

Mark Galli: Buddhist Babies in Hell? • Ben Witherington: My Daughter's Death

Christianity Today

APRIL 2012

The New **School Choice Agenda**

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might move
to a struggling
community.
But would you
educate your kid
there?**

A student at Chimborazo
Elementary School in southeast
Richmond, the second metro
area in the This Is Our City series.

WHERE ARE THE DADS? 27
JESUS DISAPPOINTS 44
PASTOR PONZI SCHEMES 65



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BRIEFING



- 11 Spotlight** Athletes in Action (Again)
- 12 Gleanings** Court says employers can limit employees' speech, British clergy cannot sue God, and bar boots 'Theology on Tap.'
- ◀ **14 Headlines** **THEOLOGY** The Family sex cult cleans house.
BIBLE Assemblies of God challenges Wycliffe translations. **15**
CHURCH-STATE New USAID policy alarms charities. **15**
LIFE ETHICS Evangelicals mimic Catholic activism. **16**
{ In Depth } **CHURCH GROWTH** Nontraditional believers recover Christian community in post-war Balkans. **17**

FEATURES

Special Section | THIS IS OUR CITY



- ◀ **22 School Choice of a Different Kind** **AMY JULIA BECKER**
 Why Christians in Richmond, Virginia, are sending their kids to struggling public schools.
- 27 Treating Richmond's Fatherless Epidemic** **KATELYN BEATY**
 How local Christians are building human capital through public health—one man at a time.
- 30 Creative Discipleship** **KATELYN BEATY**
 Richmonders who transcend their city's cultural Christianity in unlikely ways.
Global Gospel Project
- 32 'Crucified Under Pontius Pilate'** **MARK GALLI**
 Why the phrase from the Nicene Creed can calm our doubts about God's goodness.
- 36 When a Daughter Dies** **BEN WITHERINGTON**
 Walking the way of grace in the midst of my grief.
- 40 Discipling the Eyes** **W. DAVID O. TAYLOR**
 The visual arts can play a powerful role in worship—if we look closely enough.
- 44 Jesus Disappoints Everyone** **JOHN KOESSLER**
 Our Savior has come, but we're often blind to his purposes.
- 48 Breaking Nigeria's Fatal Deadlock** **SUNDAY AGANG**
 Christians and Muslims will find peace if they work together for justice.
- 52 Jesus Through Jewish Eyes** **INTERVIEW BY DAVID NEFF**
 Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish NT professor, explains what Christians have gotten wrong, and right.

VIEWPOINTS



- 63 Letters** Readers respond to the February issue of CT.
- 65 Where We Stand** Pastors' Ponzis
- ◀ **66 The Village Green** Wesley Smith, Karen Swallow Prior, and Ben DeVries contemplate Fido's eternal destiny.
- 68 Wrestling with Angels** Carolyn Arends takes Scripture literally.
- 70 Contra Mundum** Chuck Colson and Timothy George re-define *evangelical*.

CT REVIEW



COVER PHOTO BY
KEVIN MORLEY / GENESIS PHOTOS

- 75 Books**
- Jeffrey Bell's *The Case for Polarized Politics*
 - Carl Moeller: My Top 5 on Christianity in North Korea
 - D. A. Carson's *The Intolerance of Tolerance*
 - Excerpt: *Connecting Christ*, by Paul Louis Metzger
 - Wilson's Bookmarks
 - Interview: Eric Bargerhuff pinpoints our Bible *faux pas*
- 80 Movies / TV**
- *Blue Like Jazz*
 - *October Baby*
- 81 Music**
- Two minutes with Sarah Macintosh
 - ◀ Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*
- 82 Quick Takes** More media of note

IN EVERY ISSUE

- 9 Inside CT** Mark Galli tells the story behind CT's newest eBook.
- 88 Who's Next** Marshall Allman brings Donald Miller to the big screen.



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Your Eyes on God's World

God's world is a big place, and at *Christianity Today*, we have committed to doing everything we can to give you a front-row seat on what God is doing around the globe.

In this issue, we offer good news about independent church growth and grapple with the challenge of interreligious violence. On page 17, read about a group of believers that sprang up in the aftermath of the Croatian war and feels a burden to promote church unity in a divided land. Then, on page 48, theologian Sunday Agang explores ways to break the cycles of violence that have cost many Nigerian lives.

We live in a time when American pastors are taking cues from clergy in Rwanda, Ukraine, and South Korea. Because Christ-followers need to connect with fellow believers worldwide, we are constantly expanding our global vision and yours.

Can we continue to increase this unique international coverage? Like many of you, we at CT have felt the pinch of recent economic uncertainties, and travel to unfamiliar cultures takes much more of our writers' time and emotional energy.

Fortunately, you have helped. As this issue was in preparation, CT design director and photographer extraordinaire Gary Gnidovic traveled to Mozambique, where he documented the remarkable ministry of missionaries Heidi and Rolland Baker for our next issue. Your direct contributions helped underwrite his travel.

Such assistance encourages us as we plan future reports of gospel growth in the uttermost parts. That is why I want to encourage you as a CT "fellow traveler" to prayerfully consider what you can do to invest in this expanding work.

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David Neff, Editor in Chief

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A black and white portrait of President Philip W. Eaton, an older man with white hair, smiling and leaning forward with his hands clasped. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a striped tie. A watch is visible on his left wrist.

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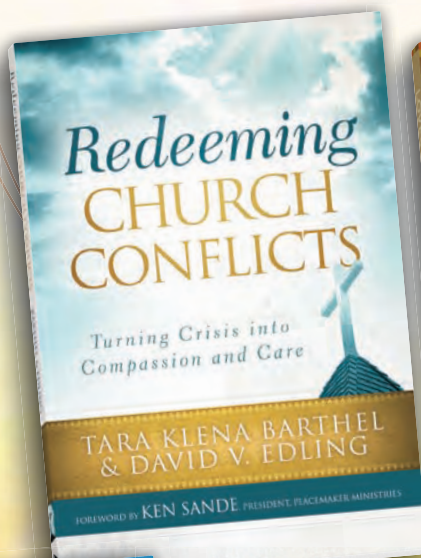


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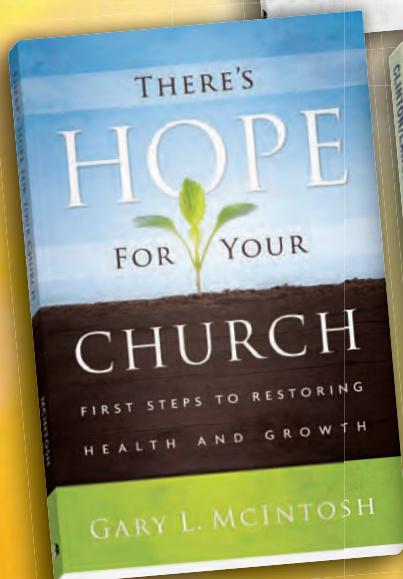
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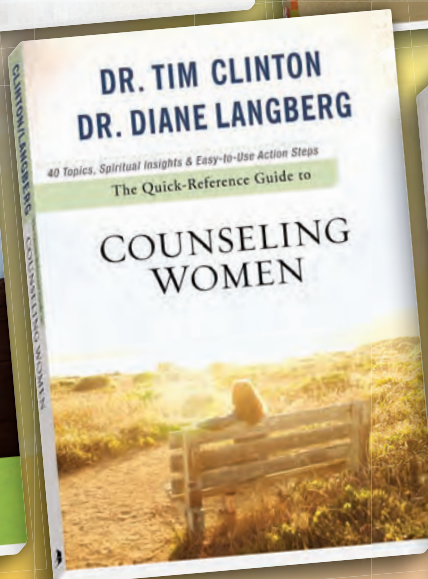
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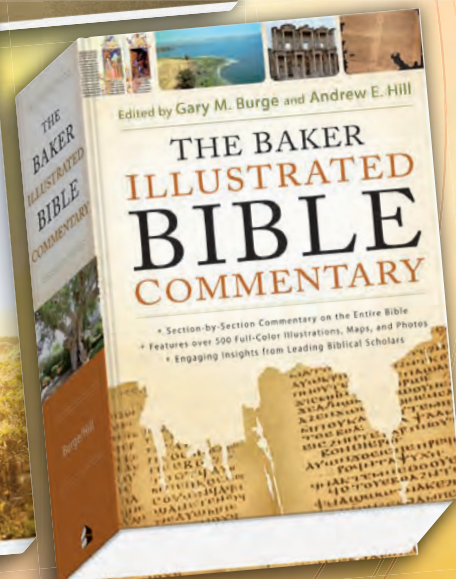
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Journaling Grief

How web-based publishing is changing everything.

It was a typical e-mail from Asbury Seminary professor Ben Witherington. It simply said, “What do you think?” followed by a link to his blog. Ben has written many pieces for me over the years, for *Christian History and Biography* and *Christianity Today*, so of course I was intrigued. Like other readers, I was stunned and impressed and inspired. Ben was blogging about his 32-year-old daughter, Christy, who had died a couple of weeks earlier. I immediately thought, *So soon?* Then again, we each have our own ways of working through grief, and Ben is a voluminous writer. It only made sense that he would grieve through blogging.

What impressed me was this: Ben’s refusal to deny the pain and his refusal to deny his hope. I’ve read many accounts of grief, and some, like C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, are superb at exeging the pain. Others wax eloquent about our hope in Christ. But here were reflections that both acknowledged the pain that will not be healed before our “glad heavenly reunion” and that refused to let go of God’s promises.

To say the least, I never broach publishing ideas with someone who is in the immediate throes of grief! But Ben had contacted me and asked for this editor’s thoughts, so I sensed he wanted to broaden his reach. Indeed, that was the case, and soon enough we were hammering out details of an article for CT and an eBook for Christianity Today Essentials.

The article, which starts on page 36, gives a taste of the longer eBook, now available at *CTeBooks.com*. For the book, Ben and his wife, Ann, added personal reflections on Christy. We wanted to help readers get to know Christy, to deepen our sense of the contours of Ben and Ann’s grief. I also asked Ben to add even more theological reflection.

The whole process highlights the dynamics of web-based publishing today. No longer do we have to wait a year for a book to move from idea to publication. Nor does a book have to justify itself with 50,000 words to make economic sense. No more do you have to go to a bookstore or mail order a book and wait a couple of days to read it. Now we are able to publish natural-length eBooks nearly instantly; Ben’s 15,000-word book took about a month to produce. And you are able to read it within minutes of logging onto Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com. You don’t even need to buy an expensive eReader; both Kindle and the Nook have free apps for your PC.

This new e-world will allow CT to publish material that will inform and inspire in ways more timely and accessible than ever. What a great time to be in publishing!

Next month: We meet Heidi Baker, whose gifts of healing and church planting are reverberating throughout Mozambique; *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat talks to Sarah Pulliam Bailey about America’s “bad religion”; and Richard Mouw says we need more than *Christus Victor*. ☩

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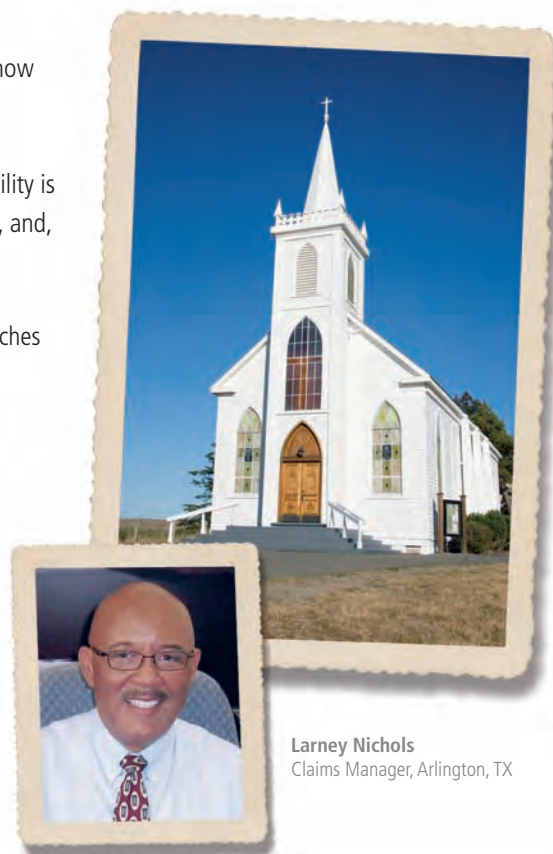
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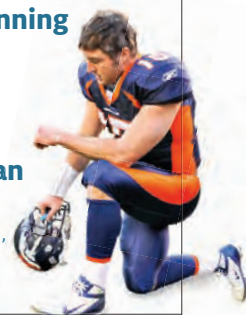
SPOTLIGHT: Muscular Christianity's Newest Heroes

➔ Even as Jeremy Lin's record-breaking NBA streak and Tim Tebow's NFL season ended, the two athletes and their Christian faith dominated sports coverage. Fans and journalists compared Lin's wristbands to eyeblack and debated players' Jesus talk. "It is kind of crazy," says *Sports Spectrum* managing editor Brett Honeycutt. "It's as if they were the first Christian athletes." Sociologist James Mathisen says it's been nearly 20 years since "jocks for Jesus" had this much attention.



"The religious lives of Tebow and Lin fit into a narrative of underdog, and they are both 'adamantly humble' in their mien. This gives their testimonies an unusual credibility. Of course, if the Knicks and Broncos hadn't had their winning streaks, we would have heard very little about their Christian faith."

Shirl James Hoffman, author, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*



Holy Hall of Fame

1891: Outfielder Billy Sunday quits. Later, the famed evangelist would criticize baseball but load his sermons with sports references.

1952: Athlete evangelists get organized with Sports Ambassadors and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (1954).

1971: Amid San Francisco Giants "God squad" hype, Graham claims sports has "more really committed Christians . . . than any other occupation in America."

1890 | 1900 | 1910 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 |

1884: The "Cambridge Seven" cricket players respond to Dwight Moody's altar calls in England and become missionaries to China.

1945: Record miler Gil Dodds joins Billy Graham at the first Youth for Christ conference.

1969: Former Cleveland Browns defensive end Bill Glass forms what would become a leading prison ministry.

1997: Promise Keepers, brainchild of college football coach Bill McCartney, rallies nearly 1 million in D.C.

ATHLETES IN ACTION



TIM TEBOW: Given the popularity of "Tebowing," you'd think he invented praying on one knee. His faith even makes offseason headlines. In *GQ*, backup QB Brady Quinn worried about Tebow's humility, while earlier Christian celeb Kurt Warner called Tebow's story "biblical." And yes, he and Lin are hanging out (via phone).



JOSH HAMILTON: While Tebow and Lin represent one underdog narrative common among Christian athletes—the moral resister of temptation—Texas Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton represents another: the penitent. "My recovery is Christ," he said in February after his latest slip with alcohol use. "It's an every-day process."



ALBERT PUJOLS: "My life's goal is to bring glory to Jesus," the first baseman says on his website. "Baseball is simply my platform to elevate . . . my Lord and Savior." It's also the source of his \$254 million contract. Pujols gives away a lot to his St. Louis-based charity, but biographer Scott Lamb thinks the contract "will hurt . . . his Christian testimony."



MARINO RIVERA: As pitchers and catchers reported for spring training, the famed Yankees reliever suggested that this season may be his last. He's said his retirement might mean going into full-time pastoral ministry. He's already planted (or at least funded the building of) one church in La Chorrera, Panama.



KAKÁ: Forget "Tebowing." The Brazilian soccer superstar pulls off his jersey after goals to reveal T-shirts declaring his love for Jesus. In October, he shocked his homeland by leaving the neo-Pentecostal church where his wife was a pastor. "It became a business," she complained. (And its leaders had recently served time for smuggling money.)



GLEANINGS

Important developments in the church and the world.

1 Employers can limit employees' speech

Your job may limit your freedom of speech. A federal court ruled in February that the University of Toledo was within its rights to fire human resources director Crystal Dixon in 2008 for a newspaper column questioning how homosexuals could be "civil rights victims." Her op-ed contradicted the university's stance. Because of Dixon's authority over university hiring and firing, wrote judge David Katz, her "interest in making a comment of public concern is clearly outweighed by the university's interest . . . in carrying out its own objectives."

had asked the publisher to remove the Bibles at its June convention. Committee chairman Adam Greenway emphasized that the decision was not an endorsement of the translation. "We do not believe the 2011 NIV rises to the level where it should be pulled or censored or not carried in our retail chain," he said.

4 Anglican clergy cannot sue God



GREAT BRITAIN Anglican clergy cannot sue their employer: God. An employment tribunal ruled in February that a former Worcester rector could not seek compensation from his bishop or diocese for resigning under duress. Church of England law states that clergy are office holders employed by God, not employees of the church. Judge Alan McCarry said the church is a central part of English society yet "has no legal personality. It cannot sue or be sued." Reverend Mark Sharpe alleges his bishop and diocese allowed parishioners to terrorize him for four years, including poisoning his dog and slashing his tires.

5 Court rejects concerns of religious parents



CANADA Parents cannot prevent Quebec schools from teaching their children about other religions. Canada's Supreme Court has ruled that a mandatory Ethics and Religious Culture program does not infringe on parents' rights. The program, which exposes children to a variety of cultures, creeds, and religious traditions, replaced similar Catholic and Protestant programs in 2008. Two parents argued the program could affect the religious beliefs children were taught

at home. The court ruled that since the program was educational and was not forcing children to join any religion, it did not infringe on religious freedom.

6 'Fake aid' may hamper relief workers

A new eBook says not all aid workers in Pakistan are what they seem. *The Command*, by *The Atlantic's* Marc Ambinder and D. B. Grady, claims the United States government used the chaos from the 2005 Kashmir earthquake to send dozens of CIA agents into Pakistan posing as aid workers. The claims are likely to strain already tense relations between genuine aid agencies and Pakistan; reports last July said the CIA ran a fake vaccination program in an attempt to gain DNA evidence from members of Osama bin Laden's family months before his death.

7 University cancels biblical finance class

Business and the Bible won't mix at Iowa State University. School officials canceled a proposed independent study course that would have examined how biblical principles can be applied to business management. Opponents argued the class, which would have used Dave Anderson's *How to Run Your Business by THE BOOK*, would have promoted one religion in violation of the Constitution. But finance professor Roger Stover, who proposed the course, said it was necessary because of the growth of companies like Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A that "openly display their use of spiritual and often Christian principles in their organization."

8 Religious education required in schools



RUSSIA Religion has returned to Russian classrooms 90 years after the Soviet revolution banned it. In 2010, Russia began requiring students at 20

GO FIGURE Missions

127,000
Missionaries sent from the U.S. in 2010. (Brazil is the second-largest sending country overall. South Korea is the second-largest if only Protestants are counted.)

32,400
Missionaries sent to the U.S. in 2010. The U.S. is the largest receiving country in the world.

Reuters / Center for the Study of Global Christianity



11

12

percent of public schools to take courses in religion and ethics; in February, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin expanded the requirement to all Russian schools. Elementary and middle-school students can choose to study the history of one of four “traditional” religions (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism) or take a general course on the “fundamentals of public ethics” or the “foundations of religious culture.” Critics do not want schoolchildren divided according to religion or exposed to proselytism.

9 Bar boots Catholic group

Barroom evangelism can be controversial for churches—and apparently for bars too. A Catholic outreach program hosted at a Denver bar had to find a new venue after a lecture on religious liberty stirred controversy among staff and patrons. Hosted by the Archdiocese of Denver, Theology on Tap is intended to provide a “nonthreatening” gathering place for those curious about Catholicism. But some at Stoney’s Bar and Grill reportedly considered the January 26 lecture, “Atheocracy and the Battle for Religious Liberty in America,” to be “too controversial.” Some employees refused to work future events. The program moved to a nearby Irish-themed pub.

10 Tithes not exempt from garnishment

Debtors must render first to Caesar before God. A federal court has ruled a Mormon who owes \$1.86 million in restitution cannot exclude 10 percent of her monthly pay from garnishment for tithing purposes. Patricia Thomas was convicted of embezzling funds from her employer and ordered to have her wages garnished toward her restitution. The court ruled that Thomas failed to make a legal argument that refusing a tithing exemption would violate her First Amendment rights.

11 Flower order creates controversy

Controversy continued to stem from a federal court’s decision to remove a prayer mural from a Rhode Island public high school. When the Freedom from Religion Foundation tried to send congratulatory flowers to the plaintiff, four different local florists refused to fill the order. The foundation, which finally ordered flowers from a store in Connecticut, filed a formal complaint with the Rhode Island Commission on Human Rights, alleging discrimination because of the plaintiff’s atheism.

12 Extremists deface Christian holy site



ISRAEL In a rare attack on a Christian holy site, a Jerusalem monastery was defaced with the words “Death to Christians” in Hebrew, allegedly by militant Jewish settlers. The Monastery of the Cross is built where tradition holds the tree used to make Christ’s cross stood. Two cars parked outside the monastery were also vandalized in the February attack with the words “Price Tag,” referring to militant settlers’ plans for retribution if the Israeli government tries to curb settlement in the West Bank. A prominent Baptist church was defaced with similar threats—including “We will crucify you”—weeks later.

13 Calvin considering football program

Calvin College needs a football team. That’s the recommendation of a task force after spending 18 months researching the idea. It found a slim majority of students, staff, and alumni favor starting a football program, while nearly two-thirds of faculty members oppose it. Launching the program will cost an estimated \$10 million, including constructing a stadium. Calvin’s athletic director said a final decision isn’t expected until May.

compiled by Ted Olsen

QUOTATION MARKS

“On the Origin of Species . . . uh . . . with . . . oh God.”

Richard Dawkins, when asked for the full title of Charles Darwin’s famous book (*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*). Dawkins was promoting a poll that found two-thirds of British Christians cannot name the first book of the New Testament.

BBC Radio 4

“To those Christians who have venomously and vomitously [*sic*] cursed the Court family and threatened bodily harm and assassination: In His name, I forgive you.”

U.S. District Judge Fred Biery, approving the settlement of a Texas school board’s prayer lawsuit. The settlement lets students lead prayer at graduation but not football games, and bars teachers from participating.

Religion Clause

“Changing the name of the convention would require a great cost in dollars and in energy.”

Jimmy Draper, chairman of a Southern Baptist Convention task force that recommended keeping the denomination’s name but encouraging the informal moniker “Great Commission Baptists.”

Baptist Press

“I am overweight. I am a terrible example to our people.”

Rick Warren, who lost 60 pounds last year and hopes to lose another 30 in 2012. He has encouraged his congregation to participate in a massive weight-loss campaign.

USA Today

“We seem to be the first.”

Niklas Raadstroem, playwright for the Gothenburg City Theatre in Sweden, on performing both the Old and New Testaments. In *The Bible*, a five-hour production, 15 actors play about 90 roles.

AFP

GO FIGURE
Money
\$1.5 million
Estimated annual operating costs for a 217-acre campus in Northfield, Massachusetts, built by D. L. Moody.

\$0
Cost to acquire it from the Green family (owners of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain), which is offering the site to a Christian institution. The C. S. Lewis Foundation could not raise the \$3 million it planned to use for a college there.

Religion News Service



THEOLOGY

The Family Cleans House

Sex cult 'reboots,' adopts biblical authority.

By James A. Beverley

The Family International (TFI), a controversial Christian movement known for once using sexual favors to win converts, has launched significant reforms that have stunned cult watchers and followers alike.

Formerly the Children of God, the group began in 1968 as part of the Jesus People movement but became infamous for sexual libertarianism, prophetic obsession, and elitism.

Founder David Berg adopted evangelical views on many doctrines, but over time his teachings supplanted the Bible. Cult watchers criticized Berg's teaching that female disciples should use sexual favors—termed “flirty fishing”—to convert men to Jesus. More notoriously, the group once had an open attitude about sexual contact between adults and minors.

Both practices ceased by 1987,

but even after Berg's death in 1994, TFI leaders Peter (nee Steve Kelly) and Maria (nee Karen Zerby, Berg's widow) taught that consensual sex between nonmarried adults was permitted in Family homes.

The last time TFI made headlines was in January 2005, when Maria's son Ricky Rodriguez, the once-future leader who left in 2001, killed longtime member Angela Smith and then shot himself.

But a new vision for TFI, which peaked at 15,000 members and numbers 4,000 today, may lead to less shocking headlines.

In a 2010 document called “Change Journey Manifesto,” Peter (who married Maria after Berg died) announced that God said TFI needed to change direction in order to allow members to blossom as individuals. “We are standing at the edge of the cliff, poised to dive into the future,



Marching Onward: The former Children of God movement is leaving its sex cult history behind as it shifts from radical legalism to more biblical behavior.

into the new,” he wrote.

Spokesperson Claire Borowick told CT that what TFI today calls “the reboot” involves dismantling the group's worldwide structure and the breakup of much of its communal living. Doctrinal changes involve a stronger endorsement of biblical authority, the minimizing of Peter and Maria as sources of revelation, and more conservative sexuality.

The reboot also makes frequent mention of focusing on principles rather than rules. Peter apologizes that TFI felt less like “a spirit-led adventure” and more like “being bound to a works-based religion.”

Gary Shepherd, a leading scholar on TFI, expressed surprise. “I don't know of any comparable group that has changed so quickly or so fundamentally altered such a large number of its beliefs and practices,” said Shepherd, coauthor of *Talking with the Children of God*. He suspects the voices of second-generation members helped shape the reboot.

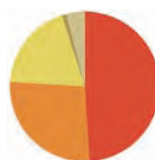
James Chancellor, author of *Life in the Family* and a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was also caught “off guard,” particularly over the group's move away from communal living. “[Peter and Maria] may have come to some personal spiritual conclusions that there were serious errors that were endemic to the movement as it was.”

The reboot has been greeted with scorn on anti-Family websites. Some writers suggest that Peter and Maria are retiring with the group's money in the face of dwindling membership. Others say many Family members feel betrayed by the changes, speculating that “with their new-found freedom, it's only a matter of time before [TFI is] only a memory.”

Peter and Maria are far more optimistic. In his “Blueprint for the Future,” Peter wrote, “We envision the Family providing an empowering environment—one that infuses members with inspiration and confidence to enact their dreams and plans for God.”

GO FIGURE Church and State

New York State residents who say public schools . . .



49%
should rent to churches and other community groups.

27%
should rent to community groups but not churches.

19%
should not rent to any churches or community groups.

1%
should rent only to churches.

4%
Not sure

LifeWay Research

"[TFI] has always been innovative and adaptable," said Shepherd. "It will be fascinating to see whether this reboot brings more stability . . . and a greater peace with ex-members and the larger evangelical world." +

BIBLE

The Problem 'Son'

Wycliffe translations challenged by Assemblies of God. By Collin Hansen

Wycliffe USA, faced with the possibility of losing support from the 3-million-member Assemblies of God, pulled one controversial Bible translation from circulation in February and halted publication of several others.

Critics have faulted the audio translation *Lives of the Prophets*, among others, for translating "Son" in reference to Jesus into the Arabic equivalent for "Messiah." Muslims object to Christian teaching that Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

"We are listening to those concerns," Wycliffe said in February, "and are seeking God's guidance as we re-evaluate our methodology."

Wycliffe says literal translations of divine familial terms should be preferred, but allows for nonliteral substitutes where translators determine the literal phrasing creates inaccurate meaning.

Wycliffe's statements followed two meetings with Assemblies of God World Mission (AGWM) leaders, who announced that they would spend the next four months reviewing their relationship with Wycliffe and international partner SIL. "We have done due diligence in researching, reflecting, and searching both the Scriptures and our hearts," said Greg Mundis, AGWM executive director. "We cannot agree with Wycliffe/SIL's [position]."

Currently 35 AGWM missionaries

work with Wycliffe in a partnership that goes back 25 years. But AGWM leaders will determine by May 15 whether they will continue approving personnel to serve with Wycliffe/SIL and endorsing the groups' support in more than 12,000 AG churches.

Last summer, the general assembly of the 347,000-member Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) declared "as unfaithful to God's revealed Word . . . [translations] that remove from the text references to God as 'Father' (*pater*) or Jesus as 'Son' (*huios*)."

PCA moderator Dan Carrell appointed a study committee that could recommend that the denomination's 1,750 churches withdraw support from Wycliffe/SIL.

Both Wycliffe and SIL have agreed to a formal review of their translation practices. The quadrennial meeting of SIL staff worldwide is scheduled for early May in East Asia. Freddy Boswell, executive director of SIL, told CT the groups hope to complete the review by the end of 2012. +

CHURCH AND STATE

Contract Concern

USAID policy on hiring alarms charities. By Bobby Ross Jr.

