

Christian Ethics Today

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It Is Hard To Keep Up

Patrick Anderson, editor

For those of us who try to make sense of the relentless moral and ethical issues we face, we can be overwhelmed. Now, as in each generation, we are confronted with old and new circumstances that challenge us to understand and respond in a faithful Christian manner.

Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine continues to destroy and kill many.

The thorny issue of abortion has reached an inflection point with the leaked text of a draft Supreme Court ruling that is intended to criminalize a decision to end a pregnancy. Religiously motivated people have sought that reversal of women's legal rights to seek pregnancy-related reproductive and medical care for decades. In many ways, the dog has caught the car. Now what?

Public school systems throughout America are under siege by citizens who wish to shield children from factual explorations of our history, warts and all. The inclusion of any educational content regarding sex and human sexuality threatens those same people.

Our twice-impeached former president still leads a large collection of people intent on changing democracy as it has been historically envisioned.

It is hard to keep up.

While browsing earlier issues of *Christian Ethics Today*, in the second issue edited by Foy Valentine, I found an address entitled "There is Hope" given by the inimitable Will Campbell. I was struck and encouraged by the forthright, irascible and hopeful approach of Will Campbell. That address follows on the next page.

J. Alfred Smith, Sr., and I recently discussed an article I wrote in the Spring 2021 issue about my grandmother, the preacher. Not to be outdone, he offers his own experiences with strong women preachers in his lifetime. That is included in this issue along with Cameron Macky's informative and inspiring reflection on neighborliness as exhibited by Mr. Rogers.

Tricia Bruce's article reports her research which provides a rare window into how some Christians who, while opposed to abortion generally still offer assistance to friends and family who seek one. The question posed is: What is authentic Christianity?

Seminarian Lindsay Bruehl offers insights to the Biblical story of Ruth, from her vantage point of being the daughter-in-law of a Native American woman with a long history of oppression. Susan Shaw and Regina McClinton describe how "Critical Race Theory" can be best understood in the context of Jesus' teachings about the Good Samaritan.

This issue is punctuated with some much-needed humor and good sense as John Crider describes his experience in "Decoration Day" services in graveyards throughout the deep south.

Mark Wingfield addresses the matter of public prayers at football games, and evangelical serenades on commercial airplanes, and what "freedom of reli-

Religiously motivated people have sought that reversal of women's legal rights to seek pregnancy-related reproductive and medical care for decades. In many ways, the dog has caught the car. Now what?

gion" actually means.

David Julen encourages Christians to be involved in helping persons suffering substance abuse addiction and recovery. Ronald Perritt offers another viewpoint on the matter of God's will and human suffering.

Rick Burnette reviews a book, *Abundance*, whose authors maintain that technological advances will result in the end of food insecurity within two centuries. He addresses their over reliance on technology and insufficient understanding of other, more human and practical approaches.

This journal offers us all help, insight and inspiration to respond in a faithful Christian manner to the moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church and to society. Enjoy. ■

There Is Hope

By Will Campbell

When I was going to school on the G.I. Bill of Rights, right after the Spanish-American War, they told me that the first few minutes of any address or sermon should be given over to sheer foolishness and nonsense. I reckon John Seigenthaler's introduction has pretty well covered that so we can proceed to the subject at hand. Whatever that subject may be. Actually, John, I was born in New York City. In the Soho district. My mother was a dancer at Radio City Music Hall with the Rockettes. My father was with the Secret Service guarding Mr. Garfield, until that terrible accident. Then we moved to Mississippi and started picking cotton for a living. And if you're buying all that I have some choice beachfront property in the Smoky Mountains you might be interested in.

Some of you asked about my walking cane. I'm always glad because that allows me to tell one of my favorite stories. Something that really happened, though perhaps I should be ashamed to tell it. The cane was made for me by a neighbor who was what we would call illiterate. But he knew something about aesthetics; knew what was pretty; what really, finally mattered. He tore down an old abandoned barn many years ago and discovered that some of the rotting timbers were made of wild cherry. He put them aside and when he was old, he made things that were at once beautiful and useful for those he loved. Fortunately, I was one of them. It is, I think, a fine metaphor for the Gospel—taking something rotten and making something beautiful of it.

All of you know about security at airports. Well, I walk through the upright sensor and the cane doesn't set off an alarm because there is not a gun in it. Not even a sword. Just a piece of wood. On one occasion the guard—the fellow who had been empowered—had a badge, you know—told me to go back and put my cane on the roller after I had walked through the upright sensor. Well, that didn't make any sense to me but I went back and put it on the roller. And then I stood there. He said, "Now come on through and get your cane.

I said, "No, no. If you don't mind bring it back to me. Now I have done what you asked me to do, so will you do what I'm asking you to do?"

He said, "Mister, can you walk without that cane?" By then people were backed up behind me clearing

their throats, 'bout to miss their airplane don'cha know.

I said, "We don't pay you to ask medical questions. That's a different specialty. They're called physicians. Just bring the cane back." He was getting mad and I was somewhat out of sorts myself. When I got home and told my wife about it, she accused me of being mildly in the grape but I wasn't. Just vexed.

Finally he said, "Mister, if you want your cane you're going to have to come down here and get it."

I said, "All right. Whatever you say." Then I got down on my belly and crawled the length of the roller. With that people were hissing and booing him."... Making that poor old man crawl to get his walking cane." Then, with feigned caducity, I pushed myself

"I'm a Baptist!! I come from a long line of hell-raisers. I was taught that I wasn't a robot, that I was a human being with a mind, capable of reason, entitled to read any book, including the Bible, and interpret it according to the ability of the mind I was given. That's why I do things like that."

up and with a palsied hand got the cane, gave it a sassy little twirl and walked on down the corridor, leaving him standing there to face the crowd.

My wife said, "Do you want to get hijacked?" Where in the Sam Hill would they take us today? L.A.?

"Well," she said, "Why do you do things like that?"

"Because," I said, "I'm a Baptist!! I come from a long line of hell-raisers. I was taught that I wasn't a robot, that I was a human being with a mind, capable of reason, entitled to read any book, including the Bible, and interpret it according to the ability of the mind I was given. That's why I do things like that."

What happened to those Baptists? Where are those people who were drowned in the Amstel River, tied on ladders and pushed in burning brush heaps because they believed in and practiced freedom of conscience; because they believed in total, total separation of

church and state; because they were so opposed to the death penalty that they wouldn't serve on juries; because they would not go to war, any war, for church or state; would not baptize their babies, not so much for doctrinal reasons but because they saw it as enrollment by the state, a way of the state maintaining control of the faithful. For those offenses they were hunted down like rabbits by armed horsemen. Where are they now? What happened?

It's a long way from that to a civil magistrate standing with a wall-sized American flag in the background—a George Bush, a Dan Quayle, an Oliver North—spewing forth the most un-Baptistic nationalistic rubbish and receiving frenzied, rabid, fanatical cheers and applause from thirty thousand alleged Baptists! Great God Almighty!! What's going on here? What happened?

We know what happened. And if we will be honest, we have to admit that it happened long before a Texas judge and his little covey of rich preachers who, where Baptist history and Scripture are concerned, appear to read only until their lips get tired, or until they find a passage that will bolster their political agenda and with that authority, go out and wreck the fellowship of one of the nation's largest religious bodies, determined to make robots of its adherents and eunuchs and handmaidens of its finest teachers and scholars.

“Man was first in creation and woman was first in the Edenic Fall” [when Carl F.H. Henry was chairing the Resolutions committee of the Southern Baptist Convention at Kansas City in 1982, this phrase appeared in the Resolution on Women and was approved by the messengers] ... now ain't that cute! Has such a nice ring to it. But the dialectics of it is overwhelming. Therefore, they reason, women should not be ordained as proclaimers of the Word. That's the kind of logic that makes a fellow crawl through airports on his belly. If woman was first in the Fall, she should have priority in ordination. Or so it has always seemed to me. Woman discovered sin first; she has been at it longer and thus should be more adept at identifying sin and casting it out. But then, logic seldom prevails over bigotry.

Surely, we are living in the throes of the greatest religious and political heresy ever to blow its chilly winds over this land called America. My yellow dog [Democrat] genes tempt me to say it is a political heresy because it is Republican; and Baptists, in my youth, were Democrats. But that isn't the reason. It is a political heresy because it is espousing a course that is a rollercoaster to a fascist theocracy. To unfreedom. It is a political heresy because it is in direct opposition to our earliest political document.

It is a religious heresy because it is religious, yes, very damnably religious, and the founder of the Christian Movement was very, very anti-religious—certainly anti-religious—and came to establish freedom and end religiosity.

But I don't want to talk about what those little people have done. I've never been one to get involved in any kind of controversy. What's the point of talking about what they have done?

They're not here. We're here. And if I may sound a note of warning to this assemblage, it is that it strikes me that too much energy is spent bemoaning the fact that the institution known as the SBC—and by that we mean some imagined, romantic SBC of the decades of the 40s, 50s, 60s and 70s—is no more. There was never anything sacred about that institution, nor any other institution, so why lament its demise? It wasn't a true copy of the Baptist birthright in the first place and didn't deserve to survive. So, the Associated Baptist Press should not attempt to resuscitate a corpse, but espouse the Kingdom now. Don't seek the living among the dead nor seek to find a risen Lord in a sep-

The original Baptist Movement was a radical, revolutionary one, scorned and persecuted by both the established church under Luther and Calvin, as well as Rome, and the established state under whatever prelate was in power.

ulcher.

I know it is rude to accept an invitation to someone's house and then complain about the décor, but one thing on which I always agreed with Robert Taft is that tact is dishonest. So, the second warning I would sound is that you tolerate the designation, “Moderate.” The original Baptist Movement was a radical, revolutionary one, scorned and persecuted by both the established church under Luther and Calvin, as well as Rome, and the established state under whatever prelate was in power. Christian discipleship can never be moderate. Christian discipleship is always radical and thus costly. The demise of the Baptist Movement began long before Judge Pressler and that bunch of ecclesiastical highwaymen began their reign of terror. When did it begin? It began, in my judgment, when a movement began to become an institution, a principality. It began when we went to Baal-Pe'or and became like unto the things we detested.

Institutions, by their very definition, are evil. For

their *raison d'être* is always and inevitably self-survival. They, all of them, when they are threatened will go to any length, tell any lie, engage in any program to protect themselves. And justify it as being in defense of Almighty God. That is what Paul was talking about when he spoke of powers and principalities and spiritual wickedness in high places. That is why it is safe to say the things that brought us to this hour began long before the so-called takeover. The takeover, of the Baptist Movement, my friends, began on our watch. Nay, long before our watch. It began with the formulation of creeds and theologies. Our Anabaptist ancestors—and Professor Estep is correct to trace our roots back to them—knew that, and that was why they had to be killed. They were dangerous to established institutions, a peril to principalities. Schwarmers, they were called. Radicals who swarm about like bees on the loose. The left-wing of the Reformation they were known as. Yes, Left-wingers. not Moderates. Where are they now? What happened?

The historic Baptist notion of discipleship over creedalism survived in the new country for a time; but now that is no more. The Baptist people, once a movement (or sect, if you prefer Troeltsch's understanding) is now a creedalistic institution. And has been for a long time. Oh, when I was a boy in Mississippi, we claimed that we weren't. But we were. We said the Bible was our creed, and made a fetish, an idol, of the Bible. Which part of the Bible? Certainly not that part where Ezekiel said, "She lusted after lovers whose genitals were like mule's genitals (That's from chapter 23 of Ezekiel, verse 20. I'm sure some of you will want to grab that Gideon Bible when you get back to your room and check the text.) I cite it here for more than cosmetic or melodramatic effect. The significance of that text for this gathering is that the prophet was addressing a group not too dissimilar to the neo-Baptists of our day. (And Neo-Baptist would be a more accurate designation than Fundamentalist.) "Your genitals are like mule's genitals." If you grew up in the country as I did, you know what God was saying through the prophet Ezekiel. A mule is a hybrid. Sterile. God was saying to that right-wing bunch, "Ha! Well, never mind."

