

Christian Ethics Today

A Special Edition in Celebration of
John Claypool's Glad Reunion

2 Walter B. Shurden's Articles Reading of John R. Claypool *Patrick R. Anderson, editor*

3 Reading John Claypool: His First, Shortest, Most Formative and Influential Book, Tracks of a Fellow Struggler *Walter B. Shurden*

6 The Pivot in Preaching: Moving from Text to Life, The Saga of Life and The Preaching Event... Writings of John Claypool *Walter B. Shurden*

9 The Light Within You and Opening Blind Eyes: Reading John Claypool *Walter B. Shurden*

12 Reading Claypool: Parables and People Stories Jesus Still Tells, Glad Reunion, and The First to Follow *Walter B. Shurden*

15 God Is an Amateur and Mending the Heart: Reading Claypool #5 *Walter B. Shurden*

18 Reading Claypool #6: God the Ingenious Alchemist and The Hopeful Heart *Walter B. Shurden*

Book Review

23 CLAYPOOL edited by **C. Douglas Weaver and Aaron Douglas Weaver** *Reviewed by William Powell Tuck*

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Walter B. Shurden's Articles About the Writings of John R. Claypool

Years ago, a company which aired frequent television commercials was the investment firm, E.F. Hutton. The setting was usually in a noisy, crowded restaurant or other public place which would suddenly become quiet and everyone in the place leaned in to hear what one person was quietly saying to another person. A deep and majestic voice then intoned, "When E.F. Hutton talks, people listen," implying that if one wishes to know about finances, Hutton was the person to listen to.

For me, when it comes to preaching, Walter B. (Buddy) Shurden carries the equivalent authority depicted in the commercial. He is a connoisseur of preaching and when he says someone is the best, or among the best preachers in the South, I take that very seriously, listening closely to what Shurden has to say.

So, two statements found in the essays that follow in this special edition of *Christian Ethics Today* cause me to perk up and pay close attention. First, Shurden writes:

In my judgment, the two most prominent and popular preacher/theologians among white, progressive Baptists of the South in the last half of the 20th century were Carlyle Marney and John R. Claypool.

Then, in a subsequent essay, he writes:

One of the best white Baptist preachers and teachers of preachers in the South of our generation is Clyde E. Fant.

I can vouch for the Shurden's judgement regarding Marney and Fant. As a student at Furman University, I was fortunate to hear Marney several times in large preaching settings and small group conversations while he was a pastor in nearby Charlotte, NC. He was magnificent, insightful, funny, challenging. Fant was my professor of preaching in seminary and my favorite preacher, my role model for what good preaching is. He is unique, blessed with the ability to take a passage from the Bible and make it live in one's mind and heart. I never missed his sermons in chapel (although I was not a very faithful attendee in chapel generally.)

But I never heard John Claypool. Looking back, it is astounding to me that my exposure to Claypool's preaching amounted to zero, zilch. My education was sadly neglected as a result.

Therefore, when Buddy Shurden offered to write

a six-part survey of Claypool's life and work, I told him that although I would gladly publish anything he writes, I was especially eager to learn from him about Claypool.

What follows in this special edition of *Christian Ethics Today* is the six articles Buddy wrote for the journal collected in a single volume. The occasion for this special publication is an event organized and planned by Claypool's son, John Rowan Claypool, and held in Louisville, September, 16-18, 2022 called GLAD REUNION: CELEBRATING THE MINISTRY AND LEGACY OF JOHN R. CLAYPOOL.

Attendees will be introduced to a new book, *CLAYPOOL*, edited by Douglas Weaver and Aaron Weaver, published by Mercer University Press. As

For readers who already have deep understanding and appreciation for Claypool's life and ministry, I hope this volume contributes to your affection and respect for him. For others, like me, who know the name and reputation of John R. Claypool but do not have the long-standing awareness and appreciation of his life and work, may we be blessed, informed and inspired to know the man better.

an addendum to this special issue of the journal, that book is reviewed by another connoisseur of preaching, William Tuck.

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Patrick R. Anderson, editor.

Reading John Claypool: His First, Shortest, Most Formative and Influential Book, Tracks of a Fellow Struggler

By Walter B. Shurden

John R. Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: How to Handle Grief* (Dallas: Word Publishing Co., 1974, 104pp.)

John R. Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing Through Grief* (New Orleans, LA, 70182, P. O. Box 8369, Insight Press, 1995, 98pp.)

In my judgment, the two most prominent and popular preacher/theologians among white, progressive Baptists of the South in the last half of the 20th century were Carlyle Marney (8 July 1916 - 3 July 1978) and John R. Claypool (15 Dec 1930 - 3 Sept 2005). Both were exceptional preachers. Marney was a “character.” Marney stories, filled with both his witticisms and his wisdom, abound. And it is probably accurate to say that Marney was more popular among progressive preachers than with the Baptist laity.

A number of years ago, I preached for several Sundays at Myers Park Baptist Church in Charlotte, NC, Marney’s last pastorate. Marney had been gone for several years. In fact, I was preaching following the retirement of Marney’s successor. In one of my sermons, I referred to Marney—a kind of obligatory toast to one I admired. After I had finished shaking hands in the narthex, I walked back down the aisle of the church to the pulpit to fetch my Bible and notes. An elderly man was collecting the worship bulletins from the pews. I stopped and greeted him, thanking him for his work. And as though he were still in my sermon, he jumped right into Marney. “Yeah, preacher, ole Marney,” he said, “I loved him a lot.” And then he paused and added, “But I never understood a word he said.”

Claypool, by contrast, claimed the attention of both clergy and laity. His sermons and lectures, more accessible than Marney’s, grabbed both heads and hearts. His sermons, or adaptations of them, were often heard in other pulpits! He served as pastor of three influential Baptist churches: Crescent Hill in Louisville, KY (1960-1971), Broadway in Fort Worth, TX (1971-1976), and Northminster in Jackson, MS (1976-1981).

