

Christian Ethics Today

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Violence

By Patrick R. Anderson

During the early decades of the 20th century, on those occasions when my grandfather had to travel away from home for work, my grandmother slept with a butcher knife under her pillow. She said she did that because of “the meanness going on” in the north Jacksonville, Florida, neighborhood where they lived. As it seems we are buried under an avalanche of violent meanness in every aspect of our lives today, I remembered that piece of family lore. It is not a new phenomenon.

Violence has been a continuous element in human existence since the dawning of time. Early in the recorded *Genesis* narrative, first brothers, Cain and Abel, faced off in a field where Cain killed Abel, spilling his blood on the ground. From that seminal event, the Bible recounts unimaginable violence throughout, the slaughter of the people and animals of Jericho being but one example.

The history of America is written in blood.

Today, we are faced with a staggering level of violence. The video of five Memphis police officers kicking and beating to death a defenseless man demonstrates a level of depravity and disregard for human life that is impossible to un-see. The fact that the five officers are black and the victim, Tyre Nichols, was likewise black only heightens the realization that police violence, while endemic to the American criminal justice system, is not limited to white on black animus. White police violence on white victims also defiles the landscape. Violence is so prevalent in the sordid history of American policing that its stain, like that of Abel’s, calls out from the ground.

Mass shootings (defined as shootings in which four or more people are shot in a single shooting spree) are so prevalent that we can hardly overcome the initial anguished feelings of one before news of another hits us full on. The sheer numbers can often blunt our feelings, but the fact that as of today (January 28), the year 2023 has already seen 49 mass shootings, bringing the 10-year total to 5,184, sends shivers up my spine

While guns are inanimate objects, the one thing all mass shootings have in common is the use of guns. Approximately 393 million guns are privately owned in America, according to the Switzerland-based Small Arms Survey, or 120 guns per 100 households; but about half of those guns are owned by about three per-

cent of the population.

The prevalence of guns made available in so many households leads to tragic access by children, as seen in the case of a six-year-old boy who took a family gun to school and shot his teacher in Newport News, Virginia, this year. The Center for Disease Control reports a total of 45,222 people died from gun shots in 2020, the latest year in which full data is available; about half were suicides. Guns are a factor.

The ethical concern here, however, is the meanness, as my grandmother would say. There is an element of evil in the human experience which, coupled with the ready access to weapons of death, creates a perfect storm of violence. No area of American life is immune

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from the tragic fact that death can be introduced without notice or warning. Mass shootings have happened in movie houses, churches, nightclubs, outdoor concerts, private parties, grocery stores, Walmart, elementary schools, universities....

Guns and violence are so entwined in America that some claim that the problem (mass shooting killings) can be prevented or solved by a more heavily armed populace. In 2017, in the wake of the mass killing of 26 worshipers in a Texas church, Pastor Robert Jeffress of First Baptist Church in Dallas told a Fox & Friends panel that a shooter would not get off more than a shot or two in his church before being shot by an armed member of the church. “I’d say a quarter to a half of our members are concealed carry, they have guns and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. They bring them into the church with them.... look, if somebody tries that in our church, they might get one shot off or two shots off, and that’s the last thing they’ll ever do in this life.”

With those facts as a backdrop, this issue of

Christian Ethics Today, sheds light on some of the current moral issues we face where violence is pervasive. Russia's invasion of Ukraine almost a year ago has opened a rift in the Eastern Orthodox Churches which can have disastrous effects. Religious wars were a shameful staple of European history for centuries. With the heightened tensions between Christian churches in war-torn countries, and the violent tendencies of self-styled Christian insurrectionists, along with the braggadocio of preachers...well, the kindling is set, awaiting the flame.

To begin this issue of the journal you will see an excellent address by George Mason on Wisdom, a topic we sorely need to read and heed.

Also, the piece by Kathy Bladock about the life and work of David Fearon, who as a 21-year-old seminarian, 60 years ago, challenged the RSV

translators on the word 'homosexual' is one of the most remarkable stories I have seen. His own long ministry and life is inspiring. After many years, Bible translators have finally begun to address mistranslation of passages in Corinthians that has resulted in untold suffering, bigotry, and erroneous theology for decades.

Baylor professor John White's article on Christian Conformity to Sports Ethics is timely and interesting. Marion Aldridge's review of Daniel Vestal's new memoir detailing his journey as pastor and denominational leader will interest everyone who has lived through the life of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Wendell Griffen and I are working on articles regarding police reform and, in this issue, he cautions us to not to have much confidence in words of police reform as a solution to what we are facing. ■

Justice Anthony Kennedy on What Marriage Means:

“No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were. As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.”

Kennedy was responding to opponents of gay marriage, holding that couples of the same sex have a constitutional right to wed. The point of same-sex unions is not to weaken marriage, he argues, but to expand it in the nation as a whole and honor it more fully in their own lives. These same arguments are also found in the final paragraph of Loving v. Virginia, the case in which the Supreme Court threw out laws banning interracial marriage in 1967.

Applying Christian Wisdom

By George A. Mason

When my daughter and son-in-law graduated from divinity school, my wife and I commissioned an artist to paint two complementary works that would depict Word and Wisdom—roughly correlating to the two different sources from which their ministries would draw. The artist created one painting of a mountain and the other of a stream. They hang side-by-side now in their living room, just as this couple should always be side-by-side in the pursuit of knowledge.

Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, draws upon the revelation of the word of God that comes down to us. Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai is the paradigm of this approach to religious knowledge. But alongside the word that drops into history and human consciousness is the wisdom that springs up from nature itself. As the Franciscan spiritual teacher, Richard Rohr, likes to say, “*Nature was our first Bible.*” That is, before any word from God fell upon the ears of prophets, the wordless creation of God made itself known to us.

When the last of the four Gospel accounts of Jesus was written, it had become important to relate the human Jesus to the eternal life and work of God from creation onward, including ways people outside the faith had apprehended truth. The writer draws on the link in Judaism between word and wisdom and joins it to the language of Greek philosophy.

The early church theologian, Irenaeus of Lyon, spoke of God’s two hands in creation: namely, word and wisdom. If the word brought the world into being, wisdom gave it shape and meaning. The primacy of the word that gives rise to the Law in Judaism and the Gospel in Christianity is understandable, but does not exclude the role of wisdom. As Proverbs 8 puts it, “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts long ago.” Then it continues by speaking of how wisdom carefully set up all the relationships that make up the harmony of creation. Wisdom is built into reality itself and reality itself can be known by it.

Despite the prominence of the word as revelation, ultimately, the Bible is a book of wisdom—less a rulebook than a guidebook. And even when it seems to be a rulebook, those rules are intended to be a guide to what 1 Timothy calls “the life that really is life.”

Now, the Bible is chiefly a record of God’s redemptive work with humans. Nature tends to be treated more as the backdrop to the human story. But there are

glimpses of how these cannot be separated.

For instance, the creation stories in Genesis begin with nature first. In the first story (which is likely the second in time), humans are the crowning achievement of creation. It takes six days to get to us, which is to say we are dependent for our existence on the rest of nature that preceded us. This is confirmed, of course, by evolutionary theory. Humans share 99 percent of our DNA with that of chimpanzees. The second and oldest creation account, shows the Earth Man—*‘adam*—being formed out of the dust of the ground and only becoming a living being upon the vitalizing breath of God being breathed into his nostrils.

All of which is to say, that the story of humankind is not and cannot be told apart from the natural world.

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We are spirit and stuff, never one without the other. And whatever our human future, it will be tied to the future of the nonhuman world.

We see in the Hebrew Bible how often judgment for human sin is reflected in natural disasters: the curse of the ground in Eden, famines, droughts, floods, storms and even brimstone. But we also see where nature proclaims the glory of God, how the mountains and the hills sing for joy and the trees of the fields clap their hands. The poet told us something by metaphor of the living character of nature before we came to understand the ways trees communicate with one another and how all of life is connected through DNA—human and nonhuman alike.

The early church was not uniform in its appreciation of the role of wisdom. Tertullian famously asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” But others, like Justin Martyr, saw the deeper connection. The

logos of God is the combination of word and wisdom—*Sophia*; then the world is both rational in the way it is ordered and understandable at the same time. He posited that the Logos finds its complement in the *logos spermatikos*, the rational capacity that resides within every human being. This opens the door to human reason and scientific pursuit.

The theologian and missiologist, Leslie Newbigin, proffered that Christianity—and I would say Judaism too in its own way—provides the necessary groundwork for science in that it deems the created world both rational and contingent. That is, nature is dependable and understandable in principle, and it is free and open. The freedom of creation is seen positively in its ability to adapt and change across time and negatively in the chaos that threatens its stability at every turn.

All of this is to say that there are adequate grounds within the Christian faith for a productive conversation and partnership with science. The Church hasn't always seen the scientific method as compatible with faith. Galileo's heliocentric universe seemed a threat to the church's authority over all learning that derived from its reading of the Bible. Likewise, Darwin's theory of evolution and Hawking's notion of the eternity of space-time has caused concern, to say the least. And today, much of the skepticism toward science regrettably comes from Christianity.

Science, for its part, can devolve into *scientism*. That is, it can become a totalistic epistemology that makes no room for the divine and no place for religion to contribute to a fuller conception of reality than science can muster on its own. However, religion could be a productive partner with science in addressing global ills, one of those ills being our worldwide ecological crisis.

