full of envy, murder and malice than any of the straight people I have known. Whomever Paul is describing in this first chapter of Romans, he is not describing the prayerful, thoughtful child of God who happens to be a gay person.

All of which is to say that, of the seven passages in the Bible which are often assumed to be about same sex sexual intimacy, it isn’t clear which ones, if any, address committed same sex relationships. The words and spirit of the Bible, with the very troubling exception of Numbers 31:13-35, condemn all forms of sexual violence, promiscuity and exploitation—both heterosexual and homosexual. The question is whether or not the Bible addresses, or even anticipates, committed same sex relationships.

But, even if some of those seven passages were intended to address committed same sex relationships, most of the Christians I know would not be able to say that it is because of their commitment to the authority of the Bible that they hold a religious objection against gay and lesbian persons. Most of the Christians I know continue to own possessions, resist evildoers, and wear jewelry, in spite of what the Bible says in Luke 14:33, Matthew 5:39 and I Timothy 2:9. That is not to say that there is something wrong with owning pos-

sessions, resisting evildoers or wearing jewelry, but it is to say that there is something wrong with using the Bible to indict others in ways in which we would never use it to judge ourselves.

I believe that most popular religious judgments about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons have less to do with the Bible than with the way we were raised—what we’ve always thought and been taught. One very large factor, especially for many men who grew up, as did I, in the deep south Bible Belt of the 20th century, is that much of our thinking about gay persons was shaped more by immature masculinity than by mature Christianity. At school, at work, and even in the church, we emphasized our masculinity by ridiculing those who were drawn to persons of their same sex, calling them names and making fun of them. (The sin, in that case, is not the sexuality of those who are gay, but the meanness of those who are straight.)

In the religious world of my origins, we talked a lot about Jesus. But when it came to how we treated those who were born beyond the bounds of comfortable

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majority, we often failed to embody the spirit of Jesus. This is one reason why people in our part of the world who had a gay or lesbian son or daughter often encouraged them to move to New York or San Francisco, where they might be more sheltered from hurt and harm than in the Bible Belt.

Ponder, for a moment, the irony of that: The part of the country which claims the most followers of Jesus is one of the most difficult parts of the country in which to be different; this is a sad commentary on how far the popular Christianity of the Bible Belt has strayed from the Jesus of the four gospels.

As far as we know, that Jesus, the Jesus of the four gospels, never said anything about same sex relationships. He did, however, have something to say about what matters most in life. When asked, as recorded in Matthew chapter 22, what matters most, Jesus is reported to have said that what matters most is that we

love God with all that is in us, and that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves. This means reading all scripture and seeing all persons in the light of and through the lens of love. Which is not unlike what we find in Matthew 7:12, where Jesus is reported to have summed up all the law and the prophets in a single simple sentence of nine simple words: Treat others as you would have others treat you.

I heard one small example of this described in an interview shortly after the death of President George Herbert Walker Bush. In early December of 2018, as the world mourned the death of President Bush, National Public Radio aired a conversation in which two women, Bonnie Clement and Helen Thorgalson, who owned a store near the Bushes' home in Kennebunkport, Maine, remembered, with much affection and gratitude, the gladness and warmth with which their longtime friend, George H. W. Bush, had served as a witness at their wedding. It was a small example from President Bush concerning how to relate to gay and lesbian loved ones and friends—as loved ones and friends, without making one part of their life,

their sexual orientation, the most interesting or important part of their life. It is seeing that human difference for what it is—a human difference, not a spiritual sin.

To learn to discern the distinction between a difference and a sin is an important step along the path to spiritual depth. For me, that has meant coming to see and say the truth which travels in those nine simple words: Homosexuality is a human difference, not a spiritual sin. The truth is that it has taken me a lifetime to see and say that truth which many dear and good people of faith do not embrace. But it is a truth which many others have always instinctively known. And, it is a truth which many more might someday come to see and say—not in spite of the fact that they are prayerful, Spirit-filled, serious Christians, but because they are prayerful, Spirit-filled, serious Christians. ■

Charles E. Poole is pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Jackson, Mississippi. This sermon was preached on May 17, 2021 and is published here with his permission.

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Vaccination or Not—Legal and Religious Perspectives

By Wendell Griffen

Two years ago, the term Covid-19 was not part of our vocabulary. Most people would have stumbled in speaking the term “novel coronavirus.” The world had survived bouts with influenza and Ebola virus in prior years. But infectious disease experts, public health officials, physicians, politicians, lawyers, judges, courts, journalists and everyone else in the world did not know about Covid-19. It did not exist in September 2019.

Two years later, Covid-19 defines how we live, move, work, study, worship, entertain and conduct the other rituals of existence from birth through death. What began as a new viral infection in one province in China, spread across that nation, spanned the world in a matter of weeks, and made globalism real in new ways.

Scientists and medical professionals worked harder and faster than ever before to develop a vaccine for this highly infectious, easily transmissible and lethal respiratory virus. A year ago, the best the world could hope was that researchers would succeed in developing, testing, and producing a vaccine by late fall or early winter 2020.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was hospitalized for a week and spent three days in intensive care after he was sickened by Covid 19 in April 2020.¹ In late September 2020 – almost a year ago now - US President Donald Trump was sickened by Covid 19 and flown to a hospital where he was treated for 72 hours.² Those examples show that 12 months ago, world leaders were as vulnerable to Covid 19 infection as anyone else.

By December 2020, when the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines were approved for emergency use, more than a million people throughout the world had died from Covid-related causes.³ Given this history, one might expect that most people would have welcomed an opportunity to receive a vaccine to protect themselves from the most lethal biological threat to human life in more than a hundred years.

However, vaccine hesitancy, meaning “delay in acceptance or the refusal of vaccination despite availability of vaccination services,” is a common phenomenon around the world. As one researcher states:

Factors that affect the attitude towards acceptance of vaccination include complacency, convenience

and confidence. Complacency denotes the low perception of the disease risk; hence, vaccination was deemed unnecessary. Confidence refers to the trust in vaccination safety, effectiveness, besides the competence of the healthcare systems. Convenience entails the availability, affordability, and delivery of vaccines in a comfortable context.⁴

People who are complacent about the risk of becoming infected with the Covid-19 virus are less likely to be vaccinated regardless of the evidence about the safety and efficacy of the vaccine and no matter how readily they may be able to obtain it. People who dis-

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trust the safety and efficacy of the vaccine and who distrust the competence and good faith of healthcare systems are less likely to be vaccinated despite knowing the risk of Covid-19 disease, even if a vaccine is available, affordable and comfortably accessible. And even when people recognize the lethal risks associated with Covid-19 infection and sickness, trust a vaccine to be safe and effective, and trust healthcare providers to deliver the vaccine competently, they are less likely to be vaccinated if a vaccine is not available, affordable and cannot be delivered in a comfortable way.

The SARS 19 coronavirus does not respect geography, ideology, social status, and the other things that are commonly viewed as why humans differ among ourselves. In the face of this common viral threat, humanity is confronted by hesitancy to accept vaccination that has been proven safe and predictably effective at preventing serious suffering and death from sickness caused by the SARS 19 coronavirus.

This presentation explores legal and religious factors surrounding vaccine hesitancy. When I speak of legal factors, I refer to the extent that societies exercise

power to influence personal behavior that bears on public health in the face of vaccine hesitancy. By religious factors, I mean how systems of moral and ethical belief influence personal behavior that bear on public health in the face of vaccine hesitancy.

My premise is that vaccine hesitancy cannot be confronted and overcome without considering how systems of societal power and religious belief influence how humans define our individual and communal existence and behavior.

Law deals with the exercise of societal power. Religion deals with the exercise of moral and ethical power. My premise is that vaccine hesitancy can be affected by those forces.

The questions surrounding this premise are real, not hypothetical. As I was preparing this presentation, President Joe Biden announced that the United States would mandate, using the authority of the federal Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) to regulate workplace safety and health, that all private companies in the United States with more than 100 workers require vaccination or weekly testing of their workers. Mr. Biden also ordered mandatory vaccination for nearly 300,000 educators in the federally funded Head Start program and at more than 200 federally run schools.

As one might expect, reaction to Biden's announcement varied depending on partisan political affiliation. The editorial board of the New York Times endorsed Biden's decision to mandate vaccination and weekly testing for Covid-19.⁵ The editorial board of *The Washington Post* appears to support vaccine mandates also.⁶

However, in a column also published in *The Washington Post*, one commentator denounced Biden's decision to impose vaccine mandates as an unconstitutional federal intrusion concerning state powers and individual freedom.⁷ Republican politicians across the United States who oppose vaccine mandates also expressed outrage at Biden's announcement and have declared their intention to challenge it in the courts.⁸ And although major denominations have announced their support for the Covid vaccines, individuals are citing personal faith as the basis for refusing to be vaccinated.⁹

Societies across the world have long exercised the power to mandate that people be vaccinated to prevent the harms that result when they are infected by and transmit communicable diseases. This power has been recognized and exercised in societies that have widely varying systems of government. It has been recognized and exercised in societies that have widely varying systems of religion. And it has been recognized and

exercised in those societies even in the face of vaccine hesitancy. Neither concerns about the limits of governmental power nor whether mandating vaccines infringes on personal liberty have blocked societies from issuing and enforcing vaccine mandates.

Instead, societies have balanced the interests of public health and safety with respect for individual liberty. Where vaccination is mandated, societies have recognized exceptions based on religious faith if unvaccinated persons do not threaten public health.

The Biden vaccine mandate announcement is an example. Workers who are not vaccinated will be required to undergo weekly testing for Covid-19. In that sense, the weekly testing option is an accommodation to people who cannot be vaccinated due to health issues or based on religious objections.