Evangelical organizations that partner with Uncle Sam to deliver humanitarian aid overseas are voicing concern over a new federal policy that "strongly encourages" all contractors to develop anti-discrimination policies covering employees' sexual orientation.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) issued the policy statement in October, a week after the Supreme Court let stand an appellate court ruling that favored World Vision's faith-based hiring policies.

All World Vision U.S. employees must sign a statement of faith and

agree to a standard of conduct that limits sexuality to "a God-ordained covenant between a man and a woman," said senior vice president Kent Hill. "For a government agency to 'strongly encourage' us to abandon such core beliefs in our hiring policies is offensive and uncalled for," he said. Last year the 1,200-employee charity received nearly \$200 million in government grants—19 percent of its total budget.

In December, President Obama elevated the rights and treatment of LGBT people abroad as a priority in U.S. foreign policy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in a Geneva speech that "gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights."

That emphasis, combined with the USAID policy, has caught the attention of organizations that believe their religious liberty could be challenged, said Stanley Carlson-Thies, president of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance. "When you put all those things together, there is significant concern," he said.

Hill said the 1964 Civil Rights Act ensures faith-based organizations can remain faithful to their religious beliefs. "The new USAID contract language does not trump the [act] or the First Amendment," he said.

USAID press officer Drew Bailey denied any effort to impose on religious beliefs. "The [policy] is not binding," he said. "We have strong, productive relationships with many faith-based organizations, and [they] will not be adversely affected by this policy."

But the new policy could be a first step toward making such guidelines mandatory, say critics such as Chad Hayward, executive director of the Accord Network (formerly AERDO).

Hayward, a USAID appointee during George W. Bush's presidency, said the policy "might have a more chilling effect" on USAID funding recommendations. "If anyone on that [closed-door] panel already

PASSAGES



Censured
Jane Adams Spahr
Retired Presbyterian Church (USA) minister, for performing same-sex marriages in 2008. The ruling came from the PC(USA)'s highest court.



Retiring
Arlin and Rebekah Horton
Founders and leaders of textbook giant A Beka Book, Pensacola Christian College, and other ministries.



Murdered
Robinson Cavilcanti
Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Recife, Brazil, by his 29-year-old adopted son. Cavilcanti had close ties to conservative U.S. Anglicans.

[continued on 16]

Briefing [from 15]

has an anti-faith bias," he said, "this language could be used to steer the panel against [such] funding."

Paul Bonicelli, executive vice president of Regent University and a USAID administrator during the Bush administration, echoed that warning. "While there is concern that this will become a mandate," he said, "the damage is already done because organizations fear that they will be tacitly ruled out of competition for funding."

LIFE ETHICS

Mass Appeal

Evangelicals copy more of Catholic playbook.

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey

Despite differences over contraception, evangelical leaders have fallen in step with Catholic bishops over what they see as federal compulsion to provide services against their conscience.

In 2011, the Obama administration ruled that religious institutions will be required to provide employees with free contraceptive coverage. President

Obama said in February that insurers will be responsible for paying for the contraception, but opponents suggest insurers could simply raise premiums to cover the cost.

Searching for strategies, some evangelicals filed lawsuits. Others followed Catholic bishops' lead, addressing the issue from the pulpit.

At least 117 Catholic bishops issued statements to their dioceses, asking for prayers and political opposition to the ruling. Many priests read the letter during Sunday Mass. Members of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) asked for advice on whether to distribute a similar letter, said Galen Carey, vice president of government relations. The organization decided not to take the unprecedented step.

While evangelicals do not oppose all contraception, they generally oppose forms of birth control that block uterine implantation.

Evangelical institutions Colorado Christian University, Louisiana College, and Geneva College joined Catholic universities in filing lawsuits to challenge the rule. More than 600 religious leaders and professors from Catholic and evangelical institutions signed a Becket Fund letter of protest.

"This is one of the more

DISCUSSION STARTER

Church and State

In *Mullin v. Sussex County, Delaware*, a U.S. District Court must answer whether the Lord's Prayer is sectarian. Four residents sued the county council for opening meetings with the prayer. The county says it's not Christian "because no Christian tradition existed" when Jesus prayed it. The judge called the case difficult "because there is no reference to Jesus or Allah."

remarkable displays of unity that I've seen in a long time," said Paul Kengor, a political science professor at Grove City College. "It's not that [Catholics and evangelicals] sought this issue; this came to them."

Evangelical leaders particularly noted that the administration did not widen an exemption that applied narrowly to churches.

"The administration anticipated and tried to address Catholic concerns more directly than they did evangelical concerns," said Carey, fearing a poor precedent for future rulings. "They're probably surprised at how important we think the issue is, even if we're talking about it from a different angle."

Catholicism's hierarchical structure carries advantages and disadvantages, said Francis Beckwith, who was president of the Evangelical Theological Society until he converted to Catholicism. Catholics bring institutional weight and have the President's ear, but often do not have evangelicals' flexibility or grassroots efforts.

"What began as a marriage of convenience has blossomed," said Robert George, a Princeton University professor. "We're united by common principles and common threat, and that's a powerful combination."

UNDER DISCUSSION Topics in the current debate.

compiled by Ruth Moon

Is the Lord's Prayer a Christian prayer?

YES

"The Lord's Prayer is 'the' Christian prayer. It comes up more than any other text in Christian liturgies since the first century. And its context in Matthew and Luke gives explicitly Christian meanings to terms such as *Father* and *kingdom*."

TELFORD WORK

author, *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*

"It is distinctly Christian. In the New Testament, it is Jesus who gives us the prayer. Throughout the Christian church—whether Catholics, Protestants, or Eastern Orthodox—people pray that prayer. You will not find it in a Jewish synagogue."

SIMON KISTEMAKER

New Testament professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

"It is a Christian prayer. Jesus was certainly influenced by certain Jewish models of prayer, but he gave it to his disciples specifically. So it's a direct inheritance for us as Christians."

ARTHUR BOERS

author, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*

"The Lord's Prayer is both Jewish and Christian. Jesus, a Jew, was teaching his Jewish followers to pray. But the fact that it is a part of both traditions fails to make it sufficiently nonsectarian to pass constitutional muster."

J. BRENT WALKER

executive director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

"You could consider it a prayer for multiple religions, because Jesus is considered to be a rabbi or a great teacher by many of the world's religions. It was not originally delivered as a Christian prayer; it was simply a teacher teaching his disciples a good way to pray."

CLAYTON SCHMIT

professor, Fuller Theological Seminary

"The prayer in and of itself does not explicitly espouse the precepts of Christianity. It recognizes God, but does not proselytize a particular religion. And case law does not support a mandatory total prohibition of prayer at public gatherings."

BRAD DACUS

president, Pacific Justice Institute

NO

Open-Air Worship: Borongajci members have moved out of the basement and into outdoor worship events. Evangelical growth is three times faster than Croatia's overall population growth.

MARIO MIHALJEVIĆ



CHURCH GROWTH CROATIA

Outside the God Box

Nontraditional believers recover Christian community in the post-war Balkans.

By Melody J. Wachsmuth in Zagreb, Croatia



Why do you want to fight in the war?

The blunt question sprang suddenly into Jasmin's mind, surprising the spiritually seeking Croatian soldier with its clarity. It happened in 1991, at the start of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

He responded, "I want to fight for good, to defend my country. I want to fight against evil." Somehow, he knew the question had not come from an earthly voice.

The unknown voice was penetrating and unforgettable. "If you want to take up a weapon, you will be killed by a weapon. But if you want to fight for good, then put off your weapon, and I will teach you how to fight for good."

A few months later, Jasmin turned in his rifle and uniform and began a three-year spiritual trek through Islam, astrology, numerology, meditation, and Christianity. One day as he studied the Sermon on the Mount, the words of Jesus captured his imagination. He thought, *If I submit under any authority, it would be Jesus.*

As he studied the Bible more intensively, other spiritual interests faded into insignificance. Eventually, in a quiet moment alone, he understood the gospel message in his heart and accepted it.

After the war for Croatian independence ended in 1995, such spontaneous conversion stories emerged in greater numbers. Local evangelical pastors found fresh openness to God as alienated

individuals wrestled with difficult questions about the war and grieved the devastating loss of 140,000 lives.

"You cannot imagine all that was happening here," one church leader told *Christianity Today*. "The whole nation was in a depression." Abuse of street drugs, especially heroin, skyrocketed right after the war, leveling off in 2006. People with post-traumatic stress disorder flooded treatment programs.

In time, many new Christians formed informal fellowships, often meeting in basements, coffee shops, or living rooms, rather than migrating into established Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox congregations. Of mixed backgrounds, the believers came together for worship, Bible study, and



MARIO MIHALJEVIC

New Life in Christ: Deaconess Anita Povalec (right) belongs to a new generation of Christian women leaders outside the traditional church hierarchy.

relationships not based on ethnic identity.

The groups operated without a name, without a pastor, without Western funding, and without ties to a denomination. But they shared a deep desire to know and obey God. A significant amount of new Christian growth in Zagreb has occurred within these informal fellowships, which are spreading beyond Zagreb into the coastal region. In a country of 4.4 million people, 87 percent are Roman Catholic. Less than 1 percent are evangelical.

NEED TO SHARE

In 1995, five young men in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, sat expectantly around a pool table in a tiny basement—a place where they had previously gathered to play games and do drugs. A single hanging light bulb revealed a Bugs Bunny poster. Pool cues and games leaned carelessly against the walls.

Slowly, others trickled in, pulling up chairs. Some seemed nervous but curious, while others were old friends. The weekly meeting started informally, and everyone shared something, whether it was a poem, a Bible verse, or a personal testimony. At such sessions, participants said, there was

no particular program since no one had expertise in conducting a Christian worship service. But the Holy Spirit moved so tangibly that many people wept.

For many participants, these meetings marked the beginning of new life in Christ. But other spiritual seekers struggled with difficult feelings from the war years. After an initial encounter with Jesus, Ivana sank back into a destructive, abusive lifestyle and avoided the group.

“Hypocrisy was not in the community,” Ivana said. “There was so much [openness] there. You felt everyone could see right into your heart.” At the time, Ivana was in deep despair. But Jasmin doggedly sought her out. Finally, she agreed to attend another fellowship meeting.

“Again, I could feel this love drawing me—everything was melting,” Ivana said. At one meeting, she had a vision of herself, crushed by guilt, standing before Jesus on the cross. Deep in her spirit, she heard Jesus tell her that he knows and loves her. Long after the meeting concluded, she finally opened her eyes—tear-soaked and exhausted, but a new person. She freely confessed the sins of which she had previously been so ashamed.

As more Croatians joined these independent fellowships and experienced inner healing, controversy ensued. Croatian national identity is fused with Roman Catholicism—to be Croatian is to be Catholic. Some religious leaders branded the fellowships a “sect,” which stigmatized them. Established Protestant leaders expressed both curiosity and concern about the groups’ theological doctrine.

“We look back now and say, ‘Yes, we were very theologically incorrect,’” Karlo Biočina, one movement founder, told *CT*. He said they were spiritual babies with no other motivation than to listen to God and understand the Bible.

“We had no intention of having a church, but we had this need to share the gospel—we just wanted to be disciples,” said Jasmin, emphasizing their movement was responding to unmet spiritual needs of the unchurched.

AN UNEXPECTED ROLE MODEL

Over four years, the fellowship tripled in size. Up to 60 people crammed into the small basement. Onlookers gathered in the hallway and peered through windows.

People began referring to the attendees

as the *Borongajci* (pronounced *Boar-own-guy-tsee*), labeling them by their meeting location in a part of Zagreb called Borongaj. Rather than finding a bigger room to accommodate their growing numbers, the core group decided to send out smaller groups to meet in homes, each fellowship led by an elder.

This was a period of self-defining. As the group moved through it, they remained open to change. Often, they confessed their sins in front of the fellowship—a practice that the fellowship elders believed allowed God to move freely in their midst. Several times, Jasmin felt convicted to confess that he had pushed his own spiritual agenda on other people, hindering the freedom of their spiritual growth.

“It’s always hard to do this because of pride. But [the practice of confession] became the foundation of our fellowship so that there were no heroes or saints,” he said.

This regular confession included admitting doctrinal mistakes. Women had been tightly restricted in the early days to the point of wearing head coverings during prayer. However, the Borongajci’s ongoing Bible study and openness to the prompting of the Holy Spirit led to the appointment of the first deaconess in 2003.

Later, the elders announced a new doctrinal position that empowered women to preach and teach publicly. This announcement was soon followed up by a service in which women were completely in leadership, in order to “give radical proof that we had changed our minds,” said Jasmin.

In 2002, during another scorching summer, the Borongajci leaders took a big step forward. They conducted public evangelistic meetings on the banks of the Sava River, inviting established churches in Zagreb to share in the worship and preaching. The 70 consecutive meetings successfully reached people who would be unlikely to enter a church to worship.

These outdoor sessions strengthened the developing friendship between the Borongajci and other churches, including the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, one of Croatia’s largest Protestant groups. Borongajci elders began to understand that God was using them to “share the fragrance of Christian unity.” Barriers began to come down.

Mladen Jovanović, pastor of the Church of Christ in Zagreb and lecturer at the Biblical Institute of Zagreb, told CT that Protestant churches had rarely mingled before the war. In fact, it would have been difficult for a Pentecostal and a Baptist to marry without one person transferring their church allegiance and membership.

The causes of such territorialism are complex. The limits on freedom of religion from years of communist rule as well as the bonding of the Catholic-Croat identity played a role in creating barriers between Christians. But during the war, a new generation of Christian leaders emerged who were open to change and working toward new possibilities for all Christians and churches.

The Borongajci had little reason to be territorial. They invited three pastors from three different churches to preach in their fellowship. Seeking the pastors’ counsel about various issues resulted in a dynamic relational exchange.

“We have been blessed by them because it really doesn’t happen often in the Christian world [that] a new group would ask an old group to help,” Jovanović said. “When I come to their meetings, they reflect a love for God and serve people in need. They teach their members how to give; in this they are great examples to us in Croatia.”

THE ROAD AHEAD

Since 1995, the Borongajci movement has weathered difficult times, recently emerging from a painful five-year period of stunted church growth.

Opinions about the dropoff differ. Some think the zeal for holiness led to a legalism that deadened the church’s spirit. Others point to visiting international teachers, some of who offered numerous critiques without understanding the church’s context. In the words of one leader, many suggestions led them to “reject their spiritual DNA” and produced a disunity of beliefs in the church.

Although many things called for change, leaders knew the answer was not to return to the doctrines of the early days. “Our unity was never based on doctrine, but on lifestyle and mission,” Jasmin said.

Instead, Jasmin notes, God seems to be reshaping their structure. The now-seven local house churches have more freedom

to focus on their specific ministries even while aligning with the movement’s larger vision: holiness, evangelism, and unity.

Returning to their spiritual roots means renewing their larger vision for service to other churches for the sake of unity in the body of Christ. In 2011, the Borongajci elders sent a letter to all the pastors in Zagreb inviting them to meet for prayer and encouragement—something that had not happened for seven years. Now the pastors meet regularly.

The Borongajci’s relational focus is not restricted to Croatia. In 2007, the Borongajci began a partnership with the charismatic ministry World Trumpet Mission (WTM) in Kampala, Uganda. Borongajci leaders became convinced that there was a “spiritual bridge” stretching from Croatia to Uganda.

Several Borongajci traveled to Uganda to assist poor families, starting several small businesses. In turn, WTM had a vision of Croatia being the “spiritual door to Europe,” and for the past two years has sent prayer missionaries there.

The WTM missionaries pray and fast for God to bring about his purposes through the church in Croatia. Both WTM and the Borongajci believe Croatia is well situated to bring spiritual renewal to the region.

The Borongajci’s evangelistic vision cannot be separated from their call to facilitate unity in the body of Christ. Jovanović said, “How often do people make the decision for Christ by looking at us and how we live together?” Perhaps the story of the Borongajci—a community defined by their love and transparent humility—provides a good example.

A few years ago, a friend of the Borongajci shared a vision she had of three flames. Each flame represented a different kind of love. The first love was God, the second was the family of God, and the third was those who did not yet know Christ.

The elders understood the three loves as the source from which all activities should flow. “When we find ourselves moving in this direction,” said Biočina, “we are like fish in water.”

Melody J. Wachsmuth, who blogs at balkanvoices.wordpress.com, is a writer based in Croatia.

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School Choice of a Different Kind

Why Christians in Richmond, Virginia, and elsewhere are choosing to send their children to struggling public schools.

By Amy Julia Becker

WHEN CHERYL BURKE first walked into the dark lobby of Chimborazo Elementary School, where she had just been appointed principal, she noted the distinct smell of urine. Outside, the playground was littered with “40s,” large empty beer bottles, and crack cocaine was stashed in one of the bathrooms. “I just cried,” says Burke, recalling that day in 1996.

Sixteen years later, the brightly lit lobby sports two armchairs and a coffee table. Where black asphalt once surrounded the buildings, there is now green grass. Sterile white cinder-block hallways now vibrate with colorful stripes of paint. Over the years, “Miz Burke,” as she is known to staff, parents, and students alike, convinced the local faith community to pray for the school, raise funds, and counsel and tutor students. Chimborazo’s scores on the state Standard of Learning exam have climbed, and now the number of students declared “proficient” in math and reading

hovers around 60 percent.

Still, 88 percent of Chimborazo’s students are so poor they receive free or reduced-price lunches; with that poverty comes a litany of challenges for the PK-5 school. As bright and beautiful as Burke has made it, Chimborazo reflects its local community, with all its hurts and all its possibilities.

Many Americans, including many Christians, do not consider urban schools like Chimborazo good enough for their children. Despite federal programs such as George Bush’s No Child Left Behind and the Obama administration’s Race to the Top, American

KEVIN MORLEY / GENESIS PHOTOS





Principled Principal: Cheryl Burke has been a driving force behind moving the students at Chimborazo Elementary from 9 to about 60 percent proficiency on statewide tests.

students still struggle to achieve basic academic goals. The nonpartisan Broad Foundation for Education reports that 68 percent of American 8th graders can't read at their grade level, and most will never catch up. Nationally, 70 percent of students graduate from high school, and only 50 percent of African American and Latino students graduate on time.

But in recent years, a growing number of Christians across the country have felt called to take up the educational challenge in their own communities. In many of those communities, including Richmond, Virginia, the tide seems to be turning.

A DREAM REALIZED

Over the past decade, a group of mostly white, middle-class Christian couples have moved into Church Hill, the community served by Chimborazo Elementary School. Unlike most families in Church Hill, these four couples have the financial and social capital to send their kids to private schools or to homeschool. Yet they have chosen otherwise. Building on the firm foundation Principal Burke has laid, they want to help restore a community struggling against generational poverty, and they believe a key component is sending their own children to the community's public school.

Sophie, Luke, Jack, and Chanan are all kindergarteners at Chimborazo, but the story of how they arrived there begins before they were born.

In 1995, most of their parents met as first-year students at the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville. They lived together for their final years of college (along with seven other men, including my husband) as an unintentionally diverse cohort: Corey Widmer, a lanky blonde interested in missional theology, and Matt Illian, then a cross-country runner, are white; Danny Avula, a stocky man who is quick to smile, is Indian; and Romesh Wijesooriya, a Jefferson scholar with athletic gifts that earned him a spot on the college's nationally ranked soccer team, is Sri Lankan. As the men's friendships developed, so did their awareness of the ethnic segregation among UVA's Christians. They wanted to figure out a way to bridge those divides.

So, Wijesooriya led a group of white and black Christians on a spring-break trip to Jackson, Mississippi, to meet Christian community development "grandfather" John Perkins and serve at his Voice of Calvary ministries. The trip sparked a vision. Widmer says, "[We] wondered if one day we might do this together—move into an urban community together and live out the principles of the Christian Community Development Association."

For years, the vision remained dormant. Then a number of prerequisites fell together. Avula and Wijesooriya joined a residency program at the Medical College of Virginia in downtown Richmond. Illian, a private wealth manager who works from home, had enough job flexibility to move to Richmond. That same year, Widmer received the call to become a pastor in a Richmond church. By that time, each man had married a woman who shared the vision for planting roots deep in an urban community.

But they didn't want to set up shop in just any poor area.

"We wanted to be invited into the neighborhood, and we wanted to go to a place where

'What would it communicate to our neighbors if we said, "We're moving into your neighborhood, but we don't consider your schools and public institutions good enough for our families?"'

~ Corey Widmer, Richmond pastor

God was already at work," says Mary Kay Avula. When they visited Church Hill, they met with local Christians. Among them, provisionally, was Don Coleman, a local pastor. After they had talked, Coleman "claimed us as an answer to his prayer," says Avula. "He sensed that the Spirit was calling us long before we did."



Head Count: Principal Burke spent two years sorting out why 900 kids were at a school built for 500. Now, Chimborazo has 585.

When another Christian, Selena Ruffin, invited the couples to move to her street, three of the four families became her immediate neighbors. The Widmers moved in a few blocks away—all in Church Hill. They soon connected with Angie and Percy Strickland, another Christian couple who had arrived in Church Hill three years prior, setting up Church Hill Activities and Tutoring (CHAT).

Church Hill sits, literally, atop a hill overlooking Richmond's downtown. Once home to Richmond's upper class, it still features a number of historic churches. But the demographics have radically changed. It now hosts a majority African American population, and most residents live at or near the poverty line.

The UVA families quickly built relationships with their neighbors: The Wijesooriyas took in a young unmarried couple expecting

their first child, and the Widmers housed two high-school boys when their mother needed temporary support. But the UVA families soon realized the move would not come without costs. Catherine Illian, a petite woman with curly brown hair, recalls a time when she heard shouting and scuffling outside her door.

"I was ready to call the police when I looked outside and saw that it was just a group of men socializing and talking very loudly. . . . I am still learning the difference between loud friendly banter and something more aggressive."

Illian faced aggression head-on in August 2007, when she and Mary Kay Avula watched a man across the street firing a handgun. "I was scared," Avula recalls. "But I was also well aware that there were dangers associated with living here."

Despite the taste of violence, Avula says her family never considered leaving. "There are dangers no matter what path you choose in life. Some of them you think you can control, but you can't."

Each family took jobs that served Richmond's poor. Danny Avula became Richmond's deputy director of public health. Romesh Wijesooriya, a pediatrician at Virginia Commonwealth Uni-

versity, began studying childhood obesity, a chronic health problem in urban areas. With Ruffin, some of the families revived a local Christian nonprofit, Urban Hope, to ensure affordable housing throughout the neighborhood. And Mary Kay Avula started teaching at Chimborazo Elementary.

In 2007, John Perkins returned the visit and came to Church Hill. He encouraged the families, but voiced one concern, remembers Widmer: "The church is absent. Without worshipping together, you will become a loose, disconnected group of social activists rather than a Christ-centered community." That prompted Widmer and Pastor Coleman to form a weekly gathering for Christians and seekers called East End Fellowship.

But a test of their commitment was on its way.

KEVIN MORLEY / GENESIS PHOTOS

WHAT TO DO WITH THE KIDS?

Within a year or two of arriving in the neighborhood, the couples all had children of their own, and they began to talk about where to send them to school. The adults' own educational backgrounds were varied: four had attended public schools, three had attended private schools, and one, Catherine Illian, had been homeschooled through 10th grade. The friends talked about starting a charter school, or founding a Church Hill campus of a private school on Richmond's South Side. But as much as such schools might eventually benefit the community, they chose another option.

"Investing in the public school meant that we were investing in an existing institution that was trusted by the community," notes Matt Illian. "Anything else that we were to start would really take decades to build that same level of trust."

But gaining the trust of the community couldn't be their only concern. "After some pretty intense late-night crying sessions with God and Matt, I decided that Jack would be gaining more than he would be losing... the decision to send him to Chimborazo forced me to trust God in a way I hadn't before," says Catherine Illian, recalling her fears about sending their son to Chimborazo. "I grew up in a family where education was one of the most

important things that we could do for our kids," says Danny Avula, who graduated from UVA at age 19, then finished medical school and earned a master's degree in public health. "But that attitude can become an idol."

Together the group decided to send their kids to Chimborazo. Corey Widmer asks, "What would it communicate to our neighbors if we said, 'We're moving into your neighborhood, but we don't consider your schools and public institutions good enough for our families'?"

These men and women in Richmond are not alone. Across the nation, Christians are in one way or another investing in local public schools, using a variety of strategies to help turn things around. Nicole Baker Fulgham, a Detroit native, for years taught with Teach for America, a nonprofit that trains teachers

to work in low-income communities. After serving as Teach for America's vice president of faith community relations, last fall she founded the Expectations Project, which equips churches, nonprofits, and individuals to help low-income public schools. "I've been blown away in the past couple of years by the receptivity and interest of the Christian community," says Fulgham, who is based in Washington, D.C. "We now have solutions to some of the problems and so we can mobilize faith communities to respond."

The Memphis Teacher Residency (MTR) is one such solution. It is the only urban teacher residency program in the country with a Christian identity. The nonprofit trains teachers in an intensive one-year residency, where they



Word Power: Scholars unanimously agree that reading skills are key to escaping poverty.

are paired with a teacher-mentor in a Memphis classroom. By the end, residents have earned a Masters of Arts in urban education through nearby Union University, and a Tennessee state teaching license. In return, residents teach in an underserved Memphis school for at least three years. Founder David Montague roots MTR's educational reform in a broader context. "We're only willing to do education reform within a community development approach," says Montague, "so that a child can be born in [a given neighborhood] and have a great teacher from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade."

Like the families in Richmond, some Christians begin by moving into low-income neighborhoods. After five years in a strong school district, Kirsten Strand and her husband moved to Aurora, Illinois, to serve in

an urban context. They had felt the call for years, but had put off moving because of the struggling school system. Ultimately, "we decided that our kids would receive a wonderful life and cultural education, even if the academic experience wasn't as enriched," says Strand. Her husband left his job in corporate America to become a third-grade teacher at the school. Other families moved to East Aurora for similar "missional" reasons. "We've found the schools here to be very open and eager to partner with our church, so we've been able to start tutoring and mentoring programs and engage in the schools in lots of ways," says Strand. "We really don't need to 'bring God' to East Aurora. We just need to join him in what he is already doing here."

Jake Medcalf describes his family's move into City Heights, California, as "the ministry God dragged us into." He and his wife, Joan, had been serving the affluent community in Pacific Beach. Jake oversaw youth ministry at a local church, and began forming relationships at the local Mission Beach High School. Only then did he realize that 90 percent of his students were bused to the school from 10 miles—and a socioeconomic world—away. A few years later, he and Joan moved into the kids' neighborhood, where the average

income for a family of four is \$18,000. Jake's philosophy for doing so is simple: "If you're called to a people, you need to live among the people." The Medcalfs' daughter will begin kindergarten at the school next fall. "We could bus her out because our local schools are underperforming," says Jake. "But we are in the same boat as our neighbors."

Stephanie McLeish, a mother of three in New Orleans, echoes Medcalf's sentiments. McLeish's oldest son attends a local public school where he is the only white student in his class and where 89 percent of his peers receive free or reduced price lunch. McLeish and her husband belonged to a group of families representing four New Orleans neighborhood churches who met for a year to discuss starting a Christian school.

"In the end," McLeish says, "many of us



felt this was an excellent time for the church to engage the public schools of our city.” She explains the theological basis for her convictions: “Christ is at work redeeming all things, not just souls but also places, systems, business, and even education.” McLeish has lived in the neighborhood for a decade, and more recently, she and her husband have invested more deeply in the local school, volunteering regularly and hosting teachers for dinner. “The problems as well as the blessings of living in this impoverished community have become my own,” says McLeish.

‘A TENUOUS HOPE’

The families who moved into Church Hill have found that forces beyond their control continue to impede Chimborazo’s growth. Mary Kay Avula notes that “many families struggle to get their basic needs met, and some don’t have permanent residences. Many have witnessed acts of violence or have a family member who is incarcerated. Students need a great deal of support to be successful in school when they face the various risk factors associated with poverty.”

Catherine Illian, an active member of Chimborazo’s PTA, explains the challenges of engaging parents: “We have parents without transportation, parents working two jobs, single moms with multiple kids, grandparents as primary guardians, parents who work at night and sleep during the day and find coming to night meetings difficult, parents who didn’t do well in school themselves and are intimidated by school and what that represents.”