I was speaking to the state annual meeting of the ACLU in Mississippi not long ago. It was not a large gathering which struck me as being odd for Baptist is the state church in Mississippi and the First Amendment was the idea of a couple of Baptist preachers. Anyway, some Baptists were protesting the gathering because the ACLU defends pornographers. It does; but it also defends Baptists, if it can find any, which isn't easy to do these days. Anyway, I cited that passage and challenged the censors to burn that

book because it contains hundreds of passages equally tempting to the aggressive scissors of censorship. With the Bible as our creed we regularly repented of the bingo games of our Catholic neighbors; but I recall no repenting of the sin of whipping black people. Nor even lynching them.

But, I wander. A geriatric propensity I suppose. My point is that the Baptist Movement floundered when it became institutionalized—when it became a vessel, not of faith, a faith such as Abraham had, and certainly not a vessel of radical discipleship such as our spiritual ancestors were—but a vessel of certitude, of theologies and creeds. And thence the fighting. "My God can whip your God." Doesn't that about sum it up?

What then are the inherent dangers of creeds, of theologies, of certitude?

In an important but little-known book called "Witness to the Truth," Edith Hamilton, a scholar best known for her work on antiquities, made a statement almost 50 years ago that addresses that question:

So, the great Church of Christ came into being by ignoring the life of Christ. ...The fathers of the

She was saying that no institution could be made to work efficiently by following Christ literally. For He had no system, no rules, no methods people could adopt and put to definite use.

Church were good men, often saintly men, sometimes men who cared enough for Christ to die for him; but they did not trust him. They could not trust the safety of his church to his way of doing things. So, they set out to make the Church safe in their own way and theologies protected it from individual vagaries; riches and power protected it against outside attacks. The Church was safe. But one thing its ardent builders and defenders failed to see: Nothing that lives can be safe. Life means danger. The more the Church was hedged about with Confessions of Faith and defended by the mighty of the earth, the feebler its life grew.

What this wise woman was saying is, to me, highly infuriating. Was saying that the structured, institutional Church was a cop-out from the outset. Even as a bootleg Baptist preacher of the South (not a Southern Baptist preacher and I know the difference), and steeple drop-out, I am not ready to go with her that far. Yet she has much evidence on her side. She was saying that no institution could be made to work

efficiently by following Christ literally. For He had no system, no rules, no methods people could adopt and put to definite use. Edith Hamilton was correct as she continued that Christ never laid down that matter of fundamental importance to an organization, clearly formulated conditions on which one could enter it. He never demanded of the people who wanted to follow Him that they must first know this or that, this creed, or that catechism, the nature of the Trinity or the plan of salvation, or subscribe to an Abstract of Principles to the satisfaction of the Sanhedrin. He had not insisted on any systematic belief whatsoever. He talked of such things as a cup of cold water. Ah, but we must build a global sprinkler system. And while we are appointing committees and electing boards and creating giant agencies to build the global sprinkler system, the one near at hand perishes from dehydration as we pass by on the other side.

The inherent danger in creed over faith, Edith Hamilton said, is that creed is passive. Faith is active and leads to discipleship. Creed simply requires recitation. What's the point in believing a whale swallowed a man unless we understand that it is a story about justice. The problem with Biblical literalism is that it is Biblical illiteracy. The words are known, but not the tune. The Bible is a book. A book about who God is. It is not a scientific dissertation to be required in Caesar's academy. But again, I wander.

Where, then, is there hope? If not in institutions, in bigness, certitude or creed, where is it? In free-lance acts of discipleship, I believe. Certainly, grace abounds and there is hope. I have been accused of being a man without hope in my writings, of being in despair. Not so. There is a difference between perplexity and despair. While it is true that I take no hope in partisan houses, in ideologies, or even theologies, I see hope all around me.

For every soul that groans under the burden of bigotry, ignorance, discrimination, rejection, and violence there is hope.

For every hug and act of kindness extended to one dying of AIDS, there is hope.

For every hand reaching sacrificially to the homeless by offering shelter from the cold and food to ward off starvation, there is hope.

For every man who says to his neighbor, "Your wife is a child of God; you strike her at your own peril," there is hope.

At the risk of toadying to our host tonight, for every organization that stands for freedom over against the tyranny of fools, there is hope.

In a Florida editor with bills [to pay] and house [mortgage] notes and family to feed who stands tall

and says, "My skills you have bought for many years for little pay; but my soul, sirs, is not for sale; goodbye," there is hope.

For every word and story you write and put on the wire containing a message of radical discipleship to a living Christ, there is hope. There is hope, for there the star of Christmas shines again, and there the star of David glows anew; for there is Immanuel: God with us. ■

The Founding Editor of this journal, Foy Valentine, asked for and received permission from Will Campbell to include this essay in the second issue of Christian Ethics Today. In his introduction, Foy wrote:

Will Campbell is a voice crying in the wilderness. He has always troubled Israel. Since he turned 70 a year or two ago, however, he has stepped up his already astoundingly frenetic, prophetic ministry of preaching, speaking, teaching, and writing. Already in overdrive, he is now airborne. Uncounted honors, awards, tributes, and degrees have been heaped on him, not to mention an adm-

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nable collection of rebukes, denunciations, diatribes, and accusations.

His book, Brother to a Dragonfly, was a publishing sensation; and his subsequent numerous books have also been widely acclaimed. He has been described as "one of the finest novelists writing within the southern tradition today." A native of Louisiana and a graduate of Wake Forest College and the Yale Divinity School, he now lives on a small farm near Mt. Juliet, Tennessee.

Will Campbell gave CHRISTIAN ETHICS TODAY permission to print this address which he delivered to the Associated Baptist Press members in their meeting on October 27, 1994.

Will Campbell lived out his days on his farm in Tennessee until his death on June 3, 2013 but his wisdom and candor continue to challenge and inspire us.

The Oracle Speaks

By J. Alfred Smith, Sr.

In 1980 the National Women's Historical Alliance noticed that women were absent from textbooks. No more than 3 percent of the content was devoted to women. The textbooks ignored the rich, diverse, cultural, ethnic and occupational contributions to American history. The NWHHA was formerly known as the National Women's History Project and has been based in Santa Rosa California since 1980. In 1985 the name was changed to the National Women's Historical Alliance. The founders were Molly Murphy MacGregor, Mary Ruthsdotter, Maria Cuevas, Paula Hammett, and Bette Morgan. In 1987 NWHHA successfully lobbied Congress in designating March National Women's month.

Out of respect for women's month and respect for my own mother, Amy, and my grandmother, Martha, who poured into me my earliest historical black consciousness of our ancestors who were God-fearing predecessors who lived lives of decency and dignity in their deeply felt responsibility to build bricks of faith out of the straw of suffering by projecting into our future what the present denied them. Out of respect for the wisdom revealed in the scriptures where the Apostle Paul, a senior, reminds Timothy, who was many years his junior, to revere the faith of his grandmother, Lois, and mother, Eunice.

Young people who listen only to hip hop poets and preachers of rap known for rhyme that traumatizes have no time for the elders when there are videos like *Tik Tok*. When social media deludes us into thinking that hip hop and rap are treasures of our culture richness our offspring end up with a diminished, distorted, and demented identity that is disgraces the memory of our ancestors. From what source will emerging leaders gain inspiration and insight for tools and techniques to transform themselves, their offspring, their adversaries, and worldwide humanity?

How many of us have heard of Jarena Lee? In 1807 she heard the voice of the Lord commissioning her to preach. When she shared her call with Bishop Richard Allen he advised her that he could not grant her permission because he had to uphold the AME Church's ban against female preachers. In 1819 during

a worship service at Mother Bethel AME Church in Philadelphia, a guest preacher was struggling with his sermon and abruptly stopped his sermon. As he stared into the congregation wordless, Jarena Lee stood up and started preaching with power where the preacher had stopped for loss of words. Bishop Allen was impressed and gave her the blessing to preach in the AME Church. Jarena Lee said:

If a man may preach, because the Savior died for him, why not a woman seeing he died for her also. Is he not a whole Savior, instead of a half one as those who hold it wrong for a woman to preach, would seem to make it appear.

Foes of women preachers forget that the women who were the last at the cross upon which Jesus died were also the first at the empty tomb, and the first to announce the gospel of resurrection. Today some good men who oppose the ordination of women may not be aware that before the civil war slave women preached and that for over 50 years Julia A. J. Foote who was the first woman deacon and the second ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion. She preached throughout the Midwest, the Northeast, Canada and California. She said to her critics :

We may be debarred entrance to many pulpits, as some of us now are, and stand at the door or on the street corner in order to preach to men and women. No difference when or where, we must preach a whole gospel. I submit that considering how close this world is to destruction we should say with Moses in Numbers 11:29 Would that all the people of God were prophets . Would that God would put his Spirit on them. ■

J. Alfred Smith Sr., Pastor Emeritus of Allen Temple Baptist Church in Oakland, California is a good friend to Christian Ethics Today and its editor. He has proven, in the finest sense, to be a Counselor, Guide, and Friend. A new endowed chair, named in his honor, is described here and I highly recommend support for this important and timely effort...Patrick Anderson, editor.

Please, May I Be Your Neighbor?

By Cameron Macky

I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania called New Wilmington, about one hour north of Pittsburgh. The town's biggest employer, where both of my parents were professors, is a small liberal-arts college, Westminster College.

In the United States, colleges and universities will sometimes give "honorary degrees" at their graduation ceremonies to citizens who have made a positive contribution to society; Westminster was no exception.

One year my father was selected to do the introductory speech for Westminster's honorary degree recipient. The honored graduate was a man named Fred Rogers. I assume that for many people, receiving one of these honors would be a once-in-a-lifetime thrill. The chance to speak at a college graduation (as the recipient usually does) would also be a lifetime highlight. But in the case of Fred Rogers, I am not so sure. For you see, during his lifetime, Fred Rogers was given honorary degrees **40 times**. He received four Emmy awards, a Peabody award and, after his retirement, he was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom – the highest honor the United States can grant any of its citizens – in a ceremony at the White House, officiated by President George W. Bush.

You might be asking: Who is this Fred Rogers and what did he do to receive these honors? What did he do to deserve his own postage stamp? Or, years after his death, to have a documentary made about him and his life's work? (That documentary, made in 2018, earned more money than any other biographical documentary in history.)

The life's work of Fred Rogers was this: He was the host of a children's show on television – or, at least, that was the career that he chose. In reality, the life's work of Fred Rogers was to teach millions of Americans, young and old, through not just his show, but also in the way he conducted his life and what it means to be a neighbor.

His show, titled "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," was filmed in Pittsburgh and ran for over 30 years on public television in the U.S. Each episode began the same way with Mr. Rogers singing "It's a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood," and an invitation to his viewers to come join him for half an hour of learning, an invitation that ended with the verse, "*Won't you please . . . won't you please . . . please won't you be my*

neighbor?" (It may not sound like much of a song, but consider this: Once, when he was riding the subway in New York, a group of schoolchildren recognized him and spontaneously started singing this song. A very large number of Americans have this song embedded deep within their psyches.)

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood emphasized one thing above all else: the nurturing and encouragement of small children. Though the use of puppets, songs, skits and conversations with guests, Mr. Rogers told generations of children that they were special; that it was okay to be different; that it was all right to have challenging emotions, and that there were positive ways of expressing those emotions.

Mr. Rogers told generations of children that they were special; that it was okay to be different; that it was all right to have challenging emotions, and that there were positive ways of expressing those emotions.

But beyond these things on the TV show – and more to the point of our scripture passages today - Fred Rogers lived his life outside his TV show exemplifying the values of love, grace, tolerance and kindness that he worked so hard to help children learn.

Fred Rogers received thousands of letters each year from children and their families. He answered every single one of them. He received prayer requests, which he always honored; requests for visits to children's groups, which he honored whenever he could; and he was famous for his kindness towards and interest in everyone he came across. In fact, when writers and reporters interviewed him, they would often find out that he asked them more questions about their lives than they were able to ask about his. Complete strangers would find comfort and grace and welcome when they met this man, who would treat them during their time together, as if they were the most important thing in his life. There are thousands of these what came to be known as "Fred" stories, many of which

are gathered in the archives of the Fred Rogers Foundation.