Religion can and should give confidence to people to trust that truth is truth wherever and however it is found—whether by revelation of the word of God that comes by hearing, or by discovery of the wisdom of God that comes by seeing. Science works by observation of creation. It is not a natural enemy of religion; it is a partner to it. Science works from below, so to speak, while religion works from above. One works inductively, while the other works deductively. Both build models of knowledge—one called faith and the other hypothesis—and then each adjusts the models in the light of testing in their respective laboratories.

I should stipulate that there is more than one form of Christianity and not every version is amenable to my description of things. One form of Christianity today is particularly hostile to attempts to address global warming, climate change and all its effects on the planet. In this version, efforts to care for creation can

be perceived to distract true believers from their duty to save souls. I actually had a woman tell me once that recycling efforts we were encouraging in our church were the way the devil-inspired New Age Movement was slipping into the church. According to this view of things, the Earth will be destroyed in the last days and only those humans who are true believers in Jesus will be saved. And how they will be saved is by escaping their bodies and going to Heaven, leaving Earth behind. Therefore, all efforts at ecological conservation are futile.

Furthermore, God made it plain in Genesis, they think, that humans are to have dominion over the earth. Which they wrongly—in my view—understand to mean that nature is there to serve us rather than our being charged to serve nature in helping it to achieve its divine purpose of flourishing as our habitat.

The Bible is not plain. It must always be interpreted. Wisdom is found in choosing those parts that comport best with an overall vision of creation and redemption, and then treating other parts in light of it.

It's past time for religion to join science in partnership for the preservation of the planet. Theology has to join anthropology with ecology in a more holistic approach.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul sees hope for nonhuman creation. He declares that creation itself longs to be free from its bondage to decay and will at last in the end obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. This is a far cry from the apocalyptic passages that see the Earth burning up in a climatic conflagration. In Paul's view, human and nonhuman nature both depend upon God for our redemption; but nonhuman redemption leans on humans for its hope.

It's past time for religion to join science in partnership for the preservation of the planet. Theology has to join anthropology with ecology in a more holistic approach.

That will require more spiritual humility than we often exhibit. We have to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers to all the questions all the time. God has chosen to embed the truth in creation that awaits our discovery of it. This requires respect for scientific inquiry and patience for the possibility of new understanding. But what I am trying to say is that we have even within our Christian scriptures and tradition

a lightly beaten path to follow. So much is at stake. John Philip Newell writes in his book, *Christ and the Celts*: “At the end of my talk [focused on John 1:9], a Mohawk elder, who had been invited to comment on the common ground between Celtic spirituality and the native spirituality of his people, stood with tears in his eyes. He said:

As I have listened to these themes, I have been wondering where I would be today. I have been wondering where my people would be today. And I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world today if the mission that came to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find Light in us.”

It’s time to find the Light in Native American spiri-

tuality that gives primacy to the Earth as our common Mother and to science that investigates the Earth for ways to preserve it. This is the path of wisdom that Christianity must begin to follow. ■

George A. Mason is pastor emeritus of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. He currently serves as chairman of the board of Christian Ethics Today Foundation, is host of the weekly podcast, Good God, and is very highly regarded as a pastor, theologian, speaker, writer and advocate for progressive Christian living. This paper was first delivered at the Global Ecological Summit at Southern Methodist University on November 1, 2022 and is reprinted here with permission of the author.

Interesting Quote:

Truth. Humility. Nonviolence. That’s where we start. More will surely be required of us, but that’s where we start. Do not give space in your brain or your heart to those who don’t embrace these three fundamental values of authentic Christian faith.

There’s a lot that’s masquerading as Christianity these days that isn’t very Christian. Church, we have work to do.

Rhonda Abbott Blevins, senior pastor of Chapel by the Sea in Clearwater Beach, Fla. In an article published in Baptist News Global, January, 14, 2023.

As a 21-year-old Seminarian, David Fearon Challenged the RSV Translators On the Word ‘Homosexual’

By Kathy Baldock, via Religion Dispatches

David Sheldon Fearon, 84, died peacefully in his home in Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, B.C. Canada at the beginning of January, 2023.

On Oct. 22, 1959, Fearon, then a 21-year-old seminary student at McGill University’s School of Religious Studies, Montréal, Quebec, wrote a five-page letter to Luther A. Weigle, head of the translation team for the newly published Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Fearon questioned the team’s combining and translation of two Greek words in *1 Corinthians 6:10* to the single word “homosexual.” Until the New Testament of the RSV was published in 1946, the word “homosexual” never had appeared in any translation of the Bible.

Fearon was raised in Lennoxville, Quebec, the son of Earl, an iceman, and Evelyn, a primary school teacher. When Fearon was 6, his mother realized he had a strong spiritual bent. As a result, Evelyn decided to change her church affiliation to the United Church of Canada, where the religious education was stronger.

In sixth grade, he developed his first “crush” on smart and handsome Dennis. He became nervous, shy and uncomfortable around boys, and he began to develop a stammer. At 16, he noticed a book at the town’s magazine stand, *The Divided Path*, subtitled “*the story of a homosexual.*” He thought, “Could he be like me? Maybe I’m not the only one. Maybe there are more people like me that just want to like and be liked by another boy.” Careful not to let the clerk see the book’s face, he paid and brought the book home to read.

‘Mother, I’m gay’

His mother seemed continually disappointed that her younger son did not seem to be “meeting a nice girl.” After all, Gene, Fearon’s older brother, seemed to date several girls simultaneously. To put an end to her nagging, he told her, “Mother, I’m gay.”

It was 1954, and his stunned mother responded, “David, you can’t be gay, you’re not a child molester or a pedophile.” As would become a lifelong pattern he

gathered resources for his mother to read so she might understand what homosexuality meant.

Upon graduating from high school, Fearon attended Bishop’s University in Lennoxville as a day student. He studied history and English, hoping to become a teacher like his mother. While a student at Bishop’s, he served with a Royal Canadian Air Force Auxiliary Squadron from 1955 through 1959.

The system acted as an early warning detection of Russian bombers that might potentially come to the United States from the north, over Canada. Serving

“God fixed my stammer, but not my homosexuality. He must be good with it.”

in the RCAF was a good opportunity for Fearon to become more comfortable being around other young men his age, something that in the past made him nervous.

Although Fearon had been solidly secure in his faith and beliefs since childhood, now that he was older and taking classes in chemistry and biology, and learning about evolution and Darwinism, he began to think more about the existence of God. He hit a crisis of faith and sought the counsel of his minister.

“I’m not sure God exists,” he confided in Leonard Outerbridge. The minister asked him to pray over the Christmas break and come to his own conclusions.

Two weeks later, Fearon was back in Outerbridge’s office. “Yes, I have found what I was looking for!” Having known David for many years, the wise minister asked, “David, do you feel called to the ministry?” In his mind, Fearon thought, “What am I getting myself into? I am a stammerer, and I’m gay.”

Outerbridge invited Fearon to give the Sunday night sermon, the service most attended by his peers, his fellow students. He stood to give the sermon, delivered it

clearly and never stammered again. It seemed settled to Fearon: “God fixed my stammer, but not my homosexuality. He must be good with it.”

The United Church of Canada gave him a scholarship to attend McGill University School of Theology. The denomination had adopted the RSV as its official text for service and worship in 1952 when the full version of the translation was published.

Reading 1 Corinthians 6

The Revised Standard Version is an English translation of the Bible that was popular in the mid-20th century. It posed the first serious challenge to the King James Version, aiming to be both a readable and literally accurate modern English translation of the Bible.

Fearon had been raised reading the King James Version of the Bible. Eventually, in his divinity program, he came across 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 in the RSV:

“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God.”

“Well,” he puzzled, “that doesn’t make sense to me. God called me to the ministry, and he knew I was homosexual. Now I am reading that homosexuals will not enter the kingdom of God. How can that be?”

Then Fearon noticed a small notation “j” beside the word “homosexual” indicating a footnote that read: “Two Greek words are rendered by this expression.”

“This translation has to be wrong, and if so, it is a terrible disservice to homosexual people,” Fearon suspected. “It shows strong prejudice on the part of the translation team.”

The RSV translation of the passage deeply bothered him. The more he thought about it, he thought that the RSV translation of the *1 Corinthians* verse would lead to the further discrimination of gay people, but this time, from the church. But Fearon knew how to dig in to find answers to his questions. He had been doing it since his teenage years.

He was a good Greek student both at Bishop’s University and now at McGill. He knew it was essential not to simply read translated words in English versions of the Bible. Instead, he was trained to return to the original Greek texts to better understand the original meanings.

Digging deeper into the text

After reading the RSV *1 Corinthians 6:9-10* footnote, he took out his Greek Bible and looked up the two words that had been combined to form the one word “homosexual.” The two Greek words are *mala-*

kos and *arsenokoites*. In his interlinear New Testament that compared the Greek text with the literal translation immediately above it, Fearon learned that the word *arsenokoites* was likely to have been coined by Paul the Apostle to address a specific situation happening within the church at Corinth.

Corinth, an ancient seaport city, regularly saw sailors, and to service their sexual needs, prostitutes. In the ancient world and in Greek culture, men enjoyed both male and female prostitutes, but more often men preferred the less complicated services of men, particularly young men.

Fearon recalled from his study that these men who had sex with male prostitutes were called by some “abusers of men.” Those who gave themselves for sexual use, especially to be used sexually as women and used, in other words, to be penetrated like women, were the *malakos*, meaning “effeminate,” which suggested “to be used like women.”

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He was confident from what he’d learned about the Greek words, from the history of Corinth, and who he was as a homosexual, that Paul could not have been writing about homosexuals as he knew them.

was as a homosexual, that Paul could not have been writing about homosexuals as he knew them.