After his resignation from Northminster in 1981,

Claypool and his wife divorced. He spent the next year in a residency in clinical pastoral education at the Baptist Hospital in New Orleans. He then became an associate pastor for two years to Dr. Hardy Clemons at Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, TX. From there he, like so many other notable Baptists, migrated to the Episcopal Church. He concluded his parish ministry as rector at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, AL. He taught preaching at the McAfee School of Theology of Mercer University, in Atlanta during his retirement years. He published 11 books.

Tracks is far and away the most influential book John R. Claypool ever wrote. Not one of his other 10 books comes close.

In his semi-autobiographical pastoral memoir, *Diary of a Pastor’s Soul*, Craig Barnes said that “the only important thing a servant of the Church brings to the ministry” is the “pastor’s soul” (p.13). Attentive parishioners, Barnes said, are grateful for glimpses into that soul. In his very first book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: How to Handle Grief*, Claypool laid bare his “pastor’s soul” for all his hearers and readers.

Tracks is far and away the most influential book John R. Claypool ever wrote. Not one of his other 10 books comes close. “This little book,” as he so aptly dubbed it, had only 104 pages in its 1974 edition, released by Word Publishing Company. By the time Insight Press produced a second edition in 1995, the book had sold one million copies! Other than making gender references more inclusive, the second edition is the same with one major exception. The sub-title of the book changed from “How to Handle Grief” to “Living and Growing Through Grief,” something Claypool had obviously done himself.

On a “hot Wednesday afternoon,” in 1969 doctors in Louisville, KY diagnosed Laura Lue, the Claypools’

eight-year-old daughter, with acute lymphatic leukemia. Eighteen months later, she died on a “snowy Saturday afternoon” on January 10, 1970. That heart-wrenching event became the backdrop for much of Claypool’s thinking, preaching, and teaching for the rest of his life.

“This little book” causes one to inhale the smog of human suffering and exhale the buoyant hope of the Christian faith. While written against the darkest of events, the book is life giving, as reflected in the vast number of copies sold. And it is hopeful because, even “after life works us over,” as Claypool often said, it is life affirming. But how does one come out of this kind of excruciating heartbreak to affirm the goodness of life?

The book contains four sermons. Claypool preached three of the sermons at Crescent Hill Baptist Church. He preached two of these during Laura Lue’s illness and one following her death. He preached the last sermon in the book three years after her death at Broadway Baptist Church. I will focus my comments on the first and third sermons in the book. They are the best known and most referenced.

The first sermon, “The Basis of Hope,” is rooted in Paul’s classic passage in Romans 8. Claypool preached it to his congregation in Louisville 11 days after Laura Lue’s diagnosis. In the introduction to the sermon, he asked his congregation to “see me this morning as your burdened and broken brother, limping back into the family circle to tell you something of what I learned out there in the darkness.”

What had he learned? First, he had learned that the challenge was to go on living “even though I have no answer or any complete explanation.” Descartes was wrong: “I think, therefore I am.” “We do not first get all the answers and then live in light of our understanding,” said Claypool. He went on: “We must rather plunge into life---meeting what we have to meet and experiencing what we have to experience---and in the light of living try to understand.” Claypool learned he could not quit living because he did not have all the answers.

Second, he learned to beware of superficiality and quick labeling, “of jumping to the wrong conclusions.” Citing one of his most cherished Old Testament stories, the up-and-down life of Joseph, he uttered what would become one of his most oft-spoken lines: “Despair is always presumptuous.” Just when it looked like old Joseph was all finished, an opening appeared and new future beckoned. James Dunn told me that Martin E. Marty caught him one day in genuine despair. “Dunn,” Marty said, “You don’t know enough to be pessimistic.” Claypool somehow embraced that

idea, even in his heartbreak.

Everyone that ever knew or heard John Claypool knew him to be a star. He was center stage, a winner in every way. But the death of his daughter put him on the losing side. He discovered, as do we all, that hurt hurts. So, we kneel at the bedside of an eight-year-old girl with leukemia, and we kneel without any answers. Empty-handed, as far as quick and pat answers, Claypool worked hard at not jumping to conclusions about the deep mystery of life.

The third thing that became of enormous value to Claypool, in light of his young daughter’s illness, was his understanding of God. God, too, he said was acquainted with “evil and grief and suffering.” He pointed to the crucifixion of Jesus. “Believe me,” Claypool said, “out there in the darkness this companionship of understanding really helps.” Claypool possessed a distinct mystical leaning, one not always recognized in him. He insisted then, as he did the rest of his life, that God’s companionship brought strength in tough times.

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ter died on that cold Saturday afternoon in January. When finally he came back to the Crescent Hill pulpit, he broke that “prolonged silence” with a sermon that was the most widely known of all the sermons he would ever preach. He called it “Life is Gift.” It was the pearl of his preaching and writing. He based it on that troublesome story of the proposed sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham.

He did not come with theological bravado. Admitting that he was in no position to “speak with any finality” about the tragedy that had bent him over and broken his heart, he said, “What I have to share is of a highly provisional character for, as of now the light is dim.” He saw three alternative roads ahead “out of the darkness.” However, two of these were dead ends. Only the third led to light.

The first road had been highly recommended to him. It was the route of “unquestioning resignation.” Do not question God, he was told. Simply submit and surren-

der, he was admonished. Accept the unfolding of life without murmuring. Claypool thought this approach closer to pagan stoicism than Christianity. God, he said, is more that brute power pulling the strings on every event of our lives. “The One who moves” through the pages of the Bible “is by nature a Being of love. We have every right to pour out our souls to God and ask, “Why?”

Claypool said the second road one could take out of the darkness was what he called “the road of total intellectual understanding.” He confessed, to some of his parishioners’ chagrin, that he had been “tempted to conclude that our whole existence is utterly absurd.” But, he said, one cannot coerce life into one posture or attitude. One cannot organize all of our existence around a single principle.