I maintain, therefore, that vaccine hesitancy is not affected by whether governments have the power to mandate vaccinations. Nor is the phenomenon of vaccine hesitancy driven by whether and how health and personal liberty – including religious – concerns of

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unvaccinated persons are accommodated. The power to mandate vaccinations includes the power to accommodate individual health and liberty concerns in ways that do not jeopardize public health and safety.

There is nothing new about societal regulation of individual behavior, even when the regulated behavior does not, in and of itself, threaten others. Private land can be appropriated for public purposes so long as landowners receive just compensation for the land even when landowners object to its being used for those purposes and dispute the purchase price offered by the state to acquire it.

Governmental power to regulate automobile safety is the basis for automobiles being sold with seat belts that must be worn and alarm systems that must be present to alert drivers to fasten the seat belts, even for car owners who prefer automobiles without seat belts, without alarms, and who consider a governmental mandate to wear seat belts an infringement on personal lib-

erty. Societal power to regulate individual behavior in the interest of public health and safety is as old as laws against robbing, killing, raping and cheating others.

While some religions have considerations, concerns and restrictions about vaccinations in general, reasons for vaccination, or specific vaccine ingredients, most religions do not prohibit vaccinations. The Jehovah's Witness sect originally denounced vaccination, but revised its doctrine in 1952.¹⁰ The sect now affirms that whether someone is vaccinated is a personal decision and that vaccinations are not prohibited by Scripture. Because vaccine mandates include exceptions and accommodations based on religious belief, the mandates do not infringe on religious freedom.

Intellectual honesty compels us to admit that current expressions of vaccine hesitancy based on opposition to vaccine mandates are not grounded in threats to personal liberty and religious expression. Instead, they are objections to the idea Howard Thurman termed "the experience of universality that makes all class and race distinctions impertinent."¹¹ They are open warfare against the view Martin Luther King, Jr., often expressed when he said, "It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality."¹²

Thurman and King were Black Baptist preachers in the religion of Jesus. Neither man held public office or wielded governmental power. Their appeal, however, is echoed by President Biden and other political leaders who recognize, at least concerning the global Covid-19 pandemic, that idolatry to personal privilege threatens communal health and safety. Vaccine mandates challenge the Cain-like attitude that personal freedom and power can be used to the detriment of others with impunity.

Implicitly, vaccine mandates affirm a value cherished throughout the world in every religion and affirmed by every legal and political system. That value system holds that all people are neighbors. It holds that each of us has a duty to not harm other persons. Each of us deserves protection from self-centered people who choose to exercise their personal freedom in ways that threaten others.

President Biden and other politicians do not attribute their decisions to mandate vaccinations to religious concerns. Their concerns are utilitarian. They want to protect people from being infected, sickened and from dying from Covid-19 so schools and businesses can remain open and so workers can be paid to produce goods and provide services.

Nevertheless, the political and economic benefits from vaccine mandates do not invalidate the moral and ethical grounds that support such mandates. Instead, Biden and other politicians who support mandates show that reverence for the inter-connectedness of all humanity produces positive results. No group in a population will be safe from the threat of Covid-19 unless the entire population is safe. No society will be safe until the world is safe.

The "universality of experience" Howard Thurman extolled, and the "inescapable network of mutuality" King preached about make vaccine mandates political, economic, moral and ethical imperatives. President Biden and other politicians may not say so, but Covid-19 is providentially exposing the world to the consequences of disregarding the moral and ethical pleas, admonitions and warnings of Thurman, King and other prophetic voices. We are seeing what happens when people refuse to obey the "love thy neighbor as yourself" values that have been the bedrock of justice and peace.

That value system holds that all people are neighbors. It holds that each of us has a duty to not harm other persons. Each of us deserves protection from self-centered people who choose to exercise their personal freedom in ways that threaten others.

And in that sense, much of the opposition to vaccine mandates shows how moral incompetence threatens human survival. A year ago, there was no vaccine available in the world to treat this highly transmissible and life-threatening disease. Now, although free vaccines are available across the United States, people are refusing to be vaccinated. Some politicians in so-called "red states" – including in Arkansas where I live – openly object to vaccines being required.¹³ It is heart-breaking to know that people are becoming infected, sickened and risk dying because they refuse to be vaccinated, refuse to wear face masks, and refuse to follow public health admonitions to practice social distancing.

In this sense, opponents to vaccine mandates who profess to believe in the sanctity of human embryos are hypocrites. It is hard to take people seriously who assert that embryos deserve governmental protection

from abortion while they try to prevent governmental vaccine mandates that protect people from becoming infected, sick and from dying from Covid-19.

But the vitriolic opposition to vaccine mandates in the United States is more than hypocritical and hubristic when one considers its consequences for human health and safety. When one considers the health and safety implications of that opposition on vulnerable persons, especially children, the opposition to vaccine mandates takes on a heinous character.

Remember that the issues surrounding vaccine hesitancy are complacency, confidence and convenience. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has given full approval to the vaccines for Covid 19. Vaccine mandate opponents have not produced any evidence showing that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are unsafe and ineffective therapies to protect people from becoming infected with the SARS 19 coronavirus and prevent serious illness and death in those rare occasions when “breakthrough” infections occur. Vaccine mandate opponents do not argue that health professionals lack the competence to administer the vaccines. People in the United States have better access to free, safe, effective and properly administered vaccines for Covid 19 than anyone else in the world.

So, it is heartbreaking to observe so many across the U.S. who are willing to let that nation’s unvaccinated children pass through the fire of the COVID-19 variants by refusing to vaccinate themselves and by opposing vaccine mandates. Much of the vaccine resistance is taking place among so-called “Christian conservatives” who are rejecting a vaccine that would protect themselves from the sickening and lethal effects of the COVID-19 coronavirus despite pleas from respected scientists and physicians to do so.

More than 700,000 people in the United States have died because of COVID-19.¹⁴ The Delta variant can infect people who have been vaccinated, though breakthrough cases remain exceptional and are without the extensive sickness and risk of death that occurs when unvaccinated persons are infected. Currently, none of the existing vaccines for COVID-19 have been approved for children 12-years-old and younger. With this population of children still at risk for contracting COVID-19, one would think that people who love and want to protect defenseless children from becoming infected and sickened would receive vaccinations and support vaccine mandates.

Medical and scientific experts urge that unvaccinated people wear facemasks to protect themselves from exposure to COVID-19. However, many are objecting to wearing face masks and object to governmental mandates that face masks be worn. They are doing so

when the Delta variant spreads like wildfire throughout the United States, causing sickness, suffering, hospitalizations and deaths of unvaccinated adults and children.

Meanwhile, families that are in arrears on rent and mortgage payments for apartments and homes are no longer protected from eviction because the Supreme Court of the United States invalidated an eviction moratorium issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to prevent the transmission of Covid-19 among unsheltered persons.¹⁵

Consequently, millions of unvaccinated adults and children face the prospect of homelessness or taking shelter in communal housing arrangements without the benefit of space to social distance or a mandate to wear masks.

In addition, millions of unvaccinated children are in states that prohibit mask mandates, including mandates that masks be worn in schools.¹⁶ Unvaccinated and unmasked children now sit in crowded classrooms. Some of them have been infected with the Delta vari-

People who deliberately expose children to the risk of sickness and death by refusing to wear masks, by discouraging others from wearing masks, and by refusing to be vaccinated, are not honoring life, protecting children, or loving God and their neighbors.

ant, and are infecting schoolmates, teachers and school staff workers. The infected students, teachers and school staff workers take the Delta variant into their homes and neighborhoods, thereby exposing other persons, including elders, to the risk of infection.

In this sense, the vitriolic opposition to vaccine and mask mandates reminds me of the ancient worship of Molech. We are causing children to pass through or walk into a fire called the COVID-19 Delta variant. Children are being sickened and dying because people who claim to love God and believe in personal liberty refuse to be vaccinated and wear face masks. The American Academy of Pediatrics has reported that after declining during the early part of the summer, child cases of Covid 19 “increased exponentially,” with more than 750,000 child cases of Covid 19 added between August 5 and September 2. About 252,000

child cases were added the last week of August alone.¹⁷

People who deliberately expose children to the risk of sickness and death by refusing to wear masks, by discouraging others from wearing masks, and by refusing to be vaccinated, are not honoring life, protecting children, or loving God and their neighbors. They are sacrificing children, much like religious people did who practiced the ancient idolatry of worshipping Molech.

The fact that they do so in the name of personal liberty and religious freedom shows the hypocritical, hubristic and idolatrous perverseness of American “exceptionalism.” At a time when the entire human population is threatened by a viral pandemic that can be stopped if adults are vaccinated, wear face masks and practice social distancing, politicians and religious people in the society with the greatest supply and access to free, safe and effective vaccines for the SARS 19 coronavirus are insisting that people who can receive vaccination are legally and morally entitled to refuse vaccines, refuse to wear face masks and congregate at will, *because they are Americans*. An appreciable amount of their opposition to vaccine mandates is fueled by social media and other deliberate exercises in misinformation, disinformation and societal disharmony.¹⁸

In 1979, the E.F. Hutton investment firm marketed itself on television with a commercial in which someone would mention that E.F. Hutton was managing their investments. Immediately, people near that speaker stopped what they were doing to overhear the conversation, leading to this catchy end of the commercial: “When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen.”

The surging tide of infection, sickness, hospitalization and death because of the Covid-19 pandemic prompts one to question why people have failed to heed warnings, instructions and pleas from physicians and public health experts about how we should behave to protect ourselves. And it highlights the threatening moral incompetence of people who oppose vaccine mandates.

According to the Biblical book of Proverbs, “simple” people are easily misled because they do not recognize the difference between what is good and true and what is harmful and false. “Scoffers” scorn knowledge, truth, warnings and pleas that would prevent them from danger. In doing so, they expose themselves and those around them to unnecessary risk of harm. “Fools” are moral idiots who expose themselves and others to harm because they do not use good judgment.