Fred Rogers, in short, exemplified love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. He treated strangers as friends. He was, and in many ways that still resonate with us, America's Neighbor.

This resonance – what one movie reviewer noted as “a yearning for kindness,” shows up emphatically in a second Mr. Rogers movie, released a year after the documentary. This second movie is a dramatized account of the friendship that developed between Mr. Rogers and a writer for *Esquire Magazine* who was assigned to write a brief article on him for an issue on American heroes. The writer, whose name in the movie is Lloyd but who in real life is named Tom Junod, is a cynical man with a difficult and deteriorating personal life and a reputation for writing articles that are unsparing in their criticism of their subjects.

Lloyd initially refused the assignment. He had recently won a national magazine-writing award, and he felt that writing about a children's show host was a fluff assignment, not deserving of his time. He asked his editor why he couldn't write an article on one of the other heroes who were to be in the issue. Her answer? “They all refused to be interviewed by you.”

Lloyd reluctantly went to Pittsburgh, where he encountered a person who was, he thought, absolutely too good to be true. But as they interacted, he discovered what so many others had: that Fred Rogers cared for him – a complete stranger. Mr. Rogers continually asked Lloyd how things in his life were going. He asked about Lloyd's shattered relationship with his father. He asked about Lloyd's wife and baby. He learned about Old Rabbit, Lloyd's favorite childhood toy, and he learned about Lloyd's struggles.

And later Fred Rogers gave his new friend, no longer a stranger, encouragement when it was most needed – when Lloyd's father suffers a heart attack and was bedridden and near death. And Lloyd responded, working to heal his relationship with his father and patching things up with his wife. He finds joy in his work, gaining a lifelong friend.

This is a story about a broken man encountering such goodness, peace, patience and kindness that he can't help but respond to it. And it is a story about one more fruit of the spirit: Mr. Rogers' manager at one point told Lloyd that he didn't want Fred to say yes to being interviewed, because of Lloyd's reputation. Lloyd asked what made Mr. Rogers say yes. He found out that after reading every single article of Lloyd's that he could find, Mr. Rogers said “I want to do the interview

anyway.” Fred Rogers saw all the evidence that everyone else saw: the cynicism, the take-downs, the anger, the brokenness, the disbelief in goodness – and he chose to spend time with this broken-down human, when all the other heroes had refused, and he chose to do everything he could to help him work through his brokenness.

This acceptance of our brokenness is called grace. It is called forgiveness. This is what it means to be a neighbor. To respond not just to the person or their behavior, but to see the inherent worth and potential in that person and to help them move closer to that worth and potential. To be a neighbor is to share the fruits of the spirit. We are to act with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control toward everyone around us.

That really is the message of Jesus's story. It's worth noting something interesting about it, however: The rich young man asked, “Who is my neighbor?” And Jesus never answers the question. He turns the question around, pointing out that it was the young

It is not, nor has it ever been, a question of who is or is not our neighbor. It is a question of choosing to be a neighbor ourselves. If you want to know who is your neighbor, Jesus says, start acting like one and the question will answer itself. It starts with us. But it doesn't end there.

man's job to be a neighbor himself, because in so doing he would begin to see everyone as his neighbor, everyone as deserving of his love, everyone as deserving of his time and energy and care.

It is not, nor has it ever been, a question of who is or is not our neighbor. It is a question of choosing to be a neighbor ourselves. If you want to know who is your neighbor, Jesus says, start acting like one and the question will answer itself. It starts with us. But it doesn't end there.

Have you ever wondered how the wounded traveler responded, after waking up to find out that he had been rescued, and cared for, by one of his people's enemies? I think I know, because of how humans often respond to grace.

There is a girl named Elizabeth Usher. At the age of five, she began to suffer as many as 100 seizures per

day. However, they never seemed to happen during her favorite TV show: Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. For two years, her parents sought medical help, until it was finally decided that she would need brain surgery to end the seizures.

A few weeks before the surgery, Elizabeth's mother called the studio where the TV show was filmed. She talked to one of the production assistants, hoping that Mr. Rogers would send an autographed picture, or maybe a note of encouragement. Little did she know.

A week before the surgery, the Usher family's phone rang. Mr. Rogers was calling. He talked – and sang – to Elizabeth for an hour. Later, he sent her tape recordings: songs and sometimes just talking about different topics. The surgery took place successfully, but there was a complication and Elizabeth fell into a coma. A little later, Mr. Rogers called the hospital for an update. He called again the next day. And the next. And he kept calling for two weeks as Elizabeth showed no sign of improving. Then Mr. Rogers decided that it was time to send in the puppets.

He got on a plane and flew to Baltimore. A friend picked him up at the airport, and they went straight to the hospital. And for an hour, Mr. Rogers, and all the characters from his neighborhood, played with and sang to Elizabeth, telling her that she was loved, and that she mattered, and that she was special. She had no idea that he was there. He knew that she would be unresponsive. He went anyway – because that is what neighbors do.

Two weeks later, when Elizabeth emerged from her coma, she indeed had no memory of the visit. But she knew it had happened – because he had left

the puppets with her. Peace. Goodness. Kindness. Gentleness. Elizabeth Usher and Fred Rogers remained friends for the rest of his life. She is now a motivational speaker, traveling throughout the United States, specializing in helping people find ways to use resilience, gratefulness, kindness, and humor get through life's challenges. One neighbor creates another; the life touched by Mr. Rogers now touches many, many others. As Jesus said, "Go and do the same." Amen. ■

Cameron Macky is a math teacher at the International School Bangkok. He preached this sermon in September 2021 at his home church in Bangkok, Thailand. He has lived in Bangkok with his wife, Caryn, for more than 20 years.

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REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

The United States has the highest rate of death during childbirth in the developed world. In 2020 the birthing person mortality rate was 23.8 deaths per 100,000 live births. And for Black people who gave birth it was more than double that: 55.3 deaths per 100,000 live births. If being a pregnant Black person was an occupation, it would be the second deadliest job in the United States.

...With even the best insurance there are copays and deductibles that pile up over 9+ months...I had an emergency c-section after my labor didn't progress for a full day. I remained in the hospital for two days after the surgery. It took me a decade to pay the bills...

Prenatal care is healthcare. Birth control is healthcare. Abortion is healthcare.

---#PadMay, May 4, 2022

Opposition to Abortion Doesn't Stop Some American Christians From Supporting Friends and Family Who Seek One

By Tricia C. Bruce

Maxine, a pseudonym for a 58-year-old woman, is among a sizable proportion of Americans who are morally opposed to abortion.

Republican, Christian and a grandmother, Maxine “can’t believe that anybody could honestly say that life doesn’t begin at conception. . . . That’s the black and whiteness of it, for me: Either it’s life or it’s not.” Abortion is “murder,” she told me.

But Maxine has also driven a friend to a clinic to get an abortion.

As a sociologist, I met Maxine in May 2019 while leading a study about how everyday people across the U.S. think and feel about abortion.

Maxine explains that her friend wasn’t perfect and neither were her circumstances, but she was still worthy of help.

“[S]eeing how [my friend] was raised and all the things that had happened to her, I guess it gave me more of a viewpoint where I would still say [abortion’s] wrong, but I would never tell anyone, ‘You did wrong,’ or condemn them in my mind,” Maxine said.

The cost and logistics of undergoing an abortion in the U.S. mean that few Americans can obtain one without help. Abortion seekers – more than half of whom are already mothers, many with young children – commonly look to friends or family for help.

My research, in collaboration with social demographer Sarah K. Cowan and colleagues, shows that many Americans may be willing to help a friend or family member get an abortion – including those morally opposed to it.

The personal side of abortion

My research team talked face to face, confidentially, with hundreds of Americans throughout the United States to explore abortion opinions beyond what surveys reveal. We mailed letters to 2,500 randomly selected U.S. residents, inviting participation in a study regarding a “social issue.” From the nearly 700 who completed a demographic pre-screener online, we selected 217 for in-depth interviews averaging 75 minutes. Our sample closely mirrors the U.S. population

overall.

Data from the 2018 General Social Survey, a nationally representative survey fielded since 1972 by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, revealed that 76% of Americans who were morally opposed to abortion would nonetheless give “emotional support” to a friend or family member who decided to have an abortion. Another 43% would help make arrangements, and 28% would help pay for associated costs. Six percent would help pay for the abor-

While federal and state courts debate the legal status of abortion, the issue is much more personal for ordinary Americans. Nearly a quarter of U.S. women will obtain an abortion by the age of 45. Three-quarters of the hundreds of Americans my team and I interviewed knew someone personally who has had an abortion.

tion itself.

Amid the backdrop of legislation in Texas permitting citizens to sue anyone who helps a woman obtain an abortion after six weeks of pregnancy, these findings may be noteworthy.

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Help despite moral opposition

Talking confidentially with morally opposed

Americans willing to help a loved one get an abortion helped us understand this seemingly contradictory behavior. Our team found three main explanations during our interviews.

The first was “commiseration”: exercising empathy for imperfect loved ones in an imperfect world. The second, “exemption,” carved out a special allowance for only their own loved ones. And a third, “discretion,” considered treating friends and family as capable of making their own moral decisions.

All three approaches enabled Americans otherwise opposed to abortion to maintain their personal values – in this case, keeping their moral opposition to abortion – while also exercising what they believed was an obligation to support a loved one.

One could ask whether this is hypocrisy. Our research suggests otherwise: that requests for help from friends and family activate multiple and potentially competing values.

Such is the case for Maxine and other Americans who hold simultaneously to their opposition to abortion and to their commitment to help a loved one in a time of need. My co-authors and I call this inclination to offer help that runs counter to another value “discordant benevolence.”

Finding morally opposed Americans among willing “helpers” muddies the line between those who support abortion rights and those who oppose them. It also complicates how many of us may understand the ways that ordinary Americans put their values vis-a-vis abortion into practice in real life.

Among interviewees who disclosed to us a personal abortion experience, 10% told us that they, too, were “morally opposed” to abortion. Another 50% said that abortion’s morality “depends.” Asked to clarify, interviewees named contingencies such as a person’s reasons, beliefs, risks, abortion history or consent to sex.

Their own reasons for seeking an abortion varied. Some felt pressured. Some didn’t know quite what to do. One told us, “It’s different when it comes to your body and your future and your life.” Interviewees with personal abortion experience were more likely to say that abortion should be “legal under any circumstances” than to say that they were “not morally opposed” to abortion, consistent with data from the General Social Survey regarding the U.S. population overall.

Americans commonly hedge and offer caveats and

exceptions to their legal opinions on abortion. Decades of polling from Gallup show the largest group of Americans to support legality in “certain” circumstances. Our interviews revealed that support varied depending on when in a pregnancy an abortion occurs, health risks, number of abortions, or even whether the abortion-seeker is known personally.

Contradictions, complexities and guesses, in other words, were common in ordinary Americans’ abortion thinking and corresponding behavior in relationship with others.

Helping at a crossroads

Like so many of the Americans we interviewed, Maxine bristled at shorthand labels for abortion positions such as “pro-life” as well as at the extremist rhetoric advanced by more radical flanks. “Both sides have a whole viciousness to them, you know?” She cautioned against rendering judgment “until you’ve walked in someone’s shoes.”

Legislation that targets the “helpers”, such as those

Contradictions, complexities and guesses, in other words, were common in ordinary Americans’ abortion thinking and corresponding behavior in relationship with others.

willing to lend a hand to a friend or family member seeking an abortion, sweeps up a far broader swath of Americans than policymakers may anticipate. The threat of a lawsuit may well dampen the degree of benevolence friends and family are willing to extend.

But as for Maxine, alongside many of her morally opposed American counterparts, the willingness to support a loved one might just persist alongside other sincerely held values. ■

Tricia C. Bruce is a sociologist at University of Notre Dame. This article was first published by The Conversation on April 22, 2022 and is reprinted here with permission of the author.