“Hmmm,” he thought, “I’m a homosexual, but this is not about me. I know I am a Christian in the kingdom of God. I know God called me to the ministry. I’ve always known God has loved me, even as a child. The translators didn’t get this right. I don’t think ‘homosexuals’ is what Paul meant by these words at all.”

Fearon then checked the translation of the two words as they had appeared in the KJV. There, the two words were translated as: “the effeminate” and “abusers of themselves with mankind.” He thought the KJV translation was far more accurate for these two words separately than the RSV combining Paul’s original two words into one sweeping word.

It seemed clear to Fearon that this RSV translation reflected the prejudice and ignorance of the society in which he had grown up.

He concluded: “My sexuality is part of God’s plan

for me and for humanity. I just don't think they got this right." He continued to think about the translation. But he couldn't talk to anyone about it, not even to his professors. The blindness in society at the time to his orientation would expose him.

Writing a letter

Over the span of almost two months, he privately went about constructing a single-spaced three-page letter, with an additional appendix, to send to the publisher of the RSV. He didn't know if his letter would even be noticed, for he was certain the many Greek scholars around him at the university and so many more throughout the world who had read this Corinthians passage during the past seven years would have noticed this error and written to the publisher as well.

On October 22, 1959, Fearon sent his five-page letter to Luther A. Weigle. At the end of his impressive academic substantiation of the assumed error in translation, the young seminarian warned:

I write this letter after many months of serious thought and hard work, partly to point out that which to me is a serious weakness in translation, but more because of my deep concern for those who are wronged and slandered by the incorrect usage of this word.

Since this is a holy book of Scripture sacred to the Christian, I am more deeply concerned because well-meaning and sincere, but misinformed and misguided people (those among the clergy not excluded) may use this Revised Standard Version translation of 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 as a sacred weapon, not in fact for the purification of the church, but in fact for injustice against a defenseless minority group which includes the sincere, convicted, spiritually re-born Christian who has discovered himself to be of homosexual inclination from the time of his memory.

I write this letter with certain homosexual individuals in mind — Christians who would die for their faith, their church, and their Lord, but who cannot alter their biological state of being.

I hope the committee responsible for considering any possible corrections or revisions of the RSV

text may take my case here presented for consideration.

Weigle responded November 3. He saw the possibility of an error and offered a suggested revision as "those who participate in homosexual vices."

Fearon responded to Weigle on November 23, 1959, counter-suggesting, "those who practice homosexual vices." Homosexual vices, as Fearon explained, were akin to same-sex rape. The same-sex referred to in 1 Corinthians, he pointed out, was abusive and exploitative in nature, like rape.

The exchange ended on December 3, with Weigle assuring him the letters would be placed in a file and revisited when the team worked on a revision.

An error duplicated

Fearon never thought about the letters again. He could not speak to anyone about them for fear his questioning the translation might point to his sexuality. He did not know his letters were placed in a file, and

Homosexuality soon became a highly charged and useful political wedge issue for the Religious Right. First, the top-selling Bibles all supported the notion of the sinfulness and depravity of homosexuality. Then, the AIDS crisis hit. Romans 1, now including the word "homosexuals," cemented the Religious Rights' idea that AIDS was a penalty for sinful behavior.

that, in the next round of translation edits, the team did change "homosexuals" to "sexual perverts," a term that could be applied to any person, and not to a specific group, homosexuals. The 1971 RSV-r reflects this change.

However, several other Bible translations already were in the creation process by 1959. None of those translation teams (*The Living Bible*, *The New American Standard Bible*, and *The New International Version*) knew about the admission of error by the RSV team and the intention to revise. All the

newer translations used the RSV as the base text. “Homosexual” had become the accepted translation. The creator of *The Living Bible* added the word “homosexual” in five more places in addition to 1 Corinthians.

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I knew of this sudden translation shift and included the information in my first book, *Walking the Bridgeless Canyon*. When I spoke about it in my public presentations, I always added, “I believe this translation shift was the result of cultural and ideological assumptions by men who were born between 1870 and 1917. They knew nothing about what it was to be gay or the meaning of homosexuality as an orientation.”

The letter exchange has been housed in the archives in the Sterling Library at Yale University since 1976, when Weigle died.

Finding the paper trail

Weigle had been the dean of Yale Divinity. In October 2017, I went to Yale University for five days with co-researcher Ed Oxford to see if we could find documentation as to why the RSV team made the decision they did. There was no paper trail that existed for the translation period; it seemed that they made a “logical” uncontested assumption in their translation.

I imagine them looking into the culture of the 1930s, when the work on *1 Corinthians* was done, and asking, “What is a simple way to express sex between men that is exploitative, abusive and excessive.” For them, that was homosexuality.

We had found no record of explanation as to their decision anywhere in the almost 100,000 documents we searched, until, on the third day of searching, I found the four-letter exchange between Fearon and Weigle.

This set Ed and me on a quest to undo the translation error that had been based on assumptions. For the past four years, I have been writing a book, *Forging a Sacred Weapon*, which traces the verses used against the LGBTQ community throughout history; it will be out in mid-2023.

The other curiosity was, “Who is this David Sheldon who wrote these crucial letters?” They were written with a P.O. box return address based in Lennoxville, Quebec. We asked my friend Tina Wood to help us find Sheldon. Tina volunteers to help adoptees, birth

families and others searching for family and friends.

The details of her search (also told in the book) are head-spinning. How do you find a person who wrote a series of letters 60 years ago with a P.O. box as the return address? (We did not know at the time that Fearon was using his first and middle name, not his last name.) It took almost a year, but Tina found him.

On Aug. 17, 2018, I called Fearon and asked him if he had written letters questioning the RSV translation team in 1959.

“Yes,” came his reply.

I had suspected on first reading the letters that the author was gay. Fearon confirmed he was.

“When did you come out?” I asked.

“Never. I never came out,” he replied. He was 80 years old.

He was partnered with Joe for 23 of those years. People thought live-in Joe was his cousin.

Fearon became a minister in the United Church of Canada after his studies at McGill. He served in nine pastorates for over 37 years. He was partnered with

Fearon’s letters left a historical record of why the RSV translation team made their long-reaching and damaging decision. There is no other documentation explaining why the team included the word “homosexual” in the Bible, except the information found in the Fearon-Weigle letters.

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The only such letters

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There is no other documentation explaining why the team included the word “homosexual” in the Bible, except the information found in the Fearon-Weigle letters.

Fearon had yet to learn he impacted the 1971 revision change. He noticed the shift to “sex pervers” in the revision. When I shared the information with him in our first of dozens of long phone calls, he was surprised his letters had moved Weigle to reassess his assumptions. Fearon always imagined his letters were

“one of hundreds, if not thousands” written objecting to the translation.

In fact, Fearon’s was the only such letter.

I began presenting these findings in public presentations starting in 2018. At one such presentation at Hollywood United Methodist Church, filmmaker Rocky Roggio brought her pastor father along.

Sal Roggio believes homosexuality is a sin. Rocky was planning on doing a documentary examining her relationship with her father. However, after listening to the presentation, Rocky switched courses. Over the past four years, she produced an excellent documentary, *1946: The Mistranslation that Shifted a Culture*.

1946 threads several stories together: Rocky and Sal, my research work with Ed, Fearon’s letters, and his story, and all supported by interviews with expert Old and New Testament scholars. The film is going through film festival now and will likely end up with a major online streamer within the next year.

Fearon died last week peacefully in his home in Nanaimo on Vancouver Island. He was discovered January 8 by a friend who requested a wellness check. He was slumped over at his dining room table, his glass of beer half-finished, his television on, and his eyeglasses only slightly askew.

I would like to imagine he was watching the news, and God said, “Hey, David, good and faithful servant, you’ve done your work. It’s time.”

Fearon did not know the legacy he would leave when, at age 21, he bravely challenged the RSV

translation error. His recently discovered letters left a record that allow us to further academically challenge a grave translation error based on wrong assumptions.

In the last few years, he often said, “I used to think God called me to pastoral ministry despite my being gay. I’ve decided he called me to ministry because I am gay.” ■

*Kathy Baldock lives in Reno, Nevada, where she is a researcher, author and LGBTQ ally. Her forthcoming book is *Forging a Sacred Weapon: How the Bible became Anti-Gay*. A video interview with David Fearon can be found at: <https://youtube.com/watch?v=rdfxPDZEO5k&feature=shares>*

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Christian Ethics Today

Christian Nationalism is Downplayed in the January 6 Report and Collective Memory

By Joyce Dalsheim and Gegory Starrett

When they entered the Senate chamber on January 6, 2021, a group of insurgents stopped and bowed their heads in prayer to consecrate the building and their cause to Jesus. When the Senate reconvened later, its chaplain, retired Navy Adm. Barry Black, also prayed, but called the insurgents' actions a "desecration of the United States Capitol building."

Both sides appealed to the Christian God as the authority for their actions and values.

Outside, at the rally that preceded the attack on the Capitol, there was a similar focus on God, in the form of Christian nationalism, which frames the U.S. as a Christian country whose politics and institutions should be guided by Christian principles.

As cultural anthropologists who study politics and religion, we attended the January 6 rally, which some called "Save America" and others called "Stop the Steal," because we were interested in observing the symbols on display and in talking with the people there. Having studied political demonstrations before, we wanted to document this event and what it meant for its participants.

Most of the people we encountered were peacefully expressing their own political views and were not part of the insurrection. But they nevertheless expressed longstanding ideas that were ultimately echoed and amplified in their most extreme form by those who did engage in violence at the Capitol.

