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Introduction: The Trinity Group

By Fisher Humphreys

The articles in this issue of *Christian Ethics Today* were written by members of The Trinity Group, an informal discussion group founded in 1990. Across almost a third of a century it has had a total of 13 members; today there are ten. Until 2020 we usually met in person twice a year, and each meeting lasted about two days. During the Covid pandemic we have been meeting online for two hours about once a month.

We are Baptist pastors, missionaries, theologians, historians, educators, and academic administrators. Our original objective was to engage in theological discussions among ourselves, but after a few years we decided that we might as a group attempt to communicate some of our theological understandings to others. In 1998 we contributed articles on the theme of "Theology for a Healthy Church" to *The Theological Educator*, a journal published by the faculty of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. In 2010 we wrote a book entitled *For Faith and Friendship*. In 2014 we wrote a book entitled *Encountering God in the Prayers of Others*.

We appreciate the editor Dr. Pat Anderson allowing us to contribute articles to this issue of *Christian Ethics Today*. We believe in the journal and think that it is making an important contribution to the life of thousands of Christians today. We hope that the articles we have written will be helpful to the journal's readers.

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The Dangers of Christian Nationalism

By Paul Basden

Christian Nationalism. The phrase either makes you proud or it makes you cringe.

If it makes you proud, it's because you are convinced that America is a Christian nation and that God's continued blessing on the U S of A depends on our cooperation with him on the major moral issues.

If it makes you cringe, it's because you are convinced that America cannot be a Christian nation for the simple reason that no entity can be "Christian." Only a person can be a Christian.

Christian Nationalism—it's hard to find a more contentious topic in our cancel-culture.

What you believe about it depends on which American story you buy into, i.e., which national narrative you believe.

Two American Stories

Two national stories are competing for supremacy in our cultural conflict. Each one is about the country we love. Each one claims to correspond to the facts of history.

Story One: America is and always has been a Christian nation. The founding fathers were devoted Christians who built a biblical foundation for the nation's future.

- God uniquely favors America above all nations and has blessed her because she is the chosen nation to Christianize the world.
- Government's role is to pass laws that privilege and empower Christians and Churches, so they can legislate and enforce godly behavior.
- The Church's purpose is to return America to its Christian roots, which will in turn restore God's plan to bless the world through America.

Story Two: America is and always has been a religiously neutral nation.

- The founding fathers, religiously speaking, were a mixed bag. They did not uniformly envision a nation where Christianity was the favored religion. Among the founders were some sincere Christians, such as Patrick Henry, John Jay and Samuel Adams; some anti-supernaturalist deists like Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen; and some quasi-deists who were favorable to, but not committed to, the Judeo-Christian tradition. This last group includes the most famous founding fathers: George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin.[1]
- God has indeed blessed America richly, but no more than he longs to bless all nations.
- Government's role is to pass laws that benefit the common good of all citizens, regardless of religious preference.
- The Church's purpose is to influence Americans by being salt and light, i.e., speaking the truth and living in love.

Christian Nationalism

Story One is the narrative behind Christian Nationalism. It's a popular story—you may have grown up hearing it at home, at school, or at Church.

When America was founded, one of the primary goals was to avoid this kind of entanglement between Church and State. The first amendment codified this separation.

It's an attractive story—there are times when I want it to be true. But it's not. It doesn't line up with the facts. Since Christians care deeply about truth, we must call out anything that is false. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "For we must always stand for the truth" (2 Corinthians 13:8, NLT).

But Story One is more than just a narrative. It is a worldview. It defines Christian Nationalism. It claims divine favor for America, for the American Church, and for American Christians. It teaches a creed, a dogma, a lifestyle. It is an *ism* that forms and informs your political views, your religious preferences and your purpose on earth.

This is why Christian nationalism poses such a grave danger to the Church's mission. The Church's mission is "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, NIV). That's the clarion call of Jesus to his followers: to do all we can to influence others to follow Jesus, starting where we live and going worldwide with the Good News.

Believing Story One, however, compromises this mission in several ways. The first danger is that when the Church depends on the State, the Church ends up serving the State. When the Church gets in bed with government, the offspring is unholy. The power that corrupts government in time corrupts the Church. That's a danger we must avoid at all costs. The Church has only one Lord, one Savior, one Messiah.

The second danger is that when the Church persuades the State to favor Christians, those who hold a different faith (or no faith) resent God and Christians. God's reputation is harmed. Jesus ends up with a black eye. The Spirit is grieved. The Church becomes the butt of jokes. We must recall and recommit ourselves to the words of Jesus: "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16, NIV).

The third danger is that when the Church embraces Christian nationalism, it produces "America-first" Christians, not "Jesus-first Christians." America-first Christians think our fight is against flesh and blood, not against principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:10). They regard culture as the enemy and engage in cultural warfare with gusto. "Lean to the right, fight, fight, fight," becomes their mantra.

But "Jesus-first Christians" believe our fight is against unseen forces of evil, not against flesh and blood. They believe the power of the Holy Spirit is the only legitimate way to influence culture for the Kingdom of God.

Few people have lined out the dangers of the first narrative better than John Piper. Piper has so identified himself with strict Calvinism that few moderate Christian leaders listen to or respect him. But we would do well to hear what he wrote to pastors on the eve of the presidential election in October of 2020:

> Have you been cultivating real Christians who see the beauty and the worth of the Son of God? Are you raising up generations who say with St. Paul, "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). Do they feel in their bones that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21)?
>
> Or have you neglected these great realities and diverted their attention onto the strategies of politics? Have you inadvertently created the mindset that the greatest issue in life is saving America and its earthly benefits? Or have you shown your people that the greatest issue is exalting Christ, with or without America? Have you shown them that the people who do the most good for the greatest number for the longest time (including America!) are people who have the aroma of another world with another King? [2]

Because Christian nationalism poses a significant threat to the mission of the Church, Christians must oppose it as a false narrative of America and therefore a faulty ideology and worldview.

Sloppy thinking

Having exposed Christian nationalism as a false teaching in the 21st century Church, it's easy to fall into sloppy thinking by identifying it with the movements that are often closely related to it. We must think clearly about its relationship to these ancillary movements. Here are three examples.

First, Christian nationalism is not Christianity. Christianity is a living faith in a living Lord who stands over all earthly authorities. It calls its followers to absolute loyalty to Jesus and God's Kingdom. Christian nationalism is a "political ideology focused on the national identity of the United States." [3] It calls its followers to absolute loyalty to a particular version of America's past and a particular vision of America's future.

Second, Christian nationalism is not evangelicalism. Since millions of Americans self-identify as "evangelical," including many who believe Story 1, it's easy to assume that evangelicals are committed to Christian nationalism. But some of the most vocal leaders and organizations within the evangelical movement have roundly condemned the beliefs and practices of Christian nationalists.[4] Evangelicalism is a broad movement in America, comprising many subgroups whose members differ with one another on theology, morals, politics, etc. Yet they still find a place under the large tent of evangelicals.

Third, Christian nationalism is not the Republican Party. It's hard to imagine that anyone who embraces the Christian nationalist worldview would identify with any party other than Republicans. But only the right wing (and it is a large wing!) of the Republican Party has welcomed the Christian nationalism movement into its ranks and advocated its policy prescriptions. The moderate wing of the Republican Party has offered a view of conservative government that differs from Christian nationalism.

It's easy to engage in sloppy thinking by identifying Christian nationalism with some of the movements that intersect it. But that's not helpful.

What about patriotism?

Those who believe Story Two can still be patriotic. How so?

Patriotism is a love for one's country that stems from affection, gratitude and a sense of responsibility for the blessings enjoyed. It's natural to love your home, birthplace and way of life. It's part of your earliest identity. There's nothing wrong with having a healthy affection for your country.

But love for country has a dark side. We can easily start to love our nation more than we love our God. Once we're moving in that direction, we're worshiping something other than God. And that's idolatry. Anything that demands our worship is idolatry. As good as patriotism can be, it turns dark when it demands that we treat as absolute what God intended as relative.

If you fall into the idolatry of American nationalism, then you will love Americans more than you love people from other nations, whom God also made. You will primarily love Americans who look like you, while barely tolerating those who look different. You will especially love Americans who say they are Christians, not those who belong to other religions or no religion.

The best patriots are those who love God more than country. "The Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most about the next. They left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven." [5] That's an eternal perspective—fitting for all of us who believe that "our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ …" (Philippians 3:20, NIV),

All who believe Story Two can love their country and be patriotic. But they will refuse to let it become their first love. They will refuse to close their eyes to sins and evils that need to be confronted with the Gospel. They will say, "I love my country, but I love it with eyes wide open." [6]

What about government?

Whoever believes Story Two is called by God to influence government. But this calling is played out in America, which is a democracy, not a theocracy. In a theocracy, God rules, but has to speak through humans. We see this form of government in the biblical story of Israel, in the Holy Roman Empire, and in modern theocracies such as Afghanistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, where Islamic rulers interpret Allah's will for the people.

When America was founded, one of the primary goals was to avoid this kind of entanglement between Church and State. The first amendment codified this separation. That means that in our democracy, our governing document is the Constitution, not the Bible. We elect officials to govern us according to the Constitution, then we vote them in or out of office accordingly.

In a democracy, the Church may influence government in three ways. First, we may collaborate with federal, State or local agencies to address crises such as natural disasters. Texas Baptist Men are a prime example of this approach. The Church works side-by-side with the government.

Second, we may complement the work of government. This occurs when Christian citizens establish home schools, private schools, private colleges and faith-based hospitals. The Church works in the same direction as the government.

Third, there may be times when we have to challenge government. When injustice arises in society, the Church must challenge the State to change its ways. The Church shows government where it is blind. "The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the State, but rather the conscience of the State. It must be the guide and the critic of the State, and never its tool. If the Church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority." [7]

We can thank God for whatever role the Church has had, and will continue to have, in influencing America through the government.

God's Story

We live in a world where too many people are looking for truth but are coming up lost and empty. Made in the image of God and for communion with God and others, they are dying every day without hope. As followers of Jesus, we don't have the luxury of endlessly debating which story of America is the truer—even if we are convinced that we are right—while the greatest and truest story is waiting to be heard and believed by those all around us.

Both stories about America are too small for your life. They are too small for our world. They are too small for God's glorious purpose.

Let's tell the only story that ultimately matters. Let's tell the story of the Creator who at great personal cost redeemed his fallen creation out of love. Let's tell the story that every person on the face of the earth is waiting to hear. Let's tell God's Story. ■

References can be found at the CET website: christianethicstoday.com

Afghan Refugees and The Honor Deficit

By Gerald Wright and Grayson Beemus

Since the United States troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in early 2020, tens of thousands of Afghan refugees have been settled in the United States across various parts of the country and thus far the results have been more than frustrating, both for the refugees and for those tasked with assisting them.

Of course, refugee frustration is nothing new in the United States. People from around the globe have migrated here for decades, indeed centuries, in hopes of realizing the American dream; but their experiences have varied widely and have often proved disappointing. Successful migration is almost always measured in the U.S. as economic self-sufficiency, sometimes with an added caveat of appreciable communal integration. When overall satisfaction with the immigration experience is factored in, deep disappointments are often discernable. When specific immigrant groups, such as those from Afghanistan, are examined, the level of measurable disappointment tends to spike and in the view of the authors, a principal component in this dissatisfaction revolves issues of honor and shame.

Afghans were forced to flee their homeland due to their involvement in United States military and stabilization efforts and they arrived in this country with an expectation of being honored because of their sacrifice for the U.S. cause. Instead, they have been met with indifference and, in many cases, resentment.

This honor deficiency is exacerbated by the challenge Americans face as they attempt to understand the basics of honor/shame culture. Anthropologists commonly distinguish honor/shame cultures such as those of the Middle East and Central Asia from the guilt/innocence cultures such as those of many western countries and the United States in particular. Failure to understand honor/shame culture most likely contributed significantly to the United States' lack of success in both Afghanistan and Iraq. When decisions are being made, whether routine or momentous, people in honor/shame cultures ask what course of action would be deemed honorable versus other choices that would result in shame being incurred, whereas those in a guilt/innocence culture typically ask themselves which choice would constitute doing the right thing, most often meaning the choice which would not incur guilt or be seen as a wrong choice. Guilt/innocence cultures could also be described as right/wrong cultures.

The Afghanistan situation is certainly not the first instance in which refugees have fled to the U.S. with an expectation of being honored, only to find themselves the recipients of what they interpret as shameful treatment. Notable among these would be the Hmong refugees who sought refuge in the U.S. following the Vietnam War in which, much like the Afghans who came to the U.S. seeking protection, they had collaborated with the American forces and hence were subject to widespread and lethal reprisals at the hands of their fellow countrymen in locations such as Vietnam and Laos once the Americans had departed. The Hmong experience was carefully and painfully articulated by Anne Fadiman in her award-winning book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*. Like present-day Afghans, the Hmong struggled with feelings of being shamed by their new and powerless circumstances and often felt betrayed and resentful.

The Afghanistan situation is certainly not the first instance in which refugees have fled to the U.S. with an expectation of being honored, only to find themselves the recipients of what they interpret as shameful treatment.

A key factor in the discussion regarding Afghan refugees in the United States is understanding migration and refugee policies and programs. Although all arriving Afghans are fleeing war and violence in their homeland, they do not have refugee status according to the Immigration and Nationality Act. Under *Operation Allies Welcome*, they arrived with a two-year Humanitarian Parolee status, though many were in the process of applying for their Special Immigrant Visa. Fortunately, as Humanitarian Parolees, Afghans are eligible for the Reception and Placement (R&P) program that exists within nine resettlement agencies with over 200 affiliates nationwide and can receive State Department funding through the Afghan Placement and Assistance Program (APA). This program lasts up to 90-days, providing housing and school enrollment services, social security, electronic benefit transfer (EBT) cards, and Medicaid application assistance, as well as providing clothing and food. Afghans

who are eligible to work are then referred to the Matching Grant Program (MGP) which can last up to eight months, providing employment and budget training, housing support, and other services to aid Afghans towards financial independence and stability.

Resettlement terminology can easily become confusing, causing a loss of focus on the people involved. To summarize, Afghans are currently holding a two-year parolee status with expectations to apply for asylum status in the near future. As of this writing, Afghans have been in the United States for just under one year and many have already completed the R&P and MG programs, meaning that the services provided by The Department of State and the Office of Refugee Resettlement have ended.

The brevity and financial focus of these programs contribute to the honor deficit. Resettlement programs expect migrants to quickly conform to American culture and live and survive in an individualistic, economic-centered society far from their own cultures. Outside of services provided by resettlement agencies, Afghans must rely on community aid, generosity, and support to stay afloat in a world unknown to them, while also navigating extreme trauma and loss.