Reproductive Justice is the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.

—SisterSong

All I Know So Far...Reflections on Ruth

By Lindsay Bruehl

*I haven't always been this way
I wasn't born a renegade
I felt alone, still feel afraid
I stumble through it anyway*

*I wish someone would've told me that this life is
ours to choose
No one's handing you the keys or a book with all
the rules
The little that I know I'll tell to you
When they dress you up in lies and you're left
naked with the truth*

These words from the singer/songwriter Pink, who wrote the song *All I Know So Far* to her daughter, mirror a similar moment of nakedness with the truth that Ruth, Naomi and Orpah experienced.

Prior to 2015, I would say that I had a good idea of what the story of Ruth was telling me. I would not say I understood everything. I was drawn to the fact the title of the book is *Ruth*; so clearly Ruth must be the heroine I am trying to imitate. I never meditated on what that meant exactly, considering what she had to do to survive later in the story. That part did not stand out as clearly to me as her choosing the one true God and not giving up on Naomi.

Orpah, on the other hand, I was taught I should not be like. Her faith was not strong enough to keep going and she returned to her home and to her gods. No, I needed the faith of Ruth so I too could have my name listed in the story of salvation.

I barely even thought about Naomi. I saw her as simply a woman Ruth loved and kept my focus on Ruth. The year 2015 took me to a place spiritually where I could see a much bigger picture. I, too, had a story fail me both personally and in our communal life together in the travesty that is our politics.

My husband and I went with the truth in a situation that was nearly impossible to breathe through and believe we were actually experiencing. Going by way of the truth left us with so much loss that I could not stay in that world anymore. Then when I saw how cruel our politics was becoming with the church remaining silent in a moment that needed a prophetic voice, I lost that community too. This time it was by choice. I felt alone. I did not understand how

I was living in a world like this or how to keep moving knowing it was this cruel. My tears flowed freely everywhere I went. I could not stop them, not even when I went to Wal-Mart or work.

We as a family had to make a change to survive. I am now here at Perkins, preaching, because of the changes we made. I am doing something that I was told was closed to me based on my gender. The script I was handed was a bunch of rules, and those rules failed. Patriarchy has never served anyone well; Ruth, Naomi and Orpah were failed by it too. There is no book with all the rules. The story of Ruth is not about the rules of faith.

Now when I read this story, I hear the voices of

*How often do we not see that life
does not come with an instruction
manual until we are in deep pain and
despair—until we are at the end of
ourselves and all we are left with is the
naked truth.*

women who were failed by a system. Their feelings are demonstrated in this book—there is weeping and kissing. I can feel their grief and love even now. Feelings are rarely spelled out about in Hebrew scripture. It is an intentional silence that leads us to think for ourselves, contemplating how we feel about the events. The fact they are mentioned in this story means they are important to the story. Orpah's leaving was not presented negatively in this story. It was presented negatively only by the way we read it and teach it to others.

These women are now exposed to poverty and abuse in a way few of us can even fathom. How often do we not see that life does not come with an instruction manual until we are in deep pain and despair—until we are at the end of ourselves and all we are left with is the naked truth. Each of these women were in a place of learning how to make their own decisions and finding who they are in the story—and it was different for each of the women.

Let's resist pitting these women against each other; instead, let's see it through the lens of women organizing and choosing to live fully in a world not meant for them to survive on their own. This is a story demonstrating the power of women who organize.

"Return to your mother's house." The Hebrew word *Bēt 'im-māh* occurs only four times in scripture—in Ruth, Genesis 24:8 (Rebekah's story) and twice in the Song of Songs. Is this a signal of women learning to live creatively in patriarchy—of women organizing? Normally, Naomi would be expected to return to her father's house. Is Naomi's wrestling with God's leading her to find her own voice? Scripture calls her "bitter." I think she felt deep grief. Grief is the feeling of loss; grief is love.

I remember how my body felt when I felt completely abandoned by God and my community. I asked one of my former pastors why I felt so weird. He told me it was grief. Ruth, Naomi and Orpah each have their individual stories, leading them to their own liberation as they go through their grief, working together. Naomi is learning she has a voice and is worthy as she is. The story her fellow-humans told her was false. God heard her and Israel's redemption story is continued.

Now let's look at Ruth and Orpah, starting with the fact that both were Moabites. We have no indication of how Naomi felt about these women whom her sons married. These marriages would have been prohibited by Hebrew law. Moab was thought of as a scandalous place of Lot's daughters. It's another example of how diminishing the worth of people often comes out in words that also denigrate women. This is something we do still today. Whatever she felt about these daughters at first, we know she came to love them. She wants them to stay, remarry, find security, and be dealt with kindly as they have dealt kindly with her. There is nothing in the story that says she saw Ruth's decision as more honorable than Orpah's. Misinterpreting this story can have disastrous consequences, even as it has in our own American history. I have since learned that Orpah is a central figure to women who are marginalized. I was surprised by what I learned when I took a closer look.

In our American history, this story has been used as justification for the oppression of indigenous women. The stories of both Ruth and Orpah are true and good when we interpret them in ways that liberate. But there is another way to see the story that flips the script on Ruth. Ruth did have faith that helped redeem Israel and Naomi's story; but it came at a cost to Ruth. Orpah's story reveals that.

My husband's grandmother is an indigenous woman

who was raised in a boarding school in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma. She is 94-years-old, and I went to speak with her earlier this month about what had happened and how she was placed in that school. It was an illuminating experience that I will never forget. I had heard bits and pieces of her story but never from her own mouth. My seminary training was vital in knowing what questions to ask and how I needed to respond when I heard parts of her story that were grievous, and when Christianity was used to justify it. I venture to say that no one would be happy to know how our own faith tradition's theology was used to justify the colonization of a people.

And the misinterpretation of Ruth's story by Thomas Jefferson, our third president and a founding father, is largely how we got here. This played out in tragic ways that we are still not over. My own husband's family is affected by it. Dr. Habito told me that Jake's grandmother, Irene Wapskineh Wheeler, may not be part of my biological family history, but she is my history through marriage. And this healing that is happen-

The Israelites hypersexualized the Moabite women and the early colonist men did this to indigenous women too. Thomas Jefferson used Ruth's action of uncovering Boaz's feet as he slept and what happened next as a theology for saying that both Moabite women and American Indian women are agents of "evil and sexual impurity."

ing is part of my salvation too. Healing is happening in the telling of her story and my receiving it.

In honor of my husband's family, I looked at this story from an indigenous perspective. That is how I discovered how Thomas Jefferson used Ruth's story to conquer indigenous women. The Israelites hypersexualized the Moabite women and the early colonist men did this to indigenous women too. Thomas Jefferson used Ruth's action of uncovering Boaz's feet as he slept and what happened next as a theology for saying that both Moabite women and American Indian women are agents of "evil and sexual impurity." He thought indigenous men were weak because of the women, and described their features and mannerisms in detail as to why he thought they were weak.

Instead of viewing Ruth as an example of interethnic bonding and how to survive as a stranger in a land where Israelites were told repeatedly not to harm her, her story was told as her turning her back on Moab and converting to Israel's God. This is how xenophobia and ethnic cleansing were justified.

But even with the privilege of mixing, American Indians (indigenous peoples) are highly suspicious of that as well. Thomas Jefferson believed there was an irresolvable problem--an "Indian Problem." He believed the mixing of blood would take the indigenous out of them eventually and the superior blood would spread over the land. Jefferson believed the marriage of Ruth and Boaz was doing the same thing--leading to social absorption. Further, Ruth's assimilation is complete through Obed's (Ruth's baby with Boaz) transfer to Naomi and Boaz. Ruth's agency in the beginning is diminished in the end and her story is absorbed into the story of Israel, back to the patriarchs after women working together brought about the salvation story for Israel once again. The story of Rahab, Ruth's mother-in-law, can be told in similar fashion.

This is a hard interpretation of a story that comes at a crucial and important time in Israel's salvific history. I was recently listening to Rabbi Nancy Kasten, co-founder of the nonprofit Faith Commons, when she said this: "There is no one way to read scripture. The goal we should have is to do no harm. But know when we present a story, that is not the only way the story can be told."

This is true for the story of Ruth. We can lament the history that has used Ruth's story to harm our own siblings in our American history. But we can also rejoice that indigenous people can find their story of salvation in scripture too. Through Orpah, their pain and story are known. When we allow the truth in, the naked truth (not the truth as we wish it were), we can find the character of God. We do not serve a God who believes anyone should be assimilated and conquered.

Can the Ruth story be read that way? Sure. But is that the God we know in scripture overall? I rarely say "must" in a sermon, but we must be careful. It is important to meditate on scripture often to know who God is. These sacred words have the power of life and death.

When I talked to Jake's grandmother, she told me

she still believes what she had been taught. She told me that she knows Methodists are a derivative of the Catholic faith. I reminded her that I am Baptist, and she said she knew that Baptists operate differently. She told me she was prevented from co-mingling with people like me growing up. So, in knowing that, we can hear a woman who had been colonized by a faith she still believes in whole-heartedly and who was even taught to not be around people like me. She is now telling her story to a woman like me, a Baptist. This is how women organize. This is how we get to the redeeming/healing work of God.

As I finished writing this sermon, Pink's words from *All I Know So Far* came to me again:

So you might give yourself away, yeah
And pay full price for each mistake
But when the candy coating hides the razor blade
You can cut yourself loose and use that rage

I wish someone would've told me that this darkness comes and goes

We can lament the history that has used Ruth's story to harm our own siblings in our American history. But we can also rejoice that indigenous people can find their story of salvation in scripture too.

People will pretend but, baby girl, nobody knows
And even I can't teach you how to fly
But I can show you how to live like your life is
on the line ■

Lindsay Bruehl is a third-year Baptist student at Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Texas. She graduated from Oklahoma State University majoring in Finance, and is anticipating pastoral ministry. This sermon was delivered in Chapel at Perkins on October 28, 2021.

Want to Understand Critical Race Theory? Read the Good Samaritan Story

By Susan M. Shaw and Regina McClinton

Critical Race Theory grew out of the work of legal scholars of color who recognized how racism was structured in law, although now it is used across a wide variety of academic disciplines and activist work. CRT recognizes that racism, rather than being individual attitudes, is a system that produces and is produced by social institutions (like the church, education, medicine, media and law) and symbolic messages (like language and images).

CRT attempts to make these systems visible in order to dismantle them and build more inclusive, equitable and just structures.

It's about story telling

A primary method of CRT is counter-storytelling. CRT tells stories that challenge dominant stories, norms and assumptions. Counter-stories highlight the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable people whose narratives expose problems with dominant narratives. Counter-stories are especially useful in exposing discourses that seem race-neutral but in reality rest on racist assumptions.

For example, the dominant narrative of science is one of objectivity, empiricism and merit. But listen to the stories of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) in science, and you'll hear another story. One Pew Research Center study found that more than 60% of Black STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) workers had experienced some sort of racial bias at work. Another report found that 77% percent of Black women in science feel they have to prove themselves over and over again.

In that same study, Latinas reported experiencing backlash for being assertive on the job. During her graduate program in plant biology, Regina felt she had to prove herself again and again, especially as the only Black student in her cohort. In fact, one white faculty member tried to have her terminated from the program. Messages were sometimes blatant, sometimes subtle, but always clear — “Are you really good enough?”

These counter-stories expose the fallacies of the dominant narrative and help us see how the dominant narrative obscures experiences of diverse people.

Learning from Jesus

Jesus used a similar technique in his teaching. In fact, we see a good example of CRT at work in the story of the Good Samaritan.

The context for that story in Luke is a challenge to Jesus by a lawyer. The lawyer asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him what is written in the law, and the lawyer replies, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus tells the lawyer that he has given the right answer. He has stat-

The prevailing narrative in Jesus' time was that a neighbor was someone who was a member of the covenant community and who shared a reciprocal relationship to support and promote welfare. A Samaritan did not fit this bill.

ed the law, and now all he has to do is live by it.

But that's not enough for the lawyer. He wants to justify himself, and so he asks, “Who is my neighbor?”