But other Christians in Church Hill have filled in the gaps. Principal Burke has organized buses to pick parents up for PTA meetings and found grant funding to host a food bank alongside the meetings. Pastor Coleman joined the Richmond City School Board as a way to represent his neighborhood’s needs. Michelle Macklin, PTA president, and Leon Warlington, another local parent, show up at Chimborazo every morning simply to help in whatever way is needed.

‘I’ve been blown away in the past couple of years by the receptivity and interest of the Christian community.’

~ Nicole Baker Fulgham,
the Expectations Project

CHAT has flourished in recent years and now operates at five different Church Hill locations, tutoring dozens of neighborhood kids one on one a few afternoons a week. Lawson Wijesooriya leads the Blue Sky Fund, a local nonprofit that gives youth from urban environments an outdoor experience. Part of her work involves monthly experiential learning projects with the third-grade students from Chimborazo Elementary.

But the most comprehensive effort to

children. All children [in the area] will receive a world-class education.” Illian’s taskforce has committed to raising over \$400,000 to fund the teacher training and media and material upgrades, in order to reach full authorization in May 2014.

As in East Aurora, New Orleans, and City Heights, Church Hill Christians have their sights set on more than education reform. After the birth of her and Danny’s first child, Mary Kay Avula stopped teaching at Chimborazo Elementary. But she invited all the girls from her third-grade class to her house for weekly Bible study. Now in high school, the girls still meet weekly. Mary Kay and Lawson co-lead the study, but also take the girls to doctors’ appointments, help their families pay the bills, and have recently begun steering them through the college admissions process. All girls in the original group have “a sincere faith in the Lord,” says Mary Kay.

Meanwhile, East End Fellowship’s congregation has grown. Corey Widmer describes the 200 congregants who show up every Sunday afternoon as a “pretty amazing mix of people—rich and poor, black and white. . . . Literally there are homeless people and partners in major law firms sitting in the same room together.”

The couples are quick to point out that while they hope to serve the community, they

also assume that they and their families will be blessed by living there. Danny Avula says, “Our neighbors don’t just need us—we need them. In the context of these diverse, complex, and beautiful relationships, we find our wholeness.” They look to the future with what Avula calls “a tenuous hope”—a hope that generations of suffering will be undone by the power of God’s Spirit, at work in believers who continue to pray and look for God’s kingdom to come among them. ☩

Amy Julia Becker, a writer and speaker based in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, is the author of *A Good and Perfect Gift: Faith, Expectations, and a Little Girl Named Penny*. She writes regularly for Her.meneutics, Christianity Today’s women’s blog.



Kingdom Classroom: Richmond school-board member Don Coleman says, ‘Not just in our homes and families, but in the entire community, Christians should be the ones serving.’

address the academic needs of students in the neighborhood has been spearheaded by Matt Illian. He has assembled a taskforce of current and future parents to make Chimborazo the first Richmond City elementary school that follows the International Baccalaureate methodology. The IB initiative would involve overhauling the entire curriculum and training every teacher. But Principal Burke has championed the initiative from its inception, and the vast majority of Burke’s staff voted in support of the curriculum change. The Richmond School Board unanimously supported it.

As Illian says, “We got momentum going because we wanted to support the local elementary school. This wasn’t just for our



Treating
Richmond's

Fatherless Epidemic

How local Christians are building
human capital through public
health—one man at a time.

By Katelyn Beaty

Family Doctors:
Pastor Brian
Gullins (right)
and Dr. Donald
Stern see their
patient as metro
Richmond, where
65 percent of
children are born
to single mothers.

O

IN THE FOURTH FLOOR of the Health District Building in downtown Richmond, Donald Stern's office is beginning to resemble a library with an unusual collection. On his desk, next to new editions of the *World Health*

Report and Control of Communicable Diseases, are *Race Matters* by philosopher Cornel West, *Was Bill Cosby Right?* by Michael Eric

Dyson, and the Moynihan Report, a controversial 1965 federal document that detailed crumbling relations in the African American family. Nearly 50 years after its publication, Stern says, it has proven "prophetic" in the former seat of the Confederacy.

Stern became Richmond's public health director after his boss urgently called him there in December 2006. He had spent the previous 25 years in some capacity in Virginia public health, tracking infection rates, administering flu shots, inspecting nursing homes—"I've done about every job a physician could do in Virginia public health," says Stern, an affable, mustached doctor trained in maternal

and child health. But all that, he says, “was God’s means of preparing me for my most challenging role,” centered in Richmond.

“Here’s some light reading for you,” Stern says as he hands me *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*, historian John McWhorter’s landmark study on the effects of welfare reform since the 1960s. “Forty years of public policy around poverty and the war on drugs have, in McWhorter’s words, sent the black community to hell.”

That hell was clear to Stern when he, like any good doctor with a new patient, examined Richmond’s vital signs. “Every health status indicator was worse than the state average. Then we looked at the

youth pastor and schoolteacher from Norfolk, two hours southeast of Richmond. “I had never heard that before. As I saw the tears well up in his eyes, I knew I had to be a part.”

With Stern, Gullins convened a Core Team of local nonprofit heads, pastors, and doctors who understood the root causes of father absence. Using the research model of Benjamin Scafidi, a Georgia economist and author of the 2008 report “The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing,” the team produced a “costs and solutions document” that translated Richmond’s family fragmentation into raw taxpayer costs. “When we’re talking with politicians, it’s always important to understand the bottom line,” says Gullins. “We needed to know how to talk their language, to get a handle on the cost.”

‘People in stable families with a married mother and father have higher high-school graduation rates and income. It’s not only about the theological basis for the design of a man and a woman. When you look at outcomes, it’s a no-brainer.’

~ Danny Avula, Richmond deputy public health director

indicators that were twice as high as the Virginia average: teen pregnancy, infant mortality, out-of-wedlock births, STD infections, and lead poisoning. The first four are all a function of relationships between men and women.”

The numbers led Stern to the same “inescapable conclusion” made by scores of sociologists, pastors, and pundits observing the post-Jim Crow black family: “There is a crisis in gender relations in the African American community. This is a painful reality.”

Should a public health department—perceived as a government monolith unqualified to counsel individual men and women—try to change citizens’ gender relations, encouraging fidelity, responsibility, and stable two-parent families?

When it costs a city \$205 million every year in taxpayer dollars, say Stern and a number of Christians in Richmond, the answer is clear.

NUCLEAR FAMILY BY THE NUMBERS

With a bottom-line, preventive approach, Richmond has since 2009 hosted one of the few U.S. public health programs whose mantra is “create a community culture connecting fathers to their families.” Unlike most city governments, which respond to father absence by increasing aid to single women, the Richmond Family and Fatherhood Initiative (RFFI) uses ad campaigns, legislation, and partnerships with Richmond’s sizable Christian community to reach its goal: Decrease the nonmarital birthrate, reconnect fathers to their children, and foster strong two-parent families—all for the future health of Richmond.

All 13 of RFFI’s founders are committed Christians, including Brian Gullins, a black pastor who arrived in Richmond to plant a church in 2008. When Gullins needed a second job, Ron Clark, director of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, encouraged him to apply to become coordinator for “Man Up Richmond,” a then-new program with the health district. After a series of interviews, Gullins met with Stern for lunch.

“I always thought father absence was a social services issue, but Dr. Stern elevated it to a public health issue,” says Gullins, a former

stamps, housing assistance, and school meals, among others—were alone costing the city over \$50 million annually. Martin Brown, Virginia Commissioner of Social Services and Core Team member, says the document revealed how much the God-ordained institutions of family and government had gotten entangled. “Each institution has either acquiesced or taken responsibility away from the other, and we’ve grown dysfunctional in solving some of our problems,” says Brown. (Using Scafidi’s model, Brown calculates that father absence costs the state \$2 billion annually.)

The report also revealed how incarcerating men without offering rehabilitation has fragmented Richmond’s families, costing \$35 million annually in the process. (All interviewees for this story said the country’s gross incarceration rates among black men amount to “the new Jim Crow,” and recommended Michelle Alexander’s new book of the same name.) “Those of us in public health apply preventive more than curative strategies,” says Stern. “The curative strategy puts more money in jails. The preventive strategy asks, ‘Wait a minute, why are these young men dropping out of school? What’s happening to the father of this baby?’ We’re raising questions about the more fundamental elements.”

Stern is clear that RFFI is about aligning Richmond’s health stats with the state average, not about making “a religious, right-ring, Republican statement,” as some have charged. “This is what the research shows.”

“If you look at health, education, and poverty indicators, people in stable families with a married mother and father have higher high-school graduation rates and income,” says Danny Avula, Richmond’s deputy health director and Core Team member. “It’s not only about the theological basis for the design of a man and a woman. When you look at outcomes, it’s a no-brainer.”

THE GOVERNMENT CAN’T CHANGE A HEART

But it’s also been a no-brainer for Richmond’s faith-based community, which Gullins says has responded overwhelmingly to RFFI.

Six years ago, Owen Cardwell started tackling family disintegration

using a tv in the basement of his small church in the East Highland Park neighborhood. Moms and kids and aunts would arrive at New Canaan International and pay \$30 to “visit” an incarcerated family member, sitting in front of a camcorder at one of nine state prisons. “Over six years, we’ve seen how impacting it is for children to visit with their fathers,” says Cardwell, a Core Team member.

Starting in 2011—with training from RFFI and a \$50,000 grant from Strengthening Families Initiative, a similar statewide program—Cardwell has been working to stop youth from going to jail in the first place. Every week, he and male volunteers from eight churches meet with 36 9th-grade boys at Armstrong High School to talk about healthy relationships, real heroes (as opposed to “media-created idols like Beyonce and Jay-Z”), and “character development,” a sanctioned way to teach biblical values in the public schools.

“This is a dropout prevention strategy,” says Cardwell, a Virginia civil rights hero for desegregating his Lynchburg high school at age 14. “If you work backwards, you find that 70 to 80 percent of persons who are incarcerated have a GED or less. At 14, the boys are not quite jaded enough to disregard us,” noting the boys were captivated during a recent trip to the Black Caucus Expo in Washington, D.C.

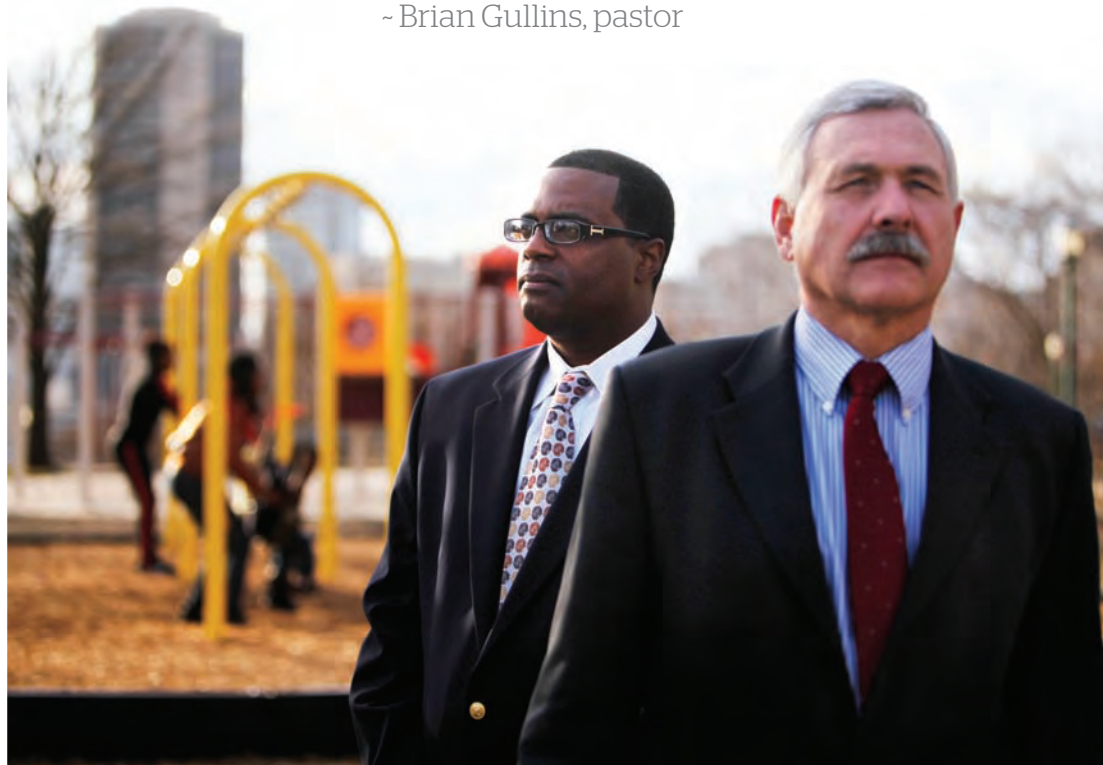
Another faith-based group, First Things First Richmond, meets with incarcerated men to encourage “manning up” and returning to their families after their sentence is over. Every Friday, staff teach inmates about relating to their kids and developing skills to enter the workforce. RFFI reached out to jail staff and provided curriculum from the National Fatherhood Initiative.

Due to the response from Richmond churches and nonprofits, Gullins is now working to replicate the RFFI model in five other cities with high nonmarital birthrates, incubating “consortiums” of Virginia churches to work with men in each city. Regent University law students are compiling costs and solutions documents for the consortiums’ use over the next two years. But city council members, school principals, and even business leaders are showing interest as well. “We’ve seen so many people from those institutions coming together,” says Gullins. “Richmond is still a small city [about 200,000 in the city limits], and if you target the right people, you can create a cultural shift.”

Avula attributes RFFI’s success in part to the fact that Richmond “is a very religious, conservative town,” noting that its mayor is an ordained black pastor. But a vocal minority says government should focus on upping support for single mothers, not getting dads back in the mix. “Stern is at a distinct disadvantage because he’s an older

‘I always thought father absence was a social services issue, but Dr. Stern elevated it to a public health issue. As I saw the tears well up in his eyes, I knew I had to be a part.’

~ Brian Gullins, pastor



white man,” says Avula. “Bill Cosby got crucified a few years ago, and he was an icon in the black community. That’s as clear an example as possible as to how countercultural this message is.”

But the message seems to be resonating, however slowly. Gale Grant, adolescent health coordinator for the city, says her teachers address father absence indirectly, teaching teens in the local high schools about paternity laws and child support enforcement. “We say things like, ‘For those of you who’ve grown up without a father, think how you feel.’ We try to connect the dots on the emotional level,” says Grant, a Core Team member. In 2011, she learned that the year prior, Richmond had the lowest teen pregnancy rate in over 20 years, at 61 births per 1,000 teens. (The abortion rate also decreased.)

In the meantime, RFFI’s success in keeping the black family intact remains to be seen, evident after years of tracking welfare and incarceration rates. Right now, its impact may be known only to the on-the-ground Christian leaders building relationships.

“The government can provide research, resources, and training, but that’s where we stop at the door,” says Gullins. “When it comes to transforming a heart, we try to set the table for the faith community to do transformative work that comes through Jesus Christ. We’re just the kingdom of God behind government lines.”

Katelyn Beaty, CT associate editor, is editorial director for This Is Our City.

Creative Discipleship

Five Richmonders you should know about. By Katelyn Beaty

In many ways, the first two metro areas featured in the This Is Our City series couldn't be farther apart—and not just on a United States map. While Portland, Oregon's Christians compose a narrow, vibrant slice of their post-Christian home, Richmond, Virginia's Christianity is so deeply embedded as to be taken for granted. The place where Thomas Jefferson in 1786 forged his budding country's commitment to religious freedom, Richmond is home to over 800 churches and 4 seminaries in a relatively small city of 1.2 million. Its current mayor, Dwight Jones, is an ordained Baptist minister, and at the time of this writing, it stood at the center of a pro-life personhood bill, one of only two in the country, sponsored by a Baptist delegate.

Thankfully, the following five Richmond Christians transcend cultural Christianity by serving the City on the James through sacrificial, creative vocations.

Lawson Wijesooriya | SOLVING THE NATURE DEFICIT

Educators lament the “nature deficit” among today’s children, who are more likely to watch the Discovery Channel than discover their own backyard. In Richmond, which flanks the James River, the deficit is deep in the red. But Lawson Wijesooriya (pictured here with husband Romesh) is working to change that through Blue Sky Fund (BSF): a year-long educational program that gets youth out in the woods and into experiential learning. Wijesooriya, who fondly remembers backpacking in Wyoming as a girl, says the trips reconnect the 900 at-risk children participating with their own place: “We have many 3rd graders who will ask if the James River is the ocean . . . they have lived two miles from the James their entire lives.”

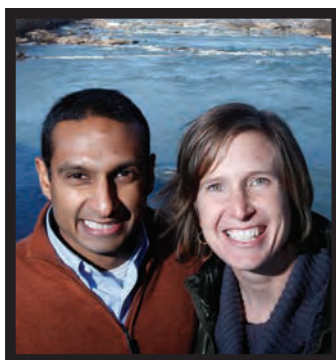
It may also offer an unlikely escape route out of poverty. Through taking kids rock climbing and backpacking, BSF hopes to strengthen their

“resiliency”—the strength to overcome obstacles—and apply it elsewhere. Wijesooriya explains: “We had a 9th-grade girl tell us, ‘I did not want to go camping. I was afraid and nervous. But after the hike, I realized I could do it. I realize that is true at school and at home too.’” Ultimately BSF is an outgrowth of Lawson and Romesh’s calling:

to share Christ’s love with an underserved generation. As a pediatrician studying childhood obesity, Romesh partners with Lawson to fight sedentary childhoods. “I had been developing vision for Blue Sky long before I knew it existed,” says Lawson, 31. “But I could have never made a living working for a young nonprofit [without Romesh] supporting our household.”

HERO John Perkins

READING NOW *A Good and Perfect Gift*, by Amy Julia Becker



PHOTOS • KEVIN MORLEY

Chris Payne | MAKING SPACE FOR MUSIC

If you’re a musician breaking into the local scene, you likely loathe the inroads: smoky bars where your hard-earned craft becomes background noise for drunken patrons. Christopher Payne knows the pain; in 2009, he and another Richmond singer-songwriter “were getting tired of competing with the loud bar scene.” In response, they founded the Listening Room, an intentionally small, growing music venue where the keyword is *connection* between songwriter and audience. “Without an audience, the performance and craft is pointless. One cannot exist without the other,” says Payne, a Virginia native and owner of Church Hill Records. “By taking music out of the normal loud places, you allow that transcendental, transactional

element of music to flourish.” Now in its third year, the Listening Room has become a central player in Richmond’s underground acoustic scene. Tyler Crowley, a local musician, says the Room has a profound effect on performers. “They always comment on the quietness of the room, the respectfulness,” says Crowley, a worship leader at Hope Church. “And when a song ends there’s a hush in the room—a holy moment.” “Regardless of background,” says Payne, “audiences leave having experienced the splendor of the Creator God.”

HERO Abraham Lincoln

READING NOW *The Meaning of Marriage*, by Tim Keller



David Bailey | RECONCILING COMPOSER

David Bailey is a regular diplomat in the “worship wars”—and not the ones you’re thinking of. In Richmond, where history draws sharp lines of race and class, the saying about the most segregated hour in America still rings true. Under the auspices of *Making a Melody*, Bailey, a pianist-producer, leads worship in churches to bridge racial gaps and teach rich theology in the process. He calls it *ethnodoxology*: writing music, the “heart language” of a people group, that lets them worship in a culturally sensible way. The results are surprising: At a recent service at a majority-white church, for example, Bailey led “In Christ Alone.” Two young men had dropped in from the neighborhood. “They didn’t get it; their eyes glazed over,” recalls Bailey. Then the band introduced hip-hop beats to the Keith Getty/Stuart Townend classic, and the two men perked up. That was “one measure of *Making a Melody*’s success for me,” says Bailey.



Now Bailey is training young believers to do the same. The Urban Worship Songwriting Institute, hosted at East End Fellowship, teaches interns to compose ethnically fitting, theologically rich music for use in urban churches. But how effectively does worship foster racial unity—and is that what worship is about? For Bailey, 30, the mission is biblical: It’s “not about getting people of different cultural backgrounds together to sing ‘Kumbaya.’ When Christians apply Philippians 2—‘Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others’—to worship music, we get a foretaste of Revelation 7:9–10, where ‘a great multitude . . . from every nation, tribe, people, and language’ worship God.”

HERO Quincy Jones

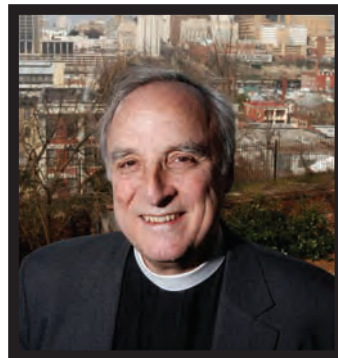
READING NOW *Building a Discipleship Culture*, by Mike Breen

Ben Campbell | CITY INTERCESSOR

Last year kicked off Richmond’s Civil War sesquicentennial celebration, and the party won’t stop until 2015. But atop the city’s highest point, Ben Campbell will be leading a quieter celebration. Richmond Hill—an urban monastery founded when nuns began praying for their war-torn city in 1866—hosts retreats and classes that attract the city’s 800-plus churches. The key to its interdenominational success? Prayer for the healing of metro Richmond, three times daily for the past 22 years. “That’s where we are all most united,” says Campbell, director since 1985. “We’re praying God’s agenda, as it were, which is the coming of his kingdom, the transformation of cities.”

That agenda includes helping evangelicals, Catholics, and mainliners confront nearly every social

malady. With direct input from Richmond’s mayor, school superintendent, and director of social services, the center equips churches for school tutoring, prison visits, and feeding programs. It hosts annual summer camps training black and white church leaders to serve at-risk children. And its Armstrong Leadership Program annually prepares 36 teens for college, then employment. But intercession remains the heartbeat of the ministry, says Campbell, 71, author most recently of *Richmond’s Unhealed History*. “If you aren’t driven to prayer, you may not be engaged in the transforming work of Christ. When we pray, we are brought into God’s agenda.”



HERO Edmund D. Campbell (father)

READING NOW *Augustine’s Confessions*

Shunda Giles | REPRESENTING KIDS IN COURT

Shunda Giles has one of the hardest jobs you’ve never heard of. As a city attorney representing Richmond’s social workers, the Virginia native encounters “some of the worst of the worst of humanity”: stories of children abused by their families, then taken by DSS to the hospital or placed in group homes. Lawyers in her field generally last only 18 months; Giles, whose goal “as an intern was to practice tax law so I could become wealthy,” has been at it for 15 years. “I have a heart for missions, which means being a servant,” says the 38-year-old. “Whether that’s serving social workers, the court, or my city in protecting its kids, my calling comes in that I get to serve. This is my mission field.”

Giles says that her mission field matches that of her grandfather, local legend Bernard Sylvester

Giles. Pastor of First Union Baptist Church for 51 years, Giles also taught at the Hanover School for Boys and the Virginia Home for Boys and Girls, and chaired the board of the Virginia Baptist Children’s Home—all ministries to foster care children. “I’ve delved deeper in a different form of advocacy, but I’m carrying his mantle,” says Giles, also a member of Richmond City’s Best Practices Court, missions director at House of Prayer in Chesterfield, and leader with the Richmond Christian Leadership Institute. “One day the fulfillment will come in realizing, ‘These kids’ lives were saved because of the work we’ve done.’”



HERO Dynevia Quarles (mother)

READING NOW *The Shack*, by William P. Young

‘Crucified Under Pontius Pilate’

Why this phrase from the Nicene Creed is key to ending our doubts about the goodness of God. By Mark Galli

ROB BELL'S *Love Wins* attracted a great deal of attention last year partly because of the questions he raised. They are not just Bell's questions, but questions all of us have. Take these, raised twice in the book:

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number “make it to a better place” and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

These questions come in many forms today, and range from the theoretical to

the personal: The Buddhist child who dies in some remote corner of China, having never heard the gospel—is she going to hell? Why would a good God allow my wife to get cancer? And so forth.

No matter how or why it is asked, its basic form is this: How do we know that God can be trusted to be good?

That question usually comes with a partial answer, which also depends on the particular concerns of the questioner. It often goes like this: “Well, I know one thing for sure, I could never believe in a God who would ____.” Fill in the blank. Like: “I could never believe in a God who would condemn the Buddhist child to hell.”

This is one way we shape our faith as we stand in the shadows of one of these dark scenarios. Faith becomes not confidence in the love of God but mostly a defensive bulwark against our nightmares, against the haunting possibility that God may be unjust and arbitrary.



MICHAEL MULLAN



Michael Mulligan

the drawn up of the supernatural l

But can we do better than this? Is there a way to face this question squarely—is God good?—and come away with even more confidence in the love of God?

JOB’S GOSPEL

A faith that defends itself against the nightmare with “I could never believe in a God who would ____” is not much of a comfort in the end, because we know we’re just making things up. Whether we happen to believe in a God who would do this or that has no bearing on who God actually is. Our belief about what is or is not possible with God cannot make him into the being we want him to be.

We’ve known too many unbelievable scenarios to have any such confidence. “I could never believe my husband would run off with another woman,” says the astonished wife. And yet her husband did just that. The wife’s belief had no bearing on the character of her husband. All well and good that we could never believe in a God who would do *x*, but it may make no difference. God may do it anyway.

To that, many reply, “Well, I’d rather spend an eternity in hell than worship a God who would ____.”

This strikes some as foolish, given who we’re talking about: the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. They too may feel troubled by questions and answers surrounding God’s goodness, but they reply, “Well, I may not like a God who would do *x*. But better to submit to this all-powerful, if sometimes arbitrary deity and take my chances!”

They are no doubt thinking of Job, who after shaking his fist at God for the injustices perpetrated upon him, is interrogated by God with, “Who do you think you are, questioning the Creator of heaven and earth?”

At which point, Job submits in abject fear and humility: “I didn’t know what I was talking about. Of course, I worship you, Lord” (to paraphrase Job 40–42).

Many Christians imagine this is the only way out of this dilemma, and they put their hope in the gospel according to Job: “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21, *NASB*). Fortunately, that is not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is only when we look at Jesus—at his incarnation but especially his crucifixion—that we are able to hear some really good news.

CRUCIFIED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

The problem with the way we sometimes frame both the question and the answer is that Jesus Christ never makes an appearance in either. When Jesus Christ is not a part of this conversation, the conversation becomes abstract. In such conversations, God is said to be *good*. Or *powerful*. Or *evil*. Or *impotent*. Or whatever we conclude, based on our understanding of these abstract words, which we apply to another abstract word—*God*.

From a variety of sources, we’ve come up with a working definition of these abstract words and this abstract God—the God of logic, who must do *y* if in fact he is *x*. So when we are told not only to believe in this abstract God but also to give every part of ourselves to him, to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—well, *faith* or *trust* is hardly the word to describe what we do. It’s more like “cross my fingers,” “hope against hope” that he’ll turn out to be a good God.

In the Gospels and the Epistles, we are never called to believe in a God who would or would not do *x*. The New Testament does not begin with the abstract. It does not give us words like *good* or *power* or even *God*, then ask us to trust in those words or ideas. Paul

teaches that, in fact, God is not the God of our imaginations or of our logic, who must do *y* if in fact he is *x*. No, we’re talking about a righteous and holy God who justifies sinners. This is a God whose workings are more wonderful and concrete than we can imagine.

Our God is not the God of philosophers, the God of metaphysicians. In the New Testament, God is first and foremost the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as the Nicene Creed puts it with great specificity, “was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.”

Only when we fully grasp the historic, concrete, fleshly, and deathly nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ—the one crucified under Pontius Pilate—can we turn the corner on the question that so plagues our age.

The message of the gospel is decidedly not: “Buddhist children who die without hearing the name of Jesus Christ are going to hell; repent and believe in the gospel!”

It is not, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” No, the gospel, the good and specific news, is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, was crucified under Pontius Pilate—a particular magistrate at a particular time and place—died, and was buried.

The New Testament, of course, is the revelation of the meaning of this event: God has looked upon his miserable creatures, rebels against his goodness, defiant in the face of his love, trapped in the nexus of sin and death, fully deserving every evil that comes their way in this life and the next—this God has looked upon all this in his holy righteousness and righteous holiness and has said, “Enough!” And he came to live among us, taking on not just a human body, but flesh, that is, the brokenness and the sinfulness of humanity. He has become *the* sinner who deserves to die, and he has died on the cross, for the very people who put him on the cross, that they might know who he really is.