Life is more complicated than that. To reduce life to absurdity is to overlook too much of the good stuff in life. “For you see,” he said, “alongside the utter absurdity of what was happening to this little girl were countless other experiences that were full of love and purpose and meaning.” Do not generalize in such a way, he urged his hearers that morning, “that either the darkness swallows up the light or the light the darkness. To do so would be untrue to our human condition that ‘knows in part’ and does all its seeing ‘as through a glass darkly’.”

The third road, the road that led to light and life, Claypool said, is the “road of gratitude.” “Only when life is seen as a gift and received with the open hands of gratitude is it the joy God meant for it to be.” The only way to descend from the mountain of loss is with gratitude. And then he added these crucial words: “I do not mean to say that such a perspective makes things easy, for it does not. But at least it makes things bearable when I remember that Laura Lue was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was ever given her in the first place.” Gratitude, he said, puts light around the darkness and provides strength for moving on.

Claypool closed that unforgettable sermon by asking his church members to help him on his way. “Do not counsel me not to question, and do not attempt to give me any total answer,” he pled. “The greatest thing

you can do is to remind me that life is gift---every last particle of it, and that the way to handle a gift is to be grateful.”

This was not a preacher pretending to be strong. To the contrary, he frightened faithful Christians with the way he publicly shared his weakness. This was a Christian living out his understanding of the Christian vision, a vision that said, “Life is gift.”

Claypool moved through the rest of his life with this same positive but realistic posture. On the Sunday after 9/11, he preached at the First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Ga. Calling his bewildered hearers that morning to hope, he said again and again in that sermon, “The worst thing is not the last thing.”

In June 2003, doctors in Atlanta diagnosed John Claypool himself with multiple myeloma, a form of dreaded cancer. The next Easter Sunday morning, in 2004, I had a vivid dream. John Claypool and Ben Philbeck, one of the dearest friends I ever had, played central roles. Ben had died with a brain tumor 15

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years earlier. The dream was obviously about these two friends, one who had died and one who was seriously ill. I called John on the phone later that morning. “John,” I said, “I had a very bad dream last night, but you became a kind of Joseph. You got us out of a bad situation and led us to hope. After I told him the peculiar circumstances of the dream, he said to me in that confident, calming, and unmistakable voice, “Buddy, I have always been hopeful.” ■

A year later, on September 3, 2005, John Claypool died as he had lived, grateful and hopeful.

The Pivot in Preaching: Moving from Text to Life, The Saga of Life and The Preaching Event... Writings of John Claypool

By Walter B. Shurden

John Claypool, *Stages: The Art of Living the Expected* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1977, 90pp.)

John R. Claypool, *The Saga of Life* (New Orleans, LA: Insight Press, Inc., 2003, 95pp.)

John R. Claypool, *The Preaching Event* (Waco, TX: Word Incorporated, 1980, 139pp.)

One of the best white Baptist preachers and teachers of preachers in the South of our generation is Clyde E. Fant. In 1969 with weak knees I followed him as pastor at the First Baptist Church in Ruston, LA. I was 29-years-old and scared to death of the job. But I was maybe more intimidated by following Dr. Fant who had left Ruston to TEACH preaching at a Baptist seminary!

One Sunday night during worship (we still had worship back then on Sunday evenings), almost three whole years after I had been pastor, I called on good ole' Fred Leachman to lead us in prayer. (Back then, we still called on people in the congregation to pray without warning.) "Dear Lord," Fred intoned, "We thank you that we are free to worship here tonight. And we ask you to bless Dr. Fant as he preaches to us." After that, I have no idea what else Fred might have asked of the Almighty!

Fant's preaching was unforgettable and I know why. Years after I left Ruston, he visited us in our home in Louisville, KY. Sitting in the den after lunch, I asked him to tell me in a sentence the secret of good preaching. "Go for the text," he said, "then go for the life."

He rattled it off so quickly that I assumed he had been asked that question a 100 times. He had it down pat. His counsel for good preaching begged brevity: "Go for the text. Go for the life."

John Claypool did that. He went for the biblical text, always with remarkable, amazing insight into its life. And he did it beautifully, Sunday after Sunday. In his second book, *Stages*, later retitled *The Saga of Life*, he went for the text of King David's life. He then demonstrated how David's life related to four developmental stages of our lives. In his third book, *The Preaching Event*, Claypool unpacked his theology and the prac-

tice of moving from text to life in the pulpit.

Stages/The Saga of Life is a book of four sermons Claypool preached in the mid 1970s at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, TX. The book had three lives. Word Books first published it in hardback in 1977 as *Stages* with the subtitle of *The Art of Living the Expected*. In 1980, Word reissued it as "A Key-Word Book" in paperback. Finally, Insight Press published it in 2003 under the title of *The Saga of Life: Living Gracefully Through all of the Stages*. Because

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it is more readily available today, the Insight publication of 2003 is the edition I cite here.

In their printed form, the four sermons of *Stages/The Saga of Life* read more like essays than sermons. One suspects Claypool elaborated in the print edition. He addressed four developmental stages of life: childhood, adolescence, adulthood and senior adulthood.

Utilizing the life of King David as his biblical background, Claypool's aim was "to blend the light of biblical wisdom with the best from the behavioral sciences" (20). And for what purposes? He wanted to help individuals understand the distinct challenges of each of the four stages of life.

This particular book mirrors John Claypool's awareness of and interaction with his contemporary culture. He used Paul Tillich's correlation method. Culture defined the issues and revelation provided the answers. Gail Sheehy, a journalist of the culture, published her blockbuster book, *Passages*, in 1976; it stayed on the New York Times Best Seller list for three years. Claypool published his sermons the next year. Eric Erickson, the great developmental psychologist, preceded Sheehy and developed eight stages of human

development. Claypool cites him in the book. While Claypool preached from the Bible, he did so in the full light of prevailing culture. Themes of his book even foreshadow James Fowler's much more expansive and comprehensive 1981 Stages of Faith.

Claypool claimed modest hopes for the book: "First, to provide an individual with perspective on his or her own past, insight into his or her own present, and preparation for his or her own future; and second, to provide individuals some 'handles of understanding' in what is going on in the lives of family and friends who are at these various stages along life's way" (22).