The prevailing narrative in Jesus' time was that a neighbor was someone who was a member of the covenant community and who shared a reciprocal relationship to support and promote welfare. A Samaritan did not fit this bill. In fact, Samaritans were considered “ethnically and religiously suspect.” While Samaritans saw themselves as true Israelites, Jews saw them as a result of a mixture of Assyrians and Israelites, especially a religious mixture. The lawyer would not have expected a Samaritan to be the protagonist of a story.

So Jesus rocks his world by telling a counter-story that challenges the lawyer's ethno-religious bias and asks him to think and act differently.

Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that often outsiders in a story may have a fuller perception of what's happen-

ing than insiders because their “outsidedness” puts them in a better position to see what’s really going on. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, outsiders often understand Jesus better, including the Samaritan woman at the well.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, we again see an outsider who better understands the law than the lawyer. So the story puts the lawyer — and Jesus’ listeners (and modern day readers) — on the spot. It disrupts our worldview of who our neighbor is, and it demands we act, not like the priest and Levite insiders, but like the Samaritan outsider.

Racial identity as motivator

Reading this narrative as a counter-story within the context of Critical Race Theory raises a number of possibilities for modern readers.

At the core of this story is ethno-religious identity. We see a similar dynamic in white evangelical Christianity in the age of Trump. What purports to be a religious identity is really a racial identity that shapes religion, which is why we often see behaviors so at odds with the teachings of Jesus.

As in the story of the Good Samaritan, the insiders are those who by their embrace of ethnic and religious identity purport to know and keep the law, and yet we see that in centering these dominant identities they actually violate the spirit of the law they profess to keep. As the story shows us, it’s one thing to know the law and another to do it. Or to paraphrase Bebe Moore Campbell, “Your Christianity ain’t like mine.”

In June 2015, Dylan Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist, studied and prayed with parishioners at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, S.C. While in the 17th and 18th centuries in this country whites shared the gospel with free and enslaved Black people, churches remained sites of segregation and discrimination. In the early 19th century, many free Black people left these congregations to create their own denominations and churches, free of white control and discrimination. Emanuel AME, “Mother Emanuel,” was one of the first of these churches and so an apt target for Roof’s bigotry and rage.

After the Bible study, Roof opened fire and killed nine members of the church.

In the aftermath, rather than crying out for retaliation, the congregation prayed for Roof, even as they buried their dead. They offered him words of forgiveness. Some predominantly white Christian denominations issued statements condemning the shooting and racial hatred; others, including the Southern Baptist Convention, remained largely silent. Some conservative news organizations turned the shooting into a

religious issue, completely ignoring the central racial dynamic.

Following the shooting, many South Carolinians gained a new awareness of the continuing existence of racism, and renewed calls for the Confederate flag at the South Carolina statehouse finally to come down prevailed at last. Yet in both 2016 and 2020, 55% of South Carolina voters, mostly white, cast their ballots for Trump, a man with a long record of violating every Christian norm, even as Black South Carolinians by far voted for Clinton and Biden.

Who is in the ditch?

We might easily read this story with Dylan Roof as the attacker who leaves someone in a ditch by the side of the road. But what if we read it with Roof in the ditch, wounded by legacies of white supremacy, with Black members of Mother Emanuel as those who show him compassion?

Where does that leave other white people? Like Roof in the ditch and in need of compassion and healing

We might easily read this story with Dylan Roof as the attacker who leaves someone in a ditch by the side of the road. But what if we read it with Roof in the ditch, wounded by legacies of white supremacy, with Black members of Mother Emanuel as those who show him compassion?

from racism? Or like the priest and Levite who walk on by, too invested in their own racial and religious purity to help? Or the lawyer, trying to justify themselves?

Read this way, the story doesn’t leave room for “good” white people who think they aren’t complicit within the system of racism. Rather, the story read this way makes abundantly clear the inconvenient truth that white people do not escape accountability for racism simply because they announce their good intentions toward people of color.

What it means to be human

Another truth of the story is the role Black people play in the liberation of white people from the sin of racism. The Samaritan saw helping the injured man as part of his responsibility as a citizen of this world, as a

human being. He didn't need to be thanked; he didn't need to be repaid. He needed to be able to look himself in the mirror and know that he had done the right thing. He knew what it was to be dismissed, discriminated against, stepped over. And so he, like many people of color, gave to someone who could be his enemy, because he understood love for his fellow human to be for all people, not just those who look like him.

This also seems to be the plight of people of color in this country, especially Black people. The racial liberation of white people rests on the work of people of color. This work takes many forms, such as leading marches to protest racial violence; devoting one's academic scholarship to explaining what race and racism are; giving guidance on how to be anti-racist; and organizing community conversations with white neighbors.

White people have their own work to do, but it always happens in relationship with the work of people of color to dismantle racism.

Get uncomfortable

If these stories and readings leave you uncomfortable, that's the point of both Jesus' parables and CRT. They expose the ambiguities, create disruptions and demand that we face truths better seen by outsiders. They bring subordinated perspectives to the surface so we have to confront systemic, institutional and personal failings, and then they call on us to act.

Only by hearing counter-stories can the white church confront its racist past and its continuing participation in the maintenance of white supremacy.

The white church needs to hear the outsider lest it become self-congratulatory for renouncing racism in its proclamations while embodying white supremacy

in its practices. The white church must realize it is in that ditch with Dylan Roof in need of redemption and healing.

The counter-stories of CRT offer a powerful and disconcerting way for the white church to begin its journey toward racial repentance, atonement and reconciliation. ■

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The white church needs to hear the outsider lest it become self-congratulatory for renouncing racism in its proclamations while embodying white supremacy in its practices. The white church must realize it is in that ditch with Dylan Roof in need of redemption and healing.

...overreach of the Catholic Church...led by a small group of old, mostly white, allegedly celibate men who will never, ever become pregnant – yet have spent almost 50 years and millions of dollars trying to control women's bodies, capture the federal judiciary, and take choice out of the rightful hands of patients and their caregivers...

—From a written statement from Catholics for Choice, President Jamie L. Manson

Is Life Possible Before Death: Reflections on “Decoration Day” in the Deep South¹

By John Crider

*“There’ll be no sorrows **there** No more burdens to bear No more sickness and no more pain No more parting over there ... What a day that will be when my Jesus I shall see ... What a day, glorious day that will be.”²*

Such were the words of the opening hymn of the 2021 annual *Decoration Day* service I attended at a small church in rural North Alabama. Out of sheer obligation, a subtle guilt trip meticulously executed by my mother, and fear of being shamed by my aging aunts for missing yet another *Decoration*—missing *Decoration* was anathema among my people and was tantamount to missing the funeral of a family patriarch—I loaded up mom (and her wheelchair) early on a Spring Sunday morning and made the trek to the other side of the neighboring county. On arrival, we rolled down the aisle to the very front of the church and created a new front row so as not to block the aisle. We had 50-yard-line seats.

Decoration is a long-standing tradition in the deep South among rural churches with adjoining cemeteries. The event serves as a family-church reunion of sorts with dinner on the grounds and sometimes a gospel music *sangin’*. Some *Decorations* feature *Fa-So-La*³ attended by singers traveling from far and wide. The festivities center on a memorial service for those of the church and family who have passed on into Glory. On this one day of the year, these rural churches, many filled with aging congregations with waning attendance and struggling to survive, are packed with former members, wayward members coming to pay tribute to MeeMaw and PawPaw, and children and grandchildren returning home from the four winds.

This congregation knew no fear. In the midst of a global pandemic and in overt violation of CDC guidelines, these congregants confronted the Coronavirus head on—perhaps a subliminal desire to join their loved ones prematurely or maybe even a demonstration of solidarity against the governmental *Beast* motivated total disregard for the deadly pathogen. While an unshakable belief in hope of life after death was evidenced by the group, belief in a virus that has killed millions is conspiratorial and vaccination is voodoo.

There were no masks in sight. Amidst this memorializing of death, the realities of life were being ignored.

After the opening hymn, those who had made previous arrangements with the *song leader*, filed down the aisle one-by-one and sang a solo in memory of their deceased relative of choice. The only qualification was that the soloist be able to hold a microphone—evidenced by one three-year-old who was just learning to talk, but who could scream-sing “*In the Highways In the Hedges*” with precision. Selections included everything from Stamps Baxter and the Broadman hymnal to straight-up country music (that on any other given Sunday would be considered inappropriate).

While an unshakable belief in hope of life after death was evidenced by the group, belief in a virus that has killed millions is conspiratorial and vaccination is voodoo. There were no masks in sight.

ate for “*big church*”). The testimony before each song always included a comment noting “This was one of Mamma’s favorite songs,” etc. immediately followed by the refrain, “Y’all pray for me as I sing.”

Once the prearranged “official” solos (as printed in the bulletin) were completed, those who had not made prior arrangements with the song director were given opportunity to pay homage in song. The talent wavered between bad and worse and, unfortunately, the sincerity of the singer often did not correlate with the quality of the performance. Many of the selections were interrupted by tears and gasps reminiscent of Briscoe Darlin of Andy Griffith lore. I found myself wishing someone would channel Charlene, saying, “*We can’t sing that one, Paw, because that one makes you cry.*”

The song service concluded with the song director bringing a powerful and touching rendition of “*It Is Well With My Soul*,” with not a dry eye in the house, including mine

Members of the congregation, now primed for the

memorial part of the service, were then invited to the altar to commemorate their loved one by lighting a memorial candle—a rural version of *All Saints Day*. At least 100 14-inch candles (approximately doubling the number of the congregants) were arranged on a four-row tiered table staged in front of the pulpit. The altar was flanked by two teenaged acolytes, each holding a 60-inch brass candlelighter extender with bell snuffer and a manual slider to keep the flame burning by slowly extending the wick. The detailed description of the acolytes and their duties was required because, unlike most liturgical churches which employ candle-bearers in most services, the use of an acolyte as such is unbeknownst in most of these rural churches. However, in this one service, these churches make up for their usual lack of liturgy, which is often viewed with suspicion by most Baptists.

As each honoree's name (published in the bulletin) was read, family members filed down to the altar to light their memorial candle. Since most of the attendees are devout back-row Baptists, the service was lengthened to accommodate the added time needed to make the trek down the aisle, requiring the organist to play at least four extra hymns, being sure to play each verse—not even skipping the middle verses as most Baptists are accustomed. Those who had neglected to add their deceased relative's name to the published list were then invited to participate. During this quite lengthy ceremony, the organist dug deep into the hymnal, playing every funeral song that even remotely mentions heaven or *the sweet by-and-by*. At this point during the processional, any remaining dry eye in the congregation welled with tears.

The only qualification for one to light a candle was their being able to make it down the aisle (by any means—cane, walker, wheelchair and, in one case, being carried down the aisle, reminiscent of an injured player being assisted off the field). Graduation from preschool or even the ability to hold the flaming torch unassisted was not a prerequisite. Minimum height also was not a requirement.

After all, the candle-lighter extender is 60 inches long.

One-by-one many approached the altar:

Families, four-deep, vying for hand position on the candle lighting extender, each simultaneously attempting to coordinate movement of the flame toward the candle wick; children, wielding the open flame like a sparkler on the Fourth of July;

Elderly widows and widowers, trudging down the aisle—walker or cane in hand—letting go of their stabilizing implement, now wobbling in front of the table of flames, making a valiant

effort to memorialize their spouse. All the while, the angst of the congregation built as if awaiting a multi-car NASCAR pile-up while simultaneously hoping the octogenarian did not lose his or her balance and fall into the inferno—hence, prematurely becoming a part of next year's memorial service; one member with Parkinson's disease and tremors so coarse that three candles are lit in the process, two unintentionally;

Seniors with eyesight so poor that the 60-inch candlelighter extender took the flame beyond the focal point of their glasses such that they were attempting to light the space between the candles;

Some, even after employing a two-handed approach, gave up in frustration with wicks that were bent down over the side of the candle, requiring the usher to take control; One elderly man dragging an oxygen tank of highly combustible gas—and in an

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answer to the prayers of all in the building—suddenly realized that he needed to remove his oxygen before approaching the table so that the entire congregation did not explode and become the theme for next year's memorial service. The dilemma of his decision became apparent only as he was gasping for breath, desperately returning to his oxygen tank deposited by the front pew. As I noted the bluish cyanosis appearing around his lips, I began reviewing my CPR protocol in order to avoid this poor fellow's being added to the list in next year's bulletin.