Healthy resettlement requires a combination of economic and culturally sensitive factors. In the R&P and MG programs, obtaining employment, receiving appropriate healthcare, attending ESOL (English as a second language) or school classes, acquiring affordable housing, and accessing benefits such as Medicaid, EBT, and SSI are at the forefront of priorities. These services are easy to describe; however, they create infinite challenges for Afghans across the country. Many Afghans have found stable employment opportunities, but due to not speaking English, they are working low-tier service jobs that are shameful to those who are educated and experienced. Healthcare is difficult to access due to long wait times, language and cultural barriers, insurance challenges, and outrageous medical bills. Children cannot be enrolled in school until they receive the mandatory vaccines which requires specific documentation and clinic appointments. The housing market is in crisis and affordable housing is near impossible to find. Afghans were delayed in receiving their food stamps and Medicaid as they waited weeks, even months, to receive their social security cards and employment authorization. The services that Afghans have received are crucial to resettlement, but they all include extensive challenges that increase the honor deficit and do not create an environment that fosters healthy resettlement.

The final goal of resettlement is economic self-sufficiency, but this self-sufficiency cannot be fully accomplished without a commitment to bridging the gap between American and Afghan cultures. The majority of the people working in resettlement agencies recognize the need for cultural sensitivity, but the funding, staff, and time are not available to create a well-rounded resettlement environment. Agencies are required to use their funding to provide specific services and resources and they do not have the luxury of slowing down and providing more in-depth, culturally relatable orientation for Afghans and cultural orientation for the people providing services.

Healthy resettlement requires patience and an understanding that preconceived expectations will not be met for both Afghans resettling and those aiding them. Everyone involved must be willing to adapt and be provided with the resources to holistically understand either the people group they are aiding or the new country they are entering. Healthy resettlement involves stepping back and listening to the Afghans' stories and their reasons for perhaps quitting a job, not wanting a specific house, or rejecting care from a particular doctor. Afghans have been forced to endure these difficult situations since arriving in the United States and frustrations with the American system and resettlement programs have peaked. Under the façade of aid and humanitarian support, many Afghans have been continually dishonored and are failing in their resettlement by both their own standards and American standards.

Christians have the potential to play a key constructive role in the plight of Afghan refugees. Those who are biblically literate should find it easier than others to comprehend honor/shame dynamics since the Bible was written in the context of cultures steeped in honor/shame issues and is replete itself with honor/shame language.

Acknowledging the honor/shame deficit and incorporating its enormous importance throughout the resettlement process has the potential to generate more successful and healthier resettlement outcomes for those fleeing danger now and in the future.

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are biblically literate should find it easier than others to comprehend honor/shame dynamics since the Bible was written in the context of cultures steeped in honor/shame issues and is replete itself with honor/shame language. Many episodes in scripture cannot be fully grasped apart from an understanding of these dynamics.

E. Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brian in their invaluable work, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes,* demonstrate the prevalence of these issues in the David and Bathsheba saga, showing that Uriah was unwilling to allow David to save face. His refusal to go sleep with his wife reflected his determination to expose David's shame. Kenneth Bailey does the same for the parable of the prodigal son in his classic study entitled *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story*. The prodigal son acts with unbelievable shame when he asks his father to act as if he is already deceased and bestow an early inheritance. He brings further shame on himself by squandering his wealth and ending up penniless. Yet, when he returns home his father takes shame upon himself by running out to meet his son, disregarding the cultural expectation that a father maintain his dignity. In running out so as to accompany his son into the village, the father in effect shields the son from the shame he has incurred from his neighbors. Later, when the father celebrates his younger son's return with a banquet, the elder brother acts shamefully by refusing to join the gathering. Again, the father sets aside the norm of acceptable behavior in order to seek out his older son in the field and beseech him to enter the banquet. Bailey astutely describes the parable as the story of the gracious father and the two lost sons, one who is lost as a law breaker and the other who is lost as a law keeper. There can be little question that the parable as laid out by Jesus is essentially driven by the dynamics of honor and shame.

Certainly, Jesus' own conduct provides Christians with ample training on approaching people who suffer from an honor deficit. His treatment of the widow with a chronic hemorrhage, of Samaritans, of children, of lepers, and of those with acute disabilities all demonstrate the bestowal of honor upon those on society's margins who suffer from dishonor at the hands of the larger society. The mere fact that these individuals were acknowledged and addressed by Jesus was a significant bestowal of honor. At the same time, Jesus challenged the honor of many of those who most energetically promoted their own public esteem such as Pharisees and members of the Sanhedrin. When Christians reach out to the margins of society to bestow honor on the dishonored and elevate those lacking in esteem, they are following in the footsteps of Jesus.

Of course, if Christians took it upon themselves to reach out to the Afghan community, it might help them understand how honor is reflected in the Afghan cultural context. One of the principal ways in which honor is bestowed is through hospitality. Foreigners traveling in regions such as Afghanistan often remark on the fact that locals invite them into their homes to share food and refreshment even though they are complete strangers. In acts such as these, locals seek to bestow honor on the foreigner. When hospitality is used to express honor, meals are often lavish even when the family is of modest means. Given this understanding of the role of hospitality in showing honor, it is easy to see why Afghans feel shamed in the U.S. when they often go months or years without ever being invited into an American home.

Ceremony is another way in which honor is bestowed and received. Americans visiting the cultures of the Middle East and Central Asia may feel there is too much pomp and ceremony, especially since most cultures in the U.S. tend towards informality. Even

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hospitality shown in one's home in honor/shame cultures may seem overly formal to foreigners, especially in the early stages of a relationship. Over time, the formality is replaced by more intimate and casual behavior, but the initial formality is itself a form of honor.

Titles and places of honor are also important in honor/shame cultures. Certificates and other forms of honor are awarded, and awarded ceremonially. The importance of a title or recognition should be matched by the manner in which such a recognition is bestowed. When Afghans come to the United States, they are placed in the most affordable housing available, often provided with used furniture and clothing, finding themselves in a lifestyle completely lacking in what they would perceive as honor. Their resentment over these circumstances and their response toward those assisting them leads to behaviors often interpreted as arrogant, self-righteous, entitled, or unappreciative.

How are Christians able to minister in ways that meet the physical needs of their Afghan neighbors but also meet their social/emotional need for honor? Several

possibilities emerge, the most obvious of which is hospitality. Inviting your Afghan neighbors into your home and providing them with a bountiful, if not lavish, meal is a language they will understand. It is helpful in this regard to know some of the basics of Afghan diet such as avoiding pork and incorporating fruits, nuts, flatbread, and halal meats which are sold in most major grocery stores.

One of the most honoring behaviors available to those seeking to serve Afghans is the simple process of listening to their stories and acknowledging their trauma and loss. Listening to them share their experiences is an important form of showing esteem. Individual Afghans could be invited to share their story with small groups, classes, or even congregations. This would serve the dual purpose of bestowing honor and educating the community.

Formal portraits are an important part OF life for many non-westerners; so providing an Afghan family with a photo session with a professional photographer and providing them with nicely framed family portraits will generally be seen as highly honoring, especially if it was done as an act of appreciation for their sacrifice on behalf of the United States. This is all the truer for the countless families who had to leave behind their family picture albums. Similarly, a church could supply a family with shopping money for new clothes, not as an act of charity, but as one of appreciation. It would even be possible to invite a group of Afghans to a church service in which they were recognized for their sacrifice and presented with gifts of appreciation and perhaps even certificates of appreciation. Another form of bestowing honor is the provision of respectable employment that includes opportunity for advancement.

Christians are also in a position to provide love and support for the people working tirelessly to provide the resettlement program services. From an Afghan's perspective, these people are bestowing dishonor but, in reality, resettlement workers are overworked, underpaid, and prevented from providing the time and services that would constitute bestowing honor. People working most intimately with refugees understand the different cultures they experience every day; however, they cannot invite clients into their homes; they cannot provide gifts or awards to one without providing to all; and they are working within tight budgets and time frames. Resettlement workers themselves make great sacrifices to devote themselves to this field and are often chastised by both clients and volunteers for not doing enough. Recognizing that resettlement workers are doing what they can within the program constraints and loving and supporting them in the process reminds workers their efforts are not done in vain. Simply altering tone to ask why something is the way it is rather than implying mistreatment of clients, can go a long way. In this way workers can become familiar with grievances expressed by clients and community members can learn more about the stringent resettlement process. The work is heart-wrenching and challenging, but the reminder that they are not forgotten allows resettlement employees to continue in their work with servants' hearts and to continue providing the existing resettlement program services while also seeking to enact effective change to improve the process of resettlement within the United States overall.

To summarize, many Afghans made significant sacrifices on behalf of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. To their surprise, their sacrifice has not been appreciated or recognized by their new host country. To the contrary, they interpret their experiences here as shameful. Christians are uniquely poised to minister in this situation by reaching out to the Afghan community in ways that elevate and bestow honor.

Christ himself has demonstrated this art in his own dealings with those lacking in honor. One need not approve of the war in Afghanistan to recognize the obligation owed by the U.S. to the Afghans who survived their collaboration efforts and have arrived in our midst. The honor deficit has been with us for a while already in our dealings with Afghans; but it is never too late to bestow honor and elevate our Afghan neighbors. Below are some helpful sites for obtaining information and becoming better informed. In addition to books already cited in this article, the chapters on honor and shame in David DeSilva's book *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity* are invaluable. The following websites provide invaluable information. ■

To summarize, many Afghans made significant sacrifices on behalf of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan. To their surprise, their sacrifice has not been appreciated or recognized by their new host country.

https://www.state.gov/refugee-admissions/
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr/programs/refugees/matching-grants
https://www.state.gov/briefing-with-senior-u-s-government-officials-on-operation-allies-welcome-relocation-assistance-efforts-for-non-siv-holders/

Bridge Builders: Turning the Wedges in a World of Division

By Gary Furr

I've been thinking a lot about bridge building and wedges in recent years.

The Britbox television network has a new series called, Annika, about a maritime homicide unit in the UK. Apparently enough homicides in the old country are occurring seaside to require a whole new unit.

In the fourth episode, a body is found under a bridge and Annika, the investigating detective, thinks to herself:

> "I remember once being in a cab going over the Forth Bridge and the driver was telling me that the bridge existed in a never-ending struggle between tension and compression. Like two sides constantly pulling away from each other. And if the engineers didn't manage the demands of these two opposing sides, the bridge would buckle. Or collapse completely.
>
> I mean I was trying to kiss someone in the back seat at the time so I - I may have missed some of the physics. But I remember thinking that in keeping a stable structure together, some tension is clearly important. Just not too much."

I've built bridges. It was the first real job I ever got on my own. I hired on with the McKinnon Bridge company where they were building bridges on Interstate 40 near Jefferson City, Tennessee, where my wife and I lived after marrying at Christmas of our sophomore year at Carson Newman College (now University).

This was the summer of 1974, and I worked there full- and part-time whenever I could get hours until 1976, because the pay was so good ($4.75 an hour—unheard of—as an apprentice carpenter). I needed a job. A baby was on the way.

I had many adventures with the bridge company, stories that I can tell about the people and things that happened. But suffice it to say that was my first job as a married man. I turned 20 years old three months after hiring on. They felt well enough about my work to let me work there and go to school.

It was an education. Streaking was the rage my first year there and, being a college student, my coworkers wanted to know all about streaking (thousands ran naked every night at the University of Tennessee, but as far as I know Carson-Newman only had one). I assured them that Baptist colleges did not encourage public nudity or even saying the word.

It was a diverse crowd. I worked with a crane operator, Elmer, who did time for murder; a moonshiner who rolled his own cigarettes and never wore teeth at work; and a Ph.D. in history who couldn't find a teaching job and went to work as a rod buster for his brother.

I started out as common laborer. The first thing they did was tell me to take a hammer and pull about 20,000 nails out of boards from wrecked forms that had been pulled off a bridge that had already been poured.

I learned everything about it on the job, watching and working with others. It was a great experience and, as it turned out, was great preparation for the ministry. Being in that rough and tumble world was an experience in empathy training and bewilderment.

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One fellow carpenter was nicknamed Love. That came from the tattoos on his knuckles. On one hand was L-O-V-E and on the other, H-A-T-E. One day, two of us college boys were trying to decide whether to ask for a promotion or not. He said, "Boys, I'm going to give you some advice. You got to start at the top and work ye way down." We got the promotion. Good advice. Kind of a reverse Peter Principle.

Now, to build a bridge, we erected huge logs and set steel beams from one row of logs to another. Before setting the steel beams down, we laid down wooden boards, maybe two feet long, on top of each log. Then we put a row of wooden wedges, as many as eight,

on each block, facing one way. Then we put an equal number of wedges facing the other direction and laid another board on top of that. Then you set one edge of the steel beam on top of the boards, a kind of wedge sandwich. Then we would build plywood forms and put steel reinforcement bars inside and pour concrete.

Then, when the concrete was dry on the new bridge, we climbed up with sledgehammers and put a hydraulic jack up to the beam and tightened it. Then we started knocking the wedges out. The weight of those 40-foot steel beams settled on the jack instead of the wedges, which fell to the ground. Then we lowered the beam until it could be pulled out and down to the ground.

It was dangerous work at every stage. Think of this—hundreds and hundreds of those wedges, facing toward one another, held thousands of pounds of steel and wood and concrete and a crew of men until the bridge was done. The wedges had one purpose—to point toward one another and hold in place and then, its work done, to be knocked aside. The purpose of the bridge was not the wedges. It was to enable people to travel and get across the river or a valley or a low place.

Now that I'm retired, I am grateful that I grew up in such a simpler time. I graduated high school in 1972. Those were more tranquil times; I hear some of my generation say. We didn't have so many of the problems that plague us today.

Well, except of course, we had witnessed the assassination of a president, his brother, and Martin Luther King, Jr. There were protests over the war in Vietnam. We were still reeling over the issue of race, with memories of Bull Connor and voter suppression. White people were angry about desegregating society, especially schools. Some folks were convinced that the Supreme Court had kicked God out of the schools. This was news, of course, to the Almighty.

We argued about communism and fascists. And radical groups were setting off bombs weekly. We were fighting over women's place, sexuality, and the environment. The Supreme Court voted to support legal abortion in Roe vs. Wade. Inflation was a problem, terrible. Gas prices were through the roof. Drug abuse was out of control. Political corruption took out another president.

Global hunger worried us. Time was short, and preachers said it was the end of the world then, too. We sang, "Wish we'd all been ready." Hal Lindsay wrote a book and set us onto the Rapture in the 1980s.