This is a startling and counterintuitive revelation; this is not a grand religious idea one can logically work toward, but an event that occurred under Pontius Pilate, not a theology but God caught in the act of loving us. This factoid and its revealed meaning are what we are called to believe and to proclaim, not what God might or might



We are not called to reject or believe in a God who would do this or that to a Buddhist child—or whatever other scenario whose possibilities alarm us. We are called to believe in the God who has died for us in Christ.

not do in this or that situation. We are asked not to preach according to our imaginations or our nightmares, but according to what God has, in fact, done for us in Jesus Christ.

This is the God we are asked to trust. Not the God who is said to be *good* or *loving* or *powerful* by some definition we might put on those words. We're asked to trust in the God who gave himself for us on the cross in Jesus Christ.

'I'LL LET IT SIT WITH HIM'

At one point in the movie *Patton*, General Omar Bradley tells General George Patton that Patton may be given a crucial assignment: leading troops in the invasion of Europe. Though he had played a decisive role in the battle for Africa and in the invasion of Sicily, Patton at the time was cooling his heels in England, having been disciplined for slapping a soldier in a field hospital. So Patton is anxious to get back into the thick of battle, and when he hears about the possible assignment, he can hardly contain himself.

Bradley tells him no decision has been made, that it's in the hands of General George Marshall. Patton is a man of action, who took initiative while others stood around deliberating their options. But when he heard that his fate lay in the hands of Marshall, he calmed down. "He's a good man," he said of Marshall. "At least he's a fair man. I'll let it sit with him." He said this based on his knowledge of who Marshall in fact was and how he comported himself in action.

The God we know, the God we've seen in action has done this: He died for us. It is because of this that we say with confidence, "He's a good God. He's a fair God. All these questions that torment us—we can let those sit with this God."

That means we don't have to go with our fear: "The Buddhist child is definitely going to hell." Nor do we have to make stuff up, like, "The Buddhist child is definitely going to heaven." We do not have to begin with the cold logic of God's righteousness or the feel-good theology of sentimental love. In fact, the Bible simply shows no interest in our speculative questions or our sentimental theology.

Instead it reveals a God who, in fact, is perfectly just and perfectly merciful, not in the abstract but in the flesh. Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian, put it this way:

There meet in Jesus Christ, infinite justice, and infinite grace. As Christ is a divine person, he is infinitely holy and just; hating sin, and disposed to execute condign punishment for sin. He is the Judge of the world, and the infinitely just Judge of it, and will not at all acquit the wicked, or by any means clear the guilty.

And yet he is infinitely gracious and merciful. Though his justice be so strict with respect to all sin, and every breach of the law, yet he has grace sufficient for every sinner, and even the chief of sinners. And it is not only sufficient for the most unworthy to show them mercy, and bestow some good upon them, but to bestow the greatest good. . . .

Not only is this not abstract in content, it is not abstract in direction. This is the gospel *for us*. It is the good news regarding what God in Christ has done *for us*. That he came to save us from our sins, and not just us, but the whole world (1 John 2). That he was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Cor. 5). That in Adam all have died, but in Christ all

are made alive (Rom. 5). And that we are all called to repent—to turn around, turn away from all the speculation and nightmares that fill our imaginations that make us fear and doubt God's goodness—and believe in this astounding news.

When it comes to that Buddhist child, what will God do? We don't know. This has not been revealed to us. What has been revealed is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ and shown himself to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful.

This is the God who is in charge of all those scenarios that keep us awake at night. We are not called to reject or believe in a God who would do this or that to a Buddhist child—or whatever other scenario whose possibilities alarm us. We are called to believe in the God who has died for us in Christ, and trust him to do what is just and merciful for all.

During the fascist rule in Nazi Germany, many Christian leaders were killed—some in war, some while resisting Hitler. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian famous for his radical commitment to Christ and his own courageous (and ultimately fatal) resistance to Hitler, once comforted his fellow believers upon hearing of another spate of deaths:

Who can comprehend how those whom God takes so early are chosen? Does not the early death of young Christians always appear to us as if God were plundering his own best instruments in a time in which they are most needed? Yet the Lord makes no mistakes. . . . We should put an end to our human thoughts, which always wish to know more than they can, and cling to that which is certain.

Coming from the lips of some people, this advice could be scoffed at as simplistic or naive. But Bonhoeffer was neither; he was one of the most realistic Christian theologians the church has known. In fact, Bonhoeffer expressed a biblically informed response to our nightmares about God's apparent injustice: the one who has shown himself in Jesus Christ to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful will do what is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. We can let it rest with him. Thus we can pray not hoping against hope but with abiding confidence, like the Psalmist:

Lord, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty.
I don't concern myself with matters too great or too awesome for me to grasp.
Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother's milk.
Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, put your hope in the Lord—now and always.
(Ps. 131, NLT)

In the face of the most perplexing questions, we put our hope not in the God of our nightmares or our dreams, but in the God who came to us in Christ and died under Pontius Pilate, died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the world. To whom can we go if we cannot wholly and completely trust *this* God to be good? ☩

Mark Galli is senior managing editor of *Christianity Today*. He is author of *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News Is Even Better Than Love Wins* (Tyndale, 2011), from which part of this article was adapted.

When a Daughter

Walking the way of grace in the midst of my grief.

By Ben Witherington

T

HE PHONE RANG late Wednesday night near the beginning of the New Year, January 11, 2012. It was

Sarangan Sankar, Christy's boyfriend. He was barely intelligible because he was crying so much. He had just been on the phone with the Durham, North Carolina, police who had cordoned off Christy's home. The words he spoke were, "Christy is gone.

She was found dead in the house. Christy has passed away."

I was desperate for more information. But Sara was in Philadelphia trying to board a plane for Durham, so I had to let him go. He didn't know any more at that point anyway, and it would have been unkind to press him for details. What did details matter if the fact was certain? Christy was dead.

I hollered to Ann, my wife, who was downstairs in our Lexington, Kentucky, home. Suddenly we were hugging each other for dear life. Ann kept saying, "I knew! In my heart, I knew!"

Since Monday she had been carrying around a premonition that something was wrong. On that day, she listened to a voicemail from Christy's boss at IBM, Paul Haberman, who said Christy had left a message for him saying she wasn't feeling well. Attempts to call her had failed. That wasn't terribly unusual, but worries arise when you know your child is home alone.

Later we learned that Sara had talked to Christy Monday night, and she had seemed fine then. But she did not show up for the weekly Tuesday night board game party that she so enjoyed. By

Wednesday, Sara was worried and asked a close friend to break into the house if necessary. James climbed in through a window. He found Christy lying on the floor upstairs and called 911, but he knew she was gone. Sara arrived at midnight, but he wasn't allowed in the house, a potential crime scene. All he could do was stand outside and talk with the police chaplain. Finally, around 3 in the morning, officials decided there had been no foul play or crime, so they removed the body and took it to the medical examiner's office in Chapel Hill.

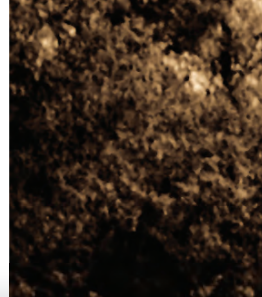
We felt a deep need for companionship. Given that we have no family within 500 miles, we called our dear friends, Bill and Susan Arnold, who stayed and prayed with us until midnight. Finally, we lay down in our bed, trying to comprehend the reality until the dawn. My heart was pounding; my breath was short. We both cried; we both prayed. Every parent's worst nightmare had come to pass.

So many thoughts and feelings run through your head and heart when you get a phone call like that. My mind darted through instant replays, from waving goodbye to Christy as she drove off to North Carolina on December 31 to holding her after her birth on August 14, 1979, in Durham, England. She is gone from this earth until the Resurrection. Until then, she will not come back except in the form of memories.

WAS THIS GOD'S WILL?

From the day Christy died, I was determined to be open to whatever positive thing there might be to glean from this seeming tragedy. I clung to the promise of Romans 8:28, that "God works all things together for good for those who love him."

The first point immediately confirmed in my heart was theological:





Paddling Upstream: Christy Witherington, here on a trip in England, died suddenly at age 32 after rowing 'against the forces in life that would hold her back or down,' says her father.

Dies

God did not do this to my child. God is not the author of evil. God does not terminate sweet lives with a pulmonary embolism. Pulmonary embolisms are a result of the bent nature of this world. As Ann kept repeating, "God is not the problem; he is the solution."

One primary reason I am not a Calvinist is that I do not believe in God's detailed control of all events. Why? First, because I find it impossible to believe that I am more merciful or compassionate than God. Second, because the biblical portrait shows that God is pure light and holy love. In him there is no darkness, nothing other than light and love. And third, the words, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," from the lips of Job (1:21), are not good theology. According to Job 1, it was not God but the Devil who took away Job's children, health, and wealth. God allowed it to happen, but when Job said these words, as the rest of the story shows, he was not yet enlightened about the true nature of the source of his calamity and God's actual will for his life. God's will for him was for good and not for harm.

The beginning of "good grief" starts with the premise of a good God. Otherwise, all bets are off. If God is almighty and malevolent, then there is no solace to be found in him. If God is the author of sin, evil, suffering, the Fall, and death, then the Bible makes no sense when

it tells us that God tempts no one, that God's will is that none should perish but have everlasting life, and that death is the very enemy of God and humankind that Jesus, who is life, came to abolish and destroy.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). If there are promises I cling to as I weep for our Christy, it is this promise, not the sorry solace and cold comfort of, "God did this but we do not know why." No! A thousand times, no. God and his will are aligned with what is good and true and beautiful and loving and holy.

Days later, as I stood before the casket and stared at our "Christy girl," as we called her, I was so thankful that the God of the Resurrection had a better plan for her. Her lifeless body was so cold, so empty. The phrase, "It's all God's will," is cold comfort. I believe in a God whose "Yes!" to life is louder than death's "No!" Death is not God's will. On the contrary, God is in the trenches with us, fighting the very same evils we fight in this world—disease, suffering, sorrow, sin, and death itself. He cries with us.

WHAT GOOD GRIEF LOOKS LIKE

For some, the phrase "good grief" (if not immediately associated with the *Peanuts* cartoon strip) seems something of an oxymoron.

What can be good about grieving a departed loved one? In the first place, there is such a thing as bad grief: inconsolable grief, grief that consumes the griever, or grieving without hope. The Bible doesn't commend or command that sort of grieving.

Paul discusses good and bad grief in 1 Corinthians 15. He tells us that grieving is both normal and natural even for Christians. In Christy's eulogy, we wrote,

It was C. S. Lewis who said that you can tell the depth of how much someone loved and was loved by the depth of the grief when that person goes on. Christy loved us deeply, and we grieve deeply. But we will continue to remember her sparkling smile, and cherish personal memories we hold close in our hearts.

Just so. It is right for Christians to grieve. Those who have loved and been loved much, grieve much. However, Paul adds a proviso: "But do not grieve like those who have no hope."

I have met Christians who thought they had to be Stoics, to pretend they didn't hurt. Strong people (especially men), they believe, should not allow themselves to grieve deeply and should certainly not let their grief show. Wrong. That's Stoic *apatheia*: the aim of avoiding deeper emotion or pathos. That is not Christian theology at all. Christians are the very ones to grieve deeply because they have loved and been loved deeply.

One thing I have noticed about this unfathomable good grief is that any little incident can trigger it. When I see a party, I think of the

one Christy gave me for my 60th birthday, and I cry. When I walk by her room and see the glitter stars on the ceiling glowing at night, I cry. When I see her picture, any picture, I cry. When I walk in the house from our garage, I see the pencil marks where we measured Christy's and David's heights as they grew, and I cry. And it's okay. Men need to let themselves grieve just as much as women do.

Here is one paradox of grieving. Grieving, for a Christian, is about *you*. We are not grieving because someone is pain-free in heaven with the Lord! That's cause for celebration! We are not grieving the condition of the Christian loved one who is deceased. For the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. There is nothing grave in that. No, we are grieving for our own sense of loss, our own sorrow over the sudden departure, our own feelings of being alone. Grief is the self's shock over what has happened to itself, and the shock is both physical and emotional.

Something is wrong, terribly and profoundly wrong, if we have no capacity to mourn the passing of someone we have loved with all our heart. In other words, it takes a strong person to weep and not be afraid to show your mortality and vulnerability. Our macho culture doesn't get that. There may be "no crying in baseball," but there is in life. We need to let ourselves grieve. Among other things it makes us more humane and compassionate with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that others experience.

So, if you see me and I am a bit teary, it's okay. God is reminding me of the eternity he's placed in my heart. And he's helping me appreciate the depths of what I miss: Christy.



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Rhonda Stapleton, Asbury Seminary M.Div. graduate, is impacting the world through Samaritan Village, a residential home for women trapped in prostitution and drugs in Orlando, Florida. Her education at Asbury Seminary helped her develop a faith-based, nine-month program to help women break the cycle. As part of this program, Stapleton has opened a thrift store called Transitions, to teach the women business skills. People's lives are being changed.

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Yes, if a Christian's grieving goes on perpetually, it becomes apparent that the person is too self-absorbed. Perhaps you are enjoying a pity party, enjoying all the attention and sympathy it brings not to your departed loved one but to you! I have ministered to people like that. I remember an elderly woman who, even though her husband had died 30 years previously, still had not gotten beyond his passing. Instead, she was dwelling on the past wistfully while missing the opportunity to go on living positively. Much though I tried, I couldn't talk or pray her out of her funk. Her experience of grief had made her bitter, not better.

What does it mean, then, to grieve as one who has hope? It means we grieve with one eye forever fixed on the eschatological horizon—that is, looking to the end of history. It means we grieve knowing that resurrection will reverse death. It means we grieve knowing that death will not have the last word. Paul reminds us of the old saying, "Who hopes for what they already have?" (Rom. 8:24). The hope to which he refers is not something we possess now in a fully realized form. While I may have comfort and solace and peace now, none of this is my hope.

My hope is in nothing less than a dramatic reversal of death in the flesh. My hope is not even just in the Risen One, though that is true enough, but in his promise to raise from the dead those who are in

Christ. Nothing less than this is my hope. So as I grieve for Christy, I do so in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection. I cannot wait to see her new resurrection form! If she is any more bright and beautiful than she is in the photo here, I will need strong sunglasses to view her.

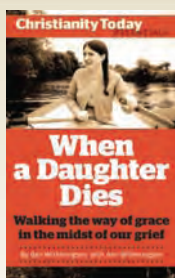
Death has a way of convincing us of what matters in life. It shuts up our squabbles and complaints. What really matters about the future is our bodily resurrection—not harps and clouds, not celestial music and comfort.

That is my hope, and that is my faith, and there are reasons I hold to this. It is not a blind or illogical faith, or one unfounded on evidence. I hold to this not simply because Jesus rose from the grave but also because I remember that Jesus raised Jairus's daughter from the dead. I can hear him say at the end times to my Christy girl, *Talitha kumi*—"Little girl, arise!"

Although I am tearing up as I write this, Paul's words remind me that it's okay to have tears in our eyes as long as we have hope in our hearts. ☩

Ben Witherington is professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. The Christy Ann Witherington scholarship has been set up in her memory at Asbury Seminary. To make a tax-deductible contribution, contact Jay Endicott at the seminary.

New from Christianity Today



When a Daughter Dies is a remarkable account of one couple's grappling with love, life, God, and grief in the immediate aftermath of their daughter's death—both a journal of grief and a testimony of hope in the face of life's deepest heartaches.

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[THE ARTS]

Disciplining *the* Eyes

The visual arts can play a powerful role in worship—if we look closely enough.

By W. David O. Taylor

W

HAT IF WE SAW the arts in worship as part of discipleship? What if we saw the arts as essential, rather than optional, to the Spirit's work of forming us in the image of Christ when we gather as a corporate body? What if a carefully crafted work of visual art enabled a congregation to see its mission in a radically new light? What if art in worship could yield a substantively formative experience?

These are the types of questions we were asking several years ago when I was a pastor at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. We invited Laura Jennings, one of our members, to exhibit art she had created while pursuing her master's degree at the University of North Texas. Our church, broadly situated in the stream of evangelical

Pentecostalism, had "sent" her off three years earlier, and now she returned with a fresh body of work. And while it was designed for her Master of Fine Arts, we felt it would serve our context too.

When her art first appeared in the sanctuary, I explained to the congregation that, as with all the visual art that hung there, Laura's work was not here merely to ornament our space (though it did that). It was here to help us to see the gospel afresh, and as it did so, we hoped it would inspire us to live out the gospel afresh. Just as Jesus repeatedly directed his disciples to notice things that society ignored, so Laura's work accentuated groups we frequently overlooked: the Dalits of India and victims of war violence.

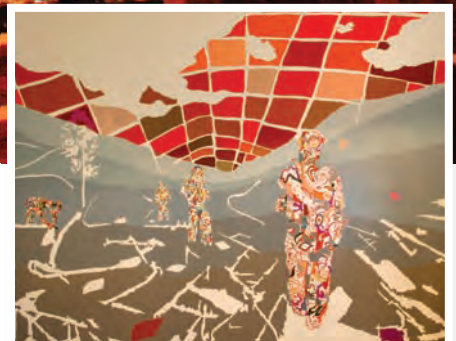
But it was more than the subject matter that challenged us. It was the style, more abstract than literal. The work did not yield its



ABOVE • COURTESY OF REDEEMER PRESBYTERIAN



Hover Crafts: At Redeemer Presbyterian in Indianapolis, a multimedia display including Bibles, live plants, candles, and more graces the sanctuary, seemingly floating above the altar.



Habit Forming: More abstract than literal, Laura Jennings's art in Austin, Texas, encourages viewers to linger and really see.

meaning easily. Some folks saw only strange figural shapes in vibrant colors. Some perhaps saw nothing but a token of decoration to the sanctuary. Some, though, took time to look, to look again and yet again, to persevere with the abstraction. With time, meaning unfolded. In Laura's envisioned world, unseen things resolved into material shapes, whose content could only be recognized with difficulty. For many at Hope Chapel, this art formed habits of sight.

As I reflect on the experience, I see two significant shifts in my thinking: one about worship, the other about the worship arts.

First, we are right to view worship as a setting where we declare truths about God and express our feelings to God, but we should also see it as a set of actions, words, and spaces that form us. If we are what we repeatedly do, as Paul insists, then what we do week after week in

corporate worship forms us to be a certain kind of Christian. What we want, then, as John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, reminds us, is "to become self-conscious about the good and bad ways that we are being formed in worship." To reduce corporate worship to acts chiefly of "thinking" or "feeling" fails to reflect the richly multisensory worship we see from Genesis to Revelation. And it falls short of the kind of holistic humanity the Scriptures commend to us and which Jesus supremely embodies.

Second, if our whole person is broken, then the worship arts can become a unique way to promote the sanctification of our affective, physical, and imaginative faculties, which are often ignored in Protestant worship. In worship, our emotions, bodies, and imaginations have a vital role, and the arts serve to bring them into an intentional and intensive participation.

A FORMATIVE POWER

How might the visual arts in particular contribute to our formation in worship?

One way is by training our sight. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, “We do not see reality by just opening our eyes.” Our sight is broken and therefore requires training to see God’s world rightly. As an act of the imagination, the visual arts can enable us to see the world, for example, not as opaque to God’s presence but as charged with it. C. S. Lewis writes, “My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.” All of us need this help. The visual arts, by fixing our sight on concrete objects—canvases, sculptures, installations, architecture—invite us to look at the world as it is or maybe as it shouldn’t be. At times they urge us to see it as it might be.

Another way the visual arts form us is by helping us to pay attention—careful attention. A good work of art asks us to look slowly, repeatedly. Often it will even implicate us in the subject matter in view. A good work will encourage us to focus our attention on one thing at a time, plying us with questions like: “Is the color red just red? Or is it the-world-could-have-existed-without-it-but-God-made-it-wondrously red?” “Are you really alone? Or are you surrounded by an invisible communion of saints?” “Is that man your neighbor?” “Was Jesus white?” By questioning our habits of sight, the visual arts can train muscles of attentive perception.

In sum, to see reality rightly, our eyes need to be disciplined, and the visual arts come along and serve this purpose well, including in the context of corporate worship.

Without getting into too many knotty issues surrounding the place of visual arts in worship, let me briefly note five ways in which they form us. (I’ll restrict my comments to 2D and 3D art, leaving “moving pictures” to another essay.)

Theologically. At Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois, when a 16x40-foot banner portraying the resurrected Christ was raised at Easter in 2011, it was a way to affirm, as they often say, that “matter matters.” Or, as Christians of the patristic period might put it, the banner was theology in visual form. The art became a way for the church to insist not only on the full humanity of Christ, but also on our own embodied humanity. To see this iconic image was a way to say, “Our sight matters, and it has a positive role to play in our worship. How we see this vividly colored, Middle Eastern-looking Christ, trampling the gates of hell, should inform how we live throughout the week.”

Morally. In certain churches, whether Orthodox or “emergent,” icons hang inside the sanctuary, and such icons will form the congregation at multiple levels. For example, an icon of Daniel in the



lions’ den will, at one level, remind worshipers that Daniel was in fact a historical person. At another level, it will remind worshipers that Daniel’s “fiery” lot in life is a type of their lot in life. At still another, it will encourage worshipers to practice the kind of courage that he exhibited. And at a final level, it will remind them that while God may not deliver them from tribulation in this world, he will deliver them at the consummation of history. In all these ways, the worshiper will be invited to draw the moral shape of their lives from Daniel’s faithful life: “Look at Daniel. Live like Daniel.”

Missionally. At First Baptist in Edmonton, Ontario, three banners hang high above and behind the pulpit. The one on the right represents an angelic being enflaming the city; former pastor Gary Nelson says its intent was to capture the church’s commitment to the city. The congregation would be persistently reminded, by what they saw Sunday after Sunday, that God through his Spirit desires to bring

Banner Events: The 40-foot-high banner at Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois, portraying the risen Christ, was unveiled at Easter last year (above), while the three banners at First Baptist in Edmonton, Ontario, encourage congregants to embrace the city as a mission field.

life to the heart of the city, and that each member has a role to play in that work—a work that is grounded in the Lord's Supper, where bread is broken and wine is poured out for the sake of the world.

Didactically. At other times the visual arts instruct us in the teachings of Christian faith. In Indianapolis, Redeemer Presbyterian Church recently created an art installation whose intention was to accompany a sermon series during Advent. A key idea was that life springs forth from the Word of Light. Stacks of Bibles, paper-collage banners embedded with live plants, jasmine set in the windows, tall glass candles, pink lanterns, and encaustic (painted with hot wax) paper hovering fantastically over the stage communicated a visual dimension of this idea. The installation also contributed aesthetic beauty to the space—a delight in line, color, smell, and texture.

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Symbolically. In an example from the early church, we see how catacomb art formed the way Christians perceived what went on above ground. They saw images of Christ the Good Shepherd and of Jonah in the whale's belly. Such images functioned symbolically as counternarratives to the cult of the emperor. They reinterpreted reality as Christians daily experienced it. And while the images could not prevent the community from suffering, they charged the community's imagination with a prophetic vision that sustained it in the face of death. There was an Emperor, seated at the right hand of the Father, who would put the world to rights once and for all.

In sum, when we think of the visual arts as formative, it helps us pay attention to the ways in which our sight is formed—or malformed—in worship. The hope is that these artistic experiences will form a holistic, Christlike view in all of our lives.

A RE-FORMED SIGHT

I think some members at Hope Chapel had a formative experience with Laura's art. By showing us pixelated bodies rather than solid ones, the work reminded us that we do not see people rightly simply by looking at them; our sight is damaged and needs mending. Also, by bringing experiences of hardship to our awareness, the art showed us that these were things that we could feel sad or angry about. Even better, God had provided the Psalms to show us how to pray with sanctified and deeply felt emotion about these matters.

Against the temptation to despair that suffering will have the last word, the art invited us to imagine what often feels impossible: that God is in fact present to our suffering. It invited us to hope in a God who has borne our sufferings with us, for us. And, finally, the art challenged us to love the poor and needy. It stirred us to consider how with our own hands and feet we might love those far from home as well as those close by.

In experiencing Laura's art over seven weeks, our congregation was given the opportunity to perceive the poor and the needy in gospel ways. We "prayed with the eyes" and were changed accordingly. Did this transformation come about automatically? No. Did a re-formed habit of sight occur immediately? No again. It was a slow, uneven process, and if the art formed sanctified habits of sight, that was due in no small part to a long and purposeful "training" period. Our congregation had already been exposed to a considerable amount of visual art, and both pastors and artists had made good teaching a priority. We recognized, furthermore, that the sanctification of our eyes would occur over a great deal of time; we would need a culture to help us engage visual art in a transformative fashion.

If Laura's art disciplined us in anything particular, however, it disciplined us to re-see the people who sat in the pews nearby, whose brokenness on certain days (if we were honest) we often had no interest in seeing. With the aid of this art, though, we were given an invaluable opportunity, to see them with a hopeful love. ✚

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JESUS DISAPPOINTS EVERYONE

Our Savior has come,
but we're often blind to his purposes.

By John Koessler

IT WAS EARLY IN THE FALL SEMESTER. Ken and I were getting acquainted over lunch. I could tell by his incandescent grin that he was a freshman. “I’m going to be a pastor,” Ken said. “It’s going to be cool!” “What makes you so sure it’s going to be cool?” I tried not to look amused. He seemed shocked by the question. The radiant glow of his smile dimmed momentarily, and he looked as if I had muttered an unexpected indecency. But the grin quickly returned to his face, and he dismissed my question with a shake of his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s going to be cool!”

Several years later, I had lunch with Ken again. He was a senior by then, and his enthusiasm had dampened. He had not quite reached the low ebb that Job’s wife did. That is to say, he was not ready to curse God and die. But he did seem genuinely disappointed—with his college experience, his church, and, I think, with God.

As I listened to him talk, it was my turn to be disturbed. I thought back to our first lunch together and wondered what had soured his disposition. He did not want to talk about it. He muttered something vague and recriminating about the church. He stared darkly at his plate, and I tried to lighten the mood with small talk and encouragement. But it was no use. Try as I might, I could not resuscitate the rosy-cheeked freshman. I ate quickly and wished him the best. A few weeks later, I watched him walk across the platform and receive his diploma, wondering whether his disposition would eventually improve.

It might not. Those who serve Christ are as prone to disappointment as anyone else. If the Gospels are any indication, we might even say that disappointment is a certainty. Read the Gospels with all their sharp edges intact. What are they but a record of disappointment with Jesus on a grand scale?

Just ask John the Baptist.

Ill at ease in Herod’s prison, John sent messengers to Jesus with a question: “Are you the one

Illustration by Rick Beerhorst



who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matt. 11:3). The question comes as something of a surprise. After all, John was one of the first to publicly identify Jesus as “the one who comes after me” (John 1:27). It was John who told Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you” (Matt. 3:14). John saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus at his baptism and heard the voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). If anyone had known the answer to this question, it would have been John.

It is possible that John had grown discouraged with the way his circumstances had turned out. Perhaps the darkness of Herod’s prison had dimmed John’s confidence in Jesus and his mission. But this too seems unlikely. John was used to a life of hardship. He dressed like a nomad and lived like a wild man of the desert, surviving on insects and honey (Matt. 3:4). Do we really believe that a prison cell could break his spirit? What is more, John would not have been surprised to find himself Herod’s prisoner. He was a student of Scripture. He knew what happens to prophets. Nine times out of ten, the prophet’s fate is a bad one. John would hardly have been shocked by his experience.

SETTING GOALS FOR GOD

John’s question signals his disappointment over the report he had received of Jesus’ ministry. The broad contours of John’s expectations were marked out in his warning to the religious leaders when they came to him for baptism. “You brood of vipers!” John thundered. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7–9).

According to John, Jesus had come to winnow the harvest. He would gather the grain and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:7–12). Instead, Jesus was roaming the hills of Galilee, preaching the gospel and healing the sick. The ax had been sharpened and the fire kindled, but Jesus did not seem interested in either. This was so at odds with John’s understanding of what the Messiah would do that he couldn’t help questioning it. It is disappointment, not doubt, that lies behind John’s question.

Failed expectation lies at the heart of every disappointment. We expect one thing and get something else. We expect beef for dinner and get chicken. We thought we would get a refund from the IRS, and we end up owing money. The weather report promised sunshine for the weekend, but it rains. Disappointments like these are so common you would think that we would be used to them.