Focus on violence

Maintaining social order and a functioning democracy requires holding people responsible for their actions. That's why much of the public focus on the insurrection has – rightly – been on the violence and the political conspiracy behind it, through which then-President Donald Trump and his allies sought to overturn the 2020 presidential election.

The congressional hearings on the insurrection, including the violent minority and the conspiracy of which they may have been a part, have concluded, and the committee's report is out. However, the committee's goal had never been to understand the tens of thousands of people who attended the rally to express their collective identity and their solidarity with

what they saw as a just cause: maintaining America's political and religious heritage. Its focus has been on Trump, as Jesus fades into the background.

Research on the events of that day reveals that most of the attendees at the rally – even those who were later arrested for their actions – were ordinary Americans, people committed to what they believed were the true results of the election. Most of them were not members of organized groups such as the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers or the Three Percenters.

Ordinary citizens

What we observed at the rally was an optimistic

As cultural anthropologists who study politics and religion, we attended the January 6 rally, which some called "Save America" and others called "Stop the Steal," because we were interested in observing the symbols on display and in talking with the people there.

occasion where the people gathered expressed pride in their collective identity. The atmosphere was celebratory, even carnivalesque, perhaps like a tailgate party preceding an American football game. When we arrived we were greeted by a woman who called out, "Welcome to the party!"

The people we saw there were expressing their concern for American democracy and the ideals of law and order. We saw them answering the call of a president and seeking to protect the integrity of the American political system. Most strikingly, we saw proud Americans standing up for Christian values.

Expressions of identity

Anthropologists have long known that public displays are a common way of crafting identities.



Women display their banners on Jan. 6, 2021.
Gregory Starrett, CC BY-ND

In the U.S. this is evident in ethnic and holiday parades, museum exhibits, popular demonstrations and highly orchestrated conferences.

On January 6, the images and slogans deployed by the crowd included a wide variety of American flags and recycled Trump 2020 campaign gear, as well as pointed insults toward his opponents. Gun rights were a major theme; flags with images of assault rifles read “Come and Take Them!” Other signs focused on individual freedom by refusing COVID-19 restrictions. American flags with a central blue stripe indicated support for law enforcement.

Christian symbols were pervasive throughout the rally. People took pride in Christian identity and often conflated Jesus and President Trump as figures of national salvation, “Chosen Ones.”

There were flags and T-shirts proclaiming, “Jesus is my Savior and Trump is my President”; posters showing a white, blond, blue-eyed Jesus wearing the Trumpian MAGA hat; and a wide variety of other flags and banners bearing Christian themes.

Some of the Christian displays were starkly militant, such as a flag depicting a raging fire with both a bald eagle and a lion roaring – symbolizing both the United States and a militant Christ. Significantly, such militant themes in broader Christian culture are not restricted to evangelical Protestants, who are often perceived as primary drivers of religious participation in U.S. politics.

God and nation

Despite their professed devotion to God and nation, from the very beginning the Capitol insurrectionists and those at the earlier rallies on January 6 were labeled “extremists.” That term suggests a moral flaw causing people to act in unacceptable ways, such as attacking members of the Capitol police or calling for the vice president to be hanged.



A group of Dominican nuns who supported Donald Trump march in Washington on Jan. 6, 2021. Gregory Starrett, CC BY-ND

But “extremism” can also be understood as a more intense or committed version of what is otherwise ordinary. As scholars of the cultural politics of reli-

Christian symbols were pervasive throughout the rally. People took pride in Christian identity and often conflated Jesus and President Trump as figures of national salvation, “Chosen Ones.”

gion, we suggest this ordinariness is actually more alarming than its extreme expressions, because it’s harder to notice. Political theorist Hannah Arendt called this “the banality of evil.” Arendt and her generation of scholars were concerned about how totalitarianism could emerge from the very principles we think make us free.

People don’t need to break windows or bones to erode human rights, endanger democracy or form a basis for authoritarianism. Instead, they can ignore what had been expected social behavior because they find a personal or political advantage or formulate or assent to unjust laws. In Arendt’s view, these people are avoiding the human responsibility “to think” from others’ perspectives and to interrogate commonly held ideas.

It was precisely the ordinariness of most of the rally-goers that day that caught our attention. We met people who were real estate agents, firemen and retired con-



Banners invoked God and praised Donald Trump on Jan. 6, 2021. Gregory Starrett, [CC BY-ND](#)

struction workers, as well as grandmothers with their children and grandchildren. They seemed familiar to us, as though they could be our Christian neighbors.

People arrived in Washington in carpools or buses

with friends or family members. They wanted to take personal responsibility for the political health of the republic and the country's Christian European heritage and freedoms. They came to uphold the country's founding myth that injustice can be met by the popular unity of mass rebellion. As one handmade sign read, "Let's 1776 this place."

They were relentlessly deceived by their leaders through media owned by wealthy corporations that reaped huge profits from those lies. But that does not change their motivations. Instead it raises questions about the manipulation of democratic and Christian values and highlights the problem of whether people can think for themselves in the face of such an overwhelming barrage of lies. ■

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BJC Offers Free Downloadable Report Explaining January 6 in Light of Christian Nationalism

By Jeff Brumley



Pro-Trump supporters storm the U.S. Capitol after a rally with President Donald Trump on Jan. 6, 2021, in Washington, DC. Trump supporters gathered in the nation’s capital to protest the ratification of President-elect Joe Biden’s Electoral College victory over President Trump in the 2020 election. (Photo by Samuel Corum/Getty Images)

A new 63-page report takes a deep dive into the role of Christian nationalism in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and the ongoing, once-underground movement to overturn constitutional democracy in favor of government for and by conservative Christians.

The report — “Christian Nationalism and the January 6 Insurrection” — was produced by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and the Freedom From Religion Foundation. It includes essays by notable academic figures on topics ranging from a definition of Christian nationalism to suggested action steps to combat it. Several contributors to the report spoke at a Feb. 9 webinar to introduce the new resource. Together, they warned that the subversive rhetoric and actions of Christian nationalists have become increasingly sinister and alarming since Jan. 6.

Rewriting history

The situation is so alarming, they said, that

Americans who stand up against the lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and who disagree with the unconstitutional idea that the United States should be an exclusively Christian nation are now being labeled as ungodly and evil at extremist rallies and through videos, websites and blogs.

Since 2021, Christian nationalist groups have resorted to more dehumanizing depictions of political opponents by “mainstreaming the idea that Democratic organizations are demonic organizations and ‘if we don’t win elections we will go under the control of the

The situation is so alarming, they said, that Americans who stand up against the lie that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump and who disagree with the unconstitutional idea that the United States should be an exclusively Christian nation are now being labeled as ungodly and evil at extremist rallies and through videos, websites and blogs.

enemy,”” said Katherine Stewart, a contributor to the report and author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*.

Also on the rise during the past year has been the use of terms such as “freedom fighters” and “martyrs” to describe extremists’ views of the Jan. 6 conspirators and rioters, said Andrew Seidel, a report contributor, constitutional attorney and director of strategic response with the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Christian nationalists also have held firm to the claim that their movement is willed by God, a position that leaves no room for reflection or repentance. “Instead, it’s a doubling down” on extreme political and theological beliefs, said Seidel, author of *The Founding*

Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American.

The report and panel

Stewart and Seidel were joined on the panel by fellow report contributors Jemar Tisby, a historian of religion and race and author of *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*; BJC executive director and event moderator Amanda Tyler; and sociologists Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead, co-authors of *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*.

The free downloadable report defines Christian nationalism as “a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy.”

Further, the introduction written by Tyler explains: “Christian nationalism relies on the mythological founding of the United States as a ‘Christian nation,’ singled out for God’s providence in order to fulfill God’s purposes on earth. Christian nationalism demands a privileged place for Christianity in public life, buttressed by the active support of government at all levels.”

Also known as white Christian nationalism, the movement is less about adhering to an orthodox Christianity than it is an ideology and “ethno-cultural political orientation” currently energized by a belief the 2020 election was stolen. It also displays a disturbing comfort level with political violence to achieve and maintain power and prone to conspiratorial thinking, Whitehead added.

The movement also espouses moral traditionalism and favors hierarchical social order and militarism, he said. That provided the theological and political cover for the Jan. 6 insurrectionists.

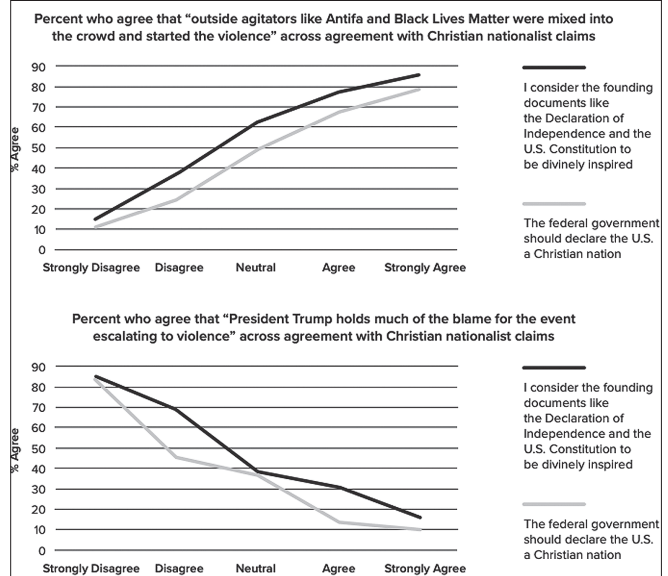
Reshaping views

Perry added that research completed since the writing of the report reveals Christian nationalism narratives are successfully reshaping some Americans’ views of the insurrectionists, resulting in a 20 percent drop in the those who believe rioters should be prosecuted.