Now that I think about it, maybe it's like I heard the great preacher Dr. Samuel Proctor say in a lecture one time, "I was there in the good old days. They were old alright, but they weren't always that good."

The question for those of us called to follow Jesus is never, "What kind of times should they be?" but "What, then, shall we do? How shall we live? Where is our calling?"

So back to bridge construction and wedges. Think about the lowly wedge. It is a demeaning task, having people kick you over and over just so you can hold the door for them. They prop open doors for elderly people on their walkers and canes or while funeral directors wheel the body of someone out to the hearse for the procession to the cemetery.

Chisels can be metal wedges. An axe head or a hatchet is essentially a metal wedge with a handle to multiply the force while you drive it into a limb or a log. The purpose is simple—to sever and split. Occasionally humans even kill each other with them.

So, wedges are powerful little things. As such, they have to be wielded with care. But also, they lift something up, little by little. A wedge can divide, split, destroy. It can lift a steel beam or prevent a car from rolling downhill.

So, wedges are powerful little things. As such, they have to be wielded with care. But also, they lift something up, little by little. A wedge can divide, split, destroy. It can lift a steel beam or prevent a car from rolling downhill.

Wedges are like human words. And words have the capacity to lift up and build, or to destroy and divide. Now we live in a time that is unlike any other. Our information age has brought with it disinformation and rumors, anarchists, and conspiracy theorists. Social media and the internet, our own news media across the spectrum from left to right, have been driving the wedges, harder and harder. Our differences are deep and out there to see. And we have pounded them into our common life, harder and harder, and anger drives them deeper than we normally would.

It would be worthwhile to note what wedges cannot do. They cannot tie things together or bond that which is separated. Wedges don't heal the sick or feed the hungry. They are not useful for wiping tears, and I cannot think of a single joke about wedges that would lift my spirits. They are lowly, mostly limited things. I mean, how many logs do you have to split? And how

much of your day should be spent propping doors open?

Wedges work by pushing apart. The Apostle Paul declared, "God was in Christ reconciling the world closer to God."

All of this brings us to this truth—human words, at best, are a sack of wedges. By them we enter into human life from the first "Dada" or "Mama" until our last breath. Our words have all kinds of uses, but they are not necessarily what is the deepest intention of life.

I do not know what is up ahead. It is a time unlike any other. Maybe it's time to face the wedges toward one another and lift something up together for the common good. Raise up good families and children. Lift spirits. Raise up the fallen. Build up others. Lift someone else's burden. Build hospitals and universities and good causes. Our world needs some bridge-builders.

Jesus said our words tell who we are. For good or bad. And on the day of judgment, how we deployed our bag of wedges and hatchets, and axes will be brought into the light. It's a terrifying image.

Recently I went to Samford University to hear historian Jon Meacham during a "Love Your Neighbor" emphasis week. He called for greater civility in our country and said that this is a difficult thing to accomplish, mainly because of our "sinful natures." He gave us four key principles to keep in mind:

The first principle is "curiosity." "We have to be curious, not just about ourselves, but about the forces that are shaping the world in which we live," Meacham said.

The next principle is "compassion." We have to attain maturity enough to at least comprehend what life is like for those who are different from us.

The third principle is "candor." "We do ourselves no favors by mistaking civility for false acquiescence. Conflict aversion is not civility," Meacham said.

The last principle is"empathy." "The most civil thing you can do is imagine what it's like for the other person and treat them as you would wish to be treated," Meacham said.[1]

All of his suggestions were aimed at our living together in a society without killing and hating one another. After months of a catastrophic war in Ukraine for no rational reason and the endless series of stupid boys shooting and killing people even that seems out of reach sometimes.

But we must start somewhere. And I would start with the people who claim the name of Jesus to start acting like it. And that means the hard, dirty work of bridge-building, nail-pulling, risk-taking and turning our wedge words in the right directions.

In John 13, Jesus gave us an example and told us to imitate him. He rose from supper and "laid aside" his garments and began to wash the disciple's feet.

In verse 4 it says he "took off" or "laid aside" his outer garment. This is the same word Jesus spoke in 10:15: "I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus willingly lays aside every claim to greatness in the worldly sense to be obedient to the cross.

The washing of the dusty feet of guests in Palestine was a lowly act, to be performed by a slave, or by the wife of the host if no servant were available. Since neither was present, it would have fallen to the last guy around the table—Peter. The disciples expected to wash the Master's feet, but how could they comprehend this?

To love one another we have to "lay aside" some things. Let them go. We lay aside our claims of superiority or importance. We lay aside our need to always be right, to always make the decisions, to always control the plans or the money or the outcome. Jesus had every right to reject his own disciples after the resurrection: One had betrayed him, another had denied him, and the rest forsook him on the cross and ran away. Jesus released his claim and instead forgave them so that he might show them another way.

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It is this "letting go" that makes real community at least possible. Sometimes this letting go can be quite painful, for it means seeing the truth about ourselves. We must let go.

And so here we find a clue both about how to forgive one another and how to tend to these dangerous wedges of ours. The act of self-denial, of laying our egos to the side for the sake of others, is a starting place. It explains Jesus' later words from our text just after that act: "By this the world will know you are my disciples, by your love for one another." Not "by your great facilities," or "by your impressive youth programs," or "by your importance in the local economy," but only this: "if you love one another."

Here are three ways I could aim my wedges if I were launching out now. First, I'd understand that I have a personal responsibility not only for what I do, but for my attitudes, words, and reactions to others.

Second, I'd build a bridge wherever I could. Our call is to see the larger blueprint that makes a way where there is no way, as Martin Luther King once put it. Bridges last. Build across suspicion, find solutions, contribute to institutions and the larger good. Of course, this will take you right into the middle of other people's anger and blame, and you'll get your share. Keep building.

Finally, remember my friend Love's advice: "Start at the top and work your way down, boys." It wasn't what he meant, but I think of the teaching of Jesus, and that brilliant exposition in the letter to the Philippians 2: "Have this mind in you that was in him: he laid aside all privilege and honor and position and took on the form of a suffering servant, even unto death." This is the way—the servant leader, who finds contentment not in fame, or power, or dancing on TikTok, or making *Forbes Magazine's* richest list, but in what that servant-leader plants deep into the soil of hope and goodness and relationships. This is the heart of all that matters in life.

Pay attention to what you do with your wedges. This will bring you life amid the busyness. Someone has said, "Attention is the most basic form of love; through it we bless and are blessed."

I don't know, seems sentimental and weak compared to "we're not going to take it anymore" and "if you're not strong, you're going to lose your country." But I ask myself: What really requires more strength? To restrain your inner infant rage for the sake of a civilized life, or to just let the rest of us have it?

Building bridges is a lot harder than just letting the separations stay there. At the end of the episode of Annika, she thinks to herself,

> "A bridge is just this beautiful idea, isn't it? And they're often beautiful in themselves. But they're so hard to build. You need loads of experts and getting the keystone in the middle right is a delicate and difficult moment…But the main problem with them is that quite a lot of the time when you say you're building a bridge, you're actually burning it to the ground."

Reconciliation appears in four passages in Paul as the heart of what the church and people who love and follow Jesus do. It costs a lot, and it's hard to do right. You need loads of experts and getting the keystone in the middle is delicate and difficult. But the greatest danger is to think you're building a bridge in the name of Jesus when you've hoisted up a toll booth to keep the wrong people off your bridge. Or worse, burning it to the ground in the name of standing up for it.

I've built bridges. I know how hard it is, costly, and time-consuming. I feel a little pride every time I drive over one I worked on (now nearly 50 years ago). Millions of us drive over hundreds of these structures every day. We never think in that split second how long it took or how much it cost or even the risks taken in building it. One man died in a fall the week before I started work. We had to crawl under the crane while explosive technicians blew big rocks standing in the way. I think, "Man, what a miracle, just to get from here to there."

If you try to figure out where the right side of the fight is, you've stopped short. The real question is, "How do we get from here to there?" And therein is the call for what is ahead. ■

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1 Rebekah Crozier, "Jon Meacham Speaks During Love Thy Neighbor Week," ***The Samford Crimson,*** March 29, 2022.

A Christian Understanding of Punishment

By Fisher Humphreys

Introduction

In this article I will attempt to describe a Christian understanding of punishment. I am not thinking about God's punishment of sin but about the punishment we humans carry out: the punishment of a child who hits his baby sister, or of a student who repeatedly disrupts a classroom, or of a criminal who assaults and robs an elderly person, or of a company that dumps toxic waste near a town's water supply.

But can there be a *Christian* understanding of punishment? After all, when you punish people, you are deliberately making them unhappy. Isn't there something un-Christian about that?

Punishment and Revenge

If we are to understand how punishment can be Christian, we must distinguish carefully between punishment and revenge.

Revenge is an emotional reaction to being mistreated. When you hurt me or someone I love, that makes me angry and I want to hurt you back. The whole point of revenge is to hit back so as to discharge the anger we feel when we have been mistreated and hurt.

We know what the Christian view of revenge is. Jesus was opposed to it. "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also" (Mt. 5:39-29). Jesus practiced what he preached. Instead of seeking revenge against those who crucified him, he prayed, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). Revenge is un-Christian.

It's understandable that people confuse revenge and punishment. They have two important things in common. Both of them are responses to being mistreated and hurt, and both of them make the people who hurt us unhappy.

But in at least four other ways they are quite different:

- Revenge is a natural reaction. Punishment is a response that must be learned.
- Revenge is an emotional reaction. Punishment is a moral response.
- Revenge is carried out by people acting as individuals. Punishment is carried out by a community.
- The objective of revenge is to hurt those who hurt us. The objective of punishment is to protect and maintain the life of a community and its members.

Understanding Punishment

Here is our definition: *Punishment is what a community does to one of its members in order to dissociate itself from that member's behavior.*

Understood in this way, only communities can punish; individuals can't. An individual child on a school playground can't punish another child who hit him; only a teacher who represents the school community can do that.

A family is a community, and in families it is usually the parents who act on behalf of the community. If a little boy hits his baby sister, the parents punish him. Perhaps they use words to punish him; they scold him. Perhaps they do not allow him to play or to move about freely for a period of time. For small children this is called time-out; for older children it is called being grounded.

By scolding or by making the boy take a time-out, the parents are in effect saying, "Hitting your little sister was wrong. In our family, this is unacceptable behavior. We want you to learn not to hit your sister in the future."

By punishing the boy, the parents are avoiding at least four undesirable alternatives:

- The parents are not reacting emotionally or violently. They are not taking revenge.
- The parents are not ignoring the boy's conduct. This would make them, and therefore the family, complicit in his conduct. Complicity with any evil—in this case, violence—is destructive of the family's life together as well as of the boy's life for the future.
- The parents are not expelling the boy from the family. What is being disowned is not the boy but the boy's behavior. In fact, it is precisely because the boy is still a member of the family that he needs to learn not to hit his sister.
- The parents' objective isn't to make the boy unhappy. It is true that they are making him unhappy, but that is a means, not an end. The end is to protect the life of the family and all its members. This includes the boy himself.

By dissociating the family from the boy's action, the parents are maintaining the integrity of the family.

This understanding of punishment applies to all communities. It is why a school may suspend a student, a military may demote a soldier, a sports team may fine a player, and a society may incarcerate a criminal.

Is Punishment Right?

Thinking of punishment in the way I have outlined, as a community's dissociation of itself from the behavior of one of its members, helps us to address some of the concerns that people feel about punishment.

The most basic concern is whether it can ever be right to deliberately inflict pain on anyone. Even though punishment is not inflicting pain for its own sake, it does include inflicting pain, and it is important not to overlook or deny or minimize this fact.

Upon reflection, we realize that we frequently inflict pain on people deliberately. A nurse who gives a child an injection inflicts pain. So do parents who insist that their child stop watching television and go to bed. So do schools who require students to sit quietly in classrooms when the students would prefer to be running around on the playground. In these and many other situations, we are confident that inflicting paint is right because it is the best way to accomplish something good that is greater than the pain inflicted.

So: can it ever be right for parents to deliberately make their child unhappy by punishing him?

I think the answer is yes. I think punishment is right in at least three senses. When parents scold their son who has hit his little sister, that is right for the family, right for the boy, and right for his little sister.

First, punishment is right for the family, in at least three ways. It keeps the family from becoming complicit in the boy's violence. As the English theologian Leonard Hodgson wrote, "The community cannot wink at and ignore its members' evil deeds without becoming a partner to them" (*The Doctrine of the Atonement*, 1951, 66). Second, it is right for the family to oppose violence so that the family members can feel safe and can flourish as individuals and be able to love and trust and enjoy one another. Third, it is right for the family because it discourages the family members from engaging in the kind of behavior that deserves punishment. If there are other children in the family, punishing the boy who hit his baby sister may discourage them from hitting.

Second, punishment is right for the boy. It can be formative for him. By punishing the boy, the family actively opposes his violence and thereby tries to help him become non-violent. Being scolded or put in time-out may help him to understand things such as:

- His behavior matters.
- His behavior affects other people.
- Other people matter, and their feelings matter.
- He has hurt his baby sister and made her unhappy.
- It is wrong to hurt his sister.
- His family disapproves of his hurting his sister.
- In the future he should not hurt his sister.

The boy needs to know things like this so that he can become a better person. Being scolded and put in time-out may help to form him into the kind of boy who doesn't hit others.

Third, punishing the boy is right for the baby sister. She does not need revenge—that doesn't do her or anyone else any good—but she does need to be safe and to feel safe from harm. She needs to be feel loved in the family, not threatened by one of its members. By punishing the boy the parents are saying to his baby sister, "You are important, and how you feel is important. We are sorry that your brother hit you. That was wrong, and our family is going to do what it can to ensure that you won't be hit again."

So, yes, it is right for parents to make their son unhappy. It is right for a community to disown the behavior of one of its members.

Retributive Justice and Restorative Justice

A second concern is whether punishment is retributive justice or restorative justice. As we have defined it, it is both.

It is retributive in the sense that it is because the little boy hit his baby sister that the parents scold him. If he had not hit his sister, then he would not have deserved to be scolded, and it would have been wrong for his parents to scold him.

But it also is restorative. Punishment helps the family to recover what it lost when the little boy hit his sister. It is for the integrity of the family and thereby for the benefit all of its members. That includes the boy as well as the others.

Some writers have promoted the restorative factor in punishment by denying the retributive factor. If their intention is to oppose revenge, that's fine, but if they really mean that punishment is not retributive in the sense of being deserved, I believe they are mistaken. If a child does not deserve to be scolded, then scolding him is violence, not justice. The English philosopher F. H. Bradley was right: "Punishment is punishment, only where it is deserved" (*Ethical Studies*, 1876, 24).