But things are different with God. We expect better

treatment from him. We know that people will let us down (though this knowledge does not lessen our disappointment when they do). God is not like that. We may not know much about theology, but at least we know that God does not lie. There is no variableness or shadow of turning with him. He is *reliable*.

Yet this good theology sometimes leads to bad practice. It causes us to confuse reliability with predictability. Because we think that God’s mind and ours are the same, we set goals for God. We know what we want, and so we put it in the mouth of God. We let our desires govern our expectations.

Sometimes the goals we set actually align with what God intends. When that happens, we can become so encouraged that we set more goals for God. But sooner or later—and probably sooner rather than later—what God does is so at odds with our expectation that we hardly know what to think.

We pray for healing and the patient dies. The job that seemed so perfect goes to someone else.

That person who would have been the perfect spouse does not return our affection.

The result is more than a crisis of faith, at least as we usually define faith. Our difficulty is not that we have set the bar so high that we must now come to terms with God’s inability to come through. We know what God can do. We believe he can meet our high expectations. No, the problem is just the opposite. What really bothers us is that we have misread God’s purposes. We are deeply disturbed, and not merely because he has failed to do what we wanted or even expected him to do. We are haunted, instead, by the fact that God hasn’t done what we believe in our hearts he *should* have done.

OUTRAGED AND DISTRESSED

Of course, not all disappointments are equal. Most are minor and easily forgotten. Some are more serious. A few haunt us all our days. John’s disappointment was the more serious kind. It was the sort of disappointment Jonah felt when he saw that the people of Nineveh were to be spared (Jonah 4:1–2). It was the disappointment of Habakkuk, who cried, “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” (Hab. 1:3) It is the same disappointment you and I feel when we see injustice around us. Oppression and evil seem to be on every side, and God appears to do little or nothing about it.

Since we are people of action as well as faith, we do what we can to make a difference. We take to the streets and befriend the homeless. We give our money to organizations that work for justice. We register to vote and try to change the system. Yet no matter what we do, the problems multiply. We keep looking for reinforcement, but no cavalry appears on the horizon. What good is the gospel if it allows a wicked ruler like Herod to treat God’s prophet like his personal plaything? We are disappointed with God because he allows the guilty to go unpunished.

But just as many, it seems, wrestle not with the outrage

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of Jonah but with the distress of Abraham (Gen. 18:25). What disturbs them is the possibility that God might cast anyone into hell. Many evangelicals, especially younger evangelicals, see the notion of hell as cruel and barbarous. They wonder whether such an idea is consistent with a God of mercy and grace. How can a God who “so loved the world” bear to watch his creatures suffer for eternity? If he means to teach sinners a lesson, couldn’t he think of a better punishment than casting them into a lake of burning sulfur?

Oddly enough, it is common to find both dispositions—outrage and distress—in the same person. Such people are simultaneously frustrated with God for leaving the guilty unpunished and distressed at the thought that he would condemn anyone. They are like the people Jesus describes after John’s messengers leave: “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds” (Matt. 11:16–19). When Jesus condemns John’s generation with these words, he also condemns ours and offers a frank assessment of our ambivalence. What do we really want from God? Do we want justice or mercy? It would seem that we want justice without judgment and mercy without justice.

YOUR GOD HAS COME TO SAVE YOU

Jesus’ condemnations reveal an even more disconcerting truth. They suggest that on some level, Jesus disappoints everyone. Jesus is an equal opportunity disappointer. He disappoints not only the people of Nazareth who drove him out of the synagogue and tried to throw him off a cliff because he wouldn’t perform miracles for them, but also people like those in Korazin and Bethsaida, where he *did* perform miracles. Jesus disappointed friends and foes alike.

Jesus’ reply to John’s question should be a clue that we have missed something. Our disappointment is mainly a problem of perception. Most striking about Jesus’ answer is that he provides no new information. John already knows everything that Jesus tells him. Even the description of Jesus’ miracles merely reminds John what he has already been told. So how does Jesus’ answer help? It alludes to a passage in Isaiah, set in the context of a promise that John, as a student of Scripture, would have recognized immediately: “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be



strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you” (Isa. 35:3–4).

What is Jesus’ answer to John’s messengers? “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor”

(Matt 11:4–5). In effect, Jesus is saying: *Tell John*

that your God has come—that he has come with a ven-

geance. John, your God has come to save you.

In other words, like John we are disappointed with Jesus because we do not see what he is *really* doing. It turns out that we have been laboring under a major misapprehension. Jesus came *for* us, but that does not mean that he came to *please* us. Jesus came *for* us, but he does not answer *to* us. He will not subject himself to our agenda, no matter how good that agenda might be. Instead, Jesus demands that we submit ourselves to his agenda.

Is the solution to our disappointment, then, to “suck it up”

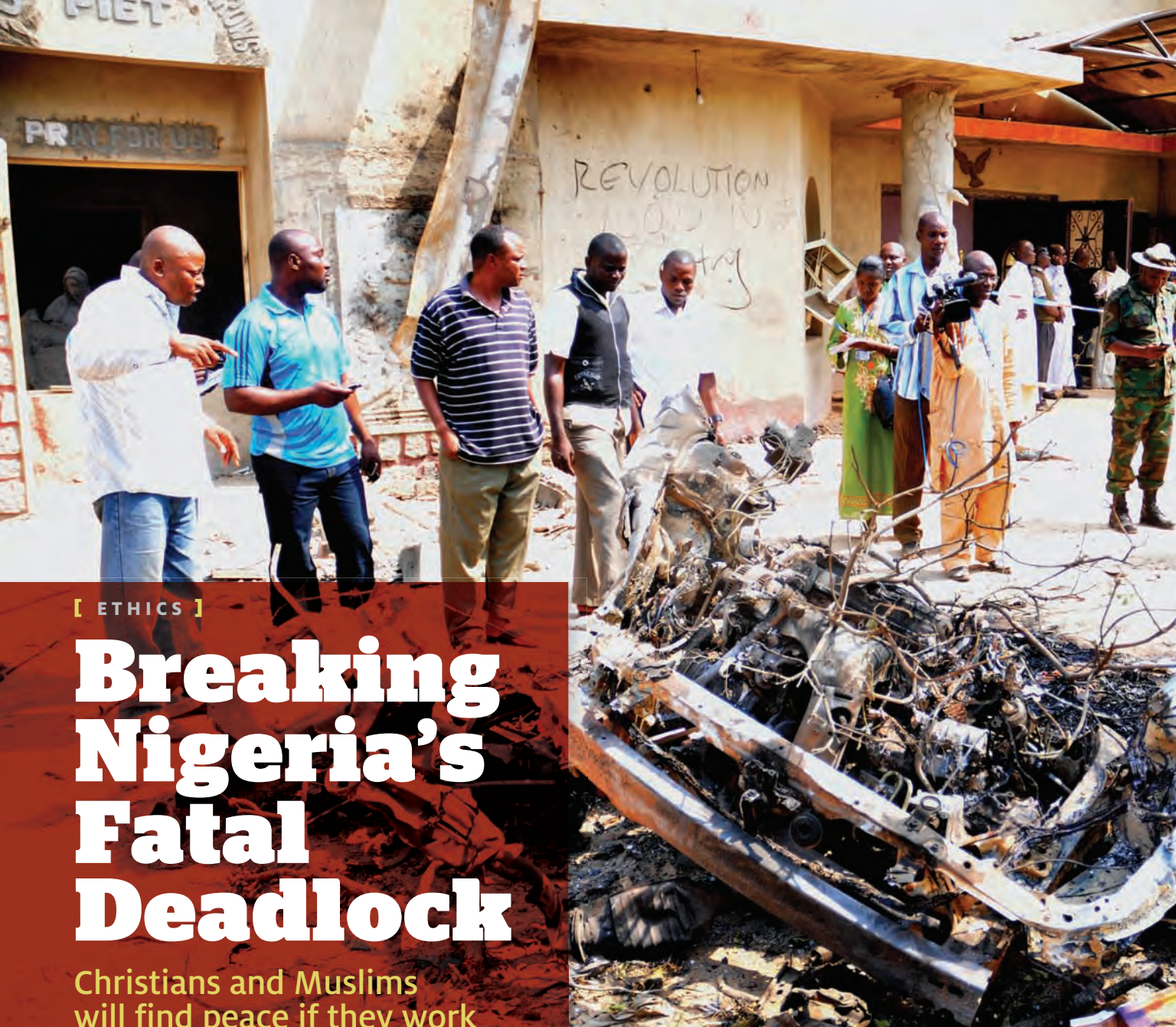
and “tough it out”? Or to admit that “life is disappointing” and resolve to “get over it”? No, just the opposite. Jesus’ parting words to John’s disciples were words of both blessing and warning: “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Matt. 11:6). These were the last words that John would hear from Jesus before his death, and they are Jesus’ last words to us in our disappointment—no matter what the cause.

In the face of great disappointment, we usually ask for an explanation. This is because we foolishly think that an explanation will make us feel better. Has it ever occurred to us that it might do the opposite? Instead of an explanation, Jesus offers something far superior: himself. When it comes to disappointment, there is no other remedy. It is the nature of disappointment to match us measure for measure. As long as we hold on to it, disappointment will wrap itself around our heart like a great snake. The tighter we hold on to it, the tighter it will grip us. The only way to free ourselves is to bow the knee to Christ.

We can hold on to disappointment, or we can hold on to Christ. We can place our disappointment under the power of the Cross and hold on to hope. When we offer our disappointment to Christ, we really offer ourselves to him. As long as we hold on to hope, we surrender ourselves to the grip of God’s grace. John should have known. This is what the voice from heaven had said all along: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Jesus disappoints everybody. Everybody except for One.



John Koessler, professor of pastoral studies at Moody Bible Institute, is the author of *Folly, Grace, and Power: The Mysterious Act of Preaching* (Zondervan).



[ETHICS]

Breaking Nigeria's Fatal Deadlock

Christians and Muslims will find peace if they work together for justice. By Sunday Agang in Kagoro, Nigeria

WHEN A SUICIDE bomber drove an explosives-packed car into the flagship church of one of Nigeria's largest denominations, angry Christian youth retaliated by burning Muslim shops and killing nearby motorcycle riders.

The February incident, which killed 12 and injured 40 at the Church of Christ in Nigeria's Jos headquarters, fueled the global debate over whether Nigeria will erupt

into a religious civil war. Christmas Day bombings of northern churches by Islamist extremists, which killed 44, also fueled such fears. The headlines haven't stopped since.

Missing from all the analysis and commentary on the ethnic, political, and economic causes of such violence was one crucial element: theology.

Decades of violence have tested the faith of Nigerian Christians, but have also warped their theology. Too many of them now believe that violence is more redemptive than nonviolence; in other words, they resort to human efforts—traditional retaliation—when seeking justice. Correcting this

warped theology offers the best way forward. Violence is a moral problem that challenges the core of the nature, presence, and power of the gospel in any environment.

Nigeria began the 21st century with the February 2000 slaughter of thousands in Kaduna over the introduction of Shari'ah law, and September 2001 saw a spree of church and mosque burnings in Jos. In November 2008, disputed local elections triggered clashes between Muslim and Christian youth in Jos. Hundreds died. In April 2011, riots following the controversial election of Christian president Goodluck Jonathan killed an estimated 800 people. Hundreds more have died in 2012 since Boko Haram militants urged Christians to leave the north.



Fanning the Flames: The suicide bombing of a Christmas Day Mass fueled fears that Nigeria would descend into civil war.

dwindling. However, both arguments challenge the core teaching of Christian faith and theology, resulting in a deadlock. Rather than fighting back or folding our hands, Christianity teaches us to leave vengeance to God while taking concrete steps to bring peace. Scripture says, “Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

After years of researching, writing, and living in two flashpoints—Kaduna and Jos—on Nigeria’s fault line between its mostly Christian south and mostly Muslim north, I argue for a third response that will finally bring healing: just peacemaking.

In the book *The Impact of Ethnic, Political, and Religious Violence, and a Theological Reflection on Its Healing*, I outline the salient reasons why just peacemaking is the solution to Nigeria’s cycles of sectarian strife. My research shows that both Muslims and Christians fall victim to the Devil’s scheme of using human agents to perpetuate moral excess and corruption. For example, in order to maintain the status quo of systemic injustice and structural inequality, the Nigerian political elite pit the poor from both faith communities—Islam and Christianity—against each other. They do so by creating an environment of political, social, economic, and ethnic dissatisfaction. The resulting violence has affected both the way Christians and Muslims relate to one another, and also the way Christians do theology in Nigeria.

THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE

The loss of ethical perspective stems from a reactionary theological method prevalent during the heyday of African independence in the late 1950s and early ’60s. It prompted political and cultural criticism of the West and caused African theologians to engage in a hermeneutic of suspicion. Their theology began with the burden of trying to indigenize Christianity so that Africans who saw it as foreign would accept it. They criticized Western imperialism on one hand and Islam or traditional African religions on the other.

This approach did more harm than good. African theologians spent too much energy

judging Western theologians, and spent little time developing theology to benefit God’s kingdom in the African context. This impaired dialogue with the global community and other faiths. It censured society without equally criticizing itself. Consequently, in Nigeria today, “The land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of violence” (Ezek. 7:23). The Christian community has been lured into the language of violence instead of the language of dialogue, love, and compassion. Christians lack the antibodies to resist the temptation to fight back when attacked.

Christian leaders across the country argue that the Christmas Day bombings were a declaration of war on Christianity. “Nigerian Christians may have no other option than to fight back their attackers,” the Christian Association of Nigeria recently told President Jonathan. Pastor Philip Mwelbush, the association’s leader for Plateau State, told the Associated Press, “We have a proverb in Nigeria: ‘If you push a goat to the wall, he will bite you.’ [Muslims] have pushed us to the wall.”

But do Nigerian Christians truly have no other option than to respond with the same violence meted out by Muslim extremists?

The unfortunate truth is that after decades of religious violence, many Nigerian Christians are no longer willing to listen to Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek. Feeling that Muslim extremists have had enough of a field day, these Christians have placed their hope for redemption in violence because they misinterpret Jesus’ cheek-turning as mere passivity. What they don’t realize is that what violence cannot do, *active nonviolence*—just peacemaking—can do. “Violence begets violence,” said Martin Luther King Jr. But active nonviolence begets justice, love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

Just peacemaking requires dialogue and reconciliation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples the principle of just peacemaking. Many think that just peacemaking is an impossible ideal. But that is misreading the text—one of many effects of violence upon the clarity of the gospel in Nigeria. Close attention to the text shows that Jesus was offering something else: a “transforming initiative,” in the words of ethicist Glen Stassen.

Christians need to understand that the central message of the Sermon on the Mount is a protest against the socioeconomic and sociopolitical injustices of Jesus’ day. In preaching this sermon, Jesus demonstrates that he loves righteousness, justice, and

The escalating attacks on churches and their members have prompted two main reactions. Some church leaders proclaim that Christians have the right to fight back against such evil. “We have turned both [cheeks], and they have slapped us. There is nothing else to turn,” says John Praise, general overseer of Dominion Chapel International Churches. Other church leaders argue that, based on Jesus’ teachings, Christians must always turn another cheek. “[Jesus] did that when he was arrested. It was what he used to conquer the world,” says Bishop Wale Oke, a national vice president of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria.

Today the eye-for-an-eye camp is growing in numbers, while the cheek-turners are

human flourishing.

God desires that the church should model and call the world to its God-given vocation: creating a humane society where justice, love, kindness, compassion, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are a way of life. This is why the biblical concept of righteousness emphasizes interpersonal relationship, creating community, and hope for the future. The church's understanding of God's justice should shape its relationship with the rest of the world, particularly other faiths that do not share its perspectives. God is just because he brings justice to unjust men and women and makes them right. His justice is a saving justice (Ps. 31:2; 146:7). Through this justice, God creates peace—a *shalom* that lasts.

The enemy of humanity is the Devil's schemes cast in social and political injustices. Nigeria's elite perpetuate moral excesses, encouraging a vicious cycle of violence that helps them to preserve their power. As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann aptly observed in *Creating a Just Future*, "Unjust

systems can be kept alive only through violence. Where there is violence there is no peace; for where violence reigns, it is death that reigns and not life."

Just peacemaking focuses on the God of justice, love, patience, and compassion who

The cloud of fear hovering over Nigeria has kept Christian leaders from grasping a central aspect of Jesus' teaching.

gives every human being dignity. That dignity is at the heart of Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek. Jesus was introducing a transforming initiative that could return dignity to the poor. Theologian Walter Wink has argued that, based on the social and cultural context of Jesus' day, his message is far from passive. It is active. Jesus was teaching his disciples how to take back their human dignity in a Greco-Roman society where dehumanization was rampant.

Greco-Roman culture recognized the right hand as a hand of honor and the left hand as

a hand of dishonor. In that context, whoever used their right hand to beat someone reduced their victim to nothing. But if the victim forced his or her oppressor to use the left hand, then the oppressor reduced himself to nothing. This turned the tables on the oppressors. They would not only realize that they had just dehumanized themselves. They would also abruptly recognize the humanity of the marginalized person.

Jesus was telling the poor that it was possible to nonviolently force persecutors to recognize their human dignity by turning the other cheek. The poor needed to remember that there was always an option; nonviolent initiatives would enable them to help oppressors recognize that the oppressed were fellow humans, not infidels. Jesus was teaching the church a powerful principle: Creative methods can end vicious cycles of violence.

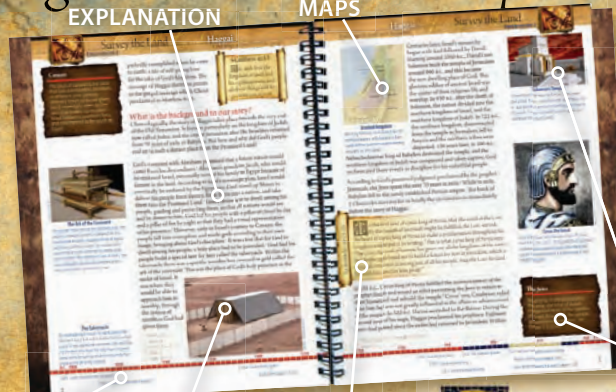
ALTERNATIVE TO RETALIATION

Unfortunately, the cloud of fear hovering over Nigeria has kept Christian leaders and their

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followers from grasping this aspect of Jesus' teaching. Their assumption that "turning the other cheek" means passivity has led to revolts whenever violent attacks by Muslims occur. Christians seem to have no message for Muslims other than fighting back.

In Kaduna and Jos, I have proposed just peacemaking as an alternative to retaliation. I have been working with two groups—Ganty's Aid for Widows and Orphans (GAWON) and Global Relief and Development Mission (GRDM)—to demonstrate that just peacemaking is a viable option and to show how to practice this theology. I believe that Christians need to reach out to their Muslim brothers and sisters as fellow victims of the systemic injustices perpetuated by the rich elite. Through this process, Muslims who assume that all non-Muslims are infidels will recognize the fellow humanity of Christians.

In Kaduna, GAWON introduced a revolving loan program based on Jesus' principle that creative initiatives can reduce threats to human dignity. The loans empower Muslims and Christians widowed or orphaned by the sectarian violence that killed thousands in

2000. GAWON believes the best way to help Christian victims overcome retaliatory violence is to create opportunities for them to work alongside Muslim victims in order to build trust and confidence. Widows work on income-generating projects in groups of 10 based on their needs and interests. They hold each other accountable and support and encourage each other. The loan program launched in 2002 in the Moro'a chiefdom of southern Kaduna State. Since then, the community has enjoyed stability and peaceful coexistence. It has even provided refuge to Hausa-Fulani tribesmen forced to leave nearby communities where just peacemaking has not been practiced.

In Jos, GRDM gives loans and relief materials to both Christian and Muslim women in order to break the wall of partition between the two faiths. Because conflicts that emanate from differences are often very costly—destroying human lives as well as the material resources desperately needed by those who survive—GRDM collaborates with other NGOs and local governments to encourage the spirit of just peacemaking in Plateau State through

workshops, seminars, and parleys.

In a Nigeria confronted with myriads of problems that perpetuate the vicious cycle of retaliatory violence, the way out is to adopt Jesus' active principle of just peacemaking. Because sectarian violence heavily affects both the Muslim and Christian poor in northern Nigeria, they need each other. Christians should make every effort to work with poor Muslims in the north who suffer the same oppression and exploitation. Both need a new affection for God, for justice, for checks and balances, for accountability, and for a free press and an independent judiciary.

Fighting back or passively turning the other cheek will fail both Christians and Muslims. But just peacemaking, as a principle rooted in the theology of nonviolent reaction to hostility, provides a biblical alternative to retaliation. As the apostle Paul advised the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." ✚

Sunday Agang is provost of ECWA Theological Seminary in Kagoro, Kaduna State, and a John Stott Ministries—Langham scholar.

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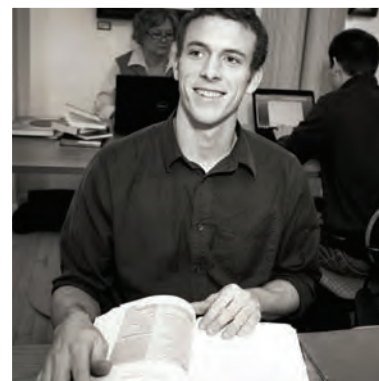
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Jesus Through Jewish Eyes

Why Jewish New Testament professor **Amy-Jill Levine** thinks Jews should know more about Jesus, and Christians more about first-century Judaism. Interview by David Neff



A

MY-JILL LEVINE, a professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University, has teamed up with Marc Z. Brettler of Brandeis University and 34 other Jewish scholars to produce the *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press). Levine, who teaches students preparing for Christian ministry at Vanderbilt Divinity

School, hopes *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* will help Christians understand the Jewish context of their faith and help Jews see that the Christian Scriptures are not only informative about Jewish history, but are also in many places “beautiful and profound.” CT editor in chief David Neff recently talked with Levine about this first-of-its-kind study Bible.

Why publish *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* now?

The publication is certainly timely; as several friends, both Jews and Christians, have suggested to me: “It’s about time!” For Jews, looking at the New Testament is a recovery of part of our own tradition. Indeed, the more I study the New Testament, the more I learn about early Judaism, and consequently the better Jew I become.

For Christians and Jews both, it’s always helpful to know the common roots of church and synagogue, to understand what we share and how we came to separate. The annotations, which draw from contemporaneous Jewish sources as well as discuss later rabbinic views on the topics in question, provide this information.

In working with Christian congregations and clergy groups, I find an enormous interest in Jesus’ Jewish context—how the parables would have sounded in Jewish ears and what the controversy stories suggest about early Jewish practice. I think that if Christians want to take the Incarnation seriously, they should also take seriously where and when and to whom it occurred. Hence the volume has 30 short essays on such topics as the Pharisees, the temple, the ancient synagogue, Jewish parables, Jewish miracle workers, Jewish beliefs



in angels and the afterlife, Jewish family life, and so on.

The Jewish Annotated New Testament also serves to correct unfortunate stereotypes of early Judaism that sometimes find their way into Christian preaching and teaching. It also addresses anti-Jewish teachings such as that all Jews are “Christ killers” or lovers of money or children of the Devil. The annotations provide historical contexts for the passages that give rise to such canards as well as note that the vast majority of Christians read their Bible as a text of love, not hate.

What are the key stereotypes that you wanted to clear up?

I find a fair number of Christians tend to look at early Judaism as comparable to the Taliban. That’s a gross misperception.

As is [the misperception] that all early Jews were looking for a warrior Messiah, and they rejected Jesus because he counseled peace.

As is [the misperception] that early Jews are so extraordinarily legalistic that they’re all sanctimonious and neurotic; then Jesus comes along and says, “Really, you don’t have to worry about the Law. Just love God and love neighbor. Be happy.” This stereotype doesn’t recognize that

for Jews, following Torah is a way of sanctifying the body, of sanctifying time, of preventing assimilation, of celebrating their own identity. Jews then, and now, looked at following the Torah as a blessing and a joy rather than a burden.

How widespread among Jewish scholars is interest in Jesus as a Jew?

For people of my parents’ generation, the New Testament was substantially a forbidden book, but now we have Jewish students taking courses in New Testament on college campuses. The Reform Jewish movement requires its rabbinical candidates to take a course on Christian origins/the New Testament.

I think it is essential for Jews to understand Christianity. If we Jews want Christians to respect us—which means knowing about our traditions, our Scripture, our practices, and our beliefs—then we owe Christians the same courtesy. That means not only knowing what is in the Scripture of the church, but also knowing how Christians have interpreted that text over time. It means recognizing that the vast majority of Christians do not read their New Testament and

come out as anti-Semites, that most of us read our texts graciously as texts of love rather than as texts of hate.

Since we Jews live in a predominantly Christian culture, knowing the New Testament also helps us understand art, music, literature, and political references.

If some rabbinical schools are requiring study of the New Testament, what should Christian seminaries do?

A number of years ago, I requested the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) put into a best practices recommendation that all candidates for Christian ministry have direct instruction on how to avoid anti-Jewish teaching and preaching. The ATS did not accept the request. So I work both nationally and internationally with clergy groups, seminarians, and religious educators to correct the major mistakes that are made—not because of bigotry, but because of ignorance. I show how knowing about first-century Judaism can help them not only avoid unintended anti-Jewish commentary but can also make their preaching more historically accurate and profound.

Were Jesus’ relationships to women as revolutionary as some have claimed?

Jesus has women followers and, indeed, women patrons, according to Luke 8. It’s women who were supporting the movement, and that would not be surprising. We have evidence of women serving as patrons of some Pharisaic movements, and we have evidence of women serving as patrons of Gentile figures as well.

The New Testament is a fabulous source for reconstructing Jewish women’s history. It tells us that women owned their own homes. For example, Martha welcomed Jesus into *her* home, and the house church in Jerusalem is at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

It tells us that women have freedom to travel. Hence, they can follow Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, or appear at the feeding of the 5,000 (the demographics are low: it was 5,000 “besides women and children,” as Matthew tells us). It tells us that they have use of their own funds—for example, the woman who spent all her money on physicians, the widow who put her coins in the temple treasury, the woman searching for the lost coin. Women show up in religious and civic institutions. Jesus tells a parable about a widow who has access to a judge. We know about women in the synagogue and women in the temple.

Women followed Jesus for the same reason that their fathers, their sons, their husbands, and their brothers followed him: They found his message compelling.

Jesus is not anomalous in having women followers, and he’s not anomalous in speaking to women. But the one place where he’s distinct is that the women surrounding him and, indeed, the men as well, are predominantly celibate. It’s difficult to name a married couple, with the exception of Mary and Joseph, who are together when Jesus talks to them. The only couple we have, with the possible exception of the two on the Emmaus Road, are Jairus and his wife. When we think about the women in the Gospels—the Samaritan woman at the well, the bent-over lady, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Joanna, Susannah, the Canaanite mother with the demon-possessed daughter, and so on—none of them is accompanied by a spouse, and some of them have actually left their spouses. This leads me to suspect that women outside traditional domestic arrangements may have found a special place in Jesus’ movement, because he talks about a



his followers such that they were willing to leave their homes and families to follow him and give up their lives for him. In that particular time and place, he was able to give fellow Jews a certain hope that some of them did not find elsewhere. To look at any one aspect of his tradition does not give us the full impact that he would have made on his followers.

We must also talk about Paul. Evangelical Protestants debate the New Perspective on Paul because it seems in tension with our 16th-century Reformation interpretations. At the same time, we really appreciate scholars like N. T. Wright.

The New Perspective allows us to see Paul operating within his Jewish context rather than against it. Since Paul claims that context—“a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, . . . as to righteousness under the law, blameless”—and since Paul is continuing to interpret Torah, I think the New Perspective is helpful.

I think it behooves anyone who takes Scripture seriously to continue to look at the history involved, to continue to question our own religious traditions over time, and to put our theologies in dialogue with what history can tell us.

One legacy of the Reformation is understanding Paul to say that his fellow Jews claimed law-keeping could lead to salvation—what we’ve come to call “works righteousness.” How did Jews in the first century think about why and how they would enjoy the world to come?

There’s no single party line held by all Jews in the first century. We don’t have a head Jew to tell us what to believe. Even if there were, we probably wouldn’t listen.

new family of faith. “Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Perhaps women who have never married, widows, women who have been deserted by their husbands or divorced—perhaps they found a special role in the new kinship group Jesus was establishing.