Regarding the stage of childhood, Claypool identified two needs: affirmation and expectation. The child needs to be affirmed and made to feel worthy. As one reads Claypool's complete oeuvre, one becomes aware of how surprisingly personal this specific need was for him. He spoke often of feeling unworthy. Those of us who knew John Claypool ask in mystification, "How could John Claypool have ever doubted his self-worth?" But that he did reminds the rest of us of how universal is the need for self-affirmation.

But as the child needed to be affirmed, she also needed to be reminded of the accountability of her life. Being has an ethic to it. "No matter how secure a child may feel in the delight of his or her family, no matter how much self-worth may have been internalized, if he or she has not also developed a sense of responsibility to take what has been given and pass it on to others, then it is not likely that God's dream for that child can ever come true" (37).

Adolescence, the second stage, said Claypool, finds one in "the valley of transition." The young person moves from dependence to interdependence, learning that independence is a myth. During a child's adolescence, the parent must step back without stepping out on the relationship, while the young person must walk forward without walking away from one's sources.

Adulthood, Claypool's third stage, is not a time of "arrival" when all things are settled. Rather it is a time of continuing areas of growth. He identifies three: vocation or generativity, intimacy or relationship with others, and inward growth or self-fulfillment. Claypool hammers away at one of the Achilles heels of many adult males, especially ministers: the need for balance between these areas. And one recalls Claypool's own confession in another place that he was better at work than he was at home.

While Claypool excels at relating each of the stages of life to the life of David, he may be at his best when he writes of "senior adulthood." Returning to one of the major themes of his preaching, that of self-worth, Claypool identifies the major shift in the senior years

from doing and having to being.

Reading these four sermons reminds us that Claypool was a pastor, not simply a preacher. His sermons, though almost always universally applicable, were rooted in the needs of local congregations. He was more than preacher; he was church visionary, church theologian and church educator. His sermons were designed to help the real people who sat before him each Sunday to make it through another week.

John A. Broadus, Edward McNeill Poteat and John R. Claypool are the only three Southern Baptist ministers to give the celebrated Lyman Beecher lectures on preaching at Yale University. Though invited, Carlyle Marney died before he could deliver his lectures in 1980.

Claypool contended that when preaching is done "authentically, something of enormous significance takes place. An event occurs, where power of the deepest sort moves out of one human being to affect other human beings" (31). Therefore, he called his four Beecher Lectures The Preaching Event in which he

Claypool contended that when preaching is done "authentically, something of enormous significance takes place. An event occurs, where power of the deepest sort moves out of one human being to affect other human beings."

sought to answer the what, the why, the how, and the when of the preaching event.

What is it that the preacher does when standing to preach? What is the objective? It is "to establish a relation of trust between the human creature and the ultimate Creator. Reconciliation of the profoundest sort is the true business of the preacher . . ." (36). A relationship has been broken! We are not simply frail and flawed creatures. We are insurgents, rebels! The preacher's role, says Claypool, is that of reconciler.

Why does the preacher do what she does? What is the motivation? "Am I trying to get something from the audience for myself, or am I intent on giving something of myself to the audience" (57)? Drawing on C. S. Lewis, as he often did, Claypool contrasts "need-love" with "gift-love." He said out loud what every preacher knows deep in her bones. There is a "high" to preaching. One becomes easily addicted to the plau-

ditions. What the preacher needs often trumps what the preacher gives. Claypool understood the preacher as a gift-giver.

How does the preacher do what he does? What methodology did Claypool recommend? “We will make our greatest impact in preaching when we dare to make available to the woundedness of others what we have learned through an honest grappling with our own woundedness” (86-87). Here Claypool called for what he is best known: confessional preaching. Truth, he insisted, has the best chance of happening through us if we admit how it happened to us. So how does a preacher preach? As a witness!

In the final chapter, Claypool addressed the timeliness or the when of preaching. “There are teachable moments and appropriate occasions when things are possible that could never have been before and never could be again” (115). Here the preacher is nurturer, one who “who works with growing things” and understands timing, what to do when.

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Mary Oliver believed poetry was life-transforming. She said, “For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry.” John R. Claypool believed exactly that about The Preaching Event.

While I cannot vouch for it nor do I know if it is simply a common practice at the Beecher Lectures, I heard that when John Claypool finished his lectures at Yale the audience stood immediately with a boisterous ovation. I would have stood with them, quickly, gladly, had I been there. ■

Thank You

For reading and sharing and supporting
Christian Ethics Today.

The Light Within You and Opening Blind Eyes: Reading John Claypool

By Walter B. Shurden

John R. Claypool, *The Light Within You* (Waco, TX: Word Books Publisher, 1983, 216pp.)

John R. Claypool, *Opening Blind Eyes* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1987, 128pp.)

In 1960, in my second year of seminary, I had a class in Baptist history under Claude L. Howe, Jr., at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. After a class session one day, so enthralled with what we had discussed, I stayed in my desk for a few minutes, flipping my notebook to the inside back cover and writing on that cardboard an outline of what would become my first book that I would write 12 years later. That book was *Not a Silent People: Controversies That Have Shaped Southern Baptists*. Ever since, I have been fascinated with the origin of books, of how they begin.

Claypool's *The Light Within You*, published in 1983, had a fascinating birth. While the 22 sermons in the book all originated with Claypool, the book itself began with Bill Taylor, the secretary and treasurer of Young Life International. Taylor, like hundreds of others who did not get to hear Claypool's sermons in person, faithfully read those printed sermons that came out each week for 18 years. "And John Claypool," Taylor said, "brought God to me in words and terms that I could understand."

Most of the white Baptist preachers of my Southern tribe in the late 60s, 70s and 80s had scores of Claypool's sermons in their files or desk drawers. So, I understand when Taylor, as an expression of overwhelming gratitude to John Claypool, spread out approximately 800 of those sermons on the floor one day and began to select the ones that had been most meaningful to him.