Justice looks both to the past and to the future. Retributive justice looks to the wrong done in the past, and restorative justice looks to the repair needed for

the future. Retributive justice and restorative justice are not adversaries. They are partners.

Methods of Punishment

A third concern is the method of punishment. What does a community do in order to dissociate itself from the wrongdoing of its member? In families, for example, some parents spank their children, others beat their children, and others never hit their children. I myself think that hitting young children is not a wise form of punishment, for three reasons. First, it may encourage the child to hit other children. Children are imitators. They learn how to behave by watching how others behave. Hitting them may mislead them into thinking that hitting is an appropriate way to behave.

Second, it's probably not necessary to hit a small child. Most small children crave the approval of their parents, so even mild forms of parental disapproval can be painful for them.

Third, hitting a child is not a measured, moral response. It is an emotional reaction coming out of anger which means it is revenge.

In the wider society, the most contested form of punishment nowadays is the death penalty. In Europe and North America, just two nations have the death penalty for crimes by civilians, Belarus and the United States. It is true that on the principle of "a life for a life" (see Exodus 21:23-25) the death penalty is proportional. However, modern societies are almost always able to protect themselves without executing criminals, so today the death penalty is unnecessary in the same way that beating children is unnecessary. I don't know of any Christian justification for a community inflicting unnecessary pain on one of its members.

And there is something else. When a community punishes one of its members, it is not dissociating itself from the member. It is dissociating itself from the *conduct* of the member. The death penalty does not qualify as punishment under this definition because it is a rejection, indeed, it is the ultimate rejection, of the member.

There are several good reasons to oppose the death penalty as practiced in the United States today. It's astronomically expensive, innocent people are sometimes executed, and it is difficult (some people say impossible) to administer justly. But for our purposes it is sufficient simply to say that it is unnecessary and that, because it rejects a person and not just that person's behavior, it falls outside the boundaries of our Christian understanding of punishment. I recognize, of course, that many sincere Christians continue to support the death penalty and they do it in good faith. I myself am unable to do that.

So I think that hitting children and executing criminals are examples of inappropriate ways to punish. I assume that there are other inappropriate ways, but I'm not aware of a comprehensive list of unworthy means of punishment.

Nor do I know how to draw up a list of acceptable means of punishment. I have mentioned scolding, time-out, and grounding for children, suspension for students, fines for athletes and for companies, demotion for soldiers, and incarceration for criminals. These all seem acceptable to me, and I assume that there are other acceptable means. In thinking about appropriate and inappropriate means of punishment, I think it is wise to be guided by the idea that punishment is a community's dissociation of itself from the conduct of one of its own members.

Proportionality

A related concern is proportionality. How much pain should the community inflict on the wrongdoer? If a young child hits his baby sister, it would not be enough for the parents to smile and say softly, "Now, that's not nice, son." On the other hand, it would be too much for the parents to beat the boy until he screams in pain. The punishment should fit the crime. It must be commensurate with the offense.

Punishment should be tailored not only to the wrongdoing but also to the response of the wrongdoer. If the boy begins to express remorse and to weep when he is being scolded, time-out may not be necessary. If he becomes stubborn and surly when he is being scolded, he may need a longer time-out to help him to internalize the fact that it was wrong for him to hurt his sister and to give him a better chance of becoming the kind of boy who doesn't hurt others.

In families, parents usually determine proportionality intuitively, but in criminal law proportionality is given painstaking attention. For example, prison sentences are longer for armed robbery than for purse-snatching. Many law codes provide a range of possible punishments for particular crimes. This allows judges to tailor the punishment to the response of the criminal as well as to take account of mitigating factors.

Punishment and Christian Faith

Several Christian beliefs support the idea that punishment is what a community does to dissociate itself from the conduct of one of its members. I will mention just two.

One is God's purpose in creation. Why did God create our universe? The great narrative of the Bible suggests that God's purpose is to bring together a community of people to be the people of God. "I will be

your God, and you will be my people." This idea is found repeatedly in the Bible (see Lev. 26:12 = 2 Cor. 6:16; Jer. 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:1, 31:33, 32:38; Ezek. 11:20, 14:11, 34:30, 36:28, 37:23; Hos. 2:23 = Rom. 9:25, 26; Zech. 13:9).

God is concerned for individuals, of course. The late John Claypool liked to say that God loves each individual as if there were no others and that God loves all individuals as God loves each. God enters into a covenant relationship with individuals that is intensely personal. However, it is not a private relationship. It is a communal relationship.

Because God is concerned to create community, Christians value the creation and maintenance of community. As long as people behave badly, punishment will play an indispensable role in the maintenance of community. It is necessary for the common good and for the flourishing of individuals.

A second Christian belief that supports our understanding of punishment concerns the dignity of persons. God has created human beings in "the image of God" (Genesis 1:27-28) and has made them "a little lower than God" (Psalms 8:5). A community which punishes its erring members is showing respect for those members. It is treating them as free beings who are responsible for their actions. It is respecting them as moral beings who are able to understand, or at least to learn, right from wrong. And it is respecting them as beings who have the capacity to become better persons than they were in the past. As Bryan Stevenson of the Equal Justice Initiative says, We are all better than the worse thing we have ever done.

Punishment exists in a middle space between two errors. On the one hand, as we have seen, it is often confused with vengeance, and for this reason it feels violent rather than loving.

The reaction against this misunderstanding of punishment can lead to another equally false and unhelpful understanding. On this understanding, people are not free, moral beings who are responsible for their actions. They may feel free and moral and responsible, but they are not. Their DNA determines their actions. Biology is destiny.

Christian faith rejects this understanding. When parents scold their son and put him in time-out because he hurt his baby sister, they are treating him not as a pawn of his biological makeup but as a responsible person capable of knowing, or at least of learning, right from wrong and capable of becoming the kind of person who does not hit his little sister.

Conclusion

Punishment as we have defined it brings together a rejection of vengeance with a respect for the moral character of persons and an appreciation for human communities. It is both realistic and hopeful. Until the kingdom of God arrives and we have all become like Jesus (see 1 John 3:2), punishment will have an important role to play in our communities. I believe, therefore, that our responsibility as Christians is to do what we can to ensure that punishment is carried out in ways that are consonant with our Christian understanding of God and of human beings. ■

Editor's Note:

This Special Issue of *Christian Ethics Today* is a collection of articles which were solicited by Fisher Humphreys, the out-going chair of the CET Board of Directors and a longtime member of the board. Fisher has been a part of the The Trinity Group, from which these essays originate. He and I have worked together to edit the articles and prepare them for this publication…*Pat Anderson, editor*

Approaches to Religious Dialogue (with Cautions)

Richard Francis Wilson

Religious dialogue, intra- and inter-,[1] became vogue in the late 20th century. The rich diversity within and among religions, however, has fostered conversations stretching back millennia to the beginning of religions with the blossoming of Aryan religions on the Asian steppes that gave rise to Zoroastrianism in the sixth century BCE.[2]

The give-and-take within religious communities for millennia has shaped the variegated practices and confessions spanning the Axial Age[3] well into our contemporary age.

The focus of this essay is to identify and engage three approaches of engagement associated with dialogue among world religions. There are three broad approaches: apologetics, comparative religions and history of religions.

Apologetics

In the "Preface to the First Edition" to *A History of Apologetics*, Avery Cardinal Dulles issues stinging critique of what popular understandings of apologetics had become in the last third of the 20th century. His assessment is tinged with sadness:

> In the minds of many Christians today the term "apologetics" carries unpleasant connotations. The apologist is regarded as an aggressive, opportunistic person who tries by fair means or foul, to argue people into joining the Church. . .
>
> [Dulles offers a sad assessment of such a method, noting] [I]ts neglect of grace, or prayer, and of the life-giving of the power of the word of God: its tendency to over-simplify and syllogize the approaches to faith; its dilution of the scandal of the Christian message; and its implied presupposition that God's word should be judged by the norm of fallible, not to say fallen, human reason.[4]

Linguistically, apologetics comes from the Greek ἀπολογία. The first component is ἀπο (next to) and the second is λογία (word). Latin, French, English and other languages reproduce the sound of the word and assign a wide range of contextual meanings. The construction of the word raises the question, "What are the words next to?"

The practical answer is that the words are next to something that has been misunderstood or misrepresented. In that case, apologetics are designed to clarify a misunderstanding or a misrepresentation.[5]

The New Testament includes passages where Paul, for example, or Jesus in the gospels, attempts to diffuse a misunderstanding or misrepresentation.[6] First Corinthians is a trove of examples of how Paul countered misunderstandings or misrepresentations about the content of the gospel, spiritual gifts, the nature of the church and the mystery of the resurrection.

The Gospel of Matthew's so-called Sermon on the Mount is thoroughly apologetic. Matthew's Jesus affirms the law and the prophets and outlines a revolutionary way to extend[7] Torah teaching to a new generation.

The lure of apologetics is to change conversations into debates, or to reframe conversations about theology into a competitive exercise.

Cardinal Dulles' reservations, noted above, notwithstanding, apologetics has shaped the emergence of Christian theology in important ways. From Paul the apostle in the first century to Paul Tillich, one of the 20th century's most notable and credible apologists, Christian theology has demonstrated how critical thinkers can foster honest and productive conversations with culture.

Cautions

The lure of apologetics is to change conversations into debates, or to reframe conversations about theology into a competitive exercise.

There is no room for competitive religion in the arena of dialogue. Competitive religion is fueled by pride and arrogance and, therefore, lacks compassion.

Comparative Religion

Colonialism and Christian missionary campaigns to the East laid the foundation for what emerged in the 19th century as the sub-discipline of religious studies known as comparative religions. The recognized origi-

nator of the discipline was Max Müller, a German-born and Oxford-trained philologist and historian. Müller borrowed and adapted Goethe's oft' repeated line about languages: "*Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiß nichts von seiner eigenen,"* translated, "One who does not know foreign languages knows nothing about his own." Müller's adaptation is "One who knows one religion knows none."[8]

Müller was embraced by western university-trained scholars and applauded for helping to draw back the curtains of mystery and suspicion that had obscured eastern religions. In Müller's day, westerners still operated on the assumption that only four religions existed: Christianity, Judaism, Islam and paganism.

Therein lies the continuing challenges for serious investigations into world religions. Popular Christianity remains unwilling to step away from an obsession with doctrine and liturgy and step toward a broader horizon of how religions shape private and social ethics and also contribute to strong community identities.

The discipline of comparative religion has had an important impact upon acknowledging and embracing our pluralistic world. The discipline of comparative religion has seeped into the cultures of the East and West in positive ways. Global awareness of religions seems to have produced more willingness for diverse religious communities to get along and show respect for each other.

Cautions

Practitioners of comparative religion need to be sensitive about confusing their perspectives as normative for all religions. Remember that comparative religions always seek to explore and explain an unknown on the basis of a known.

An excellent example is the frequent misstep of western Christians who begin to explore Hinduism and learn about the *Trimurti*. *Trimurti* is a Sanskrit term that means three forms or three faces. Western Christian readers often make an incorrect leap of correlation between the Christian concept of Trinity and T*rimurti.* Popular and quasi-academic sources often describe *Trimurti* as "the Hindu Trinity."

It is not. The linguistic, cultural and historical backgrounds of the development of Hinduism quickly dispel such a false equivalency.

A second caution is the tendency of comparative religion to succumb to the threat of reductionism. The threat of reductionism attempts to boil religion down to doctrines and practices. Lived religion is deeper and broader that doctrines and liturgies.

A third caution is to avoid the pride and arrogance that flow from the two cautions noted above. Honest comparative religion is eager to engage in conversation with a wide range of religions with the hope of finding common ground with adherents of multiple religions.[9]

History of Religion

By the mid-20th century, popular and academic conversations about religion continued to develop. Many distinct Christian groups nurtured the hope that global Christianity could overcome—if not erase—scandalous animosity. Ecumenism flourished and, in 1948, the World Council of Churches was founded in Amsterdam.[10] Although unrelated organically to the WCC, the academic conversations about the history of religion also began to emerge in the decades after World War II.

Noted above (see note 3), Karl Jaspers set the standard for what became a history of religion approach in the mid-20th century. By profession, Jaspers was a psychiatrist and a philosopher of history. He and his

Global awareness of religions seems to have produced more willingness for diverse religious communities to get along and show respect for each other.

Jewish wife fled Germany and settled in Switzerland in the 1930s. In his puzzlement about how an erudite and sophisticated society like Germany could sink to the uncivil and horrific depths that marked the Third Reich, Jaspers turned toward a broad understanding of religion that focused upon character development rather than a narrow understanding of the developments of doctrine and ritualistic practice.

In the early 21st century, Karen Armstrong refined Jasper's thesis and systematically explored the Axial Age (900-200 BCE), "which was pivotal to the spiritual development of humanity,"[11] noting that "most of the Axial philosophers had no interest whatever in doctrine or metaphysics."[12]

Armstrong's Axial Age thesis focuses upon four geographical regions—India, China, Mesopotamia and the Eastern Mediterranean (especially Greece)—that independently cultivated the sense of ritual, kenosis, knowledge, suffering, empathy, concern for everybody (compassion), all is one (human solidarity) and empire.

Cautions

The first caution raised by a history of religion perspective is to avoid a false objectivity. History is not an objective discipline. It strives for objectivity in the search for the who, what, when, where data. In the end the why demands interpretation. History is a subtly subjective endeavor.

A second caution is to avoid moralizing history. The virtues of the Axial Age noted above often have been co-opted by the lusts for power and control. A history of religion approach to dialogue needs to be aware of the subtle forces of politics and social movements.

A third caution is to avoid devaluing the inherent religious and spiritual bearings of your dialogue partners—and your own. Remember that the dialogue is not a debate. The goal is not to win or to avoid losing. The goal is mutual understanding. ■

References noted in the text are found on the CET website at christianethicstoday.com

Seeking and Speaking the Truth: Descartes, the Kung San Tribe, and Readers of Christian Ethics Today

By T. J. Mashburn

What is truth? How do we know it? How can we be certain that anthing is true? These questions are fundamental to any elementary philosophy class or philosophical text. Strangely enough, the questions are more relevant now than ever.