The emerging reinterpretation of events, including claims that Antifa and Black Lives Matter agitators — instead of Donald Trump — fomented the Jan. 6 attack, leaves “open the door to future violence,” Perry said.

Christian nationalists laid the groundwork for the riots well before the 2020 election, Stewart said. With help from conservative media outlets, they created an

“information bubble where a large flock of supporters



can be separated from the facts in a state of disinformation.”

Another approach was to promote “a sense of perse-

The free downloadable report defines Christian nationalism as “a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to merge American and Christian identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy.”

cution and resentment among the rank-and-file” mixed with language about being in “a battle against tyranny and demonic forces” mixed with claims that “the Bible will be outlawed” if conservatives are unsuccessful, she said.

Seeking power for themselves

Christian nationalist ideology also revolves around the premise that the legitimacy of the U.S. government derives from a conservative Christian political perspective and eschews the notion of “a government by and for the people.”

Leaders of the movement are primarily seeking power for themselves and their allies and policies that support approved religious and political points of view, Stewart said. “The movement is leadership driven and

organization driven. It is not driven by the rank-and-file.”

A series of rallies leading up to the Capitol attack gave warning the riot was coming, Seidel asserted. Those events involved many of the same organizers and participants of the insurrection and dripped with violent biblical imagery in word and action.

References were made to the Old Testament battle of Jericho, with participants marching around government buildings — including the U.S. Capitol — invoking the Israelites’ conquest of Canaan.

Some participating ministers performed exorcisms to free the nation of liberal politicians and policies while evangelist and Trump supporter Paula White recited the Lord’s Prayer adding the word “America.”

“Sometimes I wonder how we could have been surprised that day,” Seidel said about Jan. 6.

How to fight back

While expressing deep concern about the future actions of white Christian nationalism, he added that it can be beaten by pushing back against disinformation and by Americans committing to the separation of church and state.

The Black church and African American history offer models of how U.S. citizens can support democracy, Tisby said.

From the time they were introduced to Christianity as slaves, African Americans understood they had civic and human rights and they began to demand to exercise those rights, he explained. The church that evolved from that experience has fought for the political freedoms its members have won, and which are anathema to white Christian nationalists.

While Christian nationalists have a “very exclusion-

ary, xenophobic and racist understanding” of the religion, “others have understood faith as pointing them to multiracial democracy,” Tisby said.

That’s an important lesson, given the way Christian nationalists are attacking Critical Race Theory, dissenters within churches, public schools and local, state and national government, he added.

Opponents of white Christian nationalism must avoid the temptation to look for solutions in white spaces only, Tisby continued. Instead, the nation should look to “marginalized people groups as actual leaders in the struggle.”

Counter movements such as Christians Against Christian Nationalism are another way Americans support a constitutional government, Tyler said, referencing a network coordinated by BJC. “We need a broad coalition to work together against a common threat.”

Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom from Religion Foundation, added that the national motto, *E Pluribus Unum* — “out of many, one” — holds the key to successfully opposing white Christian nationalism because it suggests people of faith, and of no faith, can co-exist. ■

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To download a free copy of this valuable resource on Christian Nationalism and the January 6th insurrection, go to:

[Christian_Nationalism_and_the_Jan6_Insurrection-2-9-22.pdf](#)

Espionage Allegations Against Russian Church Raise Religious Freedom Issue in Ukraine

By Katherine Kelaidis

Last week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called for “targeted closures” of “Moscow-backed” religious organizations in Ukraine, a more polite way of saying that he wants effectively to ban the Russian Orthodox Church. To be clear, the decree signed by Zelenskyy doesn’t immediately close all parishes and monasteries tied to Moscow (an act that would cause widespread chaos in a country where such parishes and monasteries still account for a majority of Orthodox institutions), but it does open all of them up to potential closure.

This comes on the heels of a raid by Ukrainian officials on the 1,000-year-old Kyiv Monastery of the Caves under suspicion that the UNESCO World Heritage site, which remains under the authority of the Patriarchate of Moscow, is being used as a base for Russian intelligence and military operations. Ukrainian security forces are calling it a success, claiming to have found cash in various currencies, Russian propaganda, and “dubious” Russian citizens inside the monastery—you know, the stuff you’re likely to find in a center for espionage.

The raid was the most recent and visible example of a growing concern that the Russian Orthodox Church is operating as more than an instrument of soft power for the Putin-regime, but might actually be involved in subordinating Russian counter-intelligence activities. Though this sounds like a paranoid, dystopian delusion, it’s not without evidence.

In Norway, the Russian Orthodox Church has been buying property with unnerving proximity to key military installations since 2016. It was also in 2016 that the Russian Orthodox Church opened its “spiritual center” in the heart of Paris, which is widely suspected of serving as a base for Russian intelligence. And in Finland, where the Orthodox Church of Finland (an autonomous church under the authority of the Patriarchate of Constantinople) enjoys the status of being one of two national churches, there are whispers that a church under the jurisdiction of Moscow was recently turned into a “listening post” for Russian intelligence.

It shouldn’t be shocking that the Russian Orthodox Church might be acting in tandem with Russian intelligence services; even during the Soviet-era such collab-

oration was well documented. But such a collaboration does raise serious issues and concerns, not the least of which: How should foreign governments balance the religious freedom of ordinary Russian Orthodox believers with the very real security threat the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church seems to pose? Is a ban, like the one now proposed by Zelenskyy, the only way to guard against such security threats?

It’s a question without easy answers. There are real and growing divisions in the Orthodox world. Broadly speaking, the central division runs between a Western-facing, relatively progressive faction led by the Patriarchate of Constantinople and a Slavophile, reactionary party led by the Patriarchate of Moscow.

Notably, however, just like the Great Schism which divided Rome and Constantinople into the Catholic and Orthodox churches more than a millennium ago, this battle between bishops didn’t necessarily affect the lives of rank-and-file believers. That is until last March when Russian troops began to pour into Ukraine and it became increasingly clear that Patriarch Kirill would act as a cheerleader for Vladimir Putin and his fratricidal war. It became hard not to choose a side.

Technically, the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow haven’t been in full communion with one another since October of 2018 when Moscow unilaterally broke ties with the Greek Patriarch over his decision to grant independence to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine.

Notably, however, just like the Great Schism which divided Rome and Constantinople into the Catholic and Orthodox churches more than a millennium ago,

this battle between bishops didn't necessarily affect the lives of rank-and-file believers. That is until last March when Russian troops began to pour into Ukraine and it became increasingly clear that Patriarch Kirill would act as a cheerleader for Vladimir Putin and his fratricidal war. It became hard not to choose a side.

And while Orthodox canon law in theory allows there to be only one bishop in any geographic location—thereby precluding any real decision-making on the part of ordinary people—over the past century in particular, it has become increasingly common for this ancient order to be violated. In non-traditionally Orthodox countries, such as the United States, this is largely because the Orthodox community is the result of immigration, which has created a patchwork of parishes under different bishops founded when new arrivals “sent home” for a priest. And in traditionally Orthodox places, such as Ukraine, Finland, and Estonia, turf wars (ordinarily between Constantinople and Moscow) are evidenced by the presence of overlapping ecclesiastical jurisdictions.

The consequence of both of these realities is that an ordinary Orthodox Christian in many parts of the world can now choose whether to attend a parish under one hierarch or another—and they have good reason to make such a choice. In fact, the choice of jurisdiction has become as much an act of personal conviction and self-definition as choosing between Orthodoxy and Catholicism.

This makes it hard to argue that actions that limit or ban the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in light of its connection to the Russian state aren't limiting the religious freedom of Russian Orthodox believers. After all, it's not like they can “just go” to another Orthodox church—under Constantinople or Bucharest, for example—because at this point one could argue that these are two separate (or at least separating) faith communities.

Zelenskyy's call is the most high profile moment for this conundrum thus far. Though it should be noted that lawmakers in Ukraine have proposed banning the activities of the Moscow-backed Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) multiple times before. The Ukrainian president's position isn't necessarily that unpopular in his country.

Implicit in this ban is the suggestion that all the Orthodox faithful in Ukraine should be part of the Constantinople-backed Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). But the choice between the UOC and OCU isn't a neutral one, and banning the Moscow-backed UOC, despite the very convincing national security reasons to do so, is unquestionably placing a limit on religious freedom in Ukraine. Which in theory should

be a problem for a country that, seemingly as part of its national security strategy, is increasingly positioning itself on the world stage as dedicated to liberalism and pluralism.

The easiest answer to this problem is to say that the Russian Orthodox Church deserves to be banned if it's operating as a spy network for Putin; that no one has the freedom to attend a church that's acting as a front for foreign agents. But that kind of stridency dismisses the complexities of old, complex institutions like the Russian Orthodox Church and individuals' attachments to them.

It also, whether we like it or not, feeds the propaganda machine that Putin and his Patriarch rely on. They've justified the invasion of Ukraine by declaring themselves a persecuted remnant fighting for truth, morality, and Real Christianity™ against a decadent West that's bent on the destruction of the righteous. What better way to prove them right than to start closing Russian parishes and sending away Russian priests. And let's not forget, President Zelensky is Jewish, making him the perfect anti-Christian villain for the deeply antisemitic pro-Russian base. Even if a ban is the expedient thing to do, it feeds the paranoia in too many ways.

Perhaps at this point the only way forward that respects the demands of liberal democracy and pluralism and doesn't give Putin more fodder for his propaganda blitz are safeguards that fall short of a ban. We actually do have a model for this in the involvement of security forces with mosques in the early 2000s. To be clear, some of these efforts went very wrong, hindered by the very real forces of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.