What an undertaking! The truths of these sermons, he said, had "transformed my very life for Christ Jesus' sake." And the sermons Taylor selected that day became the essence of *The Light Within You*. So, while the sermons originated with Claypool, the origin of the book came from one of his many admirers.

Claypool published a second book in 1983 entitled *Opening Blind Eyes*. It, too, was a requested project.

Abingdon Press invited Claypool, along with other religious leaders, each to write a book for its *Journeys in Faith Series*. Claypool published a second edition of *Opening Blind Eyes* in 1987. It is that edition that I am using in this article; but keep in mind that he originally published the book in 1983.

The authors of the books in Abingdon's *Journeys in Faith Series* were given two mandates. First, they were to engage in spiritual autobiography and describe what happened to them and their faith in the decades of the 1960s and 70s. This was an interesting assignment, acknowledging the religiously revolutionary days of

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the 60s and early 70s. Second, Abingdon asked the writers in the series to look into the future and identify what they considered to be the major tasks of the church in the 1980s.

Claypool followed Abingdon's instructions faithfully for his 1983 book. *Opening Blind Eyes* has two very distinct parts. He called Part One, "Looking Back," and it contains 60 of the most invaluable autobiographical pages that we have from Claypool. Indeed, if you read these 60 pages along with Claypool's first book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, you will be able to better understand almost everything that Claypool wrote. Claypool labeled Part Two of *Opening Blind Eyes* "Looking Ahead," and here he deals with substantive issues facing the Christian church in the decade of the 80s.

These two 1983 books by Claypool originated from two completely different sources. Moreover, they diverge in structure and purpose, one a book of sermons and the other a kind of spiritual memoir that concludes with a prophetic bent to it. Despite these dissimilarities, the two books fit together magically in helping one to understand John Claypool. The sermons

in *The Light Within You* are little more than informational footnotes to the autobiography in *Opening Blind Eyes*.

In the first part of *Opening Blind Eyes*, John Claypool pulls back the curtains of his life and describes three profoundly personal experiences that help one get a measure of the great preacher. The first experience, a negative one, involved his powerful, subjective feeling of growing up with a sense of unworthiness. The second experience, a positive one, concerned a transformative, palpable experience of grace. The third experience, a family tragedy, focused on Claypool's heart-breaking bereavement at the death of his young daughter, Laura Lue. Since I have described this third experience in a previous article in this journal, I will concentrate here on the first two experiences.

Claypool lamented that his "most primitive perception" of himself was "the sense that I possessed no worth! Emptiness, a zero, a vacuum---these are the images that come to mind as I recall the way I felt about myself." Rejecting the blame game, he said, "I am the one who chose to regard myself as a nobody, a nothing, a vacuum devoid of significance."

In response to this overwhelming feeling of being a nobody, Claypool "vowed to become *homo competitus*—one who would acquire significance by outdoing others." He set out on a life of acquisition and achievement. He had to out-do in order to earn worth.

While it was, of course, much more, this aspect of his life reads like a classic case of salvation by works. Loyal Claypool readers remember that one of his most memorable sermons, a sermon included in *The Light Within You*, is titled "Who Is Your Audience?" He said in that sermon, "We each feel the need for something outside ourselves to evaluate and authenticate our deeds." That line came deep from within Claypool's psyche.

All the rest of us who marveled at his gifts and his grace are left bewildered by how that could ever be. But we should not doubt its truth for him. This was no mock humility, no faux self-portrait designed to elicit pity or to project a kind of inverted spirituality. Claypool's negative self-image, despite all evidence to the contrary, haunted and harangued him.

Then occurred the second experience. "In the midst of my mid-life crisis, something happened that proved to be positively electrifying in altering my consciousness of reality itself. The greatest single shift in my whole existence---from seeing life in terms of acquisition to seeing it in terms of awareness."

A Presbyterian minister friend in Louisville called Claypool one day in a painful cry for help. He asked

Claypool to be one of five ministers to meet with him and offer him some pastoral help. Claypool remembered two things about that first session as the ministers opened up to each other in an effort to help. One was that each of the six, though very different in religious and social backgrounds, voiced the same "conflicts and pressures" and grieved much the same personal issues. And two, he learned that "honesty evoked compassion."

In time, Claypool said he opened up to the group and "went all the way back and all the way down to those earliest, reality-conclusions that had shaped my life so powerfully. I acknowledged the bottomless feeling of nobodiness, the desperate need to acquire a sense of worth by my own strenuous effort. . ." And after emptying himself of his most honest feelings, he confessed, "It was as if I had lanced a boil and all the infected pus was gushing forth."

An Episcopal priest and the minister in the group with whom Claypool had the least natural affinity spoke. "I hear you, John, oh, I hear you!" He continued. "Do you know what we need? . . . We need to

Claypool lamented that his "most primitive perception" of himself was "the sense that I possessed no worth! Emptiness, a zero, a vacuum---these are the images that come to mind as I recall the way I felt about myself."

hear the gospel down in our guts. Do you remember in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus said, 'You are the Light of the World'? He did not say that you have to earn light or become number one in order to get light. He said simply, 'You are light.'"

Claypool later wrote that as the priest spoke these words, "I felt something akin to fire flow from the top of my head to the depths of my heart, and for the first time in my life I *experienced* grace." The image Claypool used for that experience was awareness. He moved from acquisition to awareness. "My eyes were opened in that instant as never before. I began to 'see' myself and eventually all things in a completely different light." Blind eyes were opened. He became aware that worth came with the grace of creation.

The old Zen image of "riding on an ox, looking for an ox" became important for Claypool. All his life searching for worth outside himself, he had eventually discovered he had it within him all along. "You are the

light of the world” became for him what the Damascus Road was for Saul of Tarsus, what the tower experience was for Luther, and what Aldersgate was for Wesley. He had moved from trying to acquire worthiness to an awareness that worth came with creation.