The message of Proverbs is that humans exist in a moral universe where the principle of cause and effect is as real as it is in the physical universe. People who

are simple, scoffers and fools behave as if that is not true. Meanwhile, they do not want to be reminded of the consequences of living that way. They do not want to heed appeals to behave in ways that they dislike. When their conduct results in misfortune, people dislike hearing the words, “I told you so.”

- We want the freedom to make mistakes, but do not want to be told when we have ignored counsel that could have avoided being mistaken.
- We want the freedom to take risks, but do not want to be reminded that we were warned that the conduct we intentionally took would be unsuccessful, or worse yet, harmful.
- We want to be recognized for making decisions that work out well, but we do not want people to tell us or others about the decisions we made that did not work after we were told they would not work, or that they would work in unpleasant ways.

We do not like to be reminded when we have been wrong. Each of us is vulnerable to what behavioral

The message of Proverbs is that humans exist in a moral universe where the principle of cause and effect is as real as it is in the physical universe. People who are simple, scoffers and fools behave as if that is not true.

scientists call the “self-serving bias,” the tendency to take credit for our successes but to deflect blame for our failures.

Yet, the ability to learn from our mistakes requires the humility to admit that we make mistakes. We goof. We ignore warnings. We blow it. The ability to recognize that truth is essential if people are to avoid self-inflicted harms and other consequences associated with simple-mindedness, scornful disregard for truth, and moral idiocy.

Regardless of one’s political, religious or other beliefs, the consequences of moral incompetence are painful, preventable and deserved. Like it or not, there is no exemption or exception to the principle of cause and effect – in the same way that there is no exemption or exception from the law of gravity – for people who are simple, scornful and fools. People reap the effects of their conduct. People who plant peanuts cannot

expect and do not deserve to harvest potatoes.

At some point, people who are simple, scoffers and fools are stuck with the consequences of moral incompetence. They are stuck with the results of ignoring or rejecting appeals to wake up, heed wise instructions and live differently. At that point, they must suffer the consequences of their simple-mindedness, scornfulness and foolishness.

We are witnessing the bitter fruit of moral incompetence surrounding Covid-19 every day. Some people have been infected, sickened, hospitalized and have died who said they did not need to wear masks and be vaccinated because God would not let them be infected with Covid. Children are being infected, sickened and are dying because adults refuse to wear masks and be vaccinated.

People ridicule medical and public health leaders who pleaded that we wear masks, practice social distancing and be vaccinated. Unmasked people by the tens of thousands are flocking and breathing on each other for hours in football stadiums weeks after such gatherings were prohibited for the Olympics, in open defiance of pleas to wear masks, practice social distancing and be vaccinated.

People are deliberately purchasing and ingesting ivermectin – a drug prescribed to de-worm farm animals, but which has never been tested or approved to treat or prevent Covid-19 – rather than taking medically tested vaccines that have been proven to be safe and effective.

Meanwhile, the global death toll from Covid-19 is surging. Children who cannot be vaccinated are being infected at an alarming rate. Hospitals are overcrowded. Health care workers are worn out. Funeral directors are overwhelmed.

Vaccine mandates are lawful. Vaccine mandates do not infringe on religious freedom. Our analysis of vaccine mandates and vaccine hesitancy requires that we address the pervasive moral incompetence surrounding Covid-19.

As Professor Allan Boesak has said, “The time for pious words is over.” The suffering and death experienced throughout the world from the SARS-19 coronavirus and Covid-19 disease is being worsened not merely because so many people are behaving like simpletons, scoffers and fools. Their moral incompetence is being deliberately weaponized by self-serving politicians.

A recent article in the *New York Times* reports that Republican politicians in Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and other US states *know* that vaccine mandates are lawful because their states have long mandated vaccination to

prevent infection and transmission of communicable diseases.¹⁹

Their opposition to vaccine mandates does not, therefore, require legal, scientific, medical or public policy analysis and explanation. Rather, their opposition demands the prophetic discernment, explanation, denouncement and condemnation often found in Scripture, as exemplified by the following passage from Isaiah 59:

Isaiah 59:1-16

See, the Lord's hand is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. ²Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

³For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity; your lips have spoken lies, your tongue mutters wickedness.

⁴No one brings suit justly, no one goes to law honestly; they rely on empty pleas, they speak lies, conceiving mischief and begetting iniquity.

Their opposition to vaccine mandates does not, therefore, require legal, scientific, medical or public policy analysis and explanation. Rather, their opposition demands the prophetic discernment,

⁵They hatch adders' eggs and weave the spider's web; whoever eats their eggs dies, and the crushed egg hatches out a viper.

⁶Their webs cannot serve as clothing; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their works are works of iniquity, and deeds of violence are in their hands.

⁷Their feet run to evil, and they rush to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, desolation and destruction are in their highways.

⁸The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace.

⁹Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.

¹⁰We grope like the blind along a wall, groping

like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as though we were dead.

¹¹We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us.

¹²For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities:

¹³transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart.

¹⁴Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter.

¹⁵Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. ¹⁶He saw that there was no one, and was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. [New Revised Standard Version]

Another Hebrew prophet analyzed the problem in words that, although different, are similarly indicting:

Micah 2:1-11

¹Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power.

²They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. ³Therefore thus says the LORD: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your necks; and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be an evil time. ⁴On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you, and wail with bitter lamentation, and say, "We are utterly ruined; the LORD alters the inheritance of my people; how he removes it from me! Among our captors he parcels out our fields." ⁵Therefore you will have no one to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the LORD. ⁶"Do not preach"—thus they preach—"one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us." ⁷Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Is the Lord's patience exhausted? Are these his doings? Do not my words do good to one who walks uprightly? ⁸But you rise up against my people as an enemy; you strip the robe from the peaceful, from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. ⁹The women of my

people you drive out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory forever. ¹⁰Arise and go; for this is no place to rest, because of uncleanness that destroys with a grievous destruction. ¹¹If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods, saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink," such a one would be the preacher for this people! [New Revised Standard Version]

Professor Allan Boesak has provided an incisive and succinct analysis of the abusive power machinations at work exposed by those passages in the following excerpt from his 2015 book, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*.²⁰

Micah teaches us that prophetic judgment is not emotional ranting and raving. He is meticulous as he lists the evil that those who oppress the poor "love." They "devise wickedness and evil deeds in their beds," that is they think of nothing else all

Micah offers sober insight into the human psyche: unlike animals reacting on instincts for self-preservation and survival, humans contemplate the evil they wreak upon others. They plan exploitation and oppression; they calculate the profits and benefits of war and destruction. They design the language of justification, obfuscation, and trivialization: "collateral damage," "enhanced interrogation techniques," "We tortured some folks." Allan Boesak

night long, and when morning dawns, "they perform it." This should give us pause. First, Micah offers sober insight into the human psyche: unlike animals reacting on instincts for self-preservation and survival, humans *contemplate* the evil they wreak upon others. They *plan* exploitation and oppression; they *calculate* the profits and benefits of war and destruction. They *design* the language of justification, obfuscation, and trivialization: "collateral damage," "enhanced interrogation

techniques,” “We tortured some folks.” There is nothing spontaneous about it. Then Micah adds, with amazing insight into the workings of power, ancient and modern, “*because it is in their power*” (2:1). This is what lies at the core of their evildoing: raw, abusive power. There is no fuzziness, naivete, no ambiguity about this: it is pure, naked, abusive power [Kairos, p. 125].

Politicians in Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas and elsewhere oppose vaccine mandates *knowing* that such mandates are lawful. They *know* hospitals in their states have intensive care units filled with unvaccinated and intubated Covid-19 patients. Those politicians are now *planning* lawsuits and other maneuvers to challenge vaccine mandates. They are *designing and fabricating* public appearances where they falsely blame vaccine mandates for vaccine hesitancy. And they are doing it, as Micah observed and as Boesak emphasized, *because it is in their power*.

Likewise, so-called Christian conservative religious leaders oppose vaccine mandates *knowing* that religious exemptions are provided, *knowing* that the option of weekly testing for Covid is an alternative to being vaccinated, and *knowing* that employers are obligated to make reasonable accommodations for persons who object to being vaccinated on religious grounds. As with the politicians, those religious leaders oppose the vaccine mandates and foment opposition to efforts to encourage compliance with the mandates *because it is in their power*.

The conduct of those politicians and religious leaders goes beyond being simple, scornful and foolish. It is more than hypocritical, more than hubristic, and more than arrogant. It is self-righteous, self-serving, and self-worshiping. Simply put, it is diabolical.

It is the special work of prophetic persons to say so. Courts and judges can declare Covid-19 vaccine mandates lawful. Physicians and medical researchers can attest that vaccines for Covid-19 are safe and effective. Physicians and nurses can administer the vaccines. But the work of exposing, denouncing and condemning the diabolical conduct of politicians and religious leaders who are falsely opposing vaccine mandates belongs to prophetic people.

Hence, Allan Boesak draws our attention to the repeated denunciation of hypocrites by Jesus in Matthew 23 where one reads these words:

Matthew 23:23-33

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have

neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!

25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. 28 So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, 30 and you say,

Like prophetic people such as Jesus, Micah and Isaiah in ancient time and like present-day prophets such as Allan Boesak, recognize, denounce and condemn the diabolical hypocrisy surrounding opposition to vaccine mandates for Covid-19.

‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ 31 Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. 33 You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? [New Revised Standard Version]

Boesak, a prophetic scholar, preacher and activist, observes that, therefore, such hypocrisy is never “harmless,” and reminds us:

“That is one reason why Jesus, in Matt 23, so repeatedly called the Jerusalem elites who held the power of life or death over the heads of the vulnerable, “hypocrites.” Hypocrisy is not simply “a face we put on.” What we are hiding, Jesus says, looking at this through the eyes of hypoc-

risky's victims, is a calculated, lethal intent; a choice to turn away from the God of life to the gods of death. Hypocrisy=idolatry=service to Moloch=human sacrifice, especially and specifically children."²¹

Time will tell whether politicians, judges, religious leaders and other influential persons in the United States will exercise the moral competence, including the courage, to confront the hypocrisy, misinformation, and disinformation surrounding vaccine mandates.