About 50 candles into the service, the candle-lighter extender on the left burned out. The wick was exhausted, someone having forgotten to reload the wick. I quickly looked to the acolyte on the right. He had about an inch-and-a-half to go, probably only enough for five more candles with at least 40 more

candles in arrears. Efforts by the acolytes to hasten the lighting process among the arthritic parishioners were of no avail. As the flame of the second candlelighter extender extinguished, I breathed a sigh of relief as I had been looking upward during the service wondering when the ceiling tiles would buckle under the stress of the heat.

The acolytes bumbled around for what to do. As I was about to suggest they make an appeal to the smokers in the crowd, one of the acolytes located the miniature propane trigger-lighter with a two-inch barrel which had been used to light the candlelighter extenders, and the service proceeded. (In retrospect, an appeal to the smokers in the crowd would both have solved the immediate problem and offered an ironic act of redemption to those tobacco users of the congregation whom “we ain’t been too sure about” since smoking amongst Fundamentalists approximates a cardinal sin bringing one closer to the fires of hell.)

Compared with the miniature two-inch barrel propane trigger-lighter, the importance of the *60-inch* candlelighter extender became obvious when the congregation collectively realized that the decision to start the ceremony by lighting the candles beginning with the front row on the table appeared to have been a choice not well thought out. Awkward moments occurred between each person as the acolyte struggled to relight the trigger lighter which inevitably dissipated as the trigger was released. Participants contorted their bodies with awkward arm extensions and bowed torsos as they attempted to reach for the fourth row with the two-inch lighter while attempting to avoid a taste of hell on their forearms from the candles on the first three rows. Perhaps as a result of repeatedly relighting the trigger-lighter between candles or, perhaps, an epiphany akin to the burning bush, one of the ushers offered one of the previously lit candles to the next participant, providing an additional 14 inches of extension and calming the fear and trepidation of those challenged with lighting the back row of candles.

While the show did go on using a previously lit candle and major burns were avoided, occasional jerks and flinches were noted because the candle in hand did not include the often-taken-for-granted circular paper hot-wax hand protector (aka a paper plate with a hole in the center with protruding candle). The acolytes in particular were vulnerable to the dripping hot wax. However, they quickly learned (after the second or third trickle of hot wax onto their bare hands) that tilting the candle slightly forward solved their problem. However, as I looked to the floor, I realized this had created a new problem for the church custodian as a puddle of wax collected at their feet. I also noticed

that the puddle of wax was much larger than it ought to have been based on the short time the bare-handed candles had come into play. Then it dawned on me. This lack of forethought had happened before!

I was unable to avoid the wax puddle as I rolled my mother to the edge of the blaze, now whipped into a lather by the ceiling fan originally installed to cool off the preacher. Our COVID-19 masks offered little protection against smoke inhalation. Mom fought through her asthma valiantly, lighting a candle and aptly demonstrating the communal commitment to this rural liturgy. From the back of the wheel chair watching my brother guide Mom’s tremulous hand toward the last candle in tribute to my father and overwhelmed my sensibilities. I was thankful that my mask hid my stiff upper lip.

Then, with the altar now ablaze—I’ve seen fewer candles in a Greek Orthodox cathedral—the preacher took the pulpit. Coronavirus particles lingering in the atmosphere did not stand a chance now that the sanctuary was transformed into an autoclave. My previous fear that the service would create a super-spreader

With an obvious metaphor burning before the congregation on the altar and the best opportunity he had all year to preach to the “lost,” the preacher further lit up the pulpit. In contrast to the organist’s heaven-themed music, the preacher referenced every verse pertaining to hell in the Holy Writ.

viral surge was all for naught.

With an obvious metaphor burning before the congregation on the altar and the best opportunity he had all year to preach to the “lost,” the preacher further lit up the pulpit. In contrast to the organist’s heaven-themed music, the preacher referenced every verse pertaining to hell in the Holy Writ. These scriptures were augmented by vigorous emotional appeals to one’s instinct to survive into eternity and every cliché ever preached about the Lake of Fire.

“Do you know that you know that you know...” and “If you’re 99 percent sure you’re saved, you’re 100 percent lost” were frequent refrains extending into the invitation.

The preacher offered a brow-wiping, pulpit-thumping, open-Bible-flailing delivery. One powerful

right-handed swoop of his well-worn limp-leather Bible cover across his body, pages waving in the air, extinguished three candles on the back corner, ironically lessening the effect of the flaming metaphor. The preacher qualified his harsh commentary stating, “I don’t need no ‘doctrinal’ degree to tell you what it takes to be on the highway to hell, as the old song goes.” I think he meant to reference Scripture and not *AC/DC*. Unfortunately, many of his comments appeared to apply to several of those being memorialized. “You think this altar is hot?” ...

For those who disagreed with his assessment he offered a final consolation, “Don’t be mad at me. Be mad at God.” (It was a questionable rhetorical move if one’s stated intent is to foster an attitude of humble repentance.)

The fire analogy quickly became a mixed metaphor as the preacher had initially referenced the fire as a pure flame of life that burned eternally. However, perhaps recalling the immediate context of all the “lost” in the congregation, he quickly pivoted, and the eternal flame of life was transformed into the eternal flames of Hades. Either way, the *eternal* nature of the fiery metaphor burning on the altar was being challenged with each passing minute as the memorial candles were burning down to a nub.

The sermon reintroduced me to the God I had rebelled against many years ago—a God with very real judgement and with grace out of reach, masquerading as just another version of unachievable Old Testament law or the capricious gods of Greek mythology who could not be appeased. These words conjured up memories of my white knuckles gripping the pew during invitations past as my “sincere” faith was challenged week in and week out, reminding me that my sincere faith might be “sincerely wrong.” The flames of these words, no doubt, were also fanned by my past relationship with my all-too-judgmental father whom we were also memorializing.

I had anticipated this experience and took a book to read for distraction (camouflaged in a leather cover so as to appear I was referencing the Scripture during the sermon). However, the inertia of past experience or perhaps the mesmerizing cantor of the preacher’s rhetoric or perhaps the hypnotic effect of the flames drew me back into the abyss of Fundamentalism, and I found myself in the midst of that same teenaged emotional spirituality, complete with a God who appeared more like Zeus than Jesus.

I am reminded of *New York Times*’ journalist, Dennis Covington, who wrote a book on the snake-handling churches of Sand Mountain⁴ (churches within an hour of my own church). Despite Mr. Covington’s journalis-

tic objectivity, he became so engulfed in this religious subculture and experience that he ultimately joined in and handled poisonous snakes himself! Like Mr. Covington, I, too, was drawn back into a dangerous, irrational, and destructive religious experience under the guise of a heaven to gain and a hell to pay.

As I recovered from being pummeled on the existential ropes of pseudo-spiritual emotion and experience, I recalled a story told by Reform Jewish theologian and Vanderbilt Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies, A. J. Levine. My recollection and paraphrase of the story follows. Dr Levine recounted her experience consoling her dying mother, reminding her mother of the relief of suffering, the wiping away of tears, the eternal healing of ailments, and of the heavenly bliss that awaits her. After her mother passed, her husband who had observed the encounter asked her,

“What was that all about? You don’t believe any of that.”

And she replied, “In that moment I did.”⁵

In this memorial celebration that was *well-intended* to garner hope in an often dark and grieving world,

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all the while reminding of eternal doom, I retreated to more realistic spiritual questions.

As I examined my own life through this fundamentalist scriptural interpretive lens, I pondered the thought that gain of everlasting life on the basis of tyrannical judgment perpetuated by fear and threats of eternal torment would be little more than the death and hell that so often defines the experiences of our temporal world. And who wants to experience that even now, much less for eternity?

The same Scripture also reminds us that Jesus declared:

“Let the dead bury their own dead,”⁶

and

“I came so that they would have life, and have it abundantly.”⁷ and (to people who were not *actually* dead⁸), and

“Whoever tries to keep their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life will preserve it.”⁹

I am reminded of so many in my experience who appear to grieve their own lives like they grieve their loved ones who have passed. There appears to be no life in their life. Jesus’ challenge to those who desire to experience life (Luke 17:33) is a premonition of *The Walking Dead*.¹⁰ Jesus’ proclamation to those who wager much of their existence in the here and now by seeking eternal bliss primarily on the basis of fear and what awaits in the there and then is to offer life now (John 10:10). I wonder if Jesus’ warning in Luke 17:33 also includes the afterlife. Many are so enamored with *going to heaven* that they miss the trajectory of the New Testament depicting heaven coming to earth, mostly sooner rather than later.¹¹

As I approach my own senior years, envisioning my candle flickering and burning down on the altar table, I am reminded that death and the afterlife are not the priority of the believer. Rather, I continue negotiating the tension created by fear-based Fundamentalism versus the almost ubiquitous history of human hope (both theological and anthropological) for the sweet *by-and-by*. Within this avoidance on the one hand and anticipation on the other lies the ultimate memorial question, “*Is life possible before death?*”¹² ■

1 This story is a verisimilitude and amalgamation of decades of Decoration Day experiences in rural North Alabama with concluding reflections on life and death.

2 Hill Jim. What a Day That Will Be, 1955. Renewed 1983 Ben Speer Music (admin. by ClearBox Rights)

3 *Fa-So-La* singing, also known as *Sacred Harp* or *Shape Note* singing, is a style of church music in which the notes, “Fa,” “So,” “La,” etc. (each represented by a unique *shaped-note* on the musical scale) are sang a cappella and in harmony in place of the words of the song on the first verse followed by singing the song narrative.

4 Covington, Dennis. *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia*. Addison-Wesley. 1995.

5 YouTube. Online video clip, https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=AFy_jjP2WzU

(accessed 28 March 2019).

6 Luke 9:60. New International Version.

7 John 10:10. New American Standard Bible.

8 Jesus did not have the benefit of Calvin’s theological construct and assumed that the “dead” people he was addressing actually retained a potential to experience life.

9 Like 17:33. New International Version. Luke does not think it necessary to augment Jesus’ declaration with “for my sake” as does Matthew.

10 A modern day zombie apocalypse featuring zombies who are alive only for the sake of being alive and who remain alive only by destroying life

11 Matthew 6:10 instructs the believer to pray for the rule of heaven to be experienced on earth (“Thy kingdom come *on earth* ...”) Revelation 3:12, 21:2, and 21:10 depict the New Jerusalem *descending* to earth. Even those of Thessalonians 4:17 who “will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” will return to earth to dwell with the Lord forever on earth in the same way that the citizens of Rome would flock to join the victorious Caesar and usher him back into Rome.

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12 A question explored by Radical (“Pyro-theologian”), Peter Rollins. Rollins, Peter. *Insurrection: To believe is Human, To Doubt, Divine*. Howard Books. 2011.

‘Roe’ is collapsing and millions of lives will be saved because of the millions of evangelicals who voted in 2016 for a President who kept his word.”

Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church Dallas

What Christians Singing on an Airplane and a Coach Praying on the 50-yard Line Have in Common

By Mark Wingfield

There's a common thread in two seemingly unrelated cases in the news right now: The Christians singing worship songs on a commercial airline flight and the former high school football coach in Washington State who insisted on holding public prayers on the 50-yard line after games.

The common thread is performative Christianity that operates out of a place of assumed privilege. That is a privilege so taken for granted that the average American Christian has no clue they are swimming in it.

We should not be surprised by this. This is, in fact, how much of evangelical Christianity operates. It's how I was raised and most other evangelicals were raised. We were not trained out of meanness or spite, but we were conditioned to believe we held the true truth and represented the majority culture — despite also being taught that we were being severely persecuted by godless secularists.