These two experiences appear in one form or another again and again in the sermons in *The Light Within You*. For example, in a sermon entitled “Our Peace Is in Our Place,” Claypool identified the reasons for the tragic demise of King Saul, a man who began with enormous promise. As though speaking of himself, John Claypool said that one of Saul’s problems was Saul’s “self-image, how he viewed his place in the economy of God’s purpose. For some reason, Saul was never able to accept himself—never able to feel, down to the bottom of his being, ‘By the grace of God I am what I am.’” The preacher continued, “In my judgment, there is no issue of any greater practical significance than this issue of self-image. How do you view the gift of God that is yourself? All depends on your response. To accept yourself positively and live creatively on the basis of what God has made you is the way to joy, but to deny and reject God’s gift of yourself is the way to ruin.”

I told you above that in the second half of *Opening Blind Eyes*, Claypool identified what he thought was the task of the Church in the future, which for him at that time meant the 1980s. Significantly, the very first issue he pinpoints is this issue of how individuals feel about themselves. “I feel strongly,” he wrote, “that the church should invest significant energy in ministry to individuals---be concerned with the way they image themselves, feel about themselves. This is a foundational sector of human experience. I agree with the old dictum that ‘if religion stops with the individual, it stops---period.’ But the other side of the truth is that if religion does not begin with the individual, it will not begin at all.”

He then used the story of the Prodigal Son, a New Testament text as important for Claypool as Genesis 1-3, an Old Testament text, was for him to illustrate his point. The Prodigal had to learn that he was neither a Superman without limits who could make life on his own nor was he a slave. The waiting father viewed the Prodigal not as a “hired servant” but as “this my son.”

So, what was the challenge of the Church in the 80s? For Claypool, I am sure it would have been the same

as the challenge of any era. He said, “In relation to self-image, then, the challenge of the church is to open blind eyes to two realities: a true image of self; and the mercy that gives us life apart from our deserving---not once, but again and again. What a gospel this is! What a privilege to work to unmask illusions and enable people to ‘come to themselves’ and to the mercy that will not let them go, that never gives up, and that celebrates whenever and however blind eyes are finally opened.”

Claypool’s intense dual convictions of a lack of self-worth and of the abundance of grace deepened his ability to teach people how to put one foot in front of the other, how to make it through the week, how to live. In *Opening Blind Eyes*, he recalled his decision to enter the Christian ministry. He said that as a young adult he genuinely wanted to serve humanity and leave the world a better place. Thinking that becoming a medical doctor was the best way to serve, he shared this opinion with their family’s doctor, a rather gruff and matter-of-fact kind of fellow.

Claypool remarked to the doctor, “You doctors help

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people so tangibly.” The doc retorted, “Hell! What people need most is somebody to teach them how to live. I have lots of patients who get well and are still miserable.” That chance remark, Claypool said, was revolutionary for him. “Teaching people how to live---that is the most tangible need,” he concluded. “And as I looked about for ways to engage in that sort of task,” he said, “the role of Christian minister seemed more to the point than any other.”

And Bill Taylor and thousands of others say to this very day, “Thanks be to God that he chose the path that led him to the pulpit.” ■

Reading Claypool: Parables and People Stories Jesus Still Tells, Glad Reunion, and The First to Follow

By Walter B. Shurden

Anyone who knew Dr. John R. Claypool understood two things about him. He was a people person, and he was a parable person.

He received much of his energy in life from relationships, from interfacing with other people. When you talked with him, you felt his focus, his eyes like lasers. But this was not an intimidating focus, not that kind of presence that tongue-tied you or created awkwardness or discomfort. To the contrary, Claypool's presence welcomed. It said, "I'm here, I'm interested, tell me more."

More often than not, when focusing on you, he was encouraging you, affirming you, or learning from you. He was fond of asking, "What's keeping you alive?" This was not chitchat or small talk, no fishing expedition for brag. He genuinely wanted to learn from you. He wanted to know what kept you going and growing, what kept you afloat during life's storms.

And his presence encouraged. After I had spoken to a group where he was present one day, he came up afterwards, and we had a brief conversation. He brought up the topic of a position in denominational life that was vacant. "Might that be the shape of your obedience?" he quietly asked. I am not sure how he intended the question to be heard. But I know how I heard it. I heard it not so much as a question of my vocational intention as his statement of personal affirmation. He encouraged, complimented and lifted with language hard to forget. "Might that be the shape of your obedience?" he asked.

While Claypool was a people person, he was, as all knew who heard him preach or read his sermons, a story person. Of his generation of preachers in America, maybe only Fred Craddock exceeded him in story-telling. They said of the great Hal Luccock of Yale Divinity School, "He had homiletical eyes." So did John Claypool. He saw nuggets of truth in events in which others paid little attention. I often read him and ask, "Why didn't I think of that?" or, "Why didn't I see that?"

Before I ever met him personally, or heard him preach, a close friend of mine, a member of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, where

Claypool was then pastor, wrote me of his preaching. *"He takes a text, tells a story, often a very cornpone story, and then applies that text and story in a theological way to the lives of his hearers. It is remarkable for both its simplicity and its profundity."*

I concentrate on three of his books here that deal specifically with parables and people. In 1993, McCracken Press published his *Stories Jesus Still Tells: The Parables*. Cowley Publications issued a second revised edition in 2000, and this is the edition that I will work from in this article. Also in 2000, Insight

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Press published a revised edition of *Glad Reunion: Meeting Ourselves in the Lives of Biblical Men and Women*. Again, any quotations or references I have will come from this revised edition. Claypool's wife, Ann Wilkinson Claypool, edited and published his last book in 2008, three years after his death. Another book about biblical people, it was entitled *The First to Follow: The Apostles of Jesus*. Morehouse Publishing released this volume.

When ranking Claypool's books, for me it goes like this. His first, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*, was his best. In that seminal little book he recounted the heartrending death of his young daughter along with the hopeful birth of a theology that said, "Life is Gift." His Beecher lectures on preaching, *The Preaching Event*, is his second most important book. In that book he tells how he did what he so skillfully did in the pulpit. That book will live, especially for preachers. Claypool's book on the parables, *Stories Jesus Still*

Tells, is the third most important of all his published works. It shows Claypool at work with the Bible and his astonishing ability to make applications to contemporary life.