But when these efforts went right—they went really right. The efforts that went right largely involved law enforcement working with community members to identify and act on subversive behavior in their own communities. Because, spoiler alert: The vast majority of ordinary people don't like their churches, mosques, and synagogues being commandeered for military purposes.

We can do the same in Russian Orthodox communities all around the world, not just in Ukraine. And it can make a difference. This is the only way available to us right now that both protects religious freedom and safeguards against the influence of any Bond villains in clerical clothing. It's worth a try. ■

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Do Not Be Conformed to the World of Sports

By John B. White

Stanley Hauerwas and others have noted how Christian ethics often has been dominated by moral decisionism. Moral decisionism is an approach to ethics that is preoccupied with difficult questions or hard cases of moral dilemmas (e.g., moral quandaries about the beginning or end of life decisions). This way of moral reasoning puts us as individuals at the center of doing ethics with our freely deciding what is the right decision by appealing to universal rules. However, even when such moral dilemmas demand our attention, they are episodic, and if we are not careful, decisionism's moral vision can blur or frame out larger swaths of everyday experiences that call for equal moral reflection and deliberation. During an ordinary day, our callings and roles in various sphere of life bump against the Christian story and contribute to who we are becoming as Christians.

One such area of contemporary life is sports, which continues to grow exponentially where the amount of time, devotion and money are spent. The preeminence of sports in the United States is one of the most important cultural phenomena of our time. Approximately 63 percent of Americans watch some form of sports and over 45 million children and adolescents in the U.S. participate in sports. Attention to sports touches all dimensions of human life and intersects virtually every social institution including family, school, business, community, government and religion. Globally, the athletics industrial fixation generates billions of dollars annually, notwithstanding billions more in legal and illegal betting.

Upon deeper reflection on my own sports experiences, I confess at times to adopting a constellation of complicated and culpable beliefs, attitudes or practices that seemingly conflict with the inner landscape of my Christian faith and identity. Although positive elements of beauty, friendship and quests for excellence accent most people's wide-ranging sports experiences, the dominant culture of sports can shape/form us into accepting its own logic, norms and values to our detriment.

How does this work when we step into world of sports? According to missiologists, the complexity of the powerful process of socialization can entrap and discipline our attitudes and actions us as we indiscriminately participate in a context where political

and economic forces and cultural ideologies converge, causing us to follow the will and way of sports, in this case, rather than that of the gospel.

During and after many games, where emotional highs and lows infused my imagination and actions, I remember how my identity could become indelibly intertwined with the outcome of a contest. When I won, I was a winner; but when I lost, I questioned who I was since my attempt to prove myself fell short by the metric of sports. The scoreboard empirically tells a story about winners and losers which gets recorded as stats and facts. Who I was and what I was becoming was cemented in the spirit of sport itself. Like the very odes that the ancient Greek poet Pindar wrote to

During and after many games, where emotional highs and lows infused my imagination and actions, I remember how my identity could become indelibly intertwined with the outcome of a contest.

celebrate the victories achieved in the Olympic Games, the intoxicating power of wins and the alarming shrill of losses made me vulnerable to the illusions of the false self.

Often, my sense of security and significance persuaded me to pursue and define who I am by what I have, what I do or what others think of me. Henri Nouwen refers to these missteps as the three big lies that equate our identity with possession, power or prestige, rather than who God declares we are as God's beloved.

My exhortation and admonitions in this three-part series are not as a Pharisee; for my failures – better the human condition – preclude me from holding a haughty spirit. Karl Barth writes in his Romans commentary that moral exhortation commences “when all these dubious characters [sports, in this case] are seen to be no more than exaggerations of what we all

are...” Barth continues that what we ought to do does not operate from any quest to justify ourselves, but is grounded upon the mercies of God, which God in Christ gives to us in our concrete existence.

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul exhorts us to recognize how our complete commitment to worship should follow as a response to God’s mercies. Paul provides the important grammatical and theological detail that it is “in view of God’s mercy” (NIV) that modifies his intense proclamation of how we ought to live as members of God’s community. The indicatives of God’s grace ground the imperatives of the gospel and not the other way around. Considering what God has done in and through Christ, we should offer our entire bodily selves to God and not conform to the ways the world says we are supposed to. Paul calls us to action where we understand how we live in our everyday affairs intimately connects to worship. Paul in two short verses makes the case that why and how we worship should re-order our everyday liturgies. This gospel logic is only possible when God graciously transforms the way we think and do life in this age. Consequently, this further implies that we must vigilantly resist the accepted patterns of our dominant culture’s ideologies and habits. He commands us not to accommodate or emulate the actions and customs of our world.

The arc of Romans 12:1-2 addresses all spheres of life, including our participation in the world of sports. I invite us to consider how certain myths, motives and manners intensified in the drama of sports might negatively conflict with and undermine our true gospel identity. All forms of life can unsuspectingly educate and squeeze us into pacts with what Paul refers to as the customs of this world or age (v. 2). The good news demands a sober and alert response to how sports – whether mirroring society’s values or actively socializing us into its own visions of the good life – can contradict what faith teaches. If our adolescent years have taught us anything, it is that the institutions of this world act as a social court, pushing and pulling at our consciences, both condemning and accusing us when we resist or go against what these respective tribunals defend as right and wrong.

As a worshipping community, however, we are called out to live in willful non-conformity to this aeon, which involves nothing less than the gospel engaging with and rebuking deformities in the culture of sports with a divine, “NO!”

Conformity in the world of sports beckons us to fit in, to be set apart as dedicated and real athletes, to commit completely to the goals and norms of sports, and to kowtow uncritically to sports traditions—something which translates into participating in the way

things are. For example, participation in big time sports on college campuses determines the schedules, diet, free time, studies, etc, of student athletes. Oftentimes, athletes are steered away from certain majors and therefore vocations, because the academic responsibilities would conflict with their roles as college athletes. The “athlete” in the student-athlete descriptor eclipses the “student” part, frustrating their future aspirations, skills and career development when sports participation eventually comes to an end. \

Those who embrace the gospel according to sports are praised and certainly satisfy the conditions for becoming champions. The attraction, authority, argot and all-presence of sports evangelize us as Christians to sometimes convert or adapt to the dominant sport ethos. If all work and no play make Jack a dull boy, then all sports and no discipleship make Jill a nominal Christian. Because we neglect to question the misdirected beliefs, strategies, values and actions in this slice of life, we can end up copying the sports culture.

For Christians, what sports authorizes or deems as

The arc of Romans 12:1-2 addresses all spheres of life, including our participation in the world of sports. I invite us to consider how certain myths, motives and manners intensified in the drama of sports might negatively conflict with and undermine our true gospel identity.

valid or good does not necessarily translate into a way of life compatible with the gospel. That does not mean every jot and tittle of sports are automatically bent or bad; however, the power of the gospel does not need human glory or excellence to make its mission credible. The gospel of sports fundamentally shifts the gospel of Jesus to how the gospel enables sportspersons to achieve the goals of sport, such as success, winning and discipline. If we pay uncritical homage to sports, then we should not be astonished when we as Christian coaches, athletes, administrators, ministers, fans and parents mistakenly say yes to the pressures, standards, loopholes and objectionable practices that are widespread in the sports world.

Using Romans 12:1-2, I want to diagnose a few “conformity illnesses” in a three-part series in *Christian Ethics Today*. I believe these ailments can

negatively form our imaginations and affect how we think about, feel about and do sports. And for each sickness or conformity, I offer a gospel way forward as something we must learn in order for the liturgy of sports to serve Christian worship.

Conformity #1: Sports are only a game

Howard Cosell famously jibed, “Sports is the toy department of human life.” The swimming pool was where I would go to slip into a simpler world, anchoring relay teams, keeping high elbows, eyeing flashy blue ribbons and eating Jell-O powder mix right from the box during AAU swim meets. Like Tom Hanks in the movie *Big*, I was a child trapped in a teenage body literally diving into this “toy department” where kickboards became wave-making machines and holding one’s breath was a game within a game. The arena of sports was my release from the real world of geometry proofs, Greek and Latin roots, girlfriends and peer pressure. As a disciple of sports, I inherited, and I was inculcated in the beliefs and practices that the meaning and form of sports were separate from religion or spirituality. Here was a domain that I believed was hermetically sealed off from the logic and will of all other forms of life. I was told that spiritual stuff relates to the sacred dimension – the serious and specific religious duties, devotions, missions and services – while swimming was a recipe of play, physiology, power and physical contests. God’s will pertained to the spiritual world while the will of earthly matters, such as those that sports, operated differently. Sports were tangible and about the profane world, while spirituality was about the unseen world. Sports pertained to the body, which was public and empirical, while spirituality was about the heart and soul, which were the private, subjective parts of our lives.

If various forms of sports are only games, then we should not spiritually invest in these sensual experiences. Keep spiritual things with the spiritual. “Sow to the spirit” or sacred not to the “fleshly” indulgences teeming in our games. I learned, of course, that this sports fare makes for delectable games; but if sports are only signaling earthly activities, then, at their best they only reach the “Friday Night Lights.” Sports are merely this-worldly, secular fun mixed with agon and aretaic lessons, an innocuous space with no other-worldly connections or consequences. In fact, whatever occurs in sport, even if momentarily successful, really does not matter spiritually, since victories, defeats, struggles and training do not relate to soul-making or eternal matters or worshipping God. We love sports because our we see our games as parentheses, set apart from any spiritual interferences from above--

making them splendid diversions from gravitas.