So what was truly original about Jesus?

He’s the only person I can find in antiquity who says you have to love your *enemy*. But you have to look at the entire person to see his distinctiveness. Other people told parables. Other people referred to God as Father. Other people debated how to follow Torah. Other people lost their lives on Roman crosses. Other people proclaimed that God’s justice will be breaking in, and that we can live as if we’ve got one foot in that world to come.

But the way Jesus puts it together makes him distinctive: the striking images that he gives, the loyalty that he engendered from

There’s no single party line held by all Jews in the first century. We don’t have a head Jew to tell us what to believe. Even if there were, we probably wouldn’t listen anyway.

Jews were not, and are not, following Torah in order to earn God’s love or in order to earn a place in the world to come. God’s love is already in place. That’s how Jews came into the covenant, for the covenant is a sign of divine love. Tractate *Sanhedrin* in the Mishna says all Israel has a share in the world to come (and then it has a few exception clauses). Jews are following Torah because that’s part of their covenant with God, and it’s how they return God’s love as well as show love of neighbor and love of stranger.

What are the really important Jewish themes that Christians tend to miss in the New Testament?

The really important Jewish themes are also themes in the church, so I don’t think Christians are missing them. These include the love of God (Deut. 6) and love of neighbor (Lev. 19).

There is a strong concern in both the Jewish tradition and in the New Testament for correct behavior. Jews are very much concerned with how one acts, with how one lives one’s life, and not just with belief. Throughout the New Testament, the issue is not only what one should believe, but also what one should do. Paul always ends his letters with ethical exhortation. So the Jewish concern for how you sanctify daily life carries on into the New Testament. ☩



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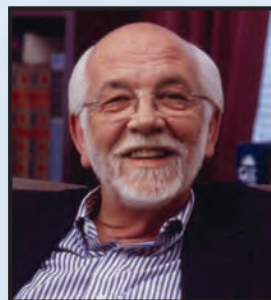
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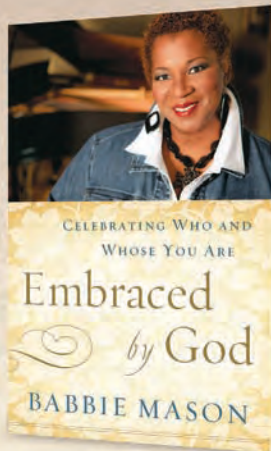
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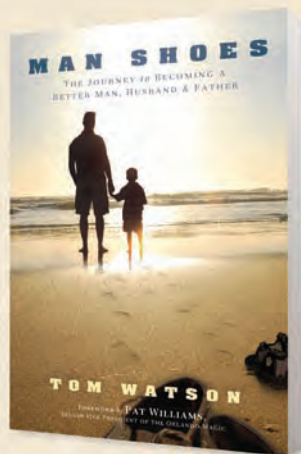
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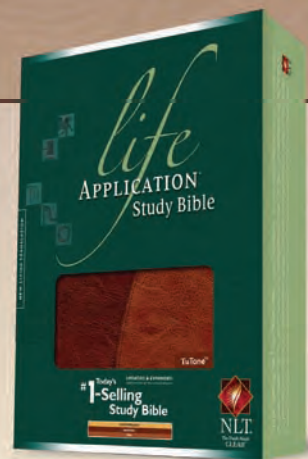
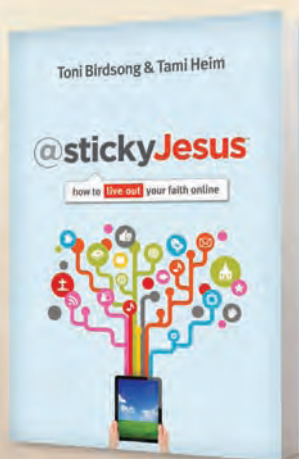


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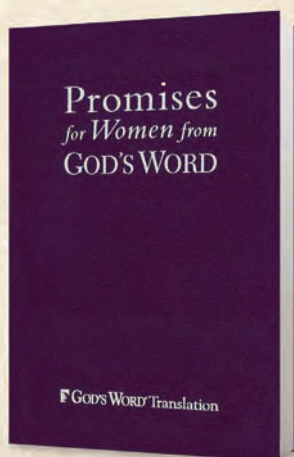
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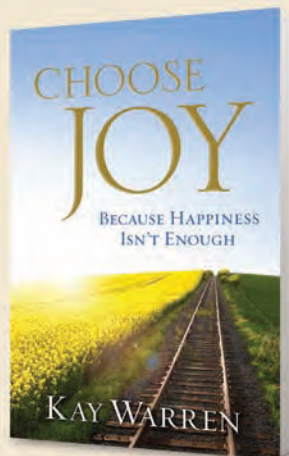
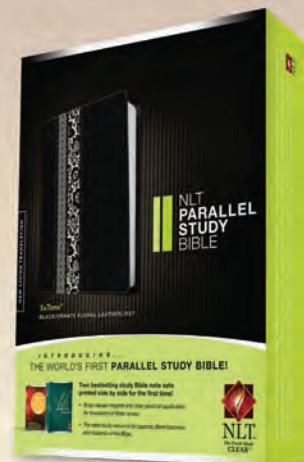
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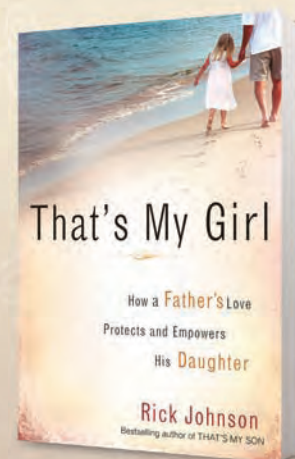


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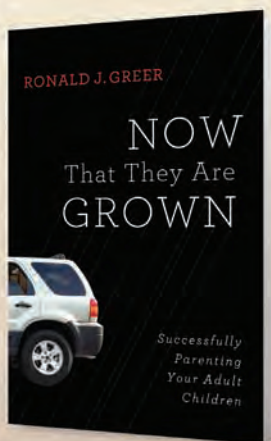


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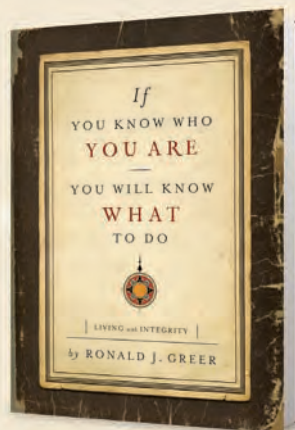
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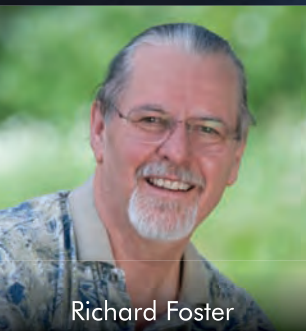
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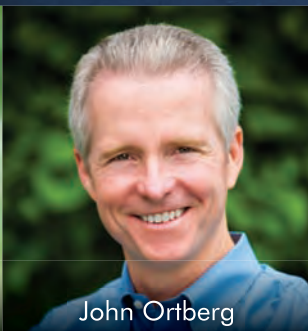
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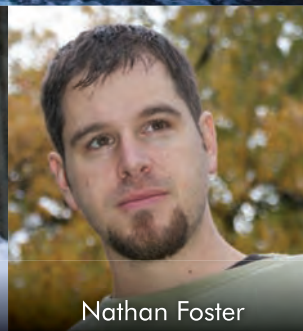
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There is so much potential for Christ-centered microfinance as we address a basic component of poverty alleviation—helping the financially poor find jobs.

Peter Greer

President and CEO, HOPE International

Helping the Poor

Christianity Today's recent cover story "Cost-Effective Compassion" [February] sought to delineate the best ways to eliminate poverty. All the strategies listed have merit and value, but the reality is much more complicated.

Without broadening the poor's understanding of the "why," the proposed solutions do not help much. The head of our nonprofit told me to forgo physical development. He could get plenty of groups to focus on clean water, nets, child sponsors, and so on. Instead, he suggested I focus on what we call "human resource development": long-term investment in working directly with the people. Often the gains are imperceptible, but without it, physical development quickly becomes what the locals call "monuments" to those who built them.

NEIL JOHNSTON
Grand Prairie, Texas

I was surprised that in your list of the top 10 strategies for poverty alleviation, only one directly relates to job creation. Ward Brehm, author of *White Man Walking*, wrote, "The best way to help the poor is to help them not be poor anymore."

Wouldn't job creation and employment be the most fundamental part of accomplishing this?

Job creation is the engine of economic growth and organizations. There is so much more potential for Christ-centered microfinance (including not just small loans but also entrepreneurship training and savings services) and other employment-based solutions to be embraced by the church as we address a basic component of poverty alleviation: helping the financially poor find jobs.

PETER GREER
President, HOPE International
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Editor's Note: For more responses to our February package on poverty, visit MoreCT.com/morepoor.

Naming the Blame

I appreciated the article about the rising sea level around Tuvalu and the theological questions it raises for Christian inhabitants ["Natural Theology," Briefing, February]. However, I was disheartened that one professor blamed "human behavior and injustice" for the destruction. Global climate change is not proven to be

the cause of Tuvalu's problems. Some scientists say the cause is rather coral growth, land reclamation, and deposits of sediment.

It bothers me to see this allegation printed unchallenged, as if it's established fact. What makes it so dangerous is that the prescriptions for "fixing" this supposedly human-caused problem will impoverish and steal the liberties of countless millions through regulation and taxation.

LYNN BARTON
Medford, Oregon

Health Crisis

At last, some real inroads into the brutal trade of abortion ["Un-Planned Parenthood," February]. But the question remains: How will pro-lifers provide some of the services (outside of abortion, of course) now provided at low cost by

Planned Parenthood? It's okay to win a victory like this, but are we, as advocates for an abortion-free world, prepared to pick up the slack and help women in trouble no matter the cost?

RICHARD STANDLEY

E-mail

Two Thumbs Up

The "Critics' Choice Awards of 2011" [February] is a great list. I am always encouraged by CT's good taste and high level of engagement with the arts. Christians

TOP 3 What got the most comments in February's CT

40%
Cost-Effective
Compassion
Bruce Wydick

14%
A Most
Personal Touch
Mark Galli

9%
The 2011 CT
Movie Awards

READERS' PICK The most praised piece in February's CT



Cost-Effective
Compassion
By Bruce Wydick

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need more of that—a willingness to see film as art and evaluate it on proper artistic terms, instead of constantly moralizing over whether scenes are “appropriate.”

STEPHEN M.
E-mail

Defining Worship

CT's February editorial, “You Can't Worship Here,” makes a valid theological point, one made by a court which is thus “establishing religion.” But the editorial failed to note that neither a court, nor a school system, nor a government entity can or should determine church theology. The church must determine its own theology based, of course, on the Word of God. That the church should take the theological position that you point out the court came to is a valid point to make. But let us not confuse that with empowering courts or other government entities to determine or make decisions based on their view of church theology.

KENNETH HENES
Cottage Grove, Wisconsin

Graham and Stott Agree

The review of Alister Chapman's *Godly Ambition* [“Stott Life Portrait,” CT Review, February] states that Billy Graham disagreed with John Stott with regard to the Lausanne Covenant's affirmation that sociopolitical involvement is a Christian

duty. This is misleading. Graham signed the Lausanne Covenant publicly. He certainly affirmed the entire covenant, including the statement that “evangelism and social-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”

There was disagreement several months later at the initial meeting of the Lausanne Continuation Committee in Mexico City, as to our mandate. Was it to promote evangelism pure and simple (a “narrower” purpose), or the whole biblical mission of the church (a “wider” mandate)? Graham and Stott did initially differ on this. The disagreement, however, was not over sociopolitical involvement as a Christian duty, but about the particular focus of the committee.

In the end it was formally—and, I believe, wisely—agreed that the mandate of the Lausanne Committee was to further the total biblical mission of the church, recognizing the central place of evangelism in that mission.

Graham and Stott may have had different approaches and emphases in these matters and in their respective callings, but the statement in the review is not correct.

LEIGHTON FORD
Honorary Lifetime Executive Chair
The Lausanne Movement
Charlotte, North Carolina



ONLINE POLL

DENYING OURSELVES
Did you give up anything for Lent?

37%

Yes, I gave up something material, like food.

18%

Yes, but I gave up something that is not material, like an activity.

20%

No, but I recognize the season in other ways.

25%

No, I didn't observe Lent.

Total votes: 353

(Online polls do not represent a scientific sample.)

compiled by Elissa Cooper

WORTH REPEATING

Things overheard at CT online.

“I see a combination of masculine and feminine attributes in Jesus. Are we to reject his feminine side?”

vrob125, pondering John Piper's recent statement that “God gave Christianity a masculine feel.”

Her.meneutics: “John Piper and the Rise of Biblical Masculinity,” by Rachel Stone

“The only thing established was that one man has a wavering opinion about who God is.”

Lynette, following the second annual Elephant Room, at which pastor T. D. Jakes talked about his own change in beliefs on the Trinity.

CT Liveblog: “T. D. Jakes Embraces Doctrine of the Trinity, Moves Away from ‘Oneness’ View,” by Michael Foust, Baptist Press

“It keeps us from supporting something in which we should be ahead of the world, not trailing.”

Phillip, expressing disappointment that Christians have difficulty appreciating art and artists.

CT Entertainment Blog: “Derek Webb's Feedback Film: What Just Happened?” by Mark Moring

“Doug Moo and his team have been extremely transparent about past mistakes in the process, but as far as the translation itself, it is still the most readable and balanced in terms of accuracy and clarity.”

Jamie, applauding LifeWay for committing to keep the 2011 NIV translation in stores.

CT Liveblog: “Lifeway Declines SBC Request to Bar NIV from Stores,” by Morgan Feddes

TIM DAVIS



Davis

Pastors' Ponzis

A rash of pastor-endorsed fraud taints our gospel witness.

It begins with a seemingly sincere offer of help from a trusted, Jesus-loving voice. But the conversation always dead-ends in perdition.

Case in point: The New Covenant Christian Center, a Seattle-area independent church, was the setting where a tragically familiar Ponzi scheme took root in 2003. The scheme's organizer offered to double or triple invested money in a matter of weeks through an overseas trading program. In total, 24 church members handed over \$1.6 million until law enforcement intervened in 2011 as the fraud collapsed. Who was that trusted voice behind this Ponzi? Anthony C. Morris, the pastor.

In recent years, Ponzi frauds that prey on the naïve, innocent, and trusting have lost billions. The Madoff Ponzi's price tag alone was \$20 billion. In these schemes, the organizer offers a high return rate at low risk, but in reality he pays existing investors with funds collected from new investors.

Prosecutors have uncovered more financial fraud in church networks than they ever imagined. "It took the financial downturn. Money was drying up—the new investors were not coming in, so Ponzi schemes collapsed," IRS Special Agent in Charge for Criminal Investigations Ken Hines told *Christianity Today*.

Hines, based in Seattle, has helped expose Ponzis for more than 20 years. He has seen first-hand how the church environment has proven to be an ideal context for affinity fraud. "When you go to church, you don't expect to get lied to or deceived or manipulated into losing your life's savings."

The New Covenant Ponzi was no isolated event. The stain of fraud that may have started in the pew has now spread to the pulpit. More pastors, elders, and other spiritual leaders are engaged in or endorse investments that later turn out to be Ponzis. Unfortunately, there are too many examples

to cite. Here are three:

- In the Ukraine, Nigerian megachurch pastor Sunday Adelaja faces a civil suit that he took a leadership role in the \$100 million Kings Capital fund, which turned out to be a Ponzi. There are hundreds of victims.

- Under the sponsorship of pastor Eddie Long and New Birth Missionary Baptist Church near Atlanta, lay minister and business executive Ephren Taylor persuaded church members to invest in City Capital Corp. for a "guaranteed 20 percent return." But investors, who have filed suit alleging a Ponzi scheme, may have lost more than \$1 million.

- A federal judge in Portland recently sentenced a former preacher, Johnny "Mickey" Brown, to almost 11 years in prison for a Ponzi fraud in which he misused the credit cards of mostly elderly church members and others. Losses may exceed \$4 million.

The sickening net effect of fraud puts a dark cloud over pastors and other leaders in local churches. Very few pastors will ever become certified financial planners. The issue is honesty and integrity, not investment advice per se. If a faithful church member cannot trust his or her own pastor, whom can they trust?

This is why when it comes to investment advice (not advice about the family budget or paying off your credit card debt) a pastor should stay two steps away from any investment plan under discussion. At the practical level, that means no endorsement or involvement of church or personal funds. Remove all appearances of conflict of interest so that

public trust can thrive.

Pastors can also help church members use unbiased third parties to evaluate investments. We should be skeptical of returns exceeding 8 to 12 percent annually and avoid secretive or highly exclusive investments.

Nearly one quarter of today's Ponzi schemes exploit friendships and mutual interests. When a church community is defrauded,

the ripple effects are deadly. Agent Hines said one fraud in San Diego "devastated that church community, broke that parish up—financially, emotionally, and spiritually."

Hines said many people who operate these frauds have no criminal record, not even a speeding ticket. He has no trouble pointing the finger at the human heart as an underlying cause. "What kicks in is the greed factor," he said. "Good

people go bad and it's always the greed factor or self-preservation. It clouds their judgment."

The spate of pastor-endorsed Ponzi schemes adds to the other pastor and priest scandals that have been in the news in recent years. Unfortunately, we're in a time when even honest pastors with deep integrity have to earn the community's trust by following the strictest of ethical guidelines. That may be burdensome, but it is a relatively easy yoke that will in the end lead to a hearing for the gospel.

In a Seattle courtroom in January, Morris pleaded guilty to fraud and money laundering charges. He agreed to restitution. Court-ordered financial restitution is great. But restoring our witness will take more than a repentant pastor. Visible, public accountability is vital to the gospel. ✚



The sickening net effect of fraud puts a dark cloud over pastors and other leaders in local churches.

*Animals and
the Afterlife*

Do pets go to heaven?

MANY OF US HOPE SO

Wesley Smith is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism and author of *A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy: The Human Cost of the Animal Rights Movement* (Encounter, 2010).

We have come a long way since Descartes claimed that animals are mere automatons without the capacity for pleasure or pain. We now know the contrary is true: They experience. They suffer. They grieve. They love.

When it comes to our relationships with pets, we not only take them into our homes: We welcome them deep within our hearts. In fact, some become so attached that they yearn to be with their pets throughout eternity. C. S. Lewis speculated on the eternal fate of animals in *The Problem of Pain*, suggesting that at least tame animals might enter heaven through their relationship with humans, in the same way that humans do through their relationship with Christ.

But I worry that the question of pets in heaven could distort our understanding of eternal life as described in Scripture and Christian tradition. If we are not careful, we could cross the line into a sentimentality that shrinks our eschatological expectation. Our human idea of heaven might be walking an adored dog in the forest, but there is no indication that is anything like God's plan. The question of whether our pets go to heaven requires an examination of the natures of animals, of humans, and of God. Animals have their lives in God. In Psalm 104 we read that animals look to God for their food and that when he withdraws his spirit, they return to the dust. God marks the dropping of every sparrow.

But John 3:16 makes no mention of animals. Only humans are made in the divine likeness. Unlike animals, we are moral agents capable of sinning by commission and omission. That makes ours a completely different nature of being.

Here's an illustration: My late cat once raided a nest and I found her happily batting a helpless, now dying chick around the backyard. She was just being a cat. Had I done that, I would be rightly branded a monster. I also knew my human duty. I put the poor chick out of its misery with a heavy work boot and removed the carcass. Doing the right thing came at a cost: Chloe was so angry I spoiled her fun that she refused to look at me for the rest of the day.

God's love is unlimited, unconditional, and eternal. When we witness the very face of God and participate through constant worship in his ineffable essence—which we are told is the never-ending

activity of heaven—it will at the very least include all we yearn for when desiring to be with our pets forever.

So do pets have souls? Do they go to heaven? God knows. For now, “we see through a glass darkly.” Instead of speculating or making strained proof-texts, let us instead give thanks to God for the great gift of joy he has given us in our pets. Let us be confident in the knowledge that whatever his plans for our animal friends, all will be perfection and light.

VIA THE COVENANT

Karen Swallow Prior is a professor at Liberty University and has written on animal welfare for *CT's Her.meneutics* blog and other publications.

When I was young and gnostic, I was certain that pets do not go to heaven. I didn't know I was gnostic, of course. I simply thought that life on earth was about bicycles and ice cream and books and not saying certain words or smoking behind the barn with my cousins.

Heaven was about being with God and angels singing and seeing great-grandma again and not being in hell.

You only got to heaven if you were saved, and I hadn't seen any animals go to church, let alone go forward during an altar call. In the old days, I was told, a nearby farmer used to ride his horse to church, where he'd hitch her up to the iron rail that still stood outside the one-room country church in Maine where my family worshiped. I never imagined a horse coming inside to get saved.

Yet the Bible teaches that God does save animals. For example, God brought Noah two of each kind of living creature in order to save them from the Flood. God chastised reluctant Jonah about the need to save not only the human inhabitants of Nineveh, but also its many animals. Such salvation is not, of course, quite the kind invited by the altar call. Even so, it should not be overlooked.



God not only saves animals. At times, his covenants include them. God's covenant with Noah included "every living thing of all flesh" (Gen. 6:18–19, *KJV*). In Hosea, God proclaimed a covenant "with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground" (2:18, *NIV*).

When God made a covenant with one of his chosen ones, he often marked it by assigning them a particular name: Abraham, Sarah, Israel, Jesus, Paul. God told Adam to name the animals and, in so doing, Adam reflected God's acts of naming. When we choose to take into our household creatures that share with us the breath of life and bestow them with names, perhaps we enter into a kind of covenantal relationship with them too. To echo C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, perhaps when we name animals, they "become themselves" and our salvation "flows over into them."

I have put away my childish thinking about heaven. Scripture describes eternity not as an ethereal cloud-top existence, but as both spiritual and material, just as our life is now. It is a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13) where "creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). As foretold in Isaiah, animals will be there. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat . . . and a little child will lead them" (11:6). Perhaps God

will honor my acts of naming the animals by bringing Gracie, Kasey, Myrtle, Peter, Oscar, and so many more there, too.

I WISH WE KNEW

Ben DeVries is founder and administrator of Not One Sparrow, a Christian voice for animals.

Oddly enough, I was part of the animal advocacy community for several months before I took the question of whether animals have souls seriously. I had even written my seminary capstone paper on a biblical-theological foundation for animal welfare, and didn't feel compelled to address the subject directly.

When I heard others speak confidently of seeing their animal companions again, often "just over the rainbow bridge," I sympathized with their loss and the natural desire that arose out of it. But the hope of reuniting with our pets seemed more based in wishful thinking and eclectic spirituality than in a confessional hermeneutic. As a result, it seemed to compromise the clear scriptural calling, which does exist, to care for God's creatures.

Just over two years ago, when one of our own cats died suddenly from an unexpected complication after an otherwise successful surgery, I found myself looking at the question of animal souls in a much more personal light. Bubba had been a constant and beloved companion since we brought him home from an adoption center four years earlier. He was wonderfully affable, as his name suggests, and the perfect pet for our newborn son to grow up with. I took his loss hard, heartbroken as my wife and I said goodbye at the vet's office, and still sobbing as I buried him in pouring rain later that night. I wrote in my journal: "It's been a gut-wrenching couple of days . . . I miss him everywhere I look in the house . . . And I feel such a hole, especially not knowing if God has taken him back to himself for us to meet again or not. I so badly want to know if I'll see him again."

It occurred to me from time to time in my grief that if God had made Bubba, and knew and loved him even more than my family did, he could very well have some desire to bring his own treasured creation back to life someday.

The same might go for many other creatures with which God has a relationship as their Creator and Sustainer, whether we humans happened to share in that relationship or not. After all, our Savior said that not even one sparrow is ever forgotten by him.

But even if this is a reasonable conjecture, I have to come back to what the Bible does and does not say on the possibility. We know that death of any kind was never part of God's original plan, and that animals will certainly be part of the new heaven and earth, where death and tears will be no more. What we don't know is whether these will be specific animals from the old creation, including those we've known and loved.

I wish we knew.

In the meantime, it seems okay to ask God if his grace might extend that far, while doing my best to trust that heaven won't seem anything but complete regardless.





Defending Scripture. Literally.

And sometimes metaphorically, too.

I attended a Christian university in the long ago days of acid wash denim and Commodore 64s. One of my classmates, Ken Jacobsen, had a gift for impersonation. He was renowned for his imitation of Bono on the U2 song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” “I have spoke with the tongue of angels,” he’d croon when he got to the fourth verse. “I have held the hand of a devil.” But then he’d alter the lyric and sing, “N-o-t literally. It’s only a metaphor.” That always got a huge laugh.

It’s been decades, but I still remember the joke. I realize now it was humorous not only for its inherent silliness, but also for the way it held up a mirror to something funny about ourselves.

Most of us were earnest, sincere evangelicals. We weren’t biblical studies majors, but we saw the defense of the Bible as our sworn duty. Against the onslaught of those who sought to undermine Scripture’s authority, we committed ourselves to upholding it as the reliable Word of God.

One of the unintended side effects of our fervor was that we took almost everything literally, at least in spiritual matters. Generally, we weren’t very good with oblique metaphors and analogies. And if, like Bono, you talked about spiritual things in a seemingly unorthodox way, well, we worried.

There was much that was good about our impulses, and maybe they were necessary in a time when the “battle for the Bible” was raging. But for me, and, I suspect, others like me, our “literalist” convictions left us confused in significant ways—not only about song lyrics, but, much more tragically, about Scripture itself.

All these years later, I’m learning that understanding the literal meaning of the Bible is a more nuanced adventure than my college friends and I imagined. We’d been blithely unaware that there is more than one genre in the Bible, or that literary context profoundly matters to meaning. We didn’t understand that when we read ancient Hebrew prose

poems (like Genesis 1), wisdom literature (like Proverbs), or apocalyptic literature (like Revelation) as if they were science textbooks, we were actually obscuring their meaning.

For me, the most negative consequence of all that well-intentioned literalism was the conviction that Yahweh, having given us his straightforward Word, was completely comprehensible. This paradigm both diminished my perception of God and set up my faith for crisis when I discovered aspects of God that remain stubbornly shrouded in mystery.

If you’d told me back then that the language we have for God—even (especially) much of our biblical language—must be understood *analogically*, I would have prayed for you and backed away slowly. I wouldn’t have understood that there are no words that can be applied to God exactly the same way they are applied to creaturely things, no language that can be used “univocally.”

When I say that I am “alive” and God is “alive,” the word “alive” is analogical, not univocal—it does not apply to me (a temporal creature) the same way it applies to God (who is eternal). The same goes for words like “good” or “powerful.” Connotations of *imperfection* or *limitation* must be deleted from any word when it is applied to God, and the notions (as best as we can conceive them) of total perfection and completion must be added.

Understanding this sooner would have helped me with biblical descriptions of God’s “wrath.” I can only get a glimmer of what God’s wrath looks like when I divest the word of

the human implications of self-centered, reactionary anger, and condition it with the unchanging goodness that must clarify all of God’s attributes. Or take the word “Father.” The claim that God is our heavenly “Father” can ultimately mean something wonderful, even to my friends who had terrible human dads, because the word is not used univocally when it’s applied to God.

J. I. Packer likens our relationship with God to that of a two-year-old with a father who has a brain of Einsteinian proportions.

To make relationship possible, the father will have to accommodate himself to the toddler he loves. The child will know her daddy, but she won’t completely comprehend him. What the father reveals

to the daughter will be true, as far as it goes. But there will always be more.

We shouldn’t be surprised (or worried) that in his overtures to us God uses every kind of language available—straightforward (but culturally lensed) historical narrative, analogy, metaphor, parable, poetry, apocalyptic vision, and, hallelujah, the Word made flesh, Jesus. The best way to receive his Word is with the humble conviction that not only can we find what we’re looking for, it (he) will be more than we could hope for, imagine, or fully comprehend. That’s the best news there is.

Literally. 

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for “Defending Scripture. Literally,” a Bible study based on this article.

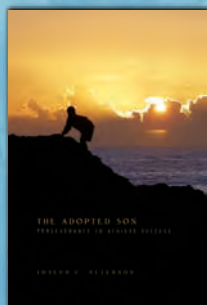


An unintended side effect of our fervor for Scripture was that we took almost everything literally. We weren’t very good with metaphors and analogies.