In the “preface” to *Stories Jesus Still Tells*, the great preacher said, “No part of the historic biblical canon has blessed me more thoroughly than the parables of our Lord.” The parables, he pointed out, usually began as portraits of other people and suddenly became mirrors in which people saw things about themselves that they had not seen before.

Recalling how King David eventually saw himself reflected in the parable of Nathan, Claypool said, “This is how Jesus worked the miracle of reconciliation again and again. People would come to him in all degrees of panic, fear, and anger. Yet instead of confronting them head-on and driving them deeper into their defensiveness, he would, like Nathan, defuse their anxiety by saying, ‘Let me tell you a story . . .’ “Then drawn in by the narrative and with their defenses down, the listeners would see the story as a mirror, and its light would make their personal darkness visible” (5).

But this was not only Nathan’s approach with David or Jesus’ approach in his parables; it was also Claypool’s approach to preaching and to pastoral ministry. He never came across as the mad prophet, excoriating his hearers because of their moral shortfall. Their spiritual power and surprising endings have caused some to refer to the parables of Jesus as “spiritual hand grenades.” The parables certainly uprooted, but Jesus, said Claypool, did not use them to “blow people up” but to “calm people down.” Ditto Claypool!

With 10 chapters in his book, Claypool included all of the major parables of Jesus, including, among others, the parables of the Talents, the Petulant Children, the Good Samaritan, the Rich Fool, the Pharisee and the Publican, and the Final Judgment. Each of Claypool’s expositions contains dazzling spiritual insights, memorable lines and marvelous stories about the stories that Jesus still tells.

One reason ministers and laity alike read Claypool so regularly and enthusiastically was because he often had some slightly different angle on scripture. For example, in his exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan, he asked the question as to why the Samaritan rather than the priest or the Levite stopped to give aid to wounded one. “What keeps us,” he asked, “from acting out of our highest and best identities?”

With artistic imagination, something that always enriches the preacher’s work, he gave five responses.

We fail to stop and help the wounded in life because (1) we lack courage, (2) we lack time, (3) we lack compassion, or (4) we lack the things that can be of help. Each is a sermon in itself! But Claypool’s fifth reason for why we fail to move toward suffering was his most creative. (5) We lack deep hurt in our own lives.

Samaritans knew what it was like to be hurt, to be ignored, and to be insulted and forgotten. People who have suffered terrible injustices in life respond in one of three ways. They give up; they fight back; or they give back. This Samaritan took the third approach. He took the injustices and sufferings of his own experience in life and transformed them into acute awareness and sharp sensitivity to others lying on the side of life’s road.

Personally, I have never been surprised at the anger of African Americans, given their tormented history in our nation. What surprises me most is the deep compassion of so many Black people. More often than I would ever imagine some have taken deep personal

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pain and transformed it into concern for the wounded, just like the Samaritan. Remember your own suffering, Claypool seemed to say, and you will find ways to ease the suffering of others. You can find this kind of creativity in each chapter of his book on the parables.

Claypool published two books about biblical people. *Glad Reunion* contains 17 sermons on characters in the Old Testament. These sermons include two women, Rebekah and Ruth, and 15 men, stalwarts such as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

After describing a Thanksgiving reunion on his old family farm in Kentucky, Claypool said, “I have come to believe that what is true in a physical-family sense is also true in a religious sense; that is, in order to understand ourselves as the people of God,

we need to look back across the centuries to all that lies behind us. And this, of course, is where the Old Testament fits so beautifully into the scheme of things, for the Old Testament is to the church what that family farm in southern Kentucky was to my particular family---namely, a place of remembrance, a repository of history and tradition. It can even be thought of as a family scrapbook in which pictures and memorabilia of the past are preserved. The Old Testament is where we get in touch with our religious root system, and this is as important to our faith as family stories are to a particular family heritage.”

You do not have to read much of Claypool to realize how important the Old Testament was to him as a Christian preacher. He harks back constantly to the lessons of Genesis 1-11, especially 1-3. One is not surprised, therefore, that he spent extensive sermonic time with the major personalities of the Old Testament, people who lived their faith in light of those early biblical chapters.

The last book that has John Claypool’s name on it was assembled, edited and published posthumously by his wife, Ann Wilkinson Claypool. Consisting of studies that he presented to Saint Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1992, the book profiles New Testament personalities, specifically the apostles of Jesus. Appropriately, the book bore the title *The First to Follow*, including material on Andrew, Simon Peter, Philip, Nathanael, Thomas, Simon the Zealot, Matthew, Thaddaeus, Judas, James the Greater, James the Lesser and John.

In *The First to Follow* as in *Glad Reunion*, Claypool often provides helpful historical background for understanding the Bible. For example, pages 82-85 of *The First to Follow* contain a lucid overview of the history of Israel as background for understanding the Zealots, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and other groups of first century Judaism.

But one can never forget who Claypool was. He was not primarily a technical biblical scholar. He was a preacher. As so many have said, “He was the preachers’ preacher.” Regarding the apostles, he said, “As I write about these twelve individuals who lived long ago, my concern is more personal and contemporary than it is historical.” Citing Brueggemann, he said, “If ‘the Story’ does not connect with our own stories, then studying the Bible is only a spectator sport.”

Claypool preached and taught about both Old and New Testament characters because he believed that “one of the best ways to understand ourselves is through stories about other people.” And he noted about the apostles, “Jesus did not wait for people to be perfect in order to call them into the circle of God’s love.” Innocence is gone. What remains is a guilty self and what to do with it.

Perfectionism, he asserted, is one of the highest forms of self-abuse. We are frail and flawed beings. To try and hide that reality only separates us from an authentic relationship with God. “As I look at these disciples Jesus chose,” he said, “it is clear that there is hope for every one of us, for they were far from perfect.”