Paul’s view of spirituality is countercultural, for he construes all that we do as spiritually connected to God and uses the language of worship. In Romans 12:1-2, God lays claim to our entire selves. Karl Barth, in his commentary, argues that God’s demand on our obedience as worship “admits of no retreat” and “rules out an obedience affecting only the ‘inner’ life of the soul or of the mind.” Barth interprets God’s claim as radically disturbing every part of our humanity so that no part of being human or Christian living is left behind, when God’s mercies break in to create our new gospel identity.

Do Not Be Conformed:

The Christian tradition affirms that human beings at their core are religious, worshiping creatures. The impulse to religion springs from the fact that God created us to know, worship and image him. Paul, in Romans 1, directs us to a truth that implanted within

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all human beings is a sense of the divine. We cannot not worship. Even when we venerate cultural idols such as sports, we are still worshipping. In Romans 12, Paul lays out the antithesis to the false worship we observe in Romans 1. Rather than revere creaturely things (Romans 1:21-25), our worship is to be directed to Creator God. Paul elsewhere argues at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34) with the Athenian philosophers (who regularly used sports metaphors in their debates) that “in God we live and move and exist.” That means that this view of worship inescapably permeates everything we do and thus bubbles up in our art, music and sports.

Paul continues in Acts 17 with an acute observation of how Athenian culture and poetry manifested this spirituality of worship. The spirituality of worship is the substance of who we are and all that we make and do in sports and life.

My Presbyterian upbringing taught me that all life is sacred and belongs to God. Our existence depends on God, and we are responsible to God in and through our most cherished cultural experiences. There is no sacred-secular divide. The kingdom of God shows no contempt for the mundane for it permeates all of life. Therefore, sports are never simply games.

When worship is not understood as basic to our human identity and story, because of our relationship with and to God, then the euphoria and creativity that can whisper, chant, sing and even scream through the refrain of activities such as sports, art, and music are not heard, as N. T. Wright remarks, as echoes of a divine voice. However, if sports are not outside the lines of the sacred, then sports are not a wasted “sub-department of ordinary life.” Sports are more than a game. Our games are cultivations and constructs of our hands, indicating something about us and our Creator. Peter Berger, in *A Rumor of Angels*, interpreted the activity of play as an ecstatic experience in which humans gesture and signal transcendence, pointing spiritually to a truly ‘other’ reality. Our human doings are suspended from a reality greater than us. This

way of seeing the world is known as a sacramental worldview. Theologically, our daily routines are never independent of God, since we live in a world made by God; so activities such as play are suffused with God’s presence and capable of communicating the divine. Liturgy and life in God’s economy interpenetrate each other. Furthermore, in Christian thought, the Greek and Latin fathers drew from Proverbs 8:27-31 to argue that the Logos plays before God the Father in the act of creation. That means, our freedom as image-bearers to play in our games is analogous to or follows from God’s playful and loving choice to create this world. We play because God plays. ■

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Do Not Be Fooled by Talk of Police “Reform”

By Wendell Griffen

Again, police officers have killed an unarmed civilian in the United States. Again, the slain unarmed civilian was a person of color.

On January 7, 2023, Tyre Nichols, an unarmed civilian Black man, died in Memphis, Tennessee, because police officers detained him, harassed him, terrorized him, cursed him, beat him, tried to electrocute him, poisoned him, kicked him, threw him to the ground like he was trash, and then propped him beside an unmarked police vehicle without providing any first aid or other assistance for more than 20 minutes. Tyre Nichols died because emergency medical technicians did not rush to aid him, but let him suffer.

Tyre Nichols is dead because policing in the United States is deadly to people of color, all the time, anywhere, on purpose.

After video footage of the brutal, cruel, deliberate, vicious, and unprovoked attack and beating Tyre Nichols suffered from members of a roving street crime unit known as SCORPION (for Street Crime Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods) was publicized by Memphis officials, five Memphis police officers were fired. After that video footage was released, they were charged with second-degree murder. And after that video footage was released, other Memphis police, fire, and emergency medical responders were fired, reassigned and investigated. The SCORPION unit has been permanently disbanded.

None of those things happened immediately after Tyre Nichols was beaten senseless on January 7. None of those things happened on January 10, when Tyre Nichols died because five police officers (who are Black, by the way) killed him. None of those things happened until Memphis political and police leaders – people who created, equipped, trained, licensed, tasked and set the SCORPION unit loose in Memphis – were ready to release the video footage, three weeks after Tyre Nichols died, showing how police officers terrorized, kidnapped, tortured and murdered him.

Now, as always happens when police kill unarmed non-threatening Black, Latinx, indigenous, Asian-Pacific, and low-income White civilians in the United States, commentators, pundits, politicians and business and community leaders are talking again about “police reform.” Do not believe them. They have been talking about “police reform” for generations.

Before you are fooled by the announcement that the Memphis Police Department has disbanded the SCORPION unit that deployed the cops who murdered Tyre Nichols, consider the following excerpt from page 150 of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report:

Although police administrators may take steps to eliminate misconduct by individual police officers, many departments have adopted patrol practices which in the words of one commentator, have “...replaced harassment by individual patrolmen with harassment by entire departments.”

These practices, sometimes known as “aggressive

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preventive patrol,” take a number of forms, but invariably they involve a large number of police-citizen contacts initiated by police rather than in response to a call for help or service. *One such practice utilizes a roving task force which moves into high-crime districts without prior notice and conducts intensive, often indiscriminate, street stops and searches...*

In some cities, aggressive patrol is not limited to special task forces. The beat patrolman himself is expected to participate and to file a minimum number of “stop and frisk” or field interrogation reports for each tour of duty... [see, https://www.hud.gov/sites/dfiles/FHEO/documents/kerne_

commission_full_report.pdf] [Emphasis added]

That statement was published in 1968, 55 years ago. It was known when current leaders of police departments in cities, towns and communities across the United States were born, when they began working as police officers, and long before they became police department leaders. And it was known to political, civic, legal, social and religious leaders who continued support for the “aggressive police patrol” practices of SCORPION and other such police units across the United States.

So do not be fooled by “police reform” talk. The Memphis SCORPION unit was no aberration. It was – like countless others like it – devised, designed, equipped, trained, dedicated and deployed to be a mobile licensed lethal occupation force to dominate neighborhoods where people like Tyre Nichols live, work, socialize and are ultimately terrorized and slain. “Aggressive preventive patrol” tactics are part of police doctrine and standard operating procedures that always eventually result in harm to people like Tyre Nichols.

Do not be fooled. This society decided long ago to terrorize people of color as a way of population control. White bankers, merchants, planters, industrialists, preachers, educators and privileged families set up policing from the beginning to dominate and control people of color and White workers so privileged White people can feel “safe.” People like Tyre Nichols are abused, harassed, terrorized and slain by police to

satisfy White supremacist notions of what “safe” and “public safety” mean.

That system cannot be reformed. It must be denounced, dismantled and discarded. The people now responsible for leading law enforcement should not be trusted to do those things, no matter what their racial, ethnic and gender may be. People who rise to the top of a system that constantly terrorizes, abuses and slaughters unarmed non-violent civilians will never denounce, dismantle and discard that system.

That good work is up to the rest of us. That good work starts when each of us refuses to remain fooled and fools, for the lie that policing in the U.S. makes us safe.

The next time you hear someone say that policing makes U.S. society safe, remember Tyre Nichols, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Sean Bell, Amadou Dialo, Abner Louima, Rodney King, Sandra Bland, Philando Castille, Jacob Webb, and Oscar Grant. Speak their names. Policing didn’t keep them safe. Policing ruined their lives.

We knew that long ago. It’s past time for us to stop pretending otherwise. ■

*Wendell Griffen is recently retired as a circuit court judge in Little Rock, Arkansas where he is also pastor of New Millennium Church. He is author of *The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope* (Judson Press) and has written for and is a member of the board of *Christian Ethics Today*. He can be followed at wendellgriffen.blogspot.com*

***E Pluribus Unum* — “out of many, one”**

Who Are the White Christian Nationalists?

1. *God and Country Conservatives*

Our friends and family, part of the 45% of Americans the Pew Research Center found that believe America should be a Christian nation and hold a non-historical, nostalgic view of America's origins and development.

2. *Religious Right's Old Guard*

Tony Perkins, Al Mohler, David Barton, Doug Mastriano, Lauren Boebert and many others who have long rejected Separation of Church and State, push for "Christian" influence in government, especially "family values" anti-abortion legislation, and lobby or advocate for the same.

3. *MAGA/QAnon*

"ReAwaken America Tour" and "Stop the Steal" Trumpists like Mickael Flynn, Pastor Greg Locke, Nick Fuentes, Sean Feucht, anti-coronavirus vaccine conspiracists, and others who claim the world is run by secret cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophile Democrats.

4. *The Extremely Online*

"America First" digital platform talk-show hosts, most of whom have been kicked off of most social media platforms, like Kanye West, Andrew Torba, Nick Fuentes who make up the online wing of Christian nationalism and who are favorite guests on Fox Network talk shows.

5. *Trump Prophets*

Prosperity Gospel and self-proclaimed prophets who believe Trump was ordained by God to be President, including Lance Wallnau, Mark Burns, Che Ahn, Mario Bramnick, the New Apostolic Reformation network, Michele Bachmann, Eric Metaxas, Doug Sheets, Stewart Rhodes, Alex Jones, Michael Flynn, and others who stand by their prophecies that the 2020 presidential election results can be overturned by prayer and spiritual warfare.