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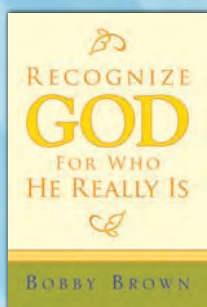
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Uniters, Not Dividers

Why evangelicals need to redefine themselves and reform the whole church.

Just what is an evangelical, anyway? The picture painted by the media—especially now that it's election time again—is confused and often unflattering. From the infamous “poor, uneducated, and easy to command” label hung on us by *The Washington Post* years ago, to the perception that we are gay-hating political maniacs in the hip pocket of the Republican Party today, it's not hard to understand that we have an image problem—and that we've let others define us.

Of course, we ourselves are part of the problem. Like those well-intentioned activists who met at a Texas ranch to anoint one of the presidential candidates in the Republican primaries. Or the pair of evangelical professors who wrote an article in *The New York Times*, criticizing evangelical leaders for their “rejection of knowledge” and for embracing “discredited, ridiculous and even dangerous ideas”—such as believing that homosexual behavior is sinful and that Darwin was wrong.

Perhaps it is time to step back and ask once again what an evangelical is.

It may seem that the word *evangelical* has been defined nearly to death, but a few answers bear repeating. First is Scottish historian David Bebbington's oft-quoted quadrilateral. Evangelicals, he says, can be recognized by these four traits: they are *biblical* Christians who proclaim the centrality of the Cross, emphasize the necessity of personal *conversion*, and do all of this with zealous *activism*.

Then there was Carl F. H. Henry's helpful use of the term “the evangelical church,” by which he meant that coalition of Bible-believing, gospel-centered Christians that stood against Roman Catholicism (which seemed monolithic in the 1950s) and liberal Protestantism (which in those days was “mainline” in more than name only).

There have been other concerted attempts, such as the Evangelical Manifesto, to define evangelicalism (its theology, its

positive, transdenominational nature) and to declare what it is not (a political movement, neither theologically liberal nor fundamentalist). Although these efforts contributed to the discussion, in the end they had little impact on the public and are relegated to search engines on the Internet.

One thing is clear: Serious evangelicals acknowledge certain “moments” that have decisively shaped our identity. First, we stand in continuity with the Trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church. Billy Graham once said that the teachings of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were central to being an evangelical. We agree. (Chuck made this point in his book *The Faith: What Christians Believe, Why They Believe It, and Why It Matters*, and Timothy in his *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness*.)

Evangelicals also accept the formal and material principles of the Protestant Reformation. The authority and sufficiency of the Bible on one hand and justification by faith alone on the other are core evangelical beliefs. But we also joyfully recognize that the Spirit continued to breathe life into the church long after Luther and Calvin were gone. Puritanism, Pietism, and Pentecostalism are all historic expressions of the spiritual awakenings that decisively shaped and continue to direct the future of the worldwide evangelical movement. A movement, by the way, which truly is worldwide, given the dramatic rise of evangelical believers in the Global South. This demographic shift makes the global evangelical movement, along with Roman Catholicism

and Orthodoxy, one of three vital, resilient forces of 21st-century Christianity.

What all this boils down to is that we evangelicals are heirs of the Reformation and that we best understand evangelicalism as a reform movement seeking to renew and strengthen orthodox faith within the holy, catholic, and apostolic church to which we belong and whose creeds we embrace. The

church is one because it is centered in Jesus Christ; holy not because its members are perfect but because Christ is pure and spotless; catholic not through allegiance to an earthly magisterium but because it is universal in mission and outreach; and apostolic because it is faithful to the teaching of the prophets and apostles found in Scripture.

When we realize we are seeking to reform the whole church, not just evangelicalism, we show the world that we are uniters, not dividers. The Manhattan Declaration is a great example of this approach. Evangelicals joined with Catholics and Orthodox to address the most pressing moral issues of our day: the defense of human life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty. We come from different traditions, but we chose to focus on our oneness in Christ as members of his body, the church—not on our theological distinctives or political differences. The result was half a million signers and a reshaping of the debate over these critical issues.

We can see more of the same if we remain faithful to the evangelical vision of a renewed, reinvigorated church, firm in its orthodox faith, bearing a positive witness both to individuals and in the public square.



We best understand evangelicalism as a reform movement that seeks to strengthen and renew orthodox faith.

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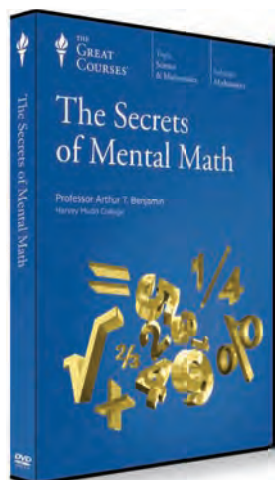
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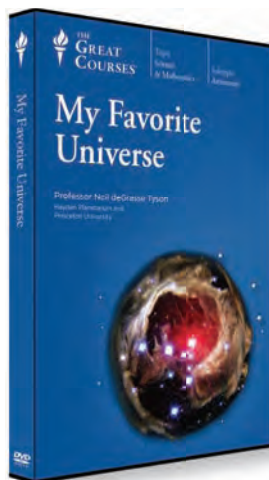
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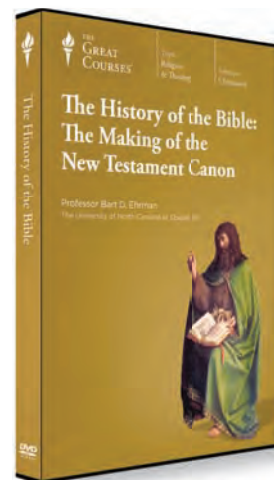
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CT REVIEW

BOOKS, MOVIES,
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Defending the Declaration

Social conservatism draws its viability from America's founding principles. By Andrew Walker

A

mericans have soured on social conservatism, if we're to believe many media pundits. Some see a hopelessly retrograde movement stubbornly clinging to outmoded attitudes that younger generations will inevitably reject. Others wonder why anyone would fixate on the "culture wars" when so many people are out of work, drowning in debt, and losing their homes to foreclosure.

And secular elites aren't the only ones writing social conservatism's obituary, or lamenting its influence. Liberal evangelicals

like Jim Wallis insist that younger evangelicals have moved beyond abortion and gay marriage to matters of immigration and economic justice. Many mainstream Republicans complain that social conservatives hold the party hostage to a divisive agenda. Happy to court social conservative votes, they sweep social conservative causes under the political rug once victory has been attained.

In ***The Case for Polarized Politics: Why America Needs Social Conservatism*** (Encounter) ★★★★★,

Jeffrey Bell, a former policy adviser to Ronald Reagan, stands this conventional wisdom on its head. Social conservatism, argues Bell, is too firmly rooted in America's founding ideals to become obsolete.

'WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS . . .'

Social conservatism is a relatively recent development in American history. It emerged, Bell says, as a response to the sexual revolution and cultural tumult of the 1960s, a decade marked by withering assaults on the institutions of church and family.

Bell ably demonstrates that social conservatism has continued to play an influential role in American politics, from the Reagan Revolution up to the present day, despite recurring protestations that the movement is on life support. He cites the political architecture Karl Rove built around social conservatism as an arguable reason that George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" commanded such large evangelical support and won two presidential elections.

But what explains this continued vitality, given all the confident predictions of demise? No other affluent Western country has witnessed the development of a similar political movement. This, argues Bell, is no accident, but rather can be traced to the divergent paths taken by the 18th-century European Enlightenment.

The French Enlightenment, shaped by thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, represented a radical break with traditional norms and values rooted in a Christian worldview.

Its proponents sought liberation from biblical religion, which they regarded as a tyrannical force to be overthrown. True freedom, in this vein, is freedom from constraints on appetite and action.

By contrast, the British Enlightenment had a more conservative orientation and generally remained within the confines of



Europe's "age-old monotheistic framework." It did not categorically reject the very notion of divine authority, or treat moral norms as irreconcilable with human freedom.

Steeped in the more conservative tradition of the British Enlightenment, America's founders grounded important liberties in a truth proposition unmistakably religious in character. Our Declaration of Independence famously holds that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator" with unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The founding documents of other countries, Bell notes, lack this theological emphasis.

The Declaration's insistence upon self-evident truths and rights derived from God, not government, has given social conservatism its philosophical grounding and a prolonged staying power in American political life. "What divides social conservatives from social liberals," writes Bell, "is this: Most—not all—social conservatives believe the words in [the Declaration] are literally true. Most—not all—opponents of social conservatism do not believe those words are literally true."

According to Bell, this basic difference underlies the "polarization" to which the title of his book alludes. The advancement of social liberalism, Bell notes, comes without exception from legal maneuvering. Social liberals, largely disagreeing with the

Undoubtedly, evangelicals hold to certain religious truths that ought to undergird the American political order. Whether they hold these truths to be 'self-evident' is another matter.

proposition that rights come from God, pressure the judiciary to invent new "rights"—for instance, a right to "privacy," encompassing the decision to kill one's unborn child, or a right to "marry" a partner of the same sex. Social conservatives, as the natural heirs to America's conservative founding, look to defend a treasured inheritance from such incursions.

For this, they are often attacked as paternalistic chauvinists or divisive bigots. But if they, and not their opponents, lay the strongest claim to the American founding, then we need to rethink the commonplace observation that social conservatives are aggressors in the culture wars. Social liberals are the real revolutionaries, harnessing government power to radically redefine society's values. But social conservatives—far from being intolerant "theocrats"—seek merely to preserve the religious heritage articulated,

however imperfectly, by the Declaration of Independence.

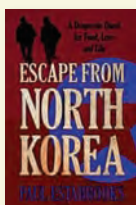
'... TO BE SELF-EVIDENT'

According to Bell, then, "social conservatism is more accurately seen as the application of natural law to politics—the self-evident truths of the Declaration—rather than as a political manifestation of religious revelation."

"Natural law" claims that certain truths are, in the Declaration's wording, "self-evident"—that is, accessible through human reason, without the aid of external revelation. Bell references Russell Kirk, the father of traditionalist conservatism, who understood there to be a moral order woven into the very fabric of existence, against which all manmade laws must be judged. According to Kirk and natural law theory, societies flourish most when universal principles are acknowledged *and* obeyed.

MY TOP 5 BOOKS ON NORTH KOREA

By Carl Moeller, CEO of Open Doors USA and coauthor of *The Privilege of Persecution* (Moody, 2011)



ESCAPE FROM NORTH KOREA

A Desperate Quest for Food, Love and Life

PAUL ESTABROOKS
(OPEN DOORS)

This true, riveting story documents a North Korean family's improbable journey from life under the brutal regime of the late Kim Jong-Il to freedom and newfound faith in Jesus Christ.



ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

Defiance and Hope in the World's Most Repressive Country

MIKE KIM
(ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD)

The author vividly describes his work with refugees along the North Korean/Chinese border and Christians' role in bringing light to this dark country.



THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON

A Novel

ADAM JOHNSON
(RANDOM HOUSE)

This secular narrative reveals that Christian ministries impacted Kim Jong-Il's innermost circles. It poignantly describes a woman captured smuggling Bibles who sings Jesus songs while tortured.



NOTHING TO ENVY

Ordinary Lives in North Korea

BARBARA DEMICK
(SPIEGEL & GRAU)

Demick, the *Los Angeles Times*'s Seoul bureau chief, narrates North Korean defectors' lives over 15 years. An Open Doors colleague recommends this as a primer on the world's number one persecutor of Christians.



THE GOOD DOCTOR

Bringing Healing to the Hopeless

SAI R. PARK, M.D.
(BIBLICA PUBLISHING)

This hope-filled story of a Christian Korean American doctor who built and staffed a hospital in Pyongyang offers proof that Christians can still significantly impact the people of the world's most restricted country.

Natural law can provide a moral grammar for bringing Christian truth claims to a pluralistic populace. If, however, natural law reasoning is essential to the social conservative project, then what about the many evangelical Christians who identify as social conservatives while remaining skeptical of natural law? Certainly, evangelicals affirm an active Creator God who endows his people with a dignity that human laws are obliged to respect. They affirm, as well, a basic moral order to the universe, grounded in God's character and binding upon both individual consciences and public authorities.

Evangelicals, however, tend to combine these affirmations with an appreciation for the depth of human sinfulness. They distrust the capacity of fallen human reason to apprehend moral truths apart from the testimony of Scripture. Undoubtedly, evangelicals hold to certain religious truths that ought to undergird the American political order. Whether they hold these truths to be "self-evident" is another matter. Perhaps Bell has underestimated the extent to which evangelical social conservatives take their bearings, in politics as elsewhere, from explicitly biblical teachings.

It seems, then, like quite a leap to base the movement almost entirely on the Declaration of Independence. Yet, the Declaration does speak clearly on the Judeo-Christian moorings of our founding. Social conservatism, in defending this founding, represents a profound connection to our past and recalls an identity the American people need to reaffirm more often.

The future of social conservatism is far from settled. Will it remain a source of "palpable discomfort and disdain"? Almost certainly. But as long as a significant number of Americans continue to see God, rather than government, as the guarantor of rights and liberties, social conservative causes will resonate widely.

The elite media may loathe social conservatives. Republicans may find their continued presence an embarrassment and a hindrance. But if Bell is right that social conservatism is a force "increasingly unified and coherent," then surely it cannot be ignored. ➤

Andrew Walker is a policy analyst for the Family Foundation of Kentucky. He blogs at MereOrthodoxy.com.

Tolerance—Or Else

D. A. Carson warns of coercive attempts to impose secular beliefs. By Mollie Ziegler Hemingway

Tolerance is our culture's supreme virtue. Whether it is *Glee* plot lines about homosexual children or battles about the role religion may play in the public square—from Christmas trees to Catholic Charities—the buzzword is "tolerance."

Casual observers might note, however, that tolerance has undergone a change in meaning. What once meant recognizing other people's right to have different beliefs and practices now means accepting the differing views themselves. Vestiges of the old tolerance—conscience protections for medical professionals, religious liberty, and open discussions—are on the way out. Nowadays, conscience protections are frowned upon, threats to religious freedom prompt Congressional hearings, and "glitter bombs" replace meaningful debate.

This shift from accepting the existence of different views to believing that all views are equally valid is "subtle in form, but massive in substance," explains D. A. Carson in his new book, **The Intolerance of Tolerance** (Eerdmans) ★★★★★. And it comes with a huge caveat: Under the "new tolerance," it's a sin not to accept the new definition. Sanctions can and will be imposed.

"What the new tolerance means," Carson writes, "is that the government must be intolerant of those who do not accept the new definition of tolerance." In this vein, tolerance becomes an absolute good with the power to erode moral and religious distinctives. Or, as the United Nations Declaration of Principles on Tolerance puts it, "Tolerance . . . involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism." Leave it to the U.N. to come up with a dogmatic and absolutist rejection of dogma and absolutism!

Take, for example, the growing phenomenon of campus policies requiring student organizations to allow practicing homosexuals to be leaders. Efforts to enforce inclusion result in excluding groups that, as a matter of conscience, can't submit to the secular doctrine. Complex moral

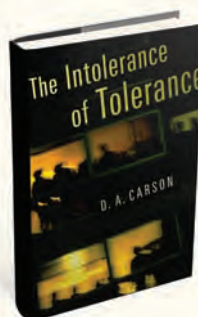
issues can't be discussed when everything is mapped on the tolerant/intolerant axis.

But the tolerance mandate only applies selectively, in protection of certain secular values. Adherents of the new tolerance, thinking themselves free from any binding ethical, moral, and religious systems of thought, assume the secular frame of reference to be morally neutral. On this understanding, imposing their values cannot possibly *impose* upon anyone. In the name of tolerance, Carson writes, the secularists assert that "they have the right to control the public sphere because they are right—completely unaware that they are trying to impose their worldview on others who disagree with it."

Carson shows the structural flaws and inconsistency of modern tolerance and its fixation on opposing traditional Christianity. By tracing its path through civic institutions, public discourse, academia, the government, and finally the church, Carson demonstrates "how controlling the discussions of tolerance and intolerance can be, precisely because there are no other widely agreed categories for right and wrong."

The Intolerance of Tolerance is not a political jeremiad so much as a call for Christians to fight for the value of truth. He shows how Christianity doesn't fit into the world of new tolerance and, when it tries, ends up paying too high a price. The result is a dumbed-down, diluted, and minimized gospel.

While the book is bracing, Carson ends on a hopeful note. He gives Christians 10 suggestions for dealing with intolerant tolerance, from simply exposing its arrogance and internal inconsistencies to speaking truthfully and civilly. He reminds Christians that they should be prepared to suffer in defense of the faith, before ending on a joyful note about trusting in God over government. ➤



Mollie Ziegler Hemingway is a contributing writer at GetReligion.org.

CONNECTING CHRIST

How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths

PAUL LOUIS METZGER

(THOMAS NELSON, 348 PAGES)

Have you ever seen the movie *As Good As It Gets*, starring Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt? Nicholson plays Melvin Udall, a man who pursues “Carol the Waitress,” played by Hunt. Until he falls in love, Melvin is rude, insensitive, racially bigoted, homophobic, and severely obsessive-compulsive. As his gay neighbor Simon Bishop explains, so it is: Melvin is the worst kind of human. As difficult as it is to deal with Melvin, it is perhaps even more difficult to imagine that this man is a best-selling author of romance novels. In fact, when a young unknown female fan who is the receptionist at his publishing house asks him how he is able to portray women so accurately in his works, Melvin tells her that women are like men, only without reason and accountability.

But what does all this have to do with apologetics? Everything. Everything, that is, if you want to engage people truthfully and relationally—and not treat them dismissively. So often I am like Melvin. I talk about romance novels—usually God’s love letter to us recorded as the Bible—but I’ll never understand the depth of his love. I talk about relationships with people, but I rarely develop them myself. I lecture on incarnational, life-on-life apologetic engagement, but I often fail to respond to people life-on-life, keeping them at a distance. . . .

Conservative Christians often approach people as Melvin Udall does. We can wax eloquent on romance and relationships, but we rarely experience them. We approach Mormons, Buddhists, and homosexuals as Melvin does: categorizing and dehumanizing them until we are forced to deal with them face-to-face. Only then do we see that they are humans and not stereotypes. . . . In other words, we can know about homosexuals or Buddhists or Mormons as groups, but never really know or engage the individuals. Instead we simply lump them all into one category, as Melvin unceremoniously labels Carol as a waitress and Simon as a fag. But it isn’t so easy to label others once we find out who they really are.

People are complex, mysterious, inconsistent, contradictory, wart-infested, and wondrous to behold. In keeping with how Simon views the matter, the longer you gaze at someone . . . that individual becomes more than just his or her worldview or demographic. Like God, in whose image everyone is created, each human is too complex to be classified. True understanding requires what Atticus Finch says in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “. . . You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

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THE MONKS OF TIBHIRINE

Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria

JOHN W. KISER (ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN)



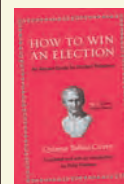
The most memorable film my wife Wendy and I saw last year—we’ve watched it three times now—was *Of Gods and Men*. If you also have been moved by the film and want to know more about the events on which it was

based, a good place to go is *The Monks of Tibhirine*. John Kiser’s book is as timely today as it was when it was first published, just a few months after 9/11.

HOW TO WIN AN ELECTION

An Ancient Guide for Modern Politicians

QUINTUS TULLIUS CICERO, TRANSLATED BY PHILIP FREEMAN (PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS)



Wearily unto death (already) of the 2012 presidential campaign? Do not despair. There is solace at hand in this little book, which takes only a few minutes to read. It consists of a letter written in 64 B.C. by Quintus Tullius Cicero to his more famous brother, Marcus Tullius Cicero, who was running for the office of consul of the Roman Republic. Translated (the Latin text appears on facing pages) and put in context by Philip Freeman, whose biography of Julius Caesar was widely praised, the letter is cynical, worldly wise, and oddly reassuring.

WRIGHT MORRIS TERRITORY

A Treasury of Work

WRIGHT MORRIS

EDITED BY DAVID MADDEN WITH ALICIA CHRISTENSEN (UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS)



It’s a melancholy affair to see, over the years, an artist you’ve greatly admired disappearing from the conversation. No one, it seems, is talking about him. A case in point is Wright Morris, one of the finest American

novelists in the second half of the 20th century and, on top of that, an exceptionally good photographer. This anthology, which includes a biographical sketch by Joseph J. Wydeven, is indeed a treasury. I hope it will fall into the hands of young readers who have never even heard of Morris, sending them on a voyage of discovery.

'God Is Not a Genie in a Bottle'

Why we must avoid misusing Bible verses for our own advantage. Interview by Owen Strachan



What does the text mean to me?

This question, asked in Bible studies and sermons around the world, can lead believers to spiritual renewal. When it is the *only* question Christians ask of the Bible, warns Eric J. Bargerhuff, faith in Christ can become disconnected from the meaning of given passages. In **The Most Misused Verses in the Bible: Surprising Ways God's Word Is Misunderstood** (Bethany House), Bargerhuff, until recently a Florida pastor, advocates careful interpretation of Scripture based on attention to context. Owen Strachan, Christian theology and church history professor at Boyce College, spoke with Bargerhuff about how the Bible becomes a mere handbook, and its verses a talisman, when our desires crowd out sound interpretive practices.

Are there specific categories of verses that evangelicals tend to misinterpret?

Our temptation is to interpret the promises of God materially and temporally instead of spiritually and eternally. We Americans have bought into a materialistic, right-now mindset, and so we're tempted to pull verses out of context to fit that mindset. We need to understand that God's greatest desire is to glorify his name. Too often, we interpret God's promises in a way that is appealing to our sinful side. We often grab things out of Scripture and try to use them for our own benefit, instead of taking the necessary steps to submit to Scripture, to be humbled by it.

You critique prayers that uncritically expect God to grant us, well, anything. Like John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

God is not a genie in a bottle. Yes, he has a good, pleasing, and perfect

will. But this doesn't mean we should pray for whatever we want. We are sinful people and don't even know what's best for us, as the Book of Romans says. Sometimes we pray with wrong motives. Praying random prayers that are self-centered is not God-honoring. We should seek his will when we pray.

What would you say to athletes who latch onto Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all this through him who gives me strength")?

In that passage, Paul is teaching on contentment and arguing that no matter what our situation is, we should learn to be content. The ability to be content, whatever the situation, is contingent on what Jesus gives us. This verse doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus will give the player victory, but rather that he can be content either way because of God's strength in him. It's not about God giving you the strength to dunk the basketball as much as it is him working in you to be content no matter what happens in the game.

Why is Jeremiah 29:11–13 ("For I know the plans I have for you . . .") commonly misinterpreted?

Most people overlook the context of the verse because it speaks to what they want to hear for their life. This was a corporate promise given to the nation of Israel, to a generation

that came out of 70 years of captivity in Babylon. We think through an Americanized filter based on our preconceived notions of what blessing is. But God's promises are spiritual promises, not promises of instant gratification. Though God does bless us in many ways, he has not promised us our best life now. This world is not our home,

and we should long for a better country.

Is there a danger, when reading Acts 2:38 ("Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'"), of thinking that baptism is a precondition of salvation?

This was a specific command given to a specific group of people who were to *express* their salvation through baptism. There is a difference between the *means* of salvation and an *obedient response* to salvation. Baptism was an expression of what had already happened in the heart. Baptism was not to be linked with salvation, because that would make salvation the product of a specific action, contradicting the teaching that salvation comes through faith, not works.

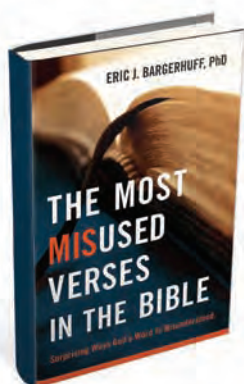
What principles can guide careful interpretation of Scripture?

There are several: understanding the Bible's various literary genres, understanding historical context, discerning the author's intent, carefully defining the meaning of words, looking at grammatical relationships, reflecting on the church's history of interpretation, and always adhering to the principle that the Bible never contradicts itself. These elements are very important to understanding what Bible passages really mean. There are plenty of resources today—Bible dictionaries, commentaries, lexicons, and more—to help ordinary Christians gain a better understanding.

Could evangelicals ever become so focused on getting texts exactly right that they end up debating how many angels can dance on a pin?

Anyone who engages the study of mathematics or architecture knows that even one slightly off-balance angle can distort the whole picture. Theologians who are trying to build an overview of what the Bible says know that we have to get things right. Satan, in the garden, twisted the Word of God ever so slightly. We must understand that God has embodied his will and his nature in these texts. If we skew them even ever so slightly, we will misunderstand him. ✚

Go to ChristianityBibleStudies.com for "Misusing the Bible," a Bible study based on this article.



Fuzzy Jazz

Blue Like Jazz pretty much delivers on the book's subtitle. By Josh Hurst

Blue Like Jazz (Roadside Attractions) ★★★★★ is based on Donald Miller's best seller of the same title. I don't know if Miller is comfortable with the "Christian book" label, but it was released by a Christian publisher (Thomas Nelson), and a lot of evangelicals bought it. What the film ultimately delivers is pretty much an adaptation of the book's subtitle: "Nonreligious thoughts on Christian spirituality."

On the plus side, *Jazz*, like the book, is not a typical "Christian movie." Director Steve Taylor, a longtime rocker known for irreverent satire and disdain of schmaltz, has rarely done anything typically "Christian." Taylor brings the kind of grit (off-color humor, brutal satirizations of evangelical culture, even some four-letter words) that you won't find in, say, *Courageous*. And he does a lot with a little, budget-wise; while the production values are not high, it is a quirky and genuinely funny indie.

The downside? Separating "Christian spirituality" from the fundamentals of the gospel message means an emphasis on feelings and experience, on social justice and an individual search for truth. Little traction is

given to the mortification of sin, to the atoning significance of the Cross, and so forth. We get a vivid portrait of where evangelical culture has gone wrong, but the alternative is a "Christian spirituality" that pretty much excludes Christ himself.

Not that it falls on the film to lay out a full gospel presentation. *Blue Like Jazz*, the movie, illuminates some ways in which some churches—and churchgoers—have lost the plot. But, like the book, the film fumbles in vain to find that plot.

Jazz translates the book's interior monologues into a narrative about a young man who flees the church culture of his youth in abject disillusionment. The hypocrisies of the faithful have grown too burdensome, and his own faith too malnourished, for him to bear it any longer. Miller (Marshall Allman, page 88) escapes to a secular university—Reed College in Portland, Oregon—where he's bombarded with the antifaith screeds of professors and classmates. Naturally, these add fuel to the fire of Miller's unbelief, but where the film

works best is in showing how the church itself failed him.

In an early scene, set in a Baptist church, young Miller stands in front of the congregation wearing the full "armor of God"—helmet, shield, breastplate, sword, the works, all rendered in glorious plastic—while cheesy organ music plays. The youth pastor talks about "how the Cross can make [one] happy," before bringing out a piñata to illustrate how Jesus showers us with goodies. It's savage because it's true: How many

of our churches basically take a similar approach, that the Crucifixion makes us happy, and we need only make a mad grab for Christ's sweet blessings?

It's only logical that Miller would abandon his faith the minute his happiness runs out, heading to a secular school and plunging into drinking, partying, and atheism.

Miller gives voice to a cynicism that many young evangelicals will relate to, and the movie's knocks on some of the cultural trappings of Christianity are probably deserved. As a satire, it works. But we also realize Miller has never been given a good picture of what true Christian faith looks like—even as he befriends a girl named Penny. She's clearly depicted as a Christ follower in the book, but less explicitly so in the film. She mentions "liking" Jesus, but most of her piety is wrapped up in good works. Miller lands on a spiritual identity characterized by the apologies he offers on behalf of Christianity's history of hypocrisy.

But Christ and the Cross don't much factor into the story, making it seem like a big swing of the pendulum, from the legalism of the Christian Right to the social causes of the Christian Left. Christian moviegoers will find much to challenge them, but those hoping Miller's journey leads him to a clear understanding of the gospel might find *Blue Like Jazz* a bit unsatisfying.

Josh Hurst, a CT music and film critic, blogs



Redeeming a Botched Abortion

October Baby (Provident Films) ★★★★★ centers on 19-year-old Hannah, who learns that her parents adopted her, as a vulnerable preemie, after she survived a botched abortion. Determined to find her birthmother, she takes a road trip against her father's wishes. She finds the nurse who was working at the clinic the day she was born, and learns another devastating secret her parents kept from her. When Hannah finds her birthmother, it doesn't bring the closure she seeks; she returns home more lost and broken than when she left. It isn't until she wanders into a cathedral and speaks with a priest about her feelings that she can begin to forgive her parents, her birthmother, and herself.