You can read Claypool for information alone. But that is not why he preached and taught. You can read Claypool for inspiration alone. But neither was that the reason he preached and taught. You can read Claypool for interpretations alone. But he neither preached nor taught to be unique. He preached and he taught to help you realize that creation is a huge party God gives so you can find joy and self-worth. He preached and taught to urge you to use your power and freedom to bless others. He preached and taught to help you understand that you can’t pay too much for the right things in life but that you can pay too much for the wrong things in life. For all those reasons and more, “reading Claypool” makes you want to live more deeply, more devotedly, and more lovingly. ■

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

By Walter B. Shurden

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the spring of 1988, John Claypool received a sur-

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

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

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

important facts of it that have nurtured and inspired me and hopefully will do the same for you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do you see now, by looking at these chapter titles,

why people flocked to hear Claypool and why so many hundreds subscribed to read his sermons? Is there anyone anywhere in the whole wide world who has not been hurt by someone else? Is there anyone anywhere in the whole wide world who has not hurt someone else? And is there anyone anywhere in the whole wide world who has not been hurt by losing someone or some thing?

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

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

He focused upon universal issues of the human heart.

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

One could never accuse him of preaching on subjects unrelated to the human struggle.

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

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

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

Humphreys, one of Baptists’ best contemporary theologians, offered an assessment of Claypool’s treatment

of the three subjects in *Mending the Heart*. “I think that what he said on all three subjects is true and important and brilliant and, much as I love some of the other books, this is my favorite.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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when "life had worked them over."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

While Claypool believed that at times God solves

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

have seen?'"

"Again, I began to remember back over all the joys of my life and started laughing as I had never laughed before, and so help me, it seemed that that ocean of light was laughing with me! If you have never heard the laughter of God, you have missed something absolutely ecstatic."

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

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

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

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

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Book Review

CLAYPOOL edited by C. Douglas Weaver and Aaron Douglas Weaver. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2022., 256 pages.

Reviewed by William Powell Tuck

Without much debate, many consider John Claypool as one of the most prominent preachers in the South in the latter half of the 20th century. He was often called “the preachers’ preacher.” His “confessional preaching” style has been the subject of doctoral dissertations and his former Episcopal church published a collection of memories in a volume entitled *Life Is Gift*. The book, *Claypool*, might be called, the editors suggest, “a posthumous *Festschrift*.” Fourteen writers, pastors, professors, former church members and students, including Claypool’s son, reflect on Claypool as pastor, preacher, and professor. The book focuses on who Claypool was and what he accomplished and seeks to introduce him to those who do not know him. Throughout the book, central themes from Claypool’s life and preaching are noted such as “life is gift,” “the basis of hope,” “humility,” and “generosity.” John Rowan, Claypool’s son, initiated the desire to see this book become a reality to capture his father’s career.

Claypool is introduced by a biographical sketch of his life which focuses on his college and seminary years, his call to ministry, marriage, churches he served, and his struggle with the death of his daughter, Laura Lue, with leukemia, and his melee with his own woundedness. In a chapter entitled “A Claypool Bibliography,” Walter Shurden explores the 12 published books of Claypool and how they reveal his theological vision, major life themes and his approach to sermon making. Shurden also believes that Claypool’s books show something of the religious experiences that shaped his own spirituality. His first book, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*; Shurden believes, revealed the framework of much of Claypool’s thinking, preaching and teaching that moved from “the darkest of events” to what he affirmed as “the basis of hope.” Shurden also notes that Claypool’s book, *Opening Blind Eyes*, has 60 pages that are autobiographical insights into the profoundly personal experience that shaped Claypool’s life.

The book relates Claypool’s success as a preacher in five churches but traces his administrative struggles,

his conflicts in some of his congregations over racism, gender equality, ordination of women deacons, civil rights issues, the Southern Baptist Convention controversy, the membership of Black people, and other issues. His congregations were gracious to allow him time away to speak at various colleges and universities, and to deliver major preaching lectures at schools like Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and the prestigious Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, only the third Southern Baptist to deliver them. This latter lecture series was published in his book, *The Preaching Event*, and relates his method of “confessional preaching.”

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The book explores Claypool’s personal struggle with his own sense of unworthiness, vocational fatigue, burnout, and his state of exhaustion which he experienced that led him to resign as pastor of Northminister Baptist Church and seek a year of Clinical Pastoral Education in the Southern Baptist Hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana, for healing. His divorce, pilgrimage into the Episcopal Church, new marriage, and 14 years as rector at St Luke’s Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama, are explored as well. An interesting read is noted in how he was almost not interviewed at St. Luke’s because of his age, divorce and not having been an Episcopal priest very long. His return to Baptist life by teaching preaching at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology is an inter-

esting climax to his lengthy career as a minister. The sermon, "View from the Second Row," by Claypool's son, John Rowan, is a moving piece that tells about his dad's time at Crescent Hill Baptist Church and gives a glimpse into the reason for his parent's divorce. The book concludes with an examination of Claypool's benediction which he used in all his churches. David Hull notes that it had a threefold focus-- the practice, the meaning and the echo. Claypool said the benediction was designed as an "interpretive framework around the pilgrimage of life."

The 12 chapters, foreword, and the epilogue are designed to guide us through the life and ministry of one of Christianity's noted preachers. The chapters are professionally written, easy to read, often genuinely personal, and presented without ignoring Claypool's weaknesses or personal struggles as well as noting his strengths and singular contributions as a preacher, pastor, teacher and fellow struggler on life's journey. For those wanting a gate into the lifeway of Claypool will find this book a genuine rich resource, and those who do not know him will find this book a stellar introduction to a minister who has much to teach those who will "listen." ■

William Powell Tuck is a retired Baptist pastor and seminary professor. He has been a contributor to Christian Ethics Today an many other journals. His

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book, Conversations with My Grandchildren about God, Religion, and Life esd reviewed by Fisher Humphreys in Issue 115 of Christian Ethics Today. He and his wife, Emily, live in Richmond, Virginia

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