6. *Patriots and Theocrats*

The "Proud Boys," "Patriot Front," and other chauvinistic, hypermasculine, anti-LGBTQ groups, among them, Pastor and Washington state lawmaker, Matt Shea who is author of a document titled *Biblical Basis for War*.

Source: "Who are the Christian nationalists? A taxonomy for the post-Jan. 6 world," by Bob Smietana, *New York Times*, January 10, 2023 which is an article as part of a *series on Christian nationalism supported by the Pulitzer Center*.

A Lament From W.W.B. DuBois, written after the Atlanta race massacre in 1906

*Bewildered we are, and passion-tossed,
made with the madness of a mobbed and mocked
and murdered people;
straining at the armposts of Thy Throne,
we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God,
by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our
dead mothers,
by the very blood of Thy crucified Christ:
What meaneth this? Tell us the Plan, give us the Sign!
Keep not thou silent, Oh God!*

Source: Robert P. Jones, [Living into Lament: A white response to the killing of Tyre Nichols by police](#), on his blogpost [White Too Long: for those dedicated to the work of truth-telling, repair, and healing from the legacy of white supremacy in American Christianity](#) January 28, 2023.

Book Review

This Treasure Within: A Memoir by Daniel Vestal

(Macon, Georgia, Smyth & Helwys Publishers, 2021)
Paperback | 368 pages 978-1-64173-344-1

Review by Marion D. Aldridge

Daniel Vestal has done the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship movement a practical and spiritual favor with his recently published (2022) memoir, *This Treasure Within*. Vestal, as well as anyone I know, manages his life and his calling with remarkable balance between the tugs and pulls of a) incarnating a spiritual, pious, moral, even holy Christian life, and b) functioning within an organizational system that challenges and demands hard boundaries and complex compromises, a very human structure that pays attention to such “worldly” issues as money, deadlines, and human personality conflicts!

Furthermore, Vestal’s gifts as a dynamic preacher, a shrewd thinker, and a passionate leader, are all first rate, top drawer. With religious credentials going back to his years as a “boy evangelist” and academic credentials including a PhD, Vestal was as prepared as anyone could be for the leadership of a barely started-up religious organization from ground zero to a multi-million-dollar international mission enterprise.

My own role in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was as a colleague, Coordinator of CBF of South Carolina. In the strange world of Baptist polity, there is little or no hierarchical authority, certainly no Pope. The national CBF Coordinator was not the boss of state CBF Coordinators, any more than state Coordinators had authority over local churches and pastors. Coordinators are not bishops in the sense of having any real power. We were bishops in the sense of being “overseers,” which is what the Greek word, *episkopoi*/episcopal means. I paid attention to the CBF churches in South Carolina, and Vestal oversaw and had a measure of responsibility for all the CBF churches throughout the United States. I could not have respected anyone more than I did Vestal. He was the right person in the right job at the right time. His authority was not coercive, but he had my full support. We are of a similar age, so my high opinion of him is not hero worship. I genuinely admire his gifts and abilities.

I’d hoped he would put his experience prior to and

with CBF in book form, and now he has. I’m pleased he included his early pilgrimage as the son of a “fire-brand” evangelist (Vestal’s word), and as a young person in a church populated with seminary educated individuals. Because of my own history, I’ve always been interested in what makes a person tick. Where did they come from? What and who influenced them? Vestal gives a thorough and helpful account, including information about his early relationship with his future wife, Earlene. One of her early influences was T. B. Maston, one of my Baptist heroes. Small world!

Equally helpful is Vestal’s chapter on how he shed some of the naivete and innocence of those early years. He calls that chapter, “Doubt, Deconstruction, Formation.” One of the saddest realities in Christian testimonies is how little the beliefs of mature men

When mature students read the Bible text with mature teachers, most will discover they had much to learn. Again, Vestal tells how he moved forward in his personal and Christian growth.

and women have changed from the cartoon Bible characters they were introduced to as children. Surely the story of Noah is about more than his life as a zookeeper. The Sermon on the Mount is a lesson that goes deeper than teaching us to be nice. Taking serious and honest religion courses in college or seminary will introduce students to surprising ideas that were not part of their childhood Sunday school curriculum. I remember the first time I heard Clarence Jordan explain the parable of the Good Samaritan, I was stunned to hear him say if the parable had been set in the South, the Samaritan would be a black man. When mature students read the Bible text with mature teachers, most will discover they had much to learn. Again, Vestal tells how he moved forward in his personal and Christian growth.

In the next chapter, Vestal next covers his years as a pastor. Throughout the memoir, Vestal helpfully includes information about writers and others who were major influences on his life and ministry. He dedicates a sidebar to the impact of Eugene Peterson

on his pastorates. He confesses, along with every other honest pastor, that nothing in seminary prepared him for “resolving conflict between members, working with staff, equipping laity for ministry, managing a budget, and leading a building program.”

He writes of his growth as a person of prayer: “My practice was to speak to God, verbally or mentally, believing that God listened. . . . But there is another side of prayer. God wants me to listen. God wants to speak, commune, and communicate with me.”

The numerical growth of the churches Vestal pastored must have been phenomenal, but he never focuses on that kind of success. I have been in a congregation when Vestal preached. His giftedness as an evangelist and preacher is impressive. People respond to his charisma, kindness, genuineness, intelligence, and passion. I can only fantasize about being half as good a preacher as Daniel Vestal. Yet he tells experiences, briefly, about each of his pastorates, without a hint of braggadocio.

Amazingly, his success as a pastor came during turbulent and disruptive times denominationally. Many pastors, with less courage than Vestal, dodged the controversy, but Vestal emerged as a leader of the moderate faction (theologically) within the Southern Baptist Convention. He sat on and chaired important committees. In this memoir, he faithfully tells the story of the political machinations within the denomination. He does not waffle. He names names. It is a fascinating read for those who were insiders and those who weren't. These chapters are worth the price of the book. Vestal objectively summarizes the events of those years (1979-1990) without apparent bitterness.

In 1990, the inevitable Southern Baptist split happened. A schism. A division. A rupture. That tale has been told many times. Vestal gives his account. As an important, articulate, and truthful voice for the minority in Southern Baptist life, he became a natural leader among the breakaway group that quickly became known as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. It was an odd time in church life in the United States and Vestal paints many of the nuances as well as anyone. There were advantages in not being a traditional denomination with huge and expensive infrastructures, but there were disadvantages as well. Some infrastructure was required. Money was needed.

One of the slogans that seemed to fit is that CBF was “a new way to be Baptist.” Vestal invests a few chapters in outlining the tensions and challenges during his tenure as Coordinator for CBF. These include a) the increasingly important role of women in the church as well as in the seminaries and mission enterprises, b) the issue of human sexuality, and c) ministries focused

on justice as well as evangelism. The birth of CBF coincided with new mission strategies in which the mission-sending organization, rather than owning or dominating all its relationships, partnered with others as equals. Churches began sending mission teams and asked CBF to help. These changes also came as the internet was establishing itself as a dominant force in the world, changing many structures from hierarchical to horizontal relationships between equals.

One of the most pleasant surprises in Vestal's memoir is the lengthy attention he gives to ecumenical and interfaith activity. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, with a grace-based and inclusive theology, found it easier to get along with other people of faith and goodwill who did not share our precise theology. Indeed, in historic and authentic Baptist life, there is considerable room for freedom with regard to specific doctrines. Furthermore, CBF has enjoyed a role in the larger world of religion as bridgebuilders and peacemakers. Part of our creation story is reaction against Southern Baptist leadership who spoke harshly against Jews and Muslims, uttering such ill-considered bromides as,

One of the most pleasant surprises in Vestal's memoir is the lengthy attention he gives to ecumenical and interfaith activity. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, with a grace-based and inclusive theology, found it easier to get along with other people of faith and goodwill who did not share our precise theology.

“God doesn't hear the prayers of Jews.”

I'm pleased Vestal invested considerable time and energy in the book writing about Interfaith dialogue in which he participated. He confesses, “For much of my life I have lived too small, too provincial, too sectarian. I failed to see that God's kingdom is so much greater than I understand, God's creation is so much grander than I have known.” Vestal articulates his pilgrimage that led him from “boy evangelist” to Interfaith activist.

His final chapter, “Retirement and Refocus,” is a model of continuing a meaningful pilgrimage into his senior adult years. He has taught seminary classes, and discovered the challenges of young graduates pastoring old churches. He joined their ranks by accepting a

call to pastor a small Baptist congregation with typical twenty-first century problems—supported by an older white membership that had been in decline for decades located in the middle of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community. It's encouraging to read about his small victories and incremental changes. His early ministry had been marked by rapid numerical success. Vestal tells these new stories, honestly: "I was learning how much I simply didn't know."

In the midst of all the organizational and cultural realities and changes, Daniel Vestal continued to live a "spiritual, pious, moral, and even holy Christian life". Throughout a person's ministry, he commends we

"begin with grace and 'lean into grace.' Scripture says that 'the law was given through Moses: grace and truth come through Jesus Christ'" (John 1: 17).

The volume concludes with four sermons preached by Vestal at various points of his career. These might be worth the price of the book to a pastor desperate to find a preachable sermon on Saturday night! ■

Marion Aldridge is a writer and blogger. He studied English at Clemson University, served as pastor in several churches, retired as the leader of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina. He lives with his wife, Sally, in Columbia, South Carolina.

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A Journal of Christian Ethics

“We need now to recover the prophethood of all believers, matching our zeal for the priesthood of all believers with a passion for the prophethood of all believers.”
—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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PURPOSES

- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
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- Address readers at the personal and emotional as well as the intellectual level by including in the Journal narratives, poetry, and cartoons as well as essays
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