Rene Descartes, the young but brilliant 17th century French mathematician, inventor, scientist, and philosopher had a problem. He was concerned about finding the truth and wanted to do something about it. He had studied Aristotelian philosophy and medieval logic but found that these could tell him what he already knew, but were unable to give him new knowledge. He wanted a method that could discover knowledge, not simply confirm it. So, he took it upon himself to think through this issue on his own. He was on furlough from the army, had plenty of time on his own, and… let's allow Descartes to pick up the story in his short but provocative text, *Discourse on Method*—

> "[…] since I found no society to divert me, while fortunately I had also no cares or passions to trouble me, I remained the whole day shut up alone in a stove-heated room, where I had complete leisure to occupy myself with my own thoughts" (Descartes 9).

And that is what he did. He spent days alone thinking about his thoughts, thinking about thinking.

I'm not sure how much time we spend thinking about thinking. I mean, let's just analyze this for a moment: Your friend says, "Hey, what are you doing this afternoon?" You respond, "I am going to the beach, grocery store, shopping mall, dentist appointment, exercise." All of these would be perfectly understandable. But, if you said, "I am going to think"—well, what would be your friend's next question? Surely, it would be this: "What are you going to think about?" And if you replied, "I'm going to think about thinking"—what in the world would your friend think about you? Would your friend think you had been working too hard or were under too much stress? Is it time to see a therapist? Is medication needed? You get the picture.

So, Descartes focused on the process of thinking itself and came up with four rules to guide his thinking. These rules are as follows:

Rule #1—"[…] to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so" (Descartes 14). In other words, there can be little or no doubt about the truth of what is being contemplated. Knowing something clearly involves the presence of facts, things that are proven to be true. This is what is called the 'Rule of Evidence.' It is what is done daily in laboratories, law courts, and testing facilities. We must have evidence in order to accept something as being true.

Rule #2—"[…] to divide up each of the difficulties which I examined into as many parts as possible, and as seemed requisite in order that it might be resolved in the best manner possible" (Descartes 14). Here we examine the evidence carefully, breaking the complex elements into more simple components in order to understand them better. This is the 'Rule of Analysis.' Examine, scrutinize, study and research. We don't make things up; we follow the evidence.

Rule #3—"[…] to carry on my reflections in due order, commencing with objects that were the most simple and easy to understand, in order to rise little by little, or by degrees, to knowledge of the most complex, assuming an order, even if a fictitious one, among those which do not follow a natural sequence relatively to one another" (Descartes 14). That sounds more complex than it really is. After subdividing the complex into simpler elements, we then put them back together and make observations, theories, and hypotheses. These are not facts per se; rather, they are theories and hypotheses, attempts to explain and organize facts. We do this by connecting the dots in an orderly fashion. This is referred to as the 'Rule of Logic.' Again, the evidence leads our analysis.

Finally, Rule #4—"[…] in all cases to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I should be certain of having omitted nothing" (Descartes 14). This is the 'Rule of Comprehensiveness.' We don't want to leave anything out of our analysis. Hence, we include all data, whether we think such data are significant or not. We consider all points of view, whether we agree or not.

Descartes believed deeply that so long as one followed this method, then true knowledge would be the result. Was he right? Aren't these four rules part and parcel of the modern scientific method? And, by the way, the answer is…."yes."

Now for a thought experiment. There is a principle that comes to us from a 5th century Gallic monk by the name of Vincent of Lerins. It says, and I paraphrase, that 'if something is true, then it is true always, everywhere, and by everyone.' Got that? If something is true, it is true at all times, in all places, and by everyone. It is clear that such thinking goes directly against post-modernism, which says basically that truth is subjective. Truth is what I perceive it to be. Well, let's just test Vincent's theory. If something is true, then it is true everywhere, always and by everyone.

The late Carl Sagan, noted astronomer, cosmologist, and astrophysicist—in his book, *The Demon Haunted World*, relates this hunting anecdote that comes from the Kung San people of Botswana. Follow me and I'll connect the dots.

> *The small hunting party follows the trail of hoof prints and other spoor. They pause for a moment by a stand of trees. Squatting on their heels, they examine the evidence more carefully. The trail they've been following has been crossed by another. Quickly they agree on which animals are responsible, how many of them, what ages and sexes, whether any are injured, how fast they're traveling, how long ago they passed, whether any other hunters are in pursuit, whether the [hunting] party can overtake the game, and if so, how long it will take. The decision made, they flick their hands over the trail they will follow, make a quiet sound between their teeth like the wind, and off they lope. Despite their bows and poison arrows, they continue at championship marathon racing form for hours. Almost always they've read the message in the ground correctly. The wildebeests or elands or okapis are where they thought, in the numbers and condition they estimated. The hunt is successful. Meat is carried back to the temporary camp. Everyone feasts* (Sagan 312-313).

How did they do it? How could they gather so much information from looking at hoofprints? Saying that they are keen observers really tells us nothing. What actually did they see in those hoofprints? What specific information did they process, which made the hunt successful? This much we know for certain: If their hunts were not successful, then the Kung San people wouldn't be around for long!!!

Sagan then shares the findings of anthropologist Richard Lee, who analyzes this somewhat typical hunting vignette. According to Lee,

> They [the hunting party] scrutinized the shape of the depressions. The footprints of a fast-moving animal display a more elongated symmetry. A slightly lame animal favors the afflicted foot, puts less weight on it, and leaves a fainter imprint. A heavier animal leaves a deeper and broader hollow. The correlation functions are in the heads of the hunters.
>
> In the course of the day, the footprints erode a little. The walls of the depression tend to crumble. Windblown sand accumulates on the floor of the hollow. Perhaps bits of leaf, twigs or grass are blown into it. The longer you wait, the more erosion there is [and the greater lapse of time between hunters and the hunted].
>
> The galloping herd hates the hot Sun. The animals will use whatever shade they can find. They will alter course to take brief advantage of the shade from a stand of trees. But where the shadow is depends on the time of day, because the Sun is moving across the sky. […] From the swerve of the tracks, it's possible to tell how long ago the animals passed. This calculation will be different in different seasons of the year. So the hunters must carry in their heads a kind of astronomical calendar predicting the apparent solar motion (Sagan 313-314).

Okay. So, what do we have here? Did the Kung San people ever read Descartes or take a college course on science? What are they doing? Simply put, what we see here is nothing short of forensic science. They are following the Cartesian or scientific method, even though unaware of it. Or, are we following the Kung San method of tracking? It goes to show that this thing we call the scientific method may come in different sizes and shapes. It may also serve to confirm Vincent's theory that 'if something is true, it will be true always, everywhere, and by everyone.'

Why am I telling you this? Why am I telling readers of *Christian Ethics Today* about Descartes, the Kung San tribe and the quest for truth? The great Spanish American philosopher, George Santayana, is credited with putting forth the following idea: 'Those who fail to learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.' So, why am I telling you this? Here are some summary reasons with commentary.

First, we have a crisis in this country involving the truth. We need look no further than the 2020 presidential election. Sides have been drawn, minds made up, emotions boiled over to the point of being unable even to discuss the event. And yet, there must be truth in this matter; and each of us has an obligation to seek and to speak it. Of course, this presupposes that we know what the truth is. Descartes is a great help with ascertaining true knowledge; the Kung San tribe also validate that method in a most practical way—they put food on the table.

But what is truth? That, as you know, is one of those fundamental questions in Philosophy 101. Here is Aristotle's definition (I've yet to find a better one): "To say that what is is not, or that what is not is, is false; but to say that what is is, and what is not is not, is true" (Metaphysics 4.1011b). Truth occurs when words accurately describe reality. What we say must reflect what is. So, we all need to be truth speakers, even if it is hard to hear, even if doing so is unpopular, even if it puts us at odds with fellow believers; we have to speak the truth.

Second, since Immanuel Kant's famous "Copernican Revolution" in which he demonstrated that not only does a perceiver perceive reality, but a perceiver also shapes the reality he or she perceives, there has been a subjective element in truth seeking. That is to say, each perceiver perceives reality in a unique way; this can and will result in differences in perspectives. The question, however, is this: Will subjectivity create a perspective in which something that is "is not" or something that is not "is"? I would suggest not. Yes, individuals may perceive truth differently; there can be aspects of truth, perspectives on truth, nuances on truth, but never to the point that the perspectives are in direct opposition. If so, then the perception is incorrect; somebody has it wrong.

Third, it is not enough, however, to speak the truth as each perceives it to be. Rather, we must take a page out of St. Paul's playbook and "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15). Now, that is tough. Why? Because speaking the truth in love means, among other things, that our words need to help, not hurt, those who might disagree with us. We don't ever need to demonize our opponents; rather, we must try to understand their perspectives and they must try to understand ours.

To put this in terms of popular cable news, try the following thought experiment. Instead of having the existing Sean Hannity or Rachel Maddow or Tucker Carlson or Lawrence O'Donnell shows, let's put Hannity and Maddow together and Carlson and O'Donnell together and have a dialogue about issues. Can there be genuine dialogue in which the truth is sought instead of simply trying to score points or win arguments or attract television ratings? I know this will never happen, but it ought to be tried, particularly if we wish to be true truth seekers.

Fourth, speaking the truth in love, means that we must follow Jesus' admonition to first cast the log out of our own eyes, then we can see clearly to cast the speck out of another's eye (Matthew 7:5). In other words, we judge ourselves before we judge others. Who knows? In so doing, we may find that we have issues that we can't or won't see. Honesty and humility—what happened to these wonderful virtues in public life? Are they not marketable? Do they not register on the Nielsen scale? Do people fear that these indicate weakness? Just maybe in this kind of weakness lies real strength!

Finally, speaking the truth in love means that we must admit that we might be wrong. "I may be wrong." That is a liberating and redemptive statement. This is why the motto of my philosophy classes at the University of Mobile is this: **"**Don't ever, ever, ever drink the kool aid." Students repeat that on the first day of class and periodically throughout the semester. Don't ever, ever, ever drink the kool aid. It also includes the kool aid that comes from my lectern. Why? Because I don't want my students to think like I think; I want them to think for themselves. We've got to do the "Descartes thing" and think for ourselves.

Yes, one must be tough to seek and to speak the truth. One has to be even tougher to seek and to speak the truth in love. It is not easy; but if ever there were a time that our country needed this, it is now. And it begins with you and with me.

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Eating That Gospel Pie: Religious Rhetoric in the Songs of John Prine

By Dwight A. Moody

From 1970, when he burst upon the Chicago folk music scene, to his untimely COVID-related death in 2020, John Prine established himself as one of the most original and gifted songwriters of his generation. He is often included in a list that names Bob Dylan, Gordan Lightfoot, Kris Kristofferson, and Shel Silverstein, all of whom he counted as friends and collaborators.

A dominant element of Prine's poetic vocabulary is religion, even though he himself was not a church-going person (at least after childhood).[1] The Christian imagery and story play a compelling role in his work and succeed in connecting his broader message to his audience that was, and is, more religiously observant than he was.

The best illustration of this is his song "Sam Stone" (*John Prine*, 1971). This song is about a soldier coming home from war only to live and die with addiction. It may be the most powerful and famous of all his songs; it certainly turns upon the most memorable line John Prine ever wrote, "There's a hole in daddy's arm where all the money goes." But it is the chorus that takes us from the horror of war to the hope of religion: "Jesus Christ died for nothing I suppose."[2]

Here, Prine invokes the core of the Christian message: the death of Jesus, supposedly bringing hope to the world, especially to the sinner. But in this one instance, for this one lone drug addict, the death of Jesus brought nothing, was not able to save this one soul from the ravages of drugs. The sadness of the story is intensified by the implied impotence of the Savior. Or so Prine sang. Whether or not it provides insight into his assessment of religion, especially his own childhood religion, is unclear. But at the core, it provides an introduction, early in his writing and singing career, to the regular role played by religion in his music.

John Prine encountered religion early in his life, much of it connected to Kentucky. Two of John Prine's early and most popular songs evoke the times and terrain of the place where his parents were born, Kentucky. "Paradise" (*John Prine*, 1986) describes a small town on the Green River and how it was "carried away" by "Mr. Peabody's coal train."[3] Religion plays a minor role in the song except for the reference to death and heaven (see below).

In a similar vein, and perhaps referring to the same displaced community, "Grandpa Was a Carpenter" (*Sweet Revenge*, 1989) eulogizes the man who influenced him greatly. "We would go down there [to Kentucky] as often as we could" the grown-up and moderately famous Prine says into a camera sitting in the front yard of his boyhood home in Chicago.[4] In the song, Prine describes his mother as graduating from college in Bowling Green, a reference to what is now called Western Kentucky University. Before that, he remembers how his grandfather would take him to church on Sundays, "stain glass in every window, hearing aids in every pew."[5]

Like his frequent lyrical references to porches and screen doors, Prine reaches back into his childhood experiences of religion to enrich his music. While religious practice may not have stayed with him throughout his long and storied career, religious ideas and memories did. "I remember everything" (2020[6]) Prine famously wrote and sang at the end of his career; and although he does not mention the images and vocabulary of religion in that song, his body of work illustrates how thoroughly and powerfully the religion of his childhood shaped his imagination. Take, for instance, his song "Spanish Pipedream" (*John Prine,* 1971). It tells the story of a soldier visiting a topless bar only to encounter a dancer that admonished him to

> Blow up your TV,
> Throw away your paper,
> Go to the country,
> Build you a home.
> Plant a little garden,
> Eat a lot of peaches.
> Try and find Jesus on your own.

Which they proceeded to do, prompting the end of the song:

> Had a lot of children.

While religious practice may not have stayed with him throughout his long and storied career, religious ideas and memories did.

Fed ‘em on peaches.
They all found Jesus on their own.

“Finding Jesus” may allude to the once-common phrase used as a euphemism for getting religion, or accepting Christ, or being converted. At the very least, we recognize that its use here disconnects true religion or spirituality from institutional or organizational affiliation, something that would continue through both Prine’s life and his music. After all, it was (according to the song) a topless dancer rather than a congregational minister that gave him counsel on how to live as a follower of Jesus! That is both comical and commentary![7]

One of the most humorous biblical settings for a John Prine song is “Sweet Revenge” (*Sweet Revenge,* 1973), which uses the story of Noah and the ark to have some fun:

I got kicked off Noah’s Ark
I turn my cheek to unkind remarks
There was two of everything but one of me
And when the rains came tumbling down
I held my breath, and I stood my ground
And I watched that ship go sailing out to sea.

Not all the religion in the songs of John Prine is so flippant and funny, especially those that deal with heaven. “John believed very strongly in heaven,” his wife and widow Fiona said after he died, and his songs testify to that. Heaven is the most dominant and persistent religious image of John Prine’s songs. One of the earliest is the social protest song “Your Flag Decal Won’t Get You into Heaven Anymore” (*John Prine*, 1971). The chorus reads like this:

But your flag decal won’t get you into Heaven any more.
They’re already overcrowded from your dirty little war.
Now Jesus don’t like killin’ no matter what the reason’s for.
And your flag decal won’t get you into Heaven any more.