Time will tell whether people will stop using political and religious excuses to avoid receiving the protection from free Covid vaccination.

Time will tell whether the society that boasts that it is powerful, just and reverent will heed prophetic calls to love our neighbors as ourselves. Time will tell how many woes the world will suffer because efforts to overcome Covid-19 are being frustrated by people in the United States who are "simple," "scoffers," and "fools," and who are followers of the idolatry of "American exceptionalism."

Beyond that, time will tell whether prophetic people will, like prophetic people such as Jesus, Micah and Isaiah in ancient time and like present-day prophets such as Allan Boesak, recognize, denounce and condemn the diabolical hypocrisy surrounding opposition to vaccine mandates for Covid-19. Just as Jesus denounced hellish hypocrisy in Matthew 23, the work of exposing the hellish hypocrisy of opportunistic politicians and self-serving religious people who oppose vaccine mandates in the name of personal freedom, including religious liberty, belongs to prophetic people. ■

This presentation was delivered virtually on September 20 at the invitation and courtesy of the Deans of the School of Religion and Theology (Dean Jerry Pillay) and School of Law (Dean Elsabe Schoeman) at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Wendell Griffen is a regular contributor to Christian Ethics Today, is a member of its board of directors, and is a Baptist pastor and trial judge in Little Rock, Arkansas

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2 See <https://www.npr.org/sections/latest-updates-trump-covid-19-results/2020/10/03/919898777/timeline-what-we-know-of-president-trumps-covid-19-diagnosis>.

3 See <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/fda-authorizes-1st-covid-19-vaccine-united-states/story?id=74665712>.

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6 See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/08/its-time-biden-reset-battle-against-covid-19/>.

7 See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/10/biden-covid-vaccine-mandate-unconstitutional-unnecessary/>.

8 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/09/world/biden-covid-vaccine-requirements-reaction.html>. See also, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/us/republicans-biden-covid.html>.

9 See <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/11/us/covid-vaccine-religion-exemption.html>.

10 See <https://www.vumc.org/health-wellness/news-resource-articles/immunizations-and-religion>.

11 See Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 104, (Beacon Press, 1976).

12 See A Christmas Sermon on Peace found in A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., James Melvin Washington, ed., (Harper and Row, 1986), p. 254.

13 See <https://www.nationalreview.com/news/republican-governors-slam-bidens-sweeping-vaccinate-mandates-as-unconstitutional/>.

14 See <https://covidusa.net/>, United States Covid-19 Statistics (accessed September 12, 2021).

15 See, Alabama Association of Realtors, et al. v. Department of Health and Human Services, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/20pdf/21a23_ap6c.pdf.

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17 See <https://www.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/children-and-covid-19-state-level-data-report/>.

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19 See, GOP Seethe at Biden Mandate, Even in States Requiring Other Vaccines, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/12/us/politics/vaccine-mandates-republicans.html>.

20 Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Kairos, Crisis, and Global Apartheid: The Challenge to Prophetic Resistance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

21 Boesak made this observation in a September 14, 2021, email exchange with the author.

Cherry-picking the Bible Has Been Carried Out for Centuries

By John Fea

A devout evangelical Christian friend of mine recently texted to explain why he was not getting the COVID-19 vaccine. “Jesus went around healing lepers and touched them without fear of getting leprosy,” he said.

This story that St. Luke tells in his gospel (17:11-19) is not the only Bible verse I have seen and heard evangelical Christians use to justify anti-vaccine convictions. Other popular passages include Psalm 30:2: “Lord, I called to you for help, and you healed me,” and also 1 Corinthians 6:19: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit?” and Leviticus 17:11: “For the life of a creature is in the blood.”

Each of these verses has been lifted out of context and repurposed to buttress the anti-vaccine movement. As a historian of the Bible in American life, I can attest that such shallow reading in service of political and cultural agendas has long been a fixture of evangelical Christianity.

Bible in the hands of ordinary people

In the 16th century, Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers translated the Bible from an already existing Greek text into the languages of common people. Prior to this, most men and women in Europe were exposed to the Bible through the Vulgate, a Latin version of the Old and New Testaments that only educated men – mostly Catholic priests – could read.

As people read the Bible for themselves – many for the first time – they inevitably began to interpret it as well. Protestant denominations formed around such interpretations. By the time Protestants started forming settlements in North America, there were distinctly Anglican, Presbyterian, Anabaptist, Lutheran and Quaker readings of the Bible.

The English Calvinists who settled the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bays built entire colonies around their reading of the Bible, making New England one of the most literate societies in the world. In the 18th century, popular access to the Bible was one way that the British – including the North American colonies – distinguished themselves from Catholic nations that did not provide such access.

American evangelicals

In early 19th-century United States, biblical interpretation became more free-wheeling and individualistic.

Small differences over how to interpret the Bible often resulted in the creation of new sects such as the Latter Day Saints, the Restorationists (Disciples of Christ and Churches of Christ), Adventists and various evangelical offshoots of more longstanding denominations such as Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists and Quakers.

During this period, the United States also grew more democratic. What the French traveler and diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville described as “individualism”

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had a profound influence on biblical interpretation and the way laypeople read the sacred text.

The views of the Bible proclaimed from the pulpits of formally educated clergy in established denominations gave way to a more free-wheeling and populist understanding of the scriptures that was often dissociated from such authoritative communities.

But these evangelicals never developed their approach to understanding the Bible in complete isolation. They often followed the interpretations of charismatic leaders such as Joseph Smith (Latter Day Saints), Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell (Restorationist), William Miller (Adventists) and Lorenzo Dow (Methodists).

These preachers built followships around innovative readings of the Scriptures. Without a church hierarchy to reign them in, these evangelical pied pipers had little accountability.

When large numbers of Irish and German immigrants arrived on American shores in the middle

decades of the 19th century, evangelicals drew on longstanding anti-Catholic prejudices. They grew anxious that these Catholic newcomers were a threat to their Protestant nation and often based these fears on perceptions of how Catholic bishops and priests kept the Bible from their parishioners.

While this fear of Catholics was mostly rhetorical in nature, there were a few moments of violence. For example, in 1844, nativist Protestants, responding to rumors that Catholics were trying to remove the Bible from Philadelphia public schools, destroyed two of the city's Catholic churches before the Pennsylvania militia stopped the violence.

These so-called "Bible riots" revealed the deep tensions between the individualistic and common-sensical approach to biblical interpretation common among Protestants and a Catholic view of reading the Bible that was always filtered through the historic teachings of the Church and its theologians. Protestants believed that the former approach was more compatible with the spirit of American liberty.

Vaccine opposition and the Bible

Today, this American approach to reading and the interpreting the Bible is front and center in the arguments made by evangelical Christians seeking religious exemptions to COVID-19 vaccination mandates. When they explain their religious objections to health officials, employers and school administrations, evangelicals select verses, usually out of context, and reference them on exemptions forms.

As was done in the 19th century, evangelicals who refuse to get vaccinated today tend to follow the spiritual leaders who have built followings by "baptizing" political or cultural propaganda in a sea of Bible verses.

Megachurch pastors, televangelists, conservative media commentators and social media influencers have far more power over ordinary evangelical Christians than those local pastors who encourage their

congregations to consider that God works through science.

When I ask those evangelicals who oppose vaccines how they come to their conclusions, they all seem to cite the same sources: Fox News, or a host of fringe media personalities whom they watch on cable television or Facebook. Others they may cite include Salem Radio host and author Eric Metaxas, the Liberty Counsel and Tennessee megachurch leader Greg Locke, to name a few.

Social media allows these evangelical conspiracy theorists to become influential through their anti-vaccine rants.

From my perspective, the response of some evangelicals to the vaccine reveals the dark side of the Protestant Reformation. When the Bible is placed in the hands of the people, void of any kind of authoritative religious community to guide them in their proper understanding of the text, the people can make it say anything they want it to say. ■

As was done in the 19th century, evangelicals who refuse to get vaccinated today tend to follow the spiritual leaders who have built followings by "baptizing" political or cultural propaganda in a sea of Bible verses.

Dr. John Fea is professor of American History at Messiah College. This essay appeared in The Conversation on October 4, 2021 and is reprinted here with permission.

"Christ the Colonizer" is the literal translation of Christopher Columbus's name, as Edgardo Colón-Emeric points out in his book *Oscar Romero's Theological Vision: Liberation and the Transfiguration of the Poor*, drawing on Bartholomé De Las Casas' *Historia de las Indias*.

The “Truth and Healing Commission” and Traumatized Native American Communities

By David R. M. Beck

Each September 30, the National Day of Remembrance for Native American children honors those children who died years ago while attending United States Indian boarding schools. On that day this year, a bill was reintroduced in both the Senate and the House to establish an American Indian Truth and Healing Commission on Indian boarding schools.

The bill’s purposes include both truth-seeking and healing. It asks such a commission “to formally investigate and document” the impact of the trauma that resulted from Indian boarding school policies— a trauma that has been passed down through the generations in Native communities. It also urges federal support to heal the “cultural and linguistic” damage to tribal communities carried out by the federal, state and local governments.

Outside of Indian country, the lasting legacy of boarding school policies has been largely ignored in the United States. As a historian of federal “Indian policy” in the 19th and 20th centuries, I study the ways that the U.S. federal government has tried to force American Indians to abandon their cultural heritage and the ways in which tribal communities have tried to remedy the damage.

One thing that I have learned is that in order for healing to occur, it is necessary to acknowledge the horrific history and impact of boarding schools on both American Indian individuals and communities. Knowing the past and healing from it have begun, but both are far from being complete.