I know to outsiders this may sound insane. But inside the system, particularly if you're a child or teenager, it makes perfect sense.

“The root of this mindset is Christian nationalism.”

The root of this mindset is Christian nationalism. If you begin with the premise that America was founded as a “Christian nation” — which it was not — then it easily follows that Christians must be given special privilege. This is seen not only as an expectation but as a historical fact.

This is one of the unspoken reasons evangelicals are so upset about revisiting the true stories of American history: If we start unraveling the previously untold stories of the Alamo and George Washington and Ronald Reagan — to name a few — there's a severe danger that Christian privilege could be challenged. Their whole cloth of privilege could come apart by pulling on a single thread.

Take the young people singing on the plane. I've been in similar situations. I've even been a chaperone with church youth choirs who were asked to spontaneously sing in public places because others were genuinely interested in the work the youth were doing. I get

it. And I also know that in the evangelical mindset, no opportunity for public witness should be ignored. This is, at root, about an evangelistic mindset, about bearing public witness to faith and inviting others to join.

But what we have failed to understand is that is the very problem. We can quickly become like siding salesmen showing up unannounced at the front door of your house. We may indeed have the best “product” in the world, but that doesn't mean we have the right to force our witness on unsuspecting passengers who

Such attitudes and actions from Christians are not evil, but they are misguided. And they originate from a place of assumed privilege.

can't simply step off the airplane.

The parallel to this, of course, is the thousands of evangelicals who have been trained — literally trained — to use places like airplanes to evangelize their seatmates. What Christians may see as a God-ordained witnessing opportunity, the poor seatmate may see as religious assault.

“What Christians may see as a God-ordained witnessing opportunity, the poor seatmate may see as religious assault.”

Such attitudes and actions from Christians are not evil, but they are misguided. And they originate from a place of assumed privilege. As I've written before, there's an easy test to understand this: What if the roles were reversed and you, dear Christian, were seated next to an evangelizing Muslim or Hindu or Mormon or atheist? Would you afford them the same assumed privilege you claim for yourself? I don't think so.

Modern Christians must understand that we live in an increasingly pluralistic society and that assuming Christian privilege actually does more harm than good. If you want to be a good witness for Jesus, this is not

the way to do it. It is tone deaf and arrogant and rude — pretty much the opposite of every virtue of love described in 1 Corinthians 13.

Which brings us to the former high school football coach, Joe Kennedy. He says his Christian faith compels him to offer public prayers on the 50-yard line after games. Compels him?

Where has he learned that? There is no biblical mandate for such an attitude. In fact, quite the opposite. Jesus scorned the Pharisees who made a show of their public piety and said instead it would be better to pray alone in a closet.

Officials with the Bremerton, Wash., school district offered Coach Kennedy the equivalent of a prayer closet and he refused it. He demanded a public display allegedly to give glory to God. But what everyone else saw was him giving glory to his own ego, not to God.

“He demanded a public display allegedly to give glory to God. But what everyone else saw was him giving glory to his own ego, not to God.”

And in the process, he effectively coerced impressionable young athletes to join his midfield spectacle — a clear violation of the First Amendment.

But as we see clearly now — good heavens, this case just was heard by the U.S. Supreme Court yesterday — modern evangelicals are interested in only half of the First Amendment’s religious freedom language. They only want to emphasize their own freedom of religious expression while ignoring the prohibition on governments or schools establishing or favoring one religion over another. As long as the religion being established is theirs.

The fact that the Supreme Court agreed to hear this case — that alone is stunning. It should have been

dismissed out of hand. And that there are enough justices on the high court who apparently believe — despite decades of legal precedent — a coach might be entitled to such a blatantly sectarian religious display is unimaginable. If the court rules in the coach’s favor, conservative evangelicals will have succeeded in rewriting the very definition of “religious liberty” to be “liberty for me but not for thee.”

If you don’t believe that’s true, go back to the test mentioned above: Would Muslims or Jews or Wiccans or atheists or Hindus be afforded the same privilege to rally at center field after every football game and coerce student athletes to participate? Once again, I don’t think so. ■

Mark Wingfield serves as executive director and publisher of Baptist News Global. This article first appeared on Baptist News Global on April 26, 2022 and is reprinted here with permission.

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Recovery From Addiction

By David Julen

The unwelcome news about the war on drugs seems to be unrelenting. Statistics from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reveal that approximately 200,000 Americans died in 2021 from substance abuse, drugs and alcohol. That is approximately 30,000 more deaths than the total of all the wars in U.S. history, outside the Civil War and WWI and II, or one person every 2.6 minutes.

Is there any good news? Actually, there is. It is contained in the results of a landmark study on recovery completed by Harvard Medical and Massachusetts General Hospital, The National Recovery Study, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29055821>. This study was completed in 2017, but has recently been given renewed attention.

This study found that approximately 75 percent of the people who self-identify as having drug and alcohol problems, wind up in recovery. That is a ray of hope for those who seem to have lost hope. One intriguing finding was of the 9.1 percent or 22.35 million in recovery, close to half, 46 percent, found recovery without going through any recovery program or twelve-step group.

In an interview, John Kelly of Harvard, an author of the study, noted that this group on average, was less likely to have been taking some of the harder drugs, started later, and had been using for a shorter time and often had more social capital, relationships, family and community support.

Still, this group according to Kelly, includes many who dealt with long-term and severe addiction. It is encouraging news that three out of four people who self-identified as having drug or alcohol problems, found their way to recovery.

Other findings are more sobering, pointing toward the difficulties of recovery. Relapse is the norm, not the exception, and the process to full recovery is not normally 30, 60 or 90 days, but can take years. Perhaps, we need to rethink some of our assumptions as a society and in the Church about recovery. In the Church, our focus has often been on striving to bring people to an authentic point of repentance and surrender, a worthwhile goal. However, most people in recovery are in process, both those in the Church and those outside the Church. Acts of repentance and surrender are often the start, not the end of the journey.

Perhaps we need to view long-term active support in the same light as repentance and surrender.

I am reminded of Paul's leaving Trophimus sick in Miletus (2Tim.4:20). There is no hint here that he does not have enough faith to get well; it is simply that he is still sick and needs to let the process of recovery unfold. Bearing other's burdens, (Gal.6:2), visiting the sick, (Matt. 25:36), seeing to their recovery, (Luke 10:30-37), are scriptural images that come to mind as we contemplate this journey together.

If those with social capital are more able to recover, the Church should see this an opportunity to be the Church. I have found that supporting the families who are supporting the one struggling, can be a needed

According to a Pew Research Study, 46 percent of Americans have a close friend or family member that is currently struggling with a substance use disorder or who has in the past. So, if you look to the left or right of you in the pew, one of those folks has likely been touched by addiction.

ministry. Families active in their church have shared with me that after experiencing deaths and through illnesses, they have been almost "casserled to death." However, when a family member is suffering from substance abuse, too often they experienced a ringing silence. Lending support, sharing in joy, and suffering, (Rom.12:12), can be as simple as a phone call. Sponsoring recovery programs and support groups is important; but listening, sitting down with a cup of coffee, is often what a family member needs.

Church leaders need to be more vocal about expressing that substance abuse is a problem for our society and for those in faith communities. They can intertwine that awareness in sermons, prayers and educational opportunities. According to a Pew Research Study, 46 percent of Americans have a close friend or

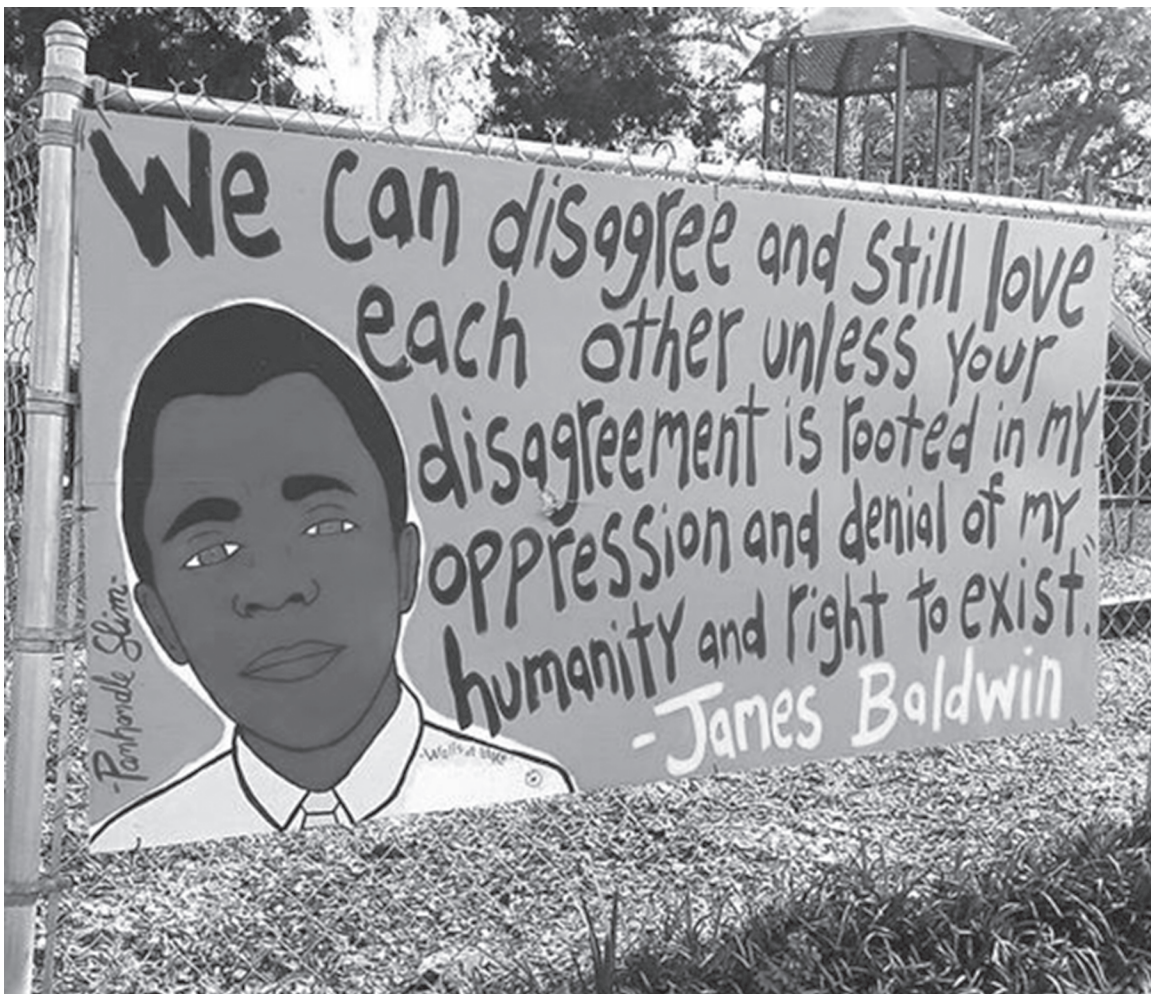
family member that is currently struggling with a substance use disorder or who has in the past. So, if you look to the left or right of you in the pew, one of those folks has likely been touched by addiction.

If three out of four people find their way to recovery, we need to find ways to keep them alive to recover. In an interview on NPR, John Kelly of Harvard, expressed his concern that the flood of fentanyl has begun to upset that equation of three out of four finding recovery. Many who would eventually find their way to recovery are dying from overdose. One injection, one pill, one mistake, can cause accidental overdose. I think people in some faith communities need to reconsider their thinking about harm reduction—harm reduction being such activities as clean needle

exchange, passing out strips to detect fentanyl and distributing Naloxone/Narcan to reverse overdose. These measures can keep people alive, for God to work.

God, help us not to be like the disciples arguing over the blind man at their feet in John 9, ignoring his need, arguing about the cause of his blindness, and subsequently, the religious leaders being upset that his healing did not follow the pattern they preferred. If people are alive, they have a chance. ■

David Julen is pastor of First Baptist Cramerton, NC and the Coordinator of Faith Fighting Addiction, a group that motivates people of faith to be more involved in the fight against substance abuse, addiction, and recovery.