It is a hilarious song, telling the story of how one man was given so many flag decals (as a sign of patriotism) which he proceeded to affix to the window of his car that he lost the ability to see where he was going, ran off the road, crashed into a tree, and died. He wrote and sang it during the Vietnam War era but reprised it during the Middle East wars of the 1990s and 2000s.

About the same time, he wrote the equally funny song “Please Don’t Bury Me Down in the Cold, Cold Ground” (*Sweet Revenge* 1973). It tells the story of an accident at home that left his head cracked and his soul, well … “Oh what a feeling! When my soul went through the ceiling, and on up into heaven I did ride.” Once there, the angels recounted to him his last words which became both the title of the song and the first line of the chorus, a plea to avoid burial. “I’d rather have ‘em cut me up and pass me all around.” He proceeds, in the song, to describe where each part of his body should end up!

Then there is the song he wrote after his surgery for cancer and after he quit smoking, which (he confesses on camera) he had done since the age of 14 and to great delight. “When I get to heaven” (*The Tree of Forgiveness,* 2018) he croons, “I’m going to shake God’s hand …” That is very traditional, I suppose, but the chorus takes us in a different direction:

And then I’m gonna get a cocktail--vodka and ginger ale
Yes, I’m gonna smoke a cigarette that’s nine miles long.
I’m gonna kiss that pretty girl on the tilt-a-whirl
‘Cause this old man is going’ to town.

The references to heaven in the songs of John Prine are too numerous to list here, but none exceed in pathos and spirituality the way heaven is used in the song introduced above, “Paradise” (which is a reference both to his grandparents’ home of origin and also to his own afterlife destiny).

The references to heaven in the songs of John Prine are too numerous to list here, but none exceed in pathos and spirituality the way heaven is used in the song introduced above,“Paradise” (which is a reference both to his grandparents’ home of origin and also to his own afterlife destiny).

When I die let my ashes float down the Green River[8]
Let my soul roll on up to the Rochester dam
I’ll be halfway to Heaven with paradise waitin’
Just five miles away from wherever I am.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Prine’s use of religion is the way he flips the traditional script. Two songs illustrate this, and the first is a proper transition at this point because of its use of the idea of heaven.

“Fish and Whistle” is one of his earlier pieces (*Bruised Orange*, 1978).[9] It is easy to read these words as non-sensical:

I been thinking lately about the people I meet
The carwash on the corner and the hole in the street
The way my ankles hurt with shoes on my feet
I'm wondering if I'm gonna see tomorrow.

They are full of nonsense! That disposition may continue into the chorus:

Father, forgive us for what we must do
You forgive us and we'll forgive you
We'll forgive each other 'til we both turn blue
And we'll whistle and go fishing in the heavens

But the idea of mutual forgiveness between us and God is both arresting and original. Even as an educated theologian, I have no recollection of such an idea. Yes, many people respond to life's disappointments (illness or death, failure, depression, etc.) by blaming God, and sometimes working through this anger toward God can involve a kind of forgiveness: forgiving God for the bad things that have happened in life. This may be what Prine had in mind; but reading all this into his lyrics may be way too much.

A similarly playful song presents this question in another way. I refer to the wonderfully inventive "Everybody" (*Diamonds in the Rough*, 1972). It is the story of a person bumping into Jesus while on an excursion. The two sit down and start to talk, but it is Jesus that does most of the talking, leading to this chorus:

You see, everybody needs somebody that they can talk to
Someone to open up their ears and let that trouble through
Now you don't have to sympathize or care what they may do
But everybody needs somebody that they can talk to.

This idea that Jesus is the person that needs somebody to talk to is another example of Prine inverting religious orthodoxy. "He spoke to me of morality, starvation, pain, and sin," Prine sings. "The whole dang time I only got a few words in." Then concludes his story with these wonderful lyrics:

Now we sat there for an hour or two just a-eatin' that Gospel pie.
When around the bend come a terrible wind and lightning lit the sky.
He said, "So long son, I gotta run. I appreciate you listening to me."
And I believe I heard him sing these words as he skipped out across the sea:
"Everybody needs somebody that they can talk to ….

Everybody, even Jesus!

Inverting religion may be a form of critique, but in other places in his body of work, John Prine is not so subtle. As we might expect of an artist shaped during the 1960s,[10] Prine has a few strong words about the religious establishment, none more so than his ballad "Billy the Bum" (*Diamonds in the Rough*, 1972). Here is the story of a man with "two twisted legs and a childhood disease." Prine tells the story in stanza two, then offers his commentary in stanza three:

Now he lived all alone in a run down home
Near the side of the old railroad track
Where the trains used to run carryin' freight by the ton
Blow the whistle as Billy'd wave back
But the children around Billy's home town
Seemed to have nothin' better to do
Then run around his house
With their tongues from their mouth
Make fun of that crippled old fool

Now some folks they wait and some folks they pray

The poetry of John Prine includes very few, if any, descriptions of attending religious services (other than one quoted above, about attending church as a child with his grandfather). But his work is full of a religious sensibility best expressed in one of his finest songs.

For Jesus to rise up again
But none of these folks in their holy cloaks
Ever took Billy on as a friend
For pity's a crime and it ain't worth a dime
To a person who's really in need
Just treat 'em the same as you would your own name
Next time that your heart starts to bleed.

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"My Mexican Home" (*Sweet Revenge*, 1973) was written following the early death of his father.[11] It describes hot days without air conditioning in subur-

ban Chicago, and then announces the news:

My father died on the porch outside on an August afternoon
I sipped bourbon and cried with a friend by the light of the moon.

The song contains two of the very best lines of poetry in his entre corpus. "The air's as still as the throttle on a funeral train" prepares the listener for the news of the death of his father. Then comes this line: "The sun is going down, and the moon is just holding its breath."

However, neither of these sterling sentences match the phrase that is buried, somewhat, in the chorus. Prine writes and sings:

Mama dear, your boy is here Far across the sea
Waiting for that sacred core that burns inside of me.
And I feel a storm all wet and warm not ten miles away
Approaching my Mexican home.

Frankly, I have no idea what the phrase "my Mexican home" means other than the use of a Central American reference to intensify the notion of hot weather; and I can only assume that the boy "far across the sea" is a reference to Prine himself serving as a soldier stationed in Germany. But I direct your attention to a most provocative phase: "… that sacred core that burns inside of me" may be the best description of the religious and spiritual life of the great lyricist, composer, and performer John Prine. His writings utilize the Christian and Biblical imagery he was given as a child, but that early exposure to such things also cultivated in him a spirit that treasured kindness, humility, gratitude, and justice, all in keeping with such transcendent texts as that of the Hebrew prophets and the Jewish rabbi himself. We just need a word or two about humor, whimsy, or plain silliness to touch all the bases in the John Prine game of life.

No song picks up this abiding spiritual reality like his wonderful tune "Boundless Love" (*The Tree of Forgiveness,* 2018). The chorus could be sung in any Christian gathering as the praise of God and Jesus.

Surround me with your boundless love.
Confound me with your boundless love.
I was drowning in a sea lost as I could be
When you found me with your boundless love.

But the verses describe a more earthy scene, that of a lover and her beloved, of two people, perhaps a husband and a wife:

I woke up this morning to a garbage truck
Looks like this old horseshoe's done run out of luck
If I came home, would you let me in
Fry me some pork chops and forgive my sin?

But verses two and three can be read either way, especially this one:

If by chance, I should find myself at risk
Of falling from this jagged cliff
I look below and I look above
I'm surrounded by your boundless love.

The Judeo-Christian literature has many examples of love poetry that live on the boundary between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the sexual and the spiritual. These lyrics by John Prine would fit right in!!

Three parts silliness mixed with two parts spirituality may be a good way to describe the poetry/lyrics of John Prine. But it is not as good as Prine's own reference to "that sacred core that burns inside of me." Childhood religion mixed with lived-life experience conspired to craft in Prine's imagination songs that oscillate between these two poles—silliness and spirituality—in ways that make his music both powerful and memorable, in ways that make his songs connect with the sacred core that burns inside the rest of us.

Three parts silliness mixed with two parts spirituality may be a good way to describe the poetry/lyrics of John Prine. But it is not as good as Prine's own reference to "that sacred core that burns inside of me."

"John wasn't pious" long-time friend Holly Gleason wrote the day after John Prine died.[12] But he was spiritual, a quality embedded deep in his soul as a child through the overtly religious aspects of his formation in the Christian religion. His talent for describing life and reflecting on the ups and downs of his own life allowed him to put both into original and memorable lyrics. In one song, referenced above, he described this process as "eatin' that gospel pie." And here we are, two plus years later, still enjoying that gospel pie whose recipe was known only to John Prine, and he didn't know it until he sat down to write or sing. ■

References can be found at the CET website: ***christianethicstoday.com***

When Life Takes Your Song

By Roger Sullivan

I grew up loving music. Most of it was centered around church, but old-time country music was popular too. My mother, however, wanted to expand our music exposure, so when I was a preteen, we went to a production of "The Messiah" at a nearby college. After high school I started playing guitar and singing with some friends, and that exposed me to folk music. One of my most enjoyable courses in college was music appreciation. Later, I married Shirley, a gifted musician, who started playing piano at age four and later majored in music at college.

That talent came in handy once we entered church ministry, because she satisfied one of the most important attributes of a pastor's wife—she could play the piano. (The other most important attribute was that she knew how to stay reserved and out of any church drama!) Hearing our three daughters sing together was a pure joy for me. Another enjoyable experience happened when Shirley formed a quartet group. We sang together for about 10 years and then reunited to sing on many occasions for years after that. Singing for me was spiritually uplifting, enriching, and fun.

As years passed, many doors opened for me in church ministry and in numerous other ways for all of our family. I was pastoring a good church, teaching as an adjunct professor at our state Baptist college, and was chairman of the Baptist state operating committee. Shirley had a great job teaching high school music where she was appreciated and loved. She also played most Sundays at our church. Our oldest daughter, Leslie, had realized her dream of going to medical school. Our second daughter, Ashley, was a sophomore at LSU and loving being involved in Baptist Student Union (Baptist Collegiate Ministries now). Our youngest daughter, Joy, was a high school senior. She had worked in the state legislature for two summers, was the parish Forestry Festival Queen, and a national officer in Future Homemakers of America (now Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America). Many times, I told Shirley that anyone would love having one daughter the likes of which we had three. It seemed that in many ways we were all living a charmed life.

And then everything changed. We all had been involved in a fun-filled family wedding back in Shirley's hometown. After the wedding on Saturday, we scattered to different obligations. I left to lead a bible study for a friend in a church in a neighboring city; Leslie went back to medical school in New Orleans; Ashley went back to LSU; and Shirley and Joy started back home to be at church for the next Sunday morning services.

Just about the time that I had fallen asleep in a motel room, the phone rang. One of my staff members was calling to tell me that Shirley and Joy had been in a very serious accident. She said that they had been taken to the emergency room at Saint Francis Cabrini Hospital in Alexandria.

It was a cold and rainy February night, and I was about an hour away. While driving much faster than I should have, I prayed. I prayed hard, and I prayed every prayer that I knew how to pray—the, "*Please God, let them be okay*" prayer; the "God, l*et's make a deal"* prayer; the *"Lord, I'm sorry for every sin I've ever committed, and I will be better than I have ever been before"* prayer; etc. I even told God that if the Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus, or Buddhists, or some other groups were more theologically correct than we Christians, I wanted the Holy Spirit (or someone) to offer their prayers for us. I even begged God to rewind time and let me be the one who had the accident, so that Shirley and Joy could be okay. In all of my praying, however, there was one prayer that I did not pray—and I knew it.

When I arrived at the emergency room, I was taken to the back immediately and met by a neurosurgeon. I will never forget the first words out of his mouth:"We aren't going to be able to save your daughter."

When I arrived at the emergency room, I was taken to the back immediately and met by a neurosurgeon. I will never forget the first words out of his mouth: "*We aren't going to be able to save your daughter*." I thought to myself, "*Can this be happening? Is he*

talking about Joy?" Immediately, I asked about Shirley. He said, "*Her back is broken, and her spinal cord has been severed at T-6.*" From my anatomy courses, I knew that this was about mid-back just below her shoulder blades. I also knew that she would never have use of or control of anything in her body beneath that break.

Suddenly, I became physically sick and knew that I needed to sit down and lower my head. In just a minute or two, I regained some composure and asked the doctor to instruct the medical team not to mention this to anyone. I explained that my daughters had to drive up from New Orleans and Baton Rouge, and that I did not want someone else giving them this news.

I also told him that I had been a hospital pharmacist and a minister who had been in many hospital situations, that I would not see anything that bothered me, and that I knew how to stay out of the way. I told him that I did not want to leave Shirley and Joy. He wrote the orders like I asked so that the official visiting hours did not apply to me or my girls. Later, this became critical.

When Leslie and Ashley arrived, I told them the sad news. I told Shirley that we were going to lose Joy, but I did not tell her the extent of her injuries. That needed to wait. I spent all night with Joy. Her only visible injury was a small cut on the middle knuckle of her right hand. She simply looked like she was sleeping and could have awakened any moment and said, "*Hey, dad! Let's go home!*"

Even though it was 1998 and few had cell phones or the internet, word of the accident spread very quickly. On the following Sunday morning, churches all over prayed for Shirley and Joy, even some who were broadcasting their services on television and radio. Thousands prayed. I prayed, too. I prayed harder than I had ever prayed. But I knew that there was that one prayer that I had not prayed. And in my mind and in my theology, I knew that it was the prayer that probably mattered most. So, in that hospital room while holding Joy's hand, I prayed: "*Lord, you know how much I want Joy to live. You know how much I want Shirley to be healed. But, nevertheless, not my will but your will be done.*" It was the hardest prayer that I had ever prayed before or since because of what was at stake. I did my best to mean it.

I also spoke to the attending nurse and told her that if we were going to lose Joy, we did not need to lose her organs and tissue. That decision was very easy. On numerous occasions before the accident, we had discussed this as a family. After discussing this with the girls, we decided to donate everything; organs, eyes and any appropriate tissue.

On that Sunday afternoon about six o'clock, a radiologist ran a final electroencephalogram to check Joy for brain waves. I was looking over his shoulder. In just a few minutes, he stood up, started his walk away without looking at me and said in the most matter-of-fact words I had ever heard: "*She's gone."* I stared at his back until he disappeared wondering why he did not say more. Didn't he know that this was Joy?