History of boarding schools

These boarding schools were run by the federal government, or by churches using federal money. From the 1870s, when the first schools began operation, into the 1960s, hundreds of thousands of children are estimated to have been taken away from their families and put into boarding schools, sometimes thousands of miles from their homes. They were forced to learn English and practice Christianity in these schools, and were severely punished for not doing so.

The United States Congress and the Department of the Interior were responsible for establishing and supporting the schools across the country. The schools represent a particularly insidious method of attempting

forced assimilation because they involved the removal of children, sometimes by kidnapping, from their families and communities.

Children suffered homesickness and were ravaged by diseases. Many were physically and sexually abused and hundreds died.

Children as young as four – who had been separated from their families and community – were punished for speaking their home languages at the schools. When they returned home, sometimes after many years, they would be unable to converse with their elders, or participate in traditional religious ceremonies since they did not speak the language. These cer-

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emonial activities were also banned by federal policy as part of the broader assimilation project.

The U.S. government has neither sought reconciliation nor provided reparations for the harms caused by the boarding school policy. On the heels of the discovery of mass graves at residential schools in Canada this past summer, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland, the first Native American in that job, vowed to take action in the U.S. She said that “only by acknowledging the past can we work toward a future that we’re all proud to embrace.”

The bill to establish an American Indian boarding

school truth and healing commission was originally introduced in 2020 by then U.S. Rep. Haaland and Sen. Elizabeth Warren. For now, the Department of the Interior has announced a Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, which, it says, will be “a comprehensive review of the troubled legacy of federal boarding school policies.”

The big picture question in both of these initiatives is, what does acknowledging the past and embracing the future look like?

Understanding the past

Historians have been working for the past quarter century to broaden understanding of the impact of boarding schools on indigenous communities. For example, scholar Brenda Child has written about the experiences of families in her own Red Lake Ojibwe community in Minnesota.

In her nuanced historical record, Child documents that even when children were not kidnapped and sent to boarding schools, their families faced heart-breaking decisions about their children. By the late 19th century, federal policies had destroyed tribal economies. Many Native people lived in dire poverty. Parents might send their children away, for example, to avoid starvation at home.

Native children tried to survive the boarding school experience and, when they could, to challenge its restrictions. Wade Davies, a University of Montana Native American Studies professor, in his award-winning book, “Native Hoops,” gives one example of this.

He tells the history of basketball as a key Native pastime in Indian boarding schools. Students reshaped the sport in ways reflective of the fast-paced way it is now played. They used it as an escape from misery and as a way to travel outside of school grounds. They developed lifelong friendships and relationships that they could later use to protect their home communities.

This is an example of what Anishinaabe writer Gerald Vizenor termed “survivance,” or going beyond survival to create healthy, self-directed futures for individuals and communities.

In order to understand survivance, scholars have worked to broaden the understanding of the impacts of boarding schools on Native communities and families. At the same time, indigenous people have worked locally and nationally to bring about healing.

Healing from within

The most effective methods of healing for survivors of boarding schools or their descendants are developing within indigenous communities themselves. The National Native American Boarding School Healing

Coalition, a Native-run nonprofit in Minneapolis, is in the process of creating a digital archive as a way of identifying all of the U.S. boarding schools. The resulting easier access to the schools’ records will provide a way for survivors and their family members to better understand their own history.

The coalition is also focused on healing. It works with legislatures and communities to find ways to help survivors heal from the traumas inflicted on them. The organization works to make policymakers accountable to Native community needs. And it works directly in communities to promote healthy recovery.

Other efforts are being made to undo the damages that the boarding schools inflicted on indigenous communities in the United States, on both local and national levels. Native religious practitioners, for example, are revitalizing traditional ceremonial practices. The National Coalition of Native American Language Schools and Programs supports local efforts to revitalize indigenous languages and works with U.S. federal and state officials to develop policies and laws

By the late 19th century, federal policies had destroyed tribal economies. Many Native people lived in dire poverty. Parents might send their children away, for example, to avoid starvation at home.

to address the language loss issues.

These issues have been of key importance among indigenous communities for some 150 years. Following the recent wrenching headlines about residential school graves in Canada, people outside of Indian country are beginning to recognize the importance of addressing the legacy of American Indian boarding schools.

But, to be able to do so effectively, it is crucial that the history of those schools be acknowledged as well as ongoing support be provided for Native community efforts to heal from it. ■

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America is Not Ready for the Next Crisis

By Lewis Brogdon

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this country in ways that will take decades to understand and address. A year-and-a-half into this historic time, the world is exhausted and operating on reserves with no clear end date in sight.

Over the past year, I have been reflecting on two incisive quotes from staff writers at The Atlantic, George Packer and Ed Young. The first is short and to the point. Packer said, “The coronavirus has revealed a sick and unequal society incapable of self-government.”

As a scholar of the Bible and religion, the idea of the pandemic acting as a catalyst, exposing the realities of our sick and unequal society, resonated with me. In scripture, God reveals and exposes truth about humanity in unorthodox ways. Throughout history, societies get locked into unhealthy and oppressive patterns and refuse to change. The Sovereign One reveals the true character of these nations. God uses nature, animals, disease and even corrupt neighboring nations to bring judgment. No one knows the mind of God or can anticipate the ways the Divine will engage in the world. *But, I cannot help wondering what broader role God is playing in these current events. Is God using the COVID-19 pandemic to expose America? If so, why?*

The second quote is from Ed Young’s article titled, “Anatomy of an American Failure.” Young offers a harsh yet accurate critique of our crisis management:

How did it come to this? A virus a thousand times smaller than a dust mote has humbled and humiliated the planet’s most powerful nation. America has failed to protect its people, leaving them with illness and financial ruin. It has lost its status as a global leader. It has careened between inaction and ineptitude. The breadth and magnitude of its errors are difficult, in the moment, to truly fathom...Despite ample warning, the U.S. squandered every possible opportunity to control the coronavirus. And despite its considerable advantages – immense resources, biomedical might, scientific expertise – it floundered.

We have and continue to mishandle this virus, at incredible cost. Much of the damage and loss we have faced was entirely preventable. It is both baffling and shameful. Much attention has been given to the failure of the government on all levels from federal to state

and local. However, we all share a measure of blame. It is easy to blame others, especially politicians. It is much harder to examine ourselves and how we may have contributed to the chaos. It is painful to recognize the ways our behavior and response might have led to job loss, small business closures, the suffering of others, and even death. In hindsight, it is important to acknowledge that we all could have done better. *We all could have been more selfless, gracious, and wise in our decisions as we navigated the challenges of the pandemic.*

The Covid Pandemic Exposed America

The world has experienced staggering loss of life and the demise of our way of life. In the face of that loss,

In hindsight, it is important to acknowledge that we all could have done better. We all could have been more selfless, gracious, and wise in our decisions as we navigated the challenges of the pandemic.

too many leaders and citizens were and are prioritizing petty partisan squabbles, trafficking in misinformation, and politicizing public health issues over saving lives and caring for others. While we often lament the lack of civility today, political scientists have been warning that we are becoming ungovernable. Over the past year, we saw that reality play out in disturbing ways.

The year 2020 was a time of social upheaval. America’s demons – racism and deep social inequities linked to poverty – were manifested on a grand scale. We all saw horrifying examples of how racism and poverty kill. Yet, rather than addressing these long-standing blights on our national character, we waste precious mental and moral energy justifying the very grotesque policies and systems that perpetuate this violence. We witnessed the culmination of decades of decisions by leaders on both sides of the aisle that severely weakened our infrastructure. While we have poured funding into weapons and defense technologies,

critical agencies like the postal service and local health departments did not have the resources and support needed to deliver essential services to citizens. These agencies lack core technologies for streamlining work and eliminating redundancies. In the face of the pandemic, they were crippled by gridlock making it nearly impossible to efficiently create and implement testing and vaccination programs.

No one, it seems, was ready to meet the challenge of Covid-19. From our government leaders to our local citizenry, we were unprepared. Our disastrous attempts at responding to the pandemic impacted millions of lives around the globe.

So, my question is: “Are we ready for the next crisis?”

My preliminary answer is, “No, we are not.”

It may feel distasteful to talk about a new crisis while we are still dealing with this one. However, visionary leadership requires us to plan for the future while addressing the present. One way to plan for what’s next is to stop blaming everyone else for what went wrong. Too many of us abdicate our responsibility to others, from politicians to neighbors who stand on the other side of our beliefs and opinions. We refuse to pause and take stock of the role we played. Unless we reflect on our own personal missteps and the lessons we learned as a result, we will not be able to navigate through the continued challenges of this current crisis. We need to weave critical self-reflection into the fabric of our society as a social value practiced by all. Only then will we have the wisdom, courage, strength and unity needed to survive, eventually heal, and be ready for whatever comes next.

Time for America to Reflect and Correct

As difficult as moments of social upheaval are, there is hope. We have a choice in what kind of nation we want to be moving forward. As America, we can be better than who we have been if we take time to reflect and course correct, practices which are rooted in the Christian tradition.

On the night of his betrayal and arrest, Jesus shared a meal with his disciples. At the end of the meal, he took a loaf of bread and a cup of wine, instructing the disciples to view them as symbols of his sacrifice and love. *“This is my body broken for you...this is my blood poured out for many.”* He urged his disciples to remember his sacrifice and be guided by these symbols in the days to come.

Years later an apostle named Paul instructed a church at Corinth to remember the death of Christ and reflect on oneself in relation to fellow members of the body

of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:23-32). The Lord’s Supper, also called the Eucharist in some church traditions, is a Christian practice that communicates a deeper value about the sacredness of life and the importance of examining the ways our lives intersect with others.