Is God Complicit in Our Suffering?

By Ronald Perritt

In the Winter 2022 issue, R. Page Fulgham wrote a thoughtful article, published in the Winter issue of *Christian Ethics Today*, on the age-old issue of evil and suffering. For many, the troublesome question is not *why* suffering, especially that caused by human behavior, exists, but rather, isn't an omnipotent God complicit in the suffering by not preventing it?

Interestingly, this is basically the same question asked about NATO regarding its refusal to enter Ukraine and stop the Russian invasion. If God does not prevent suffering, God's loving and compassionate character can only be maintained if it can be shown that to do otherwise would likely result in even greater damage to humanity or that to allow or cause suffering produces a greater good. The latter is the Irenaean type of theodicy.

I suggest Jesus actually taught that God cannot be expected to prevent or reduce suffering caused by human behavior. This conclusion is based on two ideas. First, Jesus taught the universality of God's love, that all of us are equally valued by God. Thus, God should not be expected to exhibit preferential treatment to some and not others.

So why not simply reduce the suffering of all? This question leads to the second idea. Preventing people's choices would require coercion and/or manipulation. The Great Commandment says that we are to love God and neighbor. Genuine love requires free choice. Love cannot be coerced. In order for humanity to be able to love, God must not interact with us in a way that coerces our behavior. No coercion means no rewards and punishments in this life directly from God and no interference in our freedom to choose our own course of action. For God to give the command to love, that is at the very heart of the Kingdom of God, and then interact with us in a way that inhibits our ability to obey that command would be sadistic. This is not the character of God portrayed by Jesus.

The fact of no preferential treatment and no coercion strikes at the bedrock principles of the Covenant in the Hebrew Bible whereby God gives rewards and causes suffering as a means of discipline just as a loving parent does for a small child. I suggest that this explanation was soundly rejected by Jesus. Luke 13 gives examples of suffering, one by human hands and the other by apparently natural causes, which Jesus

says are not attributable to the sins of the victims. In Matthew 5:45, Jesus says God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous."

Jesus' entire healing ministry is based on his belief that suffering was not the will of God. Even the author of the Book of Job has God say to Job that he was correct in his claim that God did not reward the righteous and punish the wicked and that his "friends" were wrong.

I suggest that Jesus was teaching that God interacts with us as morally responsible, adult children worthy of love and respect, made in God's image. If God were to coerce our behavior, it would diminish our very

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humanity. Would freedom from the consequences of our choices make us more responsible, loving people? All the evidence I see is to the contrary.

I suggest that much of the anxiety in our relationship with God exists precisely because the church has not taught Jesus' understanding of how God can and cannot interact with humanity. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father (the God figure) did not coerce the son to come home, but waited in love for the son to decide of his own free will to return.

Jesus' way of understanding how God interacts with humanity has huge implications for what we can expect from prayer. This is covered in more detail in my book *Coherent Christianity**. This understanding of God can be very freeing. During my father's long, losing battle with cancer, we expressed to God

our desire for his recovery, but we never expected that because we prayed, we could somehow persuade God to relieve Dad's suffering. We never worried that if he or we had lived more faithful lives, God would have been more likely to cure his cancer. Our relationship with God was not based on quid-pro-quo. Our trust in God's love was a source of strength, never a source of disappointment.

In conclusion, suffering, due to human behavior, is a consequence of God's choice to self-limit God's power in order to preserve our integrity as human beings made in God's image. This self-limited omnipotence

is the basis for ethics. We can no longer imagine that God will make our communities or our world a better place. This responsibility has been delegated to us and meeting this responsibility, by following Jesus' example, becomes the defining principle of Christian ethics today and gives meaning and purpose to our existence as human beings. ■

* Ronald Perritt, *Coherent Christianity, A More Liberating, Less Traveled Way*. (Nuturing Faith Inc., 2019)

***Abundance* by Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler (Free Press, 2014)**

Reviewed by Rick Burnette

Approximately 15 years ago, many change agents, do-gooders, and missionaries – including myself – possessed a considerable degree of optimism.

Even though 9/11 was still fresh in our minds and with wars continuing in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2011 Arab Spring movement offered some hope that Middle Eastern totalitarianism might be on the decline. As a member of the G20 (the Group of Twenty that is the premier forum for international economic cooperation) and APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation), Russia appeared somewhat cooperative and the election of the first African American president seemed to indicate a future of racial healing.

Abundance, published in 2012 and reprinted in 2014, exudes even more optimism. The authors, space entrepreneur and innovator, Peter H. Diamandis (co-founder of Singularity University) and Steven Kotler, a journalist and co-founder of the Flow Genome Project, assert that the basic needs of every person on the planet will be met and exceeded within two centuries.

And how? Through rapid advances in technology including artificial intelligence, robotics, infinite computing, ubiquitous broadband networks, digital manufacturing, nanomaterials and synthetic biology.

Inviting us to imagine “a world of nine billion people with clean water, nutritious food, affordable housing, personalized education, top-tier medical care and non-polluting, ubiquitous energy,” Diamandis and Kotler proclaimed that abundance was within our grasp.

And what's wrong with that?

After all, Jesus came so that “they would have life and have it abundantly.”

The authors did acknowledge the concerns of those who saw our problems worsening, with “the rich getting richer and the poor falling further behind, while the list of global threats – pandemics, terrorism, escalating regional conflicts – grows unabated.”

But they also dismissed such concerns as cynicism, claiming that such reaction might be “the biggest stumbling block in the road toward abundance.”

Unfortunately, since *Abundance* was published, in many ways, the needle of progress has barely moved. The current state of the world includes:

- The COVID-19 Pandemic causing more than 6.3 million deaths
- Wars raging in Ukraine, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ethiopia and elsewhere
- Military dictatorships in Myanmar, Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan and Burkina Faso
- Global supply line issues, shortages and inflation
- Between 720 and 811 million people in the world having faced hunger in 2020 (Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO))
- One in three children is not growing well because of malnutrition (UNICEF)
- Seventy-one percent of the world's population living in countries where inequality has grown (United Nations 2019)
- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating global income inequality, partly reversing the

decline of the previous two decades (World Bank)

Is technology the ultimate fix for these and other global challenges?

Better technology might ultimately repair our broken supply chain. But will it fix the hearts of CEOs who force farmworkers and meatpacking plant employees to labor in crowded, Covid-spreading conditions?

Better technology is making its mark on education. Not only has One Laptop per Child boosted learning opportunities around the world, Diamandis and Kotler anticipate the prospects of free virtual schools.

But has the U.S. digital divide been adequately addressed? A January 2022 *U.S. News & World Report* article highlighted a New America and Rutgers University study showing that one in seven children still do not have high-speed internet access at home.

Can technology solve ongoing global gender disparities in education? UNESCO reminds us that, worldwide, 129 million girls are out of school.

I cheer every advance in medicine, hoping indeed that advanced “Lab-on-a-Chip” (LOC) technologies will provide “accurate, low-cost, easy-to-use, point of care diagnostics” along with stem cell biotechnologies that are expected to help repair the brain and regenerate organs.

But what will it take for everyone to have full access to even basic medical care? In 2020 the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 9.3 percent of children under the age of 19 in the U.S. were still uninsured. And Partners in Health, the international agency founded by the late Dr. Paul Farmer, reminds us that half of the world’s population lacks access to essential healthcare.

Despite the authors’ excitement that a small-scale water distilling device powered by its own recycled energy could help overcome global water scarcity, almost two-thirds of the world’s population still experience severe water scarcity for at least one month per year. Domestically, up to 10 million American households and 400,000 schools and childcare centers are served by lead plumbing. Not surprisingly, low-income people and communities of color are disproportionately exposed to the risks of lead-contaminated drinking water.

Various accessible technologies exist for removing lead from water. But could it be that these persistent domestic issues, including the digital divide and unequal health care access, might have something to do with the fact that the top one percent of Americans take home 21 percent of all the income? The Economic Policy Institute reports that over the last four decades, income inequality has increased dramatically, with income growth for the vast majority having “slowed to a crawl.”

Moving along to the future of food, Diamandis and Kotler cite remaining chronic hunger, the inefficiencies of industrial agriculture, and the polluting effects of farming. However, they’re bullish on the future role of genetically engineered crops and a high tech, indoor food production approach known as vertical farming.

The high productivity of vertical farming is based on artificial lighting replacing the sun with crops being grown in soil-less cultivation systems. The approach is highly space efficient and conducive for urban settings with multiple layers or columns of plants being arranged horizontally or vertically.

But to my surprise, the technophile authors conceded that by itself, high-tech agriculture cannot feed Earth’s future nine billion inhabitants. They also highlight the essential role of agroecology, a collection of food systems designed to mimic the natural world so that more food can be produced on less land while “enhancing ecosystems and promoting biodiversity.”

Diamandis and Kotler refer to a 2011 United Nations report disclosing that agroecology projects in 57 countries were found to increase crop yields an average of 80 percent (some as high as 116 percent). While agroecology practices appear quite low-tech, the associated approaches are proven and promoted through “information-based sciences.”

Though not stated in the book, one reason that agroecology succeeds is that one-size-fits-all approaches or technologies aren’t on the agenda. Smallholder farmers - most of whom tend less than five acres of land - are the drivers of agroecology. And it’s up to them to analyze their local circumstances (e.g., environmental, nutritional, economic, political, cultural, social) to determine what is required to sustainably produce a diverse array of food and other products.

Whereas scientists, technocrats, politicians and other leaders/influencers are prone to promote mass-produced innovations, trusting that benefits will somehow trickle down to the masses, agroecology practitioners and promoters are primarily engaged at the grassroots level. Fortunately, many who operate in the smallholder arena are open to opportunities for exchange with likeminded groups, both near and far.

Effective change agents, among other smallholder allies, are also very aware of the challenges faced by these farmers – many of whom live on society’s margins. And these issues are often related to inequality and injustice.

Unfortunately, *Abundance* doesn’t focus much on the promotion of equality and justice. One brief chapter on freedom considers human rights and reviews technologies such as a website, Ushahida, that charted political violence in Kenya as well as other examples of crowd-

sourced social activism in support of citizen journalism and the promotion of free speech and expression. Even so, Diamandis and Kotler admit that the technology blade cuts both ways, observing how the Syrian government had begun to flood social media with pro-government messages, which pales compared to today's torrent of disinformation.

Technology is not a silver bullet and even the most appropriate of technologies will struggle without structural injustice and inequality being addressed. For that to happen, we must address neglected tough questions. For example, why are smallholders accessing so little land and water? Why does lead remain in the pipes of marginalized neighborhoods? And why does basic healthcare remain out of reach for so many?

Isn't this where the church comes in? Or where the church should come in?

Shouldn't the church be speaking up for the essential agricultural and food workers subjected to horrid work conditions? By itself, technology won't.

Shouldn't the church be holding our local, state and federal governments accountable to enact real immigration reform, reboot our public schools, eliminate the digital divide and guarantee that every person can trust the water flowing out of their taps? After all, technology isn't good at persuasion.

Shouldn't we be demanding that every person across

this land be afforded access to quality health care as well as nutritious food and safe shelter?

Shouldn't God's people be calling out those who create policies that work to the advantage of the wealthy and powerful while leaving everyone else behind?

Technology has no conscience, no spirit, and no sense of responsibility. It simply can't automatically address, much less solve, these issues of injustice and inequality.

Ultimately, it's the "Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done" abundance that we pray for.

May God grant us the courage, wisdom and love needed to prepare the way, including how we consider our technological options. ■

Rick Burnette has worked since 1994 to help local communities alleviate food insecurity. He and his wife, Ellen, established a nonprofit organization in Thailand (Upland Holistic Development Project) among migrant communities along the Thai-Myanmar border, and more recently among farm workers in Immokalee, Florida (Cultivate Abundance). He serves with CBF Global missions, has worked with ECHO, and others to address food insecurity and injustice, emphasizing culturally appropriate, sustainable, and holistic approaches. Rick and Ellen live in Ft. Myers, Florida.

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—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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