Things had to be done to prepare Joy's body for the harvesting of her organs, eyes and tissue, so the time was set for her to be taken to surgery the next morning at 10:30. When that time came, while the girls stayed with Shirley, I walked down a long hall holding Joy's hand until we reached the elevator. I fought back the tears as the elevator doors shut.

About 2:30 that afternoon, a nurse who was part of the organ harvesting team walked into our room. I asked her how things had gone. Her response was, "*As we speak, Joy's heart is beating in another human being!*" In our deepest sadness, other families were experiencing some of their greatest joy.

The day after the funerals, I told Shirley the extent of her injuries. I explained that she would never walk again or feel anything below the area where her back was broken.

Because of our connections to our former church and community about four hours away, we decided to have two funerals. Sadly, because of her injuries, Shirley was unable to attend. Both services were conducted by two close friends to whom I will always be indebted but will never be able to repay. I was told that the first funeral was the largest ever in that parish. Some people parked a mile way just to arrive and stand outside. Many people were unable to get inside the church at the second service as well.

The day after the funerals, I told Shirley the extent of her injuries. I explained that she would never walk again or feel anything below the area where her back was broken.

About two weeks after the accident and after Shirley had been moved to a room, my daughter, Leslie, was looking at Shirley when suddenly she went limp. Leslie immediately called for help, and fortunately Shirley's doctor was still at the nurses' station. The doctor rushed to the room and intubated her

to get her an oxygen supply. Soon we learned that she had thrown multiple blood clots (pulmonary emboli) to her lungs. Even one can be deadly and she had many. I had gone back to our church to check on some things, and when I arrived back at the hospital, a pulmonologist said to me, "*Your wife is going to die. She will not survive this.*" Again, prayers started.

Shirley was admitted to ICU. Again, we were allowed in without restrictions. She was comatose and unresponsive way into the night; but we kept talking to her and telling her that she could not leave us, that she needed to fight and get well. While I was holding her hand, she squeezed it. At first, I did not tell Leslie and Ashley, but when she did it again, I told them that I thought she was still with us. Again, we encouraged her to fight and not give up. I told her again and again that she was going to make it. In a few minutes she responded by nodding her head from side to side saying, "*No!*" Immediately, we loudly encouraged her to fight, to hang on, that we needed for her to live. After a few minutes of us fussing at her, she nodded her head up and down to say, "*Yes!*" I believe that she would not be alive today, if that neurosurgeon had not granted my request, and we had not been with her.

During our three-month stay at the hospital, Leslie, Ashley and I often attended a wonderful church where we were close to the pastor and staff. They were both kind and understanding. During most of those services, we wept—and they let us. I will always be indebted to that church and staff for their ministry to us during the most difficult days of our lives.

I remember leaving the security we had come to know at the hospital. It would be just us. I returned to my duties of preaching and being a pastor. At the same time, I was learning to be a caregiver. It was during those first worship services that I realized that for three months I had not sung. Even during the worship times, I did not, could not, sing. My heart had been broken. Life had taken my song.

A couple of months after getting out of the hospital, we realized that Shirley's initial surgery had failed. She underwent a second surgery and long hospital stay in Baton Rouge. That year, we spent about 160 days in the hospital and in rehabilitation. About a year later, I realized that I could not be both a good caregiver and a good pastor at the same time, so I resigned as pastor. I became a financial advisor and, thankfully, that profession has had far fewer demands and has provided much more flexibility than being a pastor.

Of course, events and stories like ours raise all sorts of thoughts, emotions and questions. Also, every person who loses a child is different, and every child they lose is different. Many lose them in different ways. Another significant difference in my situation is that I had the advantage of having constructed a good theology—one that had been honed in master's level classes and doctoral seminars. A significant amount of that theology was passed on to my family. It withstood some of life's greatest tests, and it has not changed.

In the same breath, I would confess that I do not have easy or simple answers or profound insights for those hoping to find such. Even apart from such a traumatic event as ours, life is often difficult, painful and challenging. And there are simply many things that we probably will never understand this side of the life to come (Isaiah 55:8-9). But with the holy text and sensible thinking, there are some things that we can better understand. I think that doing this helps.

At no time did I question God, nor did I become angry with God. I had held to the position (and still do) that God's intention was to create a world where humans are truly free. If that was his intention, then every person has to be free—free to do or not do things that can often result in or cause great pain. Also, terrible natural accidents beyond human control happen. It simply seems to be the way life is.

In reality, we are not sad because we do not know why. We are sad because of what we have lost, and no answer will change that.

John Claypool wrote a wonderful little book that has helped countless numbers dealing with loss, especially the loss of a child. In it, he said that he thought that he was honoring God when he came clean and said, "*You owe me an explanation*" (p. 57). He then wrote that in that day when all the facts were in, God could give an account. After taking this thought a step farther, I concluded that we will not have to ask any of the "*Why?*" questions or ask God to give an account, because in that place we will have all that we have lost and a lot more.

Some people have said to me that what happened to us was so unfair. Actually, it is somewhat painful to say it, but it was completely fair. If I would have had my way, I would have asked God to be unfair—unfair for just a split second and alter the laws of physics in our favor, so that when the car tire disintegrated causing the car to hit a tree, no harm would have come to Shirley or Joy. But if he had, would that have been fair to all the others and their families who have died

in similar ways?

People often lay things at God's feet that God did not do or cause. For example, many people die in automobile accidents. I do not believe that God told us to build cars that go very fast. That was the idea and choice of humans. If everyone drove very slowly or walked everywhere, few would die in automobile accidents. We also might question why so many die of cancer, but if humans had spent as much money finding a way to prevent and cure cancer instead of building weapons to fight wars, we probably would have very few people dying from cancer. But when people die, God is often blamed for "taking them."

With these things in mind, I did not ask the "Why?" questions. It was not, however, because I thought it was wrong to ask. Even Jesus asked a "Why?" question (Mat. 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-39; Luke 22:39-44) as he faced the cross. (And perhaps at other times too!) It is interesting that the "Why?" questions (and all the related and similar questions) are not answered in the Bible or any of the world's literature or lectures. And if someone were ever able to find their answers, they did not share it with the rest of us. Even if God or someone gave us answers to the "Why?" questions, I do not think it would do much to help.

In reality, we are not sad because we do not know why. We are sad because of what we have lost, and no answer will change that.

It also should be said that there is no pain like the loss of a child. It cannot be described. Before we lost Joy, several parents had talked with me about their such loss. I also had walked with other parents through part of the experience and tried my hardest to understand. At times, I thought that perhaps I had felt some of what they felt.

But when it happened to me, I realized that I had been a thousand miles away from the pain that they felt. I did not know that we could hurt to that extent and still live. Even if I had the ability to take someone to a place where they could feel it for just a moment, I would not. For a long time, I hurt every waking moment of my life. Love plus loss equals pain, and we do not love anything like we love our children. And there is no loss like death. But in my darkest hours, I believed that God would help. I held on to that as well as my belief that God was never going to leave me. Looking back, I believe that I went to the bottom, and still, God was there.

One close friend who came to see me the week after the accident offered significant help. I had officiated the funerals for both his wife and his little three-year-old son several years before. As we met in the hospital hallway, I asked him, "*Does this pain ever end?*" He spoke one sentence: "*It gets better.*" I held on to those words during my hardest times, and he was right. With time, it got better.

Looking back, I remember only a few things that people said. We often feel as though we need to say something when ministering to those during their most painful moments of loss. Many times, we do not. In most cases like ours, words do not change anything about the way we feel. And usually it is better to err on the side of saying less than saying too much or saying the wrong thing. One of the wrong things to say (by those who have not lost a child) is, "*I know how you feel*." You cannot know how we feel—thankfully, and we hope that you never do.

Remember, those who are hurting usually just need to know that others care, and that often can be shown without a lot of words. I had an abundance of support from people who cared—who loved me, our family and especially Joy. We received a meal at our home from people in our community almost every day for a year. We got so many calls, cards and letters that we could not count them all. We received financial gifts. One close friend paid to have our home made completely handicapped accessible. Two people paid for us to have a handicap van for Shirley.

Remember, those who are hurting usually just need to know that others care, and that often can be shown without a lot of words.

When I reassumed my preaching role, I was very honest. I addressed the events in the light of my theology. I was honest about Shirley's injuries being something permanent and about the pain of losing a child. A surprising number of people did not like that, but I did not allow their opinions to influence my commitment to saying what I believed to be honest, true and helpful.

What happened to us did affirm my feelings that there is nothing more valuable to us than family and good friends. Happiness has more to do with them than it does with money, possessions, education, power, etc. We can learn so much from them. I think that I may have learned more about how to live from Joy than anyone. Thankfully, family and friends usually accept and love us just the way we are, and they make life worth living. In spite of being overwhelmed with what I had lost, I kept trying to tell myself not to forget what I still had. In family and friends, I still had

and continue to have a lot. We must never forget that and arrange our priorities so that they are close to the top.

These events gave me a new appreciation for life. They made me want to live more in the moment, to listen better, to feel more. So, I would say to others: Make a call; send a text; write an email. Say "*I love you*" sincerely and often. Say things that need to be said now. You might need to spend some of your time with those you love without a watch or cell phone. Touch them; hold them; smell them; hear them—share life with them.

And really live your life! Live it every day. After Joy's death, we read her diary, and along with many good things, we found the following: "*There are only two things you have to do in this life. You have to die, and you have to live until you die. You get to make up the rest. If you're like me, you want to be sure you make the best of every day*." In her young life, she had learned how to live life to the fullest. And she never lost her song. ■

After Joy's death, we read her diary, and along with many good things, we found the following:"There are only two things you have to do in this life. You have to die, and you have to live until you die. You get to make up the rest. If you're like me, you want to be sure you make the best of every day."

Thank you, Fisher Humphreys, and members of the Trinity Group for sharing your experiences and insights in this Special Issue of *Christian Ethics Today*

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Hospital Visits: A Primer

By Paul Robertson

Jesus' reminder to his followers to "visit the sick" (Mt. 25:35-45) is at the core of pastoral care responsibilities. (See also Mt. 7:12, Gal. 6:10; 1 Pet. 3:8, Mt. 10:8, Is. 41:10, Rom 12:14, and Js. 5:14-15) I remember how inadequate I felt when I first began making hospital visits (over 50 years ago). I had a course in pastoral care in my seminary training, but quite honestly, I found it inadequate in preparing me for visiting hospital patients in the real world of their pain and suffering. So many of the religious cliches I had learned such as, "It's going to be ok," "I'm sure it will work out," "God has a plan," "God is just testing you," and "God has something for you to learn" seemed hollow and offered little in the way of help or hope. I soon realized I felt quite disingenuous offering promises that I could not guarantee.

I want to share some of what I have learned about visiting hospitals patients that I have found to be helpful. Hopefully, there will be concepts for you to consider. Some you will agree with and others you may not.

I am sharing these thoughts from several perspectives. First, I have tried to listen to what patients have taught me through the years. Some of that has come through my own pastoral visits. But much that I have learned has come though the experiences of my students as I worked with them as an Association for Clinical Pastoral Education Certified Educator.

In addition, I am sharing from my experiences as a cancer patient. I was diagnosed with Mantle Cell Lymphoma (MCL) in 2013. MCL is a terminal cancer. At the time, I was given a three-to-five year average life expectancy. I am grateful to God to still be "above ground" nine years later. Though much of my experience as a cancer patient has been as an outpatient, I have had several in-patient experiences.

Much of what I am sharing here was in fact shared with a gathering of chaplains in the Texas Medical System when I was in the midst of my cancer journey and after having been hospitalized. Thus, my thoughts are written out of the context of working with chaplains who are visiting patients in an interfaith setting. As pastors, when visiting patients, there is a different context in that the pastor normally has a prior relationship with the patient and is often of the same religious persuasion. However, I think the concepts I am sharing generally apply to the parish setting as well.

Some Unhelpful Approaches

Let me begin by offering some brief comments about approaches and attitudes that I have found to not be helpful in visiting patients. I will simply put these in the form of a list, with brief explanations.

1. Spiritual Bias: The tendency to hold stereotyped views of other faith groups, other religions and spirituality.
2. Spiritual Myopia: Difficulty seeing the spiritual dimension of problems and solutions outside of one's own religious perspective.
3. Spiritual Timidity: The fear of addressing spirituality in pastoral care arising out of anxiety, lack of understanding, fear of offending, or judgmental attitudes, etc.
4. Spiritual Over-enthusiasm: The tendency to see "religion" as the root of all problems or the source of all solutions.
5. Spiritual Cockiness: Overestimation of one's own level of competency in pastoral care of those with a different spirituality, based on one's personal spirituality.
6. Spiritual Presumptuousness: Assuming that one has the answers/solutions for the patient before exploring the patient's needs and resources.
7. Spiritual Fixing: Using stained-glass language that is not fit for helping people when life is hard. Turning sacred stories/texts into "fix-it" formulas. The urge to offer definitive, simple solutions to complex problems—intolerance of ambiguity.
8. Spiritual Interrogation: Getting so locked into asking questions as "the" way to understand a patient's world so that the conversation seems more like an interrogation.
9. Spiritual Denial: Failing to reckon with the reality that we are all mortal. Offering platitudes of hope when the reality is that sometimes things will not get better, at least on this earth.
10. Spiritual Magic: Offering formulas and steps for bending and controlling the terrible realities around us.
11. Spiritual Deafness: Ears that don't hear. Thinking that one is a good listener, but unaware of or not practicing active listening skills.

Some Basic Considerations

I am not offering these thoughts in some hierarchal order. Further, this is a primer. There are other skills

that one may use in pastoral care. But I believe these are foundational skills that most often need to precede the use of other more advanced skills.

First, remember your patients by name.

This may seem obvious. But the reality is that patients in a hospital often feel like a number. The protocol for much of my treatment has been that the first question I am asked is, "What's your number?" That is usually followed by "Can you verify your birthdate?" Then, usually, the procedure/process/next step begins. Sometimes, hospital personnel call me by name, but not too often. As a patient, behind curtains, I at times heard staff referring to patients by room numbers. I wonder if they know how degrading that can feel.

I appreciate concern for privacy and accuracy. I get it. But, I so appreciate hearing my name called. Simply calling me by name helps me to feel human again, to remember that I am more than a "cog in a wheel," or an experiment, or a number in a clinical trial. Calling me by name reminds me that I am valued.