Due to this practice, Paul and many other Christian thinkers use imagery of Christians as members of one body. Dr. King said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” These leaders understood that to honor the example of Jesus is to recognize the value of our individual lives and how our lives impact others. When we see shortcomings, and we certainly will; we confess them to God and others and then do everything we can to correct them. This practice is not only personal, but also communal. Jesus taught us to pray for forgiveness of our trespasses. The practices of reflection and correction can keep any community grounded, healthy, and growing.

I am not under any illusion that America is a

Dr. King said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Christian nation. It is not. However, there is no escaping the influence Christianity has played on this country historically and today. A large number of Americans are Christian or have been influenced by the Christian religion in some way. The Church and Christians in America have significant influence on our society, and I am horrified by their response to the pandemic. As a whole, they have shown a gross misunderstanding and complete betrayal of Christ’s character. In no way has the church reflected and corrected according to the example set in the Lord’s Supper. As we say in the street, “check yourself before you wreck yourself.” You don’t need to be a church member to know this is an important life skill. We all need to reflect and identify ways we can do better so we are prepared for the next crisis.

Here are five lessons I have learned from the pandemic followed by a word about why I believe the pandemic is a wakeup call for America, one we cannot ignore.

Five Lessons from the Covid Pandemic

1. We can all be better neighbors than we were in 2020.

Imagine if we use the language of “neighbor” as a way to think about all citizens in this country. Scripture teaches us to love God and our neighbor and both commands are linked. Love and care for neighbors is a Christian value that can help us recover from the current crisis and prepare for the next. Last year, the pandemic showed we are not good neighbors.

We could have been more selfless. Think of those in the first weeks of the pandemic who ran to the store and purchased more supplies than they actually needed, leaving others to fend for themselves. Many people live paycheck to paycheck. They have to wait for payday to go shopping. Motivated by fear and self-protection, some families quickly emptied the store shelves and had enough toilet paper, paper towels and cleaning supplies to last a decade, leaving other families to find empty shelves when payday arrived.

How many of us paused before raiding those shelves? How many of us thought outside of ourselves and our fear? Did we even consider our neighbors who might need some of these supplies? Or were we consumed only by our own needs? Did we buy any essential supplies for others? Did we send a donation to the Salvation Army or other organizations working directly with disenfranchised populations? Some of us did. Many of us did not.

This is just one example. There are so many more. From unnecessary stock piling to masking and quarantining, we need to take time to reflect on whether we lived out Jesus’s example of loving others during this challenging season. When Jesus taught about loving our neighbors, he held up the example of the Samaritan who had compassion for someone in need and went out of his way to help him. The Samaritan was not commended for doing what was best for himself but for what he did for a complete stranger.

Wearing a mask is a way we can show our love and care for others. This simple, easy act can help protect our neighbors from a virus that could cause illness or even death. Yet, so many Americans, including many claiming to be Christian, refuse. Why? Is our personal comfort or preference so much more important than following the example of Christ? Let us reflect and correct. When the next crisis comes, let’s do better. Let’s be like Jesus to our neighbors.

2. Don’t know everything? That is okay!

What is not okay is thinking you do know everything. Intelligence should always inspire humility, not arrogance. Why do I say this? Because the more you know, the more you should realize all you do not know.

A truly educated person should be acutely aware of the limits of his or her knowledge.

Our public schools, colleges and universities have failed to produce a citizenry that knows and respects the boundaries of knowledge. We are decades into the information and technology age; yet our educational models and philosophies have not kept pace. We have produced citizens intelligent enough to engage ideas and issues but not always with the discernment needed to process sources and find facts. Many folks are ready to tout the latest “information” they read on Facebook, but lack the wisdom to see the reality of their own echo chambers. The ability to wrestle with ideas and expand our minds requires curiosity and openness. But too many people are unwilling to admit they have anything to learn. They lack the humility needed to recognize when they have reached the limit of their own knowledge. Their hubris doesn’t allow them to acknowledge or respect others whose education, experience and expertise extends beyond their own. People who barely made it through high school science class believe

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they have the knowledge to question and argue about viruses and vaccines with scientific experts who have doctorates and years of careful and rigorous research under their belts.

While I applaud people’s desire to make informed decisions about their health, pretending to be a medical expert or public health official is reckless, foolish and could cost you your life. It is okay not to not understand the science behind these things. Not everyone is a medical expert! Where we get in trouble is when we can’t admit that our knowledge and understanding of complex scientific and medical information is limited.

3. It is okay to admit we were wrong.

Our social “insistence” on being right about everything traps us into obstinate thinking. So many cannot

admit to a single wrong, especially about systems that have a negative effect on minority populations. This dangerous line of thinking has become a social value among U.S. citizens and a leadership trait employed by our politicians, religious, and business leaders.

Being right has become an American idol deluding us into overestimating our objectivity and overvaluing our opinions. When I was a very young man, a good friend named Anthony Hull told me, “All you know is what you have been taught but what you have been taught is not all there is to know.” This simple proverb is a recognition of what we do know and a reminder of all we do not.

Knowledge gaps are places of unintentional ignorance that cause us to be wrong about or misunderstand some things. We all have knowledge gaps! No human can know everything. Why is it so hard for people to recognize this universal truth? Whether it was the pandemic or issues of systemic racism, too many refused to admit they misunderstood things or didn’t have the full picture when making a statement. Instead of admitting to a wrong, too many dug in as if the little they know is all there is to know. In the end, this behavior highlights our foolishness and makes social change nearly impossible.

4. It is time to bring science and research into the public square.

In fact, it is past time. The academy bears some responsibility for what has unfolded in this country over the past decade. College and university scholars and researchers have hidden away in the ivory towers of academia for too long. We have been busy sharing our complex and highly sophisticated theories and ideas with each other, but we have forsaken the public square.

By the day, it is abundantly clear that most Americans do not understand how the scientific process works and how research advances knowledge and public policy. Americans have been getting vaccinated for years; but today, some have suddenly become “experts” on vaccines and side effects and the efficacy of vaccines for masses of people. Sparked by distrust of the medical community and science, Americans are demonstrating widespread ignorance while clinging to their own poorly-informed and fear-based beliefs. Members of the scientific and scholarly community must address this knowledge gap. We need a continuous and evolving public education campaign that proactively equips people with tools to learn and grow as humans, to be open to new ideas, to trust science and scholarship, to develop information literacy, and to combat misinformation.

5. We need to do a better job valuing human life.

Our social tendency to take a reductionistic approach to people dying is callous, immoral and counter to the example of Christ. This hard-heartedness is a byproduct of our legacy as a nation built on the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. America has always had an appetite for death. Our society has been built on the necessity that some must die so others can have a better life. Any country with this nihilistic approach will eventually unravel, as we are witnessing in America daily. A global pandemic could not curb our appetite for death. How easy it has been for us to minimize the loss of life around us. We see people as numbers and statistics—not living, breathing persons who are valued by family and friends, beloved by God.

We have significant work to do in this country. We must recover a sense of the precious value of human life before the next crisis or many more will needlessly die.

The Covid pandemic was a wakeup call for America

Is God using the pandemic to expose America, to show us how deep our selfishness and our disunity run? Maybe God has exposed these things not just to indict us or embarrass us, but to grant us an opportunity to reflect and correct.

What the pandemic has exposed about us is our inability to recognize and understand a global problem and manage it on the national and local level. It revealed the deep divisions in our country and our inability to bridge those divides to work together with the shared goal of keeping our country strong, safe and healthy. On a more troubling level, it also showed that most Americans cannot be galvanized around anything today, even something as basic as trying to keep people from getting sick and dying. We are losing touch with our humanity and weakening our nation by the day.

Is God using the pandemic to expose America, to show us how deep our selfishness and our disunity run? Maybe God has exposed these things not just to indict us or embarrass us, but to grant us an opportunity to reflect and correct. Maybe it is time to identify the changes we need to make to heal and do better when

another crisis envelops us.

A statement in the Bible describes such a moment in graphic detail. The prophet Hosea said, “My people perish for a lack of knowledge.” Millions of people died because of mass ignorance and reckless group thinking that played out on social media. They died because of our arrogance.

In a letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul described the last days as “perilous times” when people would be “ever learning but not able to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Those words resonate in powerful ways today. Hiding ignorance under the pretense of intelligence is the epitome of arrogance. As citizens we have to be more than smart or even passionate; we need enough understanding, curiosity, discernment and wisdom to acknowledge what we don’t know and the humility to listen and learn. If we cling to this arrogance rooted in pride, it will not only compound our current challenges, it will be our undoing.

The Bible talks about knowledge, understanding and wisdom. We need all three today. People are surrounded by information but do not always have understanding. Socially, we are drowning in confusion, sickness, strife, poverty and death because we lack understanding and wisdom. We do not know how to apply knowledge to complex situations. We do not know how to

discern and weigh the competing interests, strengths and weaknesses, and varying risks in a way that benefits the greatest number of people. We do not stop and consider the consequences that a given course of action might have on different groups. All of these deficiencies have been on display throughout the pandemic.

There are environmental, biological and militaristic threats on the horizon that will have real-world economic, social and public policy implications. Covid-19 was only the latest reminder. The behavior and response of leaders and citizens offer clear evidence that we were not prepared for this crisis and we are certainly not ready for the next. We have important work to do in what I call the “public square” and we have to begin now.

Let’s reimagine our public life and learn how to work for the “common good” and not group interests. I hope these insights and lessons assist us in the work of reimagining our public life and preparing us for whatever crisis the future holds. ■

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Puzzling a Medieval Quandary

How many angels can dance on a pin?

It depends, my friends, it depends.

It depends if it is a pen or a pin.

It depends if we’re talking about angels or angles.

But let us assume it is a pin.

And let us assume we’re talking about angels.

It still depends.

It depends: what size is the pin?

It depends: are the angels fat or slim?

It depends: on its side or its ends?

It depends: if the end, which end?

It depends: is it calm or is there wind?