I am reminded of a scene in the movie "Patch Adams." In it, Robin William plays a medical student, Patch Adams, in training. In one scene he is with a group of medical residents making rounds. The physician leading the group stands at the head of the bed and goes through a long list of symptoms, diagnoses and prognoses. Listening, the patient appears to be in obvious distress. The lead physician then asks the residents, "Are there any questions?" Patch, standing way in the back, sheepishly raises his hand and asks, "What's her name?" The physician looks at him as if he is crazy…the group starts to move on to the next "number" (patient). While passing by, Patch pauses, looks at the patient in her eyes and asks, "What's your name? She responds "Mary" and she smiles. Her face radiated joy that she felt validated as a human being. Always remember that patients are human beings of worth and are alive and not just sick objects to be treated.

Second, give your patients the freedom to say "No."

While this may be more relevant for chaplains than pastors, I think the principle applies to both.

As a patient, I learned that when most of the hospital staff knock on the door and say, "May I come in?" they are really not asking a question. Rather they are making a statement, "I am coming in…" Most often, they come in before I can answer.

My suggestion: Stop…wait…let the patient decide. I can promise, that means a lot. For you see, most of the time patients in the hospital feel powerless. I have often said that a hospital is an "anxiety house." Just think of some of the losses that occur: trust, mobility, privacy, time, what is done to one's body, what one's body can do, control over emotions, identity, purpose and meaning, just to name a few. These losses and lack of control lead to anxiety.

Being a patient is a time of the real loss of dignity. It feels at time like every orifice in one's body is being probed.

But, in a small way by asking and waiting, caregivers give the patient just a little control. And that can be liberating and empowering.

Third, learn to be with your patient.

My experience has been that too often "pastors" want to control the patient, fix the patient, or make the patient feel better. Often what patients most need is for you just to walk alongside them as they journey through their illness.

Chris Hedges wrote about his father, who was a pastor, in *Losing Moses on the Freeway*: "I asked him once when I was a teenager what he said to bereaved families when he went to the farmhouses after the funerals of loved ones. Surely, I thought, even my father with his close proximity to disease and death and grief would have some wisdom to impart. 'Mostly,' he answered, 'I make the coffee.' It was his presence, more than anything he could say, which mattered."

My experience has been that too often "pastors" want to control the patient, fix the patient, or make the patient feel better. Often what patients most need is for you just to walk alongside them as they journey through their illness.

In my Christian tradition, there is a wonderful Greek word that describes this process perfectly: *kenosis*—the emptying of self. Skilled listening requires one "to empty oneself." An empty, open state allows for deep listening. Pastors and chaplains need to set aside their prejudices, frames of reference and desires in order to experience as far as possible the patient's world from the inside, and to set aside one's self temporarily and totally accept the other.

Fourth, learn to empathize, not just sympathize.

Some caregivers just do not seem to get it. They do not connect with patients. They seem to be afraid of losing their "objectivity." They do not seem to be concerned about how the patient feels or thinks. When they say, "I am sorry," somehow it does not always

feel real.

I am reminded of the dean's speech in the "Patch Adams" movie when he was speaking to the incoming class. "We're going to train the humanity out of you and make you something better. We're going to make you doctors."

Whoa! Remember, patients are not just a disease; they are persons who have a disease. The reality is that patients are most often really anxious with strong emotions what are just under the surface. They leak out. They often have little control or ability to channel these emotions. Too often we are afraid of my emotions. As a pastoral caregiver, you can be a sanctuary where they can be safely expressed.

As a caregiver, have the interest and take the time to know and understand what it is like for your patients. Try to put yourself in their shoes. When you do this well, your patients will feel heard and understood. They will become more aware of their feelings. They will share more. They will feel your relationship with them at a deeper level. They will feel validated and relieved. They will feel closer to God.

The choice is to be engaged but not enmeshed on the one hand, or disengaged on the other hand. The bottom line is that good pastoral caregivers develop their empathic radar and have the capacity to step into another's shoes—to see and understand the patient's world from their perspective.

Fifth, learn to listen deeply.

When chaplains and pastors are at their best, they do not focus on giving advice (which most patients do not want or need), telling others they should feel the way the caregiver does (which invalidates their feelings, offends, pressures, and controls), trying to solve problems (which makes patients feel underestimated and disempowered), or doing things that patients can and need to do for themselves (which harms their self-esteem).

Instead, what they need to do first is listen. Patients urgently need support, trust, and encouragement. Rachel Remen, in *My Grandfather's Blessing*, writes, "Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing. It is often through the quality of our listening and not the wisdom of our words that we are able to effect the most profound changes in the people around us.…Listening creates a holy silence."

When patients feel listened to, they feel loved. "Listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force….When we are listened to, it creates us, makes us unfold and expand. Ideas actually begin to grow within us and come to life." (Brenda Ueland, *Strength to Your Sword Arm)*

Sixth, offering healing and not just curing.

I do not know about you, but I get discouraged and even angry when folks offer me cures (physical in nature) rather than healing (wholeness). It almost feels that some want to resort to magic and offer formulas for controlling the terrible around me and controlling even God. I do not want people trying to "fix me" or trying to control God.

What I think is helpful for patients is to invite them to walk in freedom even in the midst of their brokenness, to help them remember that cure is temporary and healing is eternal, and to remind them that God is sitting with them in the midst of their pain. That in fact facilitates healing.

Calvin Miller has written a book titled *The Philippian Fragment.* It is a collection of fictitious letters written by a first century pastor, Eusebius, to his pastoral mentor Clement. In one of those letters, he writes of his encounter with Helen of Heierapolis, a traveling healer:

> "Helen is different [than other healers]. She came to Philippi with a conviction that God loves the suffering and she is determined to participate with God in that love. I met her in the synagogue when she was talking with a group of blind beggars. I was surprised that she didn't even try to heal [cure] them, but bought each of them a new cane and reminded them that the curbs on Casesar's Boulevard were especially high…. She is not much of a show woman, I'm afraid. She just mixes with humanity in order to take divinity as far as it will go….Sister Helen opened a great crusade in Philippi on Thursday and she is the sensation of the leper colony. She rarely does anything that one could call a miracle. Last week she laid hands on a crippled boy and was not

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> able to heal him, but she gave him a new pair of crutches and promised to take him for a walk in the park here in Philippi. Yesterday with my own eyes I saw her pass an amputee selling styluses. She touched his legs and cried, 'Grow back! Grow back! In the name of Jesus of Nazareth grow back!'…What's a faith healer to do with an amputee that refuses to grow legs on command? She sat down with the little man, crossed her legs on the cold pavement, and began selling styluses herself….He smiled and said, 'Do you heal everyone this way?' 'It is better to heal with promises than to promise healing [curing].'" (pp. 24-25)

What's a pastor or chaplain to do when "cure" won't come? Offer healing, not promises of cure. Remind your patients with your presence and words that God is with them in their suffering and participate in that love.

"Mix with humanity in order to take divinity as far as it will go."

Seventh, with your presence and words, remind your patients of the sacred.

I have learned that patients often do not think about the sacred too much while you are there, while you are talking. After all, they are sick and dealing with a lot at the time. But after you have gone, as they reflect, they realize that God was with them in a special way. As a result, they do not feel as alone. They realize afresh that God cares.

Irvin Yalom tells a story about a friend's final days in her horrible fight with cancer, and the news that her surgeon informed her that he had "nothing more to offer." "What is wrong with doctors?" she said. "Why don't they understand the importance of sheer presence? Why can't they realize that the very moment they have nothing else to offer is the moment they are most needed?"

Connecting with a higher power, can be a powerful coping mechanism and needs to be respected by the entire medical team. In one survey I read, 87 percent of patients said that spirituality was important in their lives. Fifty-one percent to 77 percent considered religion to be important.

As pastors and chaplains, we need to nurture the role of the sacred in our patients› lives. At the same time, I cannot over stress how important it is to understand the spiritual needs and resources of the patients first. It is not helpful to offer or try to give someone resources that are important for you, but that might not be important for them.

Remember, by being there, you show them a glimpse of God's face**.**

Closing

There is a lot more that could be said about making hospitals visits. And there is more that can at times be done (such as teaching, preaching exhorting, guiding, reconciling, and liberating, etc.). But I do not think we can accomplish much else until we have first done these basics. And at times that is enough.

I want to close with a poem by John Fox.

When Someone Deeply Listens to You

When someone deeply listens to you
it is like holding out a dented cup
you've had since childhood
and watching it fill up with
cold, fresh water.
When it balances on top of the brim,
you are understood.
When it overflows and touches your skin,
you are loved.
When someone deeply listens to you
the room where you stay
starts a new life
and the place where you wrote
your first poem
begins to glow in your mind's eye.
It is as if gold has been discovered!
When someone deeply listens to you
your bare feet are on the earth
and a beloved land that seemed distant
is now at home within you.

You really cannot go wrong by starting with listening. As you understand your patients, you will discover paths to empower them to find strength and assurance in what are often difficult times.

Your patients may not always remember or even have the opportunity to say, "Thank You." On their behalf and as one who has been a patient and has been cared for by chaplains and pastors, let me say,

"Thank you, Chaplain (Pastor) for visiting me when I was sick." ■

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Practicing Hospitality

By LaMon Brown

The genesis of this article began months ago. I had been asked to fill in for a pastor friend of mine one Sunday at a Disciples of Christ church. At this particular church, the pastor (or preacher, in my case) is expected to offer a few appropriate words before Communion is shared. At some point I thought about how we are invited to the Lord's Table. Hospitality became the theme for my short pre-Communion remarks.

So, looking at the Bible we see that one the characteristics of God is hospitality. God feeds God's creation. In the Book of Psalms, God's hospitality extends to all creatures:

> *You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills,*
> *giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst.*
> *By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches.*
> *From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.*
> *You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth,*
> *and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart (Psalm 104:10-15).*

*In the New Testam*ent this characteristic of God is expected in those who follow Jesus Christ. The Greek word *philoxenos* means "lover of strangers." It is the opposite, of course, of our familiar Greek inspired word "xenophobia."

Here are the passages that use a form of the *philoxenos or philoxenia.*

> *"Extend hospitality to strangers" (Rom 12:13).*
> *"[Bishops must be] hospitable" (1 Tim 3:2).*
> *"[Bishops} must be hospitable" (Titus 1:8).*
> *"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers" (Heb 13:2).*
> *"Be hospitable to one another without complaining" (1 Pet 4:9).*

Hospitality to strangers is clearly intended in Third John 5: *"Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you."*

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it appears that the rich man is condemned because he refused to show courtesy or hospitality to the starving Lazarus. And in Matthew 25, Jesus' final public teaching, the "goats" are condemned because they refused to show hospitality to those in need.

Of course, many of us have heard how hospitality was so important in the ancient world of Jesus and Paul because there were few inns and those that existed were often not safe. Additionally, there were no soup kitchens or homeless shelters or any other of the present means of assistance that may be available to the needy.

Such an argument misses the point. We are called to be hospitable toward strangers as our friends. We are to treat all others, in so far as we are able, with kindness and generosity. As Matthew 15 illustrates, we are to visit the lonely, care for the sick, feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, etc. That is one way we and our churches can come face to face with Christ.

The Celtic Christians believed that hospitality was not only meant to be a custom in their homes, they believed it was a key into the Kingdom of God. To offer hospitality was seen as receiving Christ into their midst and fulfilling the law of love.

This reality has been recognized over the centuries by different Christian communities. For example, "The Celtic Christians believed that hospitality was not only meant to be a custom in their homes, they believed it was a key into the Kingdom of God. To offer hospitality was seen as receiving Christ into their midst and fulfilling the law of love."[1]

Inevitably someone in our modern age will raise the issue of how dangerous it is to welcome strangers into our midst. The only answer to that is this: Love is always dangerous. If we love, we become vulnerable. To the degree we refuse to care for strangers, to that degree we withdraw from walking with Christ.

Reflecting on Matthew 25, I realize that genuine hospitality includes listening. It is quite possible to feed the hungry, house the homeless, visit the incarcerated,

and go to see the sick, but easy to miss another important element of hospitality, i.e., listening. Love listens. Love takes time to hear the other's story. Unless we are willing to take time to listen, our hospitality can appear self-serving and even arrogant. Listening extends respect to those we feed or house or visit. It is an offer of courtesy.

I don't know if I have ever used the word courtesy in my writing or in my preaching, but here it is. It is more, much more, than an element of old-fashioned chivalry. This was revealed to me in a short meditation by Michael Guite on a poem by Hilaire Belloc.

Belloc's poem "Courtesy" begins:

Of courtesy, it is much less
Than Courage of Heart or Holiness,
Yet in my Walks it seems to me
That the Grace of God is in Courtesy.[2]

Four verses of poetry follow as the writer is shown three different pictures in a monastery. The last picture was of the visitation of the Magi.

The third it was our Little Lord,
Whom all the Kings in arms adored;
He was so small you could not see
His large intent of Courtesy.[3]

Guite closes his meditation with these words:

It is not simply saying that the Christ-child intends courtesy at this moment towards the kings who have come to worship him but that his large intent of courtesy reaches out towards us and through every action in his life. Soon we will see the courtesy with which he lays aside his garments, takes the bowl and the towel and washes his disciples' feet; the courtesy with which he carries our load for us; and finally, in the sacrament of Communion, the courtesy with which, in Herbert's words, 'Love bids us welcome.'[4]

As Christians our life in Christ begins with God's offer of hospitality. We are invited into God's Kingdom. Or as Elizabeth Newman puts it, "'Hospitality' names our graced participation in the triune life of God."[5] We are welcomed into the family of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One of the ways in which we enjoy the hospitality of God is through worship. For many churches, the celebration of Communion is the high point of the service. "The Eucharist…is our participation in God's hospitality."[6]

This seems right for in our human experience, food and hospitality often go together. Through Communion we remember the sacrifice of Christ and we experience the presence of the resurrected Christ that is as real as the bread we eat and the wine we drink. If our spiritual senses are too numb, we might not *feel* that presence. However, that does not make it any less real. It is for this reason that I believe Communion should be open to all. Every human being is hungry for the presence of the divine whether they know it or not. I, for one, would not deny those who are starving the opportunity to share in God's hospitality.

I close with a portion of a liturgy that may be used in regular worship services. It seems especially appropriate in a time of commitment after God has welcomed us to the Lord's Table.

Leader: I open my heart to Christ in the stranger;
People: To Christ in the face of colleague and friend.
Leader: I open my heart to the one who is wounded;
People: To Christ in the hungry, the lonely, the homeless.

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Leader: I open my heart to the one who has hurt me;
People: To Christ in the faces of sinner and foe.
Leader: I open my heart to those who are outcast;
People: To Christ in the broken, the prisoner, the poor.
Leader: I open my heart to all who are searching;
People: To Christ in the world God's generous gift[7] ■

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