It depends: are the angels pure or have sinned?

You see, my friends, it really depends,

So we really don’t know in the end.

*By James D. Rapp, published in his book,
And Your Neighbor As Yourself (2019)*

Reading Claypool #6: God the Ingenious Alchemist and The Hopeful Heart

John R. Claypool, *God The Ingenious Alchemist: Transforming Tragedy into Blessing* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2005, 77 pp.)

John R. Claypool, *The Hopeful Heart*: (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2017, 96pp.)

In the “Introduction” to Martin E. Marty’s brief 114-page book, *October 31, 1517: Martin Luther and the Day that Changed the World*, James Martin wrote, “My favorite genre of writing is a short book on a big topic written by an expert.”

Who doesn’t like that genre? A short book . . . on a big topic . . . written by an expert!

In the first article in this series, I miscounted and said that John Claypool published 11 books. He actually published 12 and, interestingly, of those 12 books, six were less than 100 pages long. Only one of the other six books numbered 200 pages.

Claypool wrote short books. He wrote on big topics, especially the topic of “transforming tragedy into blessing.” And because of his personal tragedies in life---growing up with little sense of self-worth, losing his 10-year-old daughter to leukemia, and losing his marriage at the peak of his ministry---he was about as close to being an expert as a Christian minister could be on that subject.

I have commented several times in previous articles in this series about the importance of the book of Genesis in Claypool’s preaching. In the early 1960s, while Claypool was still a pastor among Southern Baptists, the Southern Baptist Convention experienced a controversy over the interpretation of the book of Genesis. The controversy stemmed from a book, *The Message of Genesis*, written by Professor Ralph Elliott of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The controversy came to be known as “The Genesis Controversy” or “The Elliott Controversy.” Claypool responded promptly to the conflict by preaching a series of sermons on Genesis 1-11.

Throughout his parish ministry, Claypool “conducted a large number of short-term and even year-long studies of the book of Genesis.” He said that he was “shaped and reshaped” by the dialogue following these studies, especially in his last two parishes, Christ Episcopal Church in San Antonio, Texas, and Saint

Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

When Claypool began teaching preaching at the McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta in 2001, he utilized the book of Genesis as the basis for courses during two entire semesters. And he said that the contents of *God The Ingenious Alchemist* “is the distillation of some 45 years of ‘asking, seeking, and knocking’ regarding the truths of this ancient and inspired segment of Holy Scripture.” One can hardly overemphasize the centrality of the book of Genesis for Claypool’s preaching and his personal theological vision.

Beginning with the “Introduction” and throughout *God the Ingenious Alchemist*, Claypool sets forth his theological vision of life more clearly and more spe-

Whereas other preachers and theologians would stress creation as Exhibit A of God’s omnipotence, Claypool saw it as God’s gladness and bliss about being itself. For Claypool, in creation the Holy One lifts a toast TO LIFE!

cifically than he does anywhere else in his published writings. It is a vision rooted in the earliest chapters of Genesis and elaborated on in chapters 25-50. You will find this theological vision scattered throughout many of Claypool’s writings, but nowhere as systematically enunciated as in this little book.

It is a theological vision that begins with creation. Claypool, like many theologians/philosophers before him, pondered the question: “Why is there something and not nothing?” And with a theology that accentuated the sheer delight of existence itself, the Episcopalian priest said, “The Ultimate Mystery behind all things---the One who is life, has life, and possesses the power to give life---must have said, ‘This wonder of my existence is something too good to keep to myself. I want others to experience the ecstasy of aliveness and to share the essence of the joy that is the very heart of my Being.’”

Claypool's playful, imaginary conversation of God with God's self is one that Claypool obviously enjoyed. He repeats it often in his published works. This fictional dialogue with the Divine also provided this sensitive preacher, so in touch with the fragility and fruitfulness of life, another means to say again, "Life is gift." Divine generosity is the heartbeat behind all things. "The Holy One," as he often called God, created to "give something of God's self," and "not to get something for God's self."

Whereas other preachers and theologians would stress creation as Exhibit A of God's omnipotence, Claypool saw it as God's gladness and bliss about being itself. For Claypool, in creation the Holy One lifts a toast TO LIFE!

And then come humans! Made in God's image! And because they are made in God's very image, they have real power and authentic freedom. Without these—"real potency and genuine freedom"—humans could never know God's kind of ecstasy of aliveness. These two features of humanity are central to Claypool's theological vision. However sovereign and omnipotent, Divine power never compromised the freedom and creativity of human beings.

Continuing with his anthropomorphic language, the Holy One, said Claypool, clearly ran a risk. The gifts of human creativity and human freedom meant that things could go awry. And they did. "The humans who were called into being in order to experience God's joy abused their freedom and moved in the opposite direction." Human beings arrogantly ignored the one thing that constituted God's joy---love. They reversed the pattern of creation and turned what was good and beautiful back into chaos.

Where does this leave the Generous One who brought something out of nothing and wanted only delight for humans? For Claypool, the Generous One becomes the Merciful One, and this leads to the title of his book and his vision of God as "The Ingenious Alchemist."

Alchemists tried to find a way to transform lead into gold. They worked to take one thing and turn it into something better. This, Claypool said, is what God does as recorded in chapters 25-50 of Genesis and throughout the Bible. Moreover, it is what God continues to do in our lives. Using the stories of Jacob and his family, Claypool uses example after example "in which egregiously wrong human actions are redemptively transformed into occasions of growth and blessing." Claypool's retelling of the story of Jacob and his descendants in *God the Ingenious Alchemist* makes for a good but thoughtful Sunday School curriculum on the book of Genesis.

God, the Ingenious Alchemist, is profoundly collaborative, retaining both human freedom and Divine freedom. Claypool said, "The central contention of this book is that we must honor both of these participants and hold firmly to the hope that, while Divine ingenuity never abolishes human freedom, it does possess the potency to transform even the worst of actions into occasions for growth and blessing." Claypool loved to quote that line from Frederick Buechner that, "The seemingly worst things were never the last things."

Is Claypool's theological vision a fanciful and irrelevant abstraction or does it have an end in view? It held pastoral intent for us, his listeners and readers. He wanted "to open for you a pathway to hope and to make it possible for you to believe that, through thick and thin and the very worst of times, the Ingenious Alchemist can still do the best of things."

"It is this theological vision," he says, "that can enable you to move from a life of fear and despair to a life of courage and hopeful coping." Claypool always wanted to help people live better, more joyfully, even

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when "life had worked them over."

Appropriately, Claypool centered one of his very last books, *The Hopeful Heart*, on the subject of hope. He viewed "hope as the very fuel that animates our human species."

Two convictions undergirded all that he said in this small, 92-page book on hope. First, "Hope is utterly essential" for our wellbeing. Hope is to the human spirit what breath is to our physical bodies. Claypool reversed the familiar adage, "Where there is life there's hope," arguing that the deeper truth is, "Where there is hope, there is life."

His second foundational conviction was that hope had to be based in reality rather than in wild fantasies. "There is nothing simple or magical about the act of hoping, for there is always the risk of disappointment,"

he said. Unrealistic expectations lead to inevitable disillusionment. Hope must be reality-based.

So, where and what are the authentic resources for hoping? Claypool gave two. The first road to hope is to admit that we do not know enough to embrace despair. Acknowledge mystery, he begged, the true context of our lives. "In any given moment we never know the full extent of what is happening about us . . . and the only appropriate response is genuine humility."

Claypool recalled that at a particularly hopeless moment in his own life, an elderly rabbi told him that the only unforgiveable sin for a Jew is the sin of despair. "Despair is presumptuous," said the rabbi. "It is saying something about the future that we have no right to say because we have not been there yet and do not know enough."

John Claypool repeated the phrase "despair is presumptuous" for the rest of his preaching ministry. Even more, he made it a fundamental part of his spirituality. He was a "hope-er."

If some things that Christians do not know should lead us to humility, other things that we do know should lead to confidence and hope. What we do know, Claypool said, is the nature of the Holy One and what Claypool called "the Great Story that courses through Holy Scripture."

That "Great Story" is about creation and the Holy One who created to share the joy of aliveness. But the "Great Story" is also about how the "Holy One," even in the face of "the mystery of iniquity," never gave up on the desire to share divine joy with the whole human race. Some accused Claypool of being a liberal who did not believe the Bible. Ironically, it was the great sweep of biblical history, "the Great Story," that gave him hope!

In the most interesting chapter in *The Hopeful Heart*, John Claypool discusses three forms or manifestations of how God's grace brings us hope. These are (1) miracle, (2) collaboration, and (3) endurance. Again, some will be surprised to hear this so-called great liberal preacher say, "I do believe in the possibility of miracles, those times when things happen for which there is no human or physical explanation." These are the events, he said, that leave us with "slack-jawed amazement." Without diffidence or apology, he called these events "miracles."

Claypool said that the second way God's grace brings us hope is through collaboration. God moves alongside us, inviting us to join forces with the Divine in bringing about a solution to our difficulties. This collaboration, said the preacher/priest, is the one God employs most often in bringing us help and hope.

While Claypool believed that at times God solves

our problems *for* us (miracles), and at other time solves our problems *with* us (collaboration), he also believed that there were tragic events in life without solutions. We are left only with endurance. He called this kind of hope "the gift of endurance."

It was this gift that he saw in his 10-year-old daughter's dying with leukemia. "I cannot begin to describe the incredible maturity and courage that I saw develop in my little one as that disease ravaged her, and yet she never became bitter or lost her love for life."

But Claypool, too, experienced something of that gift. On one unspeakably horrible day for his daughter, when he was feeling the pain of his powerlessness, he wanted to run screaming out of the room. He then said, "From somewhere far beyond me, an Energy not my own had silently enveloped me like a gentle mist and enabled me to resist running away in panic, and to stay connected and be present for my suffering daughter."

I have wondered for some time what Claypool's preaching was like before his daughter died. Some day, a graduate student hunting a PhD topic will make that

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study and comparison of before and after. Claypool gives a lead when he said that he became a very different person from the one he was before Laura Lue's death. Of himself, he said, "I sense that I am more humble, grateful and sensitively attuned to the suffering of others than was the case before this ordeal." Watching your 10-year-old daughter suffer and die will do that for you.

Two comments as I conclude this series "Reading Claypool." First, of the 12 books John Claypool wrote, he published three books while still a Baptist, two books in the process of his transition to the Episcopal Church. But most of his books, seven, were published while an Episcopal priest. One must conclude that the culmination of his lifetime of thinking and preaching came in his role as a priest in the Episcopal Church. It was the room in God's great church where he was most himself.

Secondly, John Claypool wanted to live life to the fullest, even in the face of its sometimes-piercing pain, and his one purpose in life, as I perceived it, was to help others live in that fullness as well. One night, after reading Raymond Moody's small book, *Life After Life*, John had a vivid dream, flushed with powerful images. Here is his description and a bit of his interpretation of that dream:

"I dreamed I died physically, moved through a dark tunnel, and came out into what can best be described as 'kindly light.' There was no visible object or figure, only a great sense of warmth and acceptance. Then a Voice said, 'Welcome, my child, I want to ask you some questions.'" "I stiffened in fright and thought to myself, 'Here comes the judgment and my condemnation.'"

"But the Voice said, 'First, I want to ask you, can you weep over all the mistakes you made, over all the pain you have caused other people, over all the ways you have failed to live up to your highest and best?'"

"I began to think about the many things in my life that were occasions for regret. Genuine tears began to come up from the depths of my being, and I cried as if my heart would break."

"But then the Voice spoke again. 'Let me ask you something else. Can you laugh over all the good experiences you have had, all the good jokes you have heard, all the funny things you have seen?'"

"Again, I began to remember back over all the joys of my life and started laughing as I had never laughed before, and so help me, it seemed

that that ocean of light was laughing with me! If you have never heard the laughter of God, you have missed something absolutely ecstatic."

"Then the Voice spoke yet again. 'I need to ask you one more question. This wonder of aliveness---do you want any more of it? Do you want to go on living?'"

"I remember thinking that there was no predestined answer. I really did have a choice. I pondered slowly all the pain and pleasure that I had known from living, and then from the deepest place in my being I said, 'Yes! Yes, I do want some more of it!'"

"With that the Voice exclaimed delightedly, 'Come, then, you blessed of the Father and enter into the joy of your lord. Plunge deeper in and further on,' and with that I swam off into the ocean of light."

Claypool ended by saying, "I do not claim for this dream any ultimate authority, but I do believe it corresponds to the highest and deepest notes of the Christian vision. To enter the Kingdom of Heaven, what could be more essential than being able to weep over our sins, to laugh appreciatively over all our good times, and to say from the depths of our beings, 'Yes, Lord, I want more of it.'" ■

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***You pray for the hungry,
Then you feed them
That is how prayer works.***

Pope Francis

Michael Lewis, *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*

W. W. Norton & Company (May 4, 2021). Reviewed by Gary Furr

After retirement I am deeply enjoying reading again at a level that I could not do when I was so busy. I just finished *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story* by Michael Lewis. Michael Lewis is the best-selling author of *Liar's Poker*, *Moneyball*, *The Blind Side*, *The Big Short*, *The Undoing Project*, and *The Fifth Risk*.

Rather than an exhaustive overview of the pandemic, Lewis tells us from the viewpoint of individuals—a state public health officer, an epidemiologist, IT entrepreneurs and medical researchers racing to understand what was coming and sounding the alarm amid the complexity and disconnect that is American healthcare and politics.

It is a great read, as all of Michael's books are, but it is focused on the puzzle of how our society was felled by the virus by our incompetence and inability to move quickly and unified, of deep distrust bred over decades, the politicization of the CDC (for example, it's director ceased being a civil servant in the Ford, Carter, and Reagan errand instead became a political appointee, thus dooming any independence and functioned less to act and more to discuss and recommend.)

A quote that stood out to me was this one:

One day some historian will look back and say how remarkable it was that these strange folk who called themselves "Americans" ever governed themselves at all, given how they went about it. Inside the United States government were all these little boxes. The boxes had been created to address specific problems as they arose. "How to ensure our food is safe to eat," for instance, or "how to avoid a run on the banks," or "how to prevent another terrorist attack." Each box was given to people with knowledge and talent and expertise useful to its assigned problem, and, over time, those people created a culture around the problem, distinct from the cultures in the other little boxes. Each box became its own small, frozen world, with little ability to adapt and little interest in whatever might be going on inside the other boxes. People who complained about "government waste" usually fixated on the ways taxpayer money got spent. But here was the real waste.

One box might contain the solution to a problem in another box, or the person who might find that solution, and that second box would never know about it.

He tells multiple stories about individuals who saw it coming or had extraordinary insight into how we might act and yet ran into wall after wall when action was of the essence. There really isn't much about the usual Democrat or Republican politicizing for what followed. Rather, it was the perfect storm of human inertia, oblivion, and bureaucratic lethargy. His insight is that some of the problems came about because the solution of some earlier generation became a problem for the next one.

I have seen this in the institutional church in my life experience. The hardest thing in the world is to kill off something that three people started 70 years ago and only two people are keeping going now. Rather than celebrate what it did and give it a proper burial, we perpetuate something because of our inability to say that it no longer is the best thing we could do.

Perhaps part of the problem is our constant rushing past "endings" in life—to say, "This was a very good thing once, and we honor it." Our style as humans is generally either to worship the mythical past as perfect or destroy it as the worst that ever was. It may be why we keep trying to turn genuine history into something else—control of the so-called "narrative." Instead, our best efforts might be letting history speak to us completely rather than only hearing what we want to hear.

Another issue is our inability to think and act on the long view. The first real effort to build a pandemic response plan began not with President Obama but President George W. Bush. The problem, though, is that it only became an interest during crises and then other issues would push it aside once more. The bureaucratic and political problems of the CDC and other health entities stretch back all the way to the 1970s and Gerald Ford's administration. In our rush to the future, Lewis warns, we continue to sustain our prior lessons.

Some critics have debated the heroes he chose and that his portrayal of lonely and persistent people against the wave of indifference or hesitance is

not fair. Still, it is easy to see how what he says is true. I came away with sympathy for all those who were struggling to come to grips with this—even understanding the tendencies of those who hesitated. Nothing is the same in real time. For those of us in leadership of institutions, it is a familiar pressure. It is incredibly difficult under pressure to recognize and galvanize others to respond to a crisis in a timely way. In these kinds of moments, you can never wait for all the information before you can act. That's what makes these kinds of decisions so much harder than more routine ones.

For me it also brought up the challenge of community building. America has been tearing itself into tribal warfare for a long time, but while pressure is necessary for pushing us into solutions, it ultimately must be turned into actual concrete actions. For that reason, the deepening of genuine citizenship, enlarging our tents, and continuing the good fight to get one another engaged and involved rather than analyzing and post-ing might be the great challenge of our day.

I love everything Michael Lewis writes, and this is no exception. I would suggest that his prior book, *The Fifth Risk* is a great companion read with this one. It focuses (and genuinely sets the stage for *Premonition*) on the disruption of transition from one administration to another, looking at 2016-17 in particular, but more directly on the issue of “competence” as one of the great threats to our current existence.

We are, I believe, in a crisis, and the needs of this moment are for competence, cooperation, and authen-

We are, I believe, in a crisis, and the needs of this moment are for competence, cooperation, and authentic leadership. This is why authoritarianism is appealing to so many. The great temptation in our anxiety is to turn to the safety of giving responsibility to someone else. Far harder is stepping up to our own part.

tic leadership. This is why authoritarianism is appealing to so many. The great temptation in our anxiety is to turn to the safety of giving responsibility to someone else. Far harder is stepping up to our own part.

Michael Lewis stirs all these thoughts and more. You ought to read this book. It is not so much a comprehensive look at the pandemic as a larger reflection on the costs of inaction and bureaucratic insulation that cripple us when institutional wisdom and clear leadership are needed most. This is a book that takes a complicated story and serves it up well. It's worth your time to read it, because this will not likely be the last pandemic we face. Will we learn? ■

Gary Furr is a retired pastor living in Birmingham, Alabama.

Stand by Me

New lyrics, old hymn

by Ken Sehested

In the face of Pharaoh's fury, Stand by me
In the face of Pharaoh's fury, Stand by me
With enemies surrounding, with fearful threat confounding,
Part the drowning waters 'fore me, Stand by me

When beset by ruin and ravage, Stand by me
When beset by ruin and ravage, Stand by me
Lead the way amid the dangers, keep me safe from Satan's daggers
Send your angels to watch o'er me, Stand by me.

Should my hopes and dreams unravel, Stand by me.
Should my hopes and dreams unravel, Stand by me.
When my confidence lies tattered, and nothing seems to matter
Thou who faced the cross, forsaken, stand by me

As the drums of war start rolling, Stand by me.
As the drums of war start rolling, Stand by me.
Grant me courage to resist, and in Mercy's fold enlist
Strong Deliverer, Shield and Comfort, Stand by me.

Through the sorrow and the sadness, Stand by me.
Through the heartache and the madness, Stand by me.
Arms of mercy, sure surrounding, hearts protected, ne'er confounding
Joyful singing, grace astounding, Stand by me.

When my health begins to falter, Stand by me
When my health begins to falter, Stand by me
Give me grace to make that passing, o'er the Jordan's chilly flowing
To that Land of weal and welcome, Stand by me.

Original lyrics by Ken Sehested to the Charles Albert Tindley hymn.

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A Journal of Christian Ethics

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—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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

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- 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
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