Pro-life films are often heavy-handed, but directors Jon and Andrew Erwin avoid that. This is a coming-of-age movie, not propaganda disguised as a docudrama. The story focuses on Hannah's journey and on the power of forgiveness. References to faith are subtle, making that moment in the cathedral, and the moment when Hannah is faced with the opportunity to forgive her birthmother, all the more powerful. —Morgan Feddes, CT editorial resident



TWO MINUTES WITH...

Sarah Macintosh



A decade ago, Sarah Macintosh essentially cut ties with the Christian music industry after her band, Chasing Furies, bombed despite critical acclaim. Discouraged, she asked

Sparrow to release her from her contract, and she moved to California to cut a few solo albums. Fast forward to *Current*. That's the title of her new album, and catch the irony: She's back in Nashville, and on a ccm label—this time, Integrity Music, known for its worship catalog. Macintosh spoke to CT's Mark Moring.

How did you end up with Integrity?

I released *Current* independently last year, but Integrity wanted to jump on board with this CD, just as it was, with no changes. That shows me that they believe in my vision for this album and they support me as an artist. So I was more than thrilled to be able to lock arms with them.

It's a worship album, but there are songs of lament.

As a songwriter, I want to be able to express everything to the Lord, and a lot of times there are songs that are dark and questioning. One, called "The Damaged," was sparked by seeing a woman from a third-world country with a broken arm that's barely useable, only because she couldn't get the treatment she needed. It made me think that often people go through trials without realizing they can get that broken thing reset. As a Christian, I can cry out to a Savior, "Don't let me be broken. Don't let me be damaged by these things that are pulling so heavily on me."

Is that song autobiographical?

Yes. For a long time, my husband and I were unable to get pregnant because there was something wrong with my body. There was a lot of heartbreak. We finally just decided, "Okay, let's try not to worry about it anymore." We went on the road for a tour and essentially stopped trying. Well, a month later I got pregnant, and we had our daughter Scarlett, who's now 3. The Savior gave her to us out of nowhere; she burst on the scene, this bundle of joy.



Rage and Hope

Springsteen vents on *Wrecking Ball*. By Andy Whitman

After 2009's perfunctory *Working on a Dream*, Bruce Springsteen seemed in danger of becoming a caricature of himself; the Boss punching the clock and delivering uninspired couplets from the comfort of a lush corner office instead of trafficking in the blood and sweat of the factory floor.

But *Wrecking Ball* (Columbia) ★★★★★, Springsteen's finest album in a decade, gives the lie to the notion of rock legends coasting on past glories. It is a synthesis of Springsteen sounds old and new, with muscular rockers shouldering up next to atmospheric ballads and raucous folk hootenannies. It is fueled by compassion for working-class Americans, and in the best tradition of protest music, it is mad as hell. But it is an anger balanced by faith and hope; there's more spiritual imagery here than Springsteen has used in a long time.

In a world of fat-cat bankers and robber barons in corporate boardrooms, in a time when too many people struggle merely to survive, Springsteen surveys the carnage. The Celtic-influenced "Shackled and Drawn" and the bleak, beautiful ballad "Jack of All Trades" explore the deep resignation and

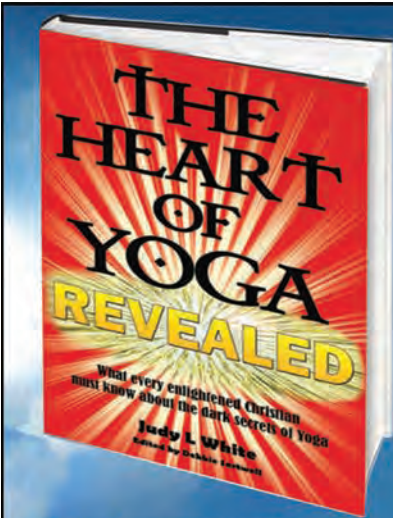
world-weariness of people too worn down to fight anymore. But there is anger and seething resentment too, particularly on the defiant title track and on the first single, "We Take Care of Our Own," in which Springsteen probes vast societal indifference to the plight of the poor.

But then there's the optimism of the glorious "Land of Hope and Dreams," long a staple of Springsteen's concerts. Featuring the late Clarence Clemons's last recorded sax solo, this is gospel music in all senses of the term, as Springsteen envisions a coming world where faith will be rewarded, where social divisions will be broken down, and where fools and kings alike will find welcome. And on "Rocky Ground," he beseeches, "Rise up, Shepherd, rise up / Find your flock, get them to higher ground / Flood waters rising, Canaan bound."

A few songs are saddled with clichés, so the album falls just short of being a classic. But half a dozen songs here are as incisive and powerful as anything Springsteen has ever written. It's great to have him back, and thundering prophetically. ✦

Andy Whitman is a regular contributor to *Paste* magazine and *Image* journal.





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Envisioning a Just and Peaceable Kingdom

EDITED BY BRUCE ELLIS BENSON, MALINDA ELIZABETH BERRY, AND PETER GOODWIN HELTZEL (EERDMANS)

★★★★★ Evangelicals tend to reinvent themselves. The authors of this book are no exception. Unlike presumably Western, white, patriarchal, pietistic evangelicals, these "prophetic evangelicals" follow the *shalom* politics of Jewish prophet Jesus; emphasize deeds—"neighbor love, hospitality to the stranger, and the ministry of peace and justice"—over creeds; conceive of the church as *mission* more than *polis*; and envision a new social order, inspired by the abolitionist and civil rights movements, that challenges empire. Their minority report may be commended for its improvisational interpretation of Scripture and confession of Christian culpability in historic cruelties, but it goes overboard in its activism, reducing the biblical religion to a justice movement. —*Christopher Benson*

► THE EXPLICIT GOSPEL

MATT CHANDLER WITH JARED WILSON (CROSSWAY)

★★★★★ In his debut book, popular Dallas pastor Matt Chandler reaches out to those weaned on what Reformed theologian Michael Horton once called "Christless Christianity": the man-centered, semi-Pelagian, therapeutic pseudoreligion all too prevalent in contemporary evangelical churches. Shunning this false gospel of self-improvement starring Jesus as life coach, Chandler walks readers through the "gospel on the ground" (God's work to redeem sinners) and the "gospel in the air" (God's work to restore the entire cosmos). —*Matt Reynolds*

► WINNING THE FOOD FIGHT

Victory in the Physical and Spiritual Battle for Good Food and a Healthy Lifestyle

STEVE WILLIS WITH KEN WALKER (REGAL)

★★★★★ Pastor Steve Willis took it as a sign from God when celebrity chef Jamie Oliver brought his "Food Revolution" to Willis's small West Virginia community—one of the poorest and fattest in the nation. Faith-based diet books are nothing new for American evangelicals, but Willis breaks new ground by making the connection between poverty and obesity (as well as the unbalanced farm subsidies that make chips cheaper per calorie than carrots), and aiming more deliberately at masculine readers (he narrates a "battle" with 12 "rounds" in place of chapters). —*Rachel Stone*

MUSIC

BOWERBIRDS

► THE CLEARING

(DEAD OCEANS)

★★★★★ After a "disaster chapter" (so named in a video promoting this album), Phil Moore and Beth Tacular, better known as the Bowerbirds, have produced a memento of their experiences aptly called *The Clearing*. With lilting phrases, they create soundscapes sometimes stark and percussive, sometimes lush with haunting strings, guitar, and vocal harmonies, and always unfailingly organic and free. Exploring the duality of darkness and light, the nature of seasons, and the inevitable movement of time, they express an understanding that "I'm dust and you're dust" in "a world half-broken"—but its inherent beauty is no accident, and is meant to be savored. —*Kristin Garrett*

RACHEL HARLOW

► FEATHERS & TWINE

(RAINFATHER RECORDS)

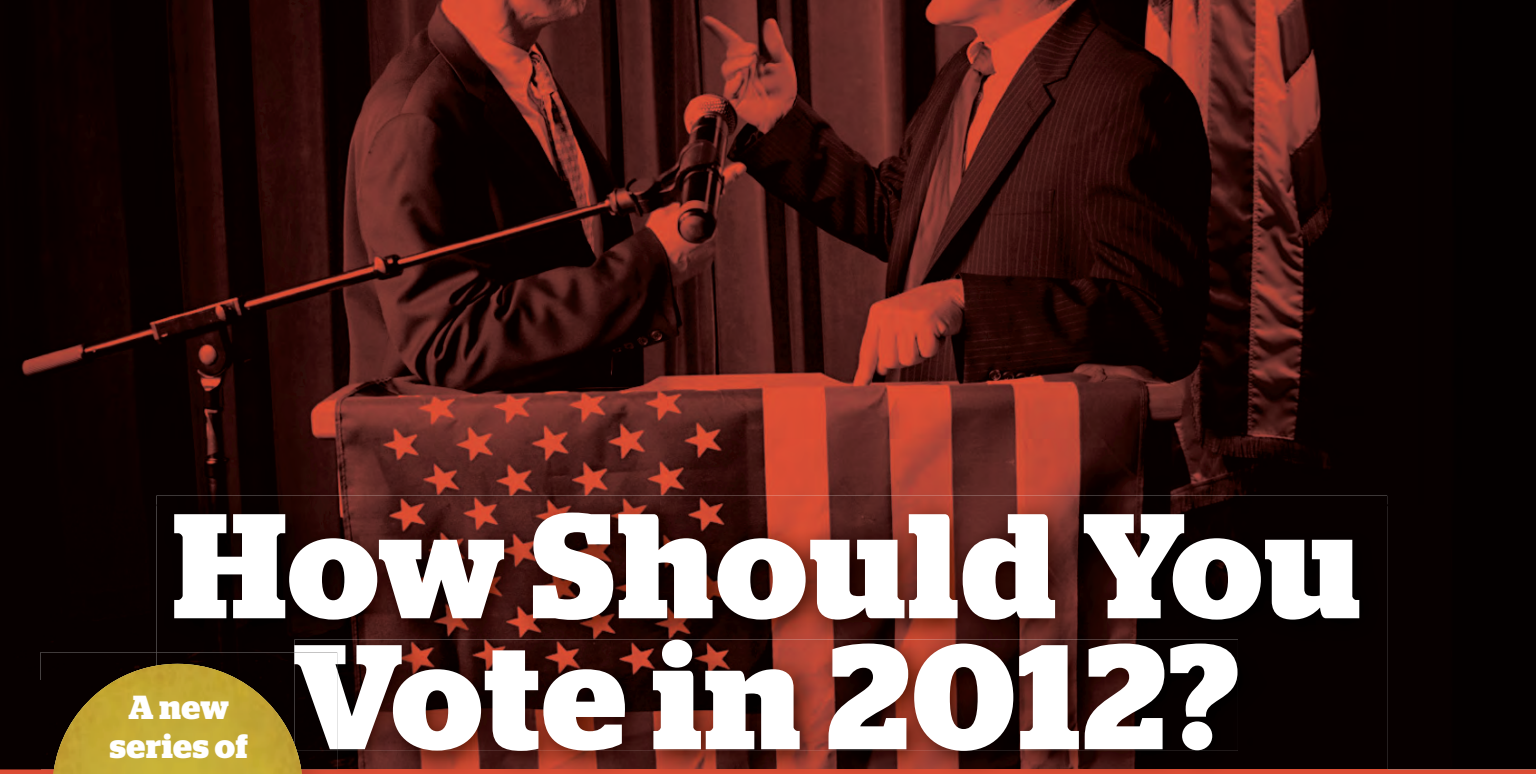
★★★★★ Formerly of Mosaic, Nashville's Rachel Harlow continues in that group's folk/acoustic pop/Americana tradition, while evoking classic songwriters from yesteryear. Though the disc covers a few everyday subjects (marriage, brokenness), she also offers clever observations on the ordinary. With her gloriously earthy vocals and understated but often poignant instrumentation, Harlow goes out on a limb on several occasions—the scars of South African apartheid on "Cain" and the story of a foreigner who feels like a second-class citizen in "Nohemy"—all while balancing feelings of hope with empathy. —*Andy Argyrakis*

CHRISTOPHER PAUL STELLING

► SONGS OF PRAISE & SCORN

(MECCA LECCA)

★★★★★ Christopher Paul Stelling's album, both haunting and haunted, was recorded in an apartment above a funeral home that has been in operation since 1848. Apparently, the setting provided the perfect recipe for these intensely crafted grapplings with life and death. As for the title, it is more scorn than praise, more lost than found. Yet its doubts and laments are seasoned with spiritual yearning. Stelling mourns, "Ain't it a shame all the people on this earth they have to die" ("Mourning Train to Memphis"), but he also prays, "But if we must burn then, Lord, let us burn bright" ("Solar Flares"). His lyrics and delivery leave no doubt that he's willing to stare down the sun to come to grips with the forces of the universe. —*Jeremy V. Jones*



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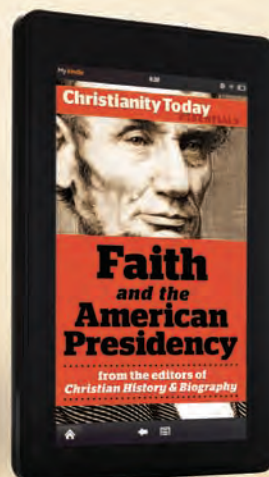
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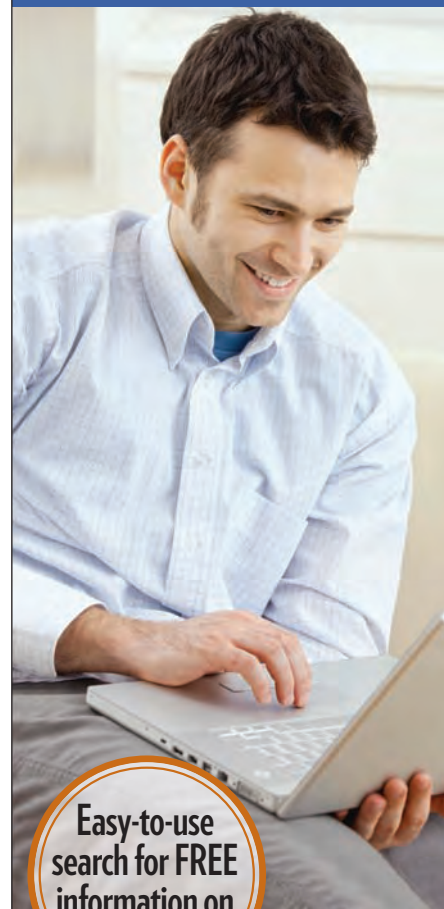
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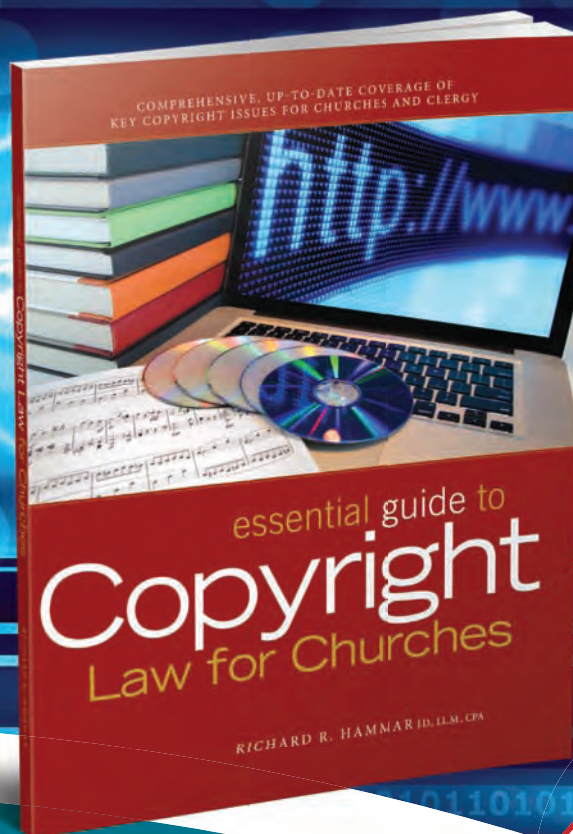
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All That Jazz: Allman, who loves Miller's "razor sharp sense of humor," in the lead role.



Becoming Donald

Marshall Allman plays the author of *Blue Like Jazz*.

While filming *Blue Like Jazz* (see our review on page 80), Marshall Allman—who plays the Donald Miller character at the center of the story—was to ride an unsteady “tall bike” across Portland, Oregon’s Hawthorne Bridge. Director Steve Taylor, concerned that Allman might “plunge over the rail” into the Willamette River, considered a stunt double, but Allman declined. Says Taylor, “For Marshall, it’s all just part of the work, and he approaches it with both a singular intensity and a great sense of play.”

Allman, 28, has received thumbs-up for his acting—for *Blue Like Jazz* as well as recurring roles in TV’s *Prison Break* and *True Blood*. He recently finished filming *Jayne Mansfield’s Car*, a 1960s-era drama starring Robert Duvall, John Hurt, Kevin Bacon, and Billy Bob Thornton. Taylor believes Allman can go a long way: “He takes the craft of acting very seriously, and he wants to get the role right.”

Allman was a soccer star and award-winning art student in high school, but ultimately pursued acting instead because of a knee injury and the likelihood of earning a steadier income in acting than as an artist. “When I discovered the art of acting, and that it combined the physicality of soccer with the craftsmanship of art, I thought, *Why paint when I can be the painting?* For me that was enough.”

- **Hometown** Los Angeles
- **Family** Jamie Anne (wife)
- **Reading now** Lots of scripts
- **On your iPod** Gary Clark Jr., Foster the People, Menomena
- **Favorite movie** *The Princess Bride*
- **Favorite book** *A Confederacy of Dunces*, by John Kennedy Toole
- **Favorite Bible verse** Hebrews 4:12
- **Your hero** Brad Bird or Stanley Kubrick
- **Best meal you cook** Conversation

question & answer

How did you get this role?

I got an e-mail from Steve Taylor saying I was on his shortlist. I hadn’t read the book, but I was really excited when I read the script. I e-mailed Steve and said that I was 1,000 percent in. He responded that he loved my enthusiasm but it wasn’t an offer yet—he wanted to meet in person. We met for lunch a week later, and he told me I had the part.

What did you like about the script?

It was funny and moving at the same time, which is rare. And though it dealt with issues of faith, it wasn’t trying to force any beliefs on anyone. It just happened to be a story about a kid wrestling with his beliefs and his identity. That’s a story anyone can identify with.

How did you capture Don’s personality?

It wasn’t a literal interpretation of Don’s book or the actual person; I wanted to capture the spirit of both. I watched videos of Don and read all his books; I basically stalked him. Eventually, I got to know him and found those two to be consistent. The main qualities that struck me about Don are his pursuit of adventure and a razor-sharp sense of humor.

Did you “become” Don for the role?

That’s what makes acting sort of like magic. If people believe I am Don, then I’ve done a great job. As an actor, I strive to be no more than a vessel for the story. Here to serve you, the audience.

How would you describe the film?

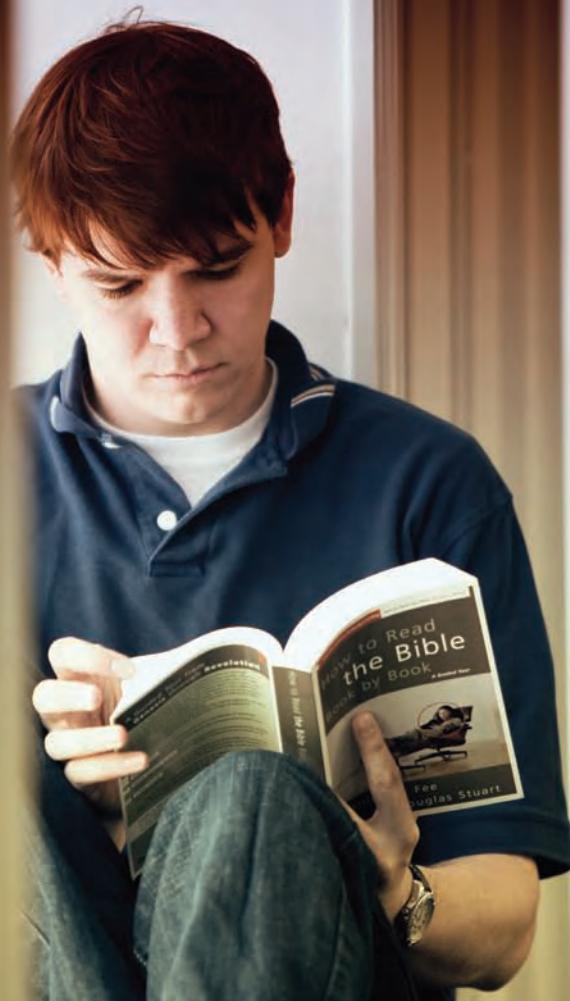
A Southern Baptist kid is set to go to seminary, but gets burned by the very church that raised him. He instead attends Reed College in an attempt to run as far away from his upbringing and God as he can. And it’s funny too.

More: BlueLikeJazzTheMovie.com

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1 In the beginning, God created everything: the heavens above and the earth below. *Here's what happened:* ²At first the earth lacked shape and was totally empty, and a dark fog draped over the deep while God's spirit-wind hovered over the surface of the empty waters. *Then there was the voice of God.*

God: ³Let there be light.

And light flashed into being. ⁴God saw that the light was beautiful and good, and He separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God named the light "day" and the darkness "night." Evening gave way to morning. That was day one.

God: ⁶Let there be a vast expanse in the middle of the waters. Let the waters above part from the waters below.

⁷So God parted the waters and formed this expanse, separating the waters above from

Italic type indicates content added to help contemporary readers bridge the history gap.

was beautiful and good. ¹³Evening gave way to morning. That was day three.

God: ¹⁴⁻¹⁵Lights, come out! Shine in the vast expanse of heavens' sky dividing day from night to mark the seasons, days, and years. Lights, warm the earth with your light.

It happened just as God said. ¹⁶God fashioned the two great lights, the brighter to mark the course of day, the dimmer to mark the course of night, and the stars.

cast war
the day
from the
new cre
ning ga

God: ²⁶creat
earth

IN-TEXT INSIGHTS

The crown of God's creation is a new creature, a creature that can sound the heartbeat of its Creator. That creature, made male and female, reflects God's own relational richness. The human family is to join God in the ongoing work of creation. The earth below and the sky above with all their inhabitants are too beautiful and too good to be left alone. They need the tender care and close attention that only God's favored creature can give.

In-text notes offer cultural, theological, or devotional insights.

SCREENPLAY FORMAT

God (calling to Adam): ⁹Where are you?

Adam: ¹⁰When I heard the sound of You coming in the garden, I was afraid because I am naked. So I hid from You.

God: ¹¹Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten from the tree in the center of the garden, the very one I commanded you not to eat from?

Adam (pointing at the woman): ¹²It was she! The woman You gave me as a companion put the fruit in my hands, and I ate it.

¹For the rest of your life,
You will fight for every crumb
from the crusty clump of
you from.

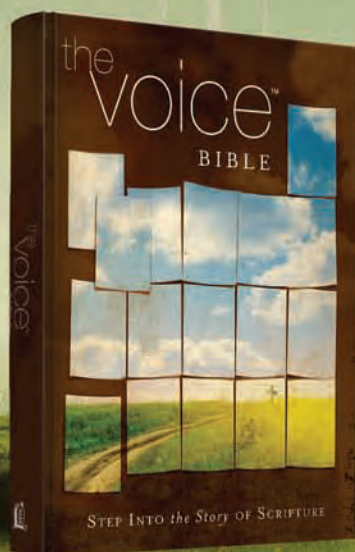
¹³As you labor, the ground will
thorns and thistles,
and you will eat the plants
field.

¹⁴Your brow will sweat for your
taste
even a morsel of bread until
you return

To the very ground I made you
From dust you have come,
And to dust you shall return.

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JESUS DISAPPOINTS 44
PASTOR PONZI SCHEMES 65



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BRIEFING



11 Spotlight Athletes in Action (Again)

12 Gleanings Court says employers can limit employees' speech, British clergy cannot sue God, and bar boots 'Theology on Tap.'

◀ **14 Headlines** **THEOLOGY** The Family sex cult cleans house.

BIBLE Assemblies of God challenges Wycliffe translations. **15**

CHURCH-STATE New USAID policy alarms charities. **15**

LIFE ETHICS Evangelicals mimic Catholic activism. **16**

{ In Depth } **CHURCH GROWTH** Nontraditional believers recover Christian community in post-war Balkans. **17**

FEATURES

Special Section | **THIS IS OUR CITY**

◀ **22 School Choice of a Different Kind** **AMY JULIA BECKER**

Why Christians in Richmond, Virginia, are sending their kids to struggling public schools.

27 Treating Richmond's Fatherless Epidemic **KATELYN BEATY**

How local Christians are building human capital through public health—one man at a time.

30 Creative Discipleship **KATELYN BEATY**

Richmonders who transcend their city's cultural Christianity in unlikely ways.

Global Gospel Project

32 'Crucified Under Pontius Pilate' **MARK GALLI**

Why the phrase from the Nicene Creed can calm our doubts about God's goodness.

36 When a Daughter Dies **BEN WITHERINGTON**

Walking the way of grace in the midst of my grief.

40 Discipling the Eyes **W. DAVID O. TAYLOR**

The visual arts can play a powerful role in worship—if we look closely enough.

44 Jesus Disappoints Everyone **JOHN KOESSLER**

Our Savior has come, but we're often blind to his purposes.

48 Breaking Nigeria's Fatal Deadlock **SUNDAY AGANG**

Christians and Muslims will find peace if they work together for justice.

52 Jesus Through Jewish Eyes **INTERVIEW BY DAVID NEFF**

Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish NT professor, explains what Christians have gotten wrong, and right.

VIEWPOINTS

63 Letters Readers respond to the February issue of CT.

65 Where We Stand Pastors' Ponzis

◀ **66 The Village Green** Wesley Smith, Karen Swallow Prior, and Ben DeVries contemplate Fido's eternal destiny.

68 Wrestling with Angels Carolyn Arends takes Scripture literally.

70 Contra Mundum Chuck Colson and Timothy George re-define *evangelical*.

CT REVIEW

75 Books

- Jeffrey Bell's *The Case for Polarized Politics*
- Carl Moeller: My Top 5 on Christianity in North Korea
- D. A. Carson's *The Intolerance of Tolerance*
- Excerpt: *Connecting Christ*, by Paul Louis Metzger
- Wilson's Bookmarks
- Interview: Eric Bargerhuff pinpoints our Bible *faux pas*

80 Movies / TV

- *Blue Like Jazz*
- *October Baby*

81 Music

- Two minutes with Sarah Macintosh
- ◀ Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*

82 Quick Takes More media of note



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IN EVERY ISSUE

9 Inside CT Mark Galli tells the story behind CT's newest eBook.

88 Who's Next Marshall Allman brings Donald Miller to the big screen.



Your Eyes on God's World

God's world is a big place, and at *Christianity Today*, we have committed to doing everything we can to give you a front-row seat on what God is doing around the globe.

In this issue, we offer good news about independent church growth and grapple with the challenge of interreligious violence. On page 17, read about a group of believers that sprang up in the aftermath of the Croatian war and feels a burden to promote church unity in a divided land. Then, on page 48, theologian Sunday Agang explores ways to break the cycles of violence that have cost many Nigerian lives.

We live in a time when American pastors are taking cues from clergy in Rwanda, Ukraine, and South Korea. Because Christ-followers need to connect with fellow believers worldwide, we are constantly expanding our global vision and yours.

Can we continue to increase this unique international coverage? Like many of you, we at CT have felt the pinch of recent economic uncertainties, and travel to unfamiliar cultures takes much more of our writers' time and emotional energy.

Fortunately, you have helped. As this issue was in preparation, CT design director and photographer extraordinaire Gary Gnidovic traveled to Mozambique, where he documented the remarkable ministry of missionaries Heidi and Rolland Baker for our next issue. Your direct contributions helped underwrite his travel.

Such assistance encourages us as we plan future reports of gospel growth in the uttermost parts. That is why I want to encourage you as a CT "fellow traveler" to prayerfully consider what you can do to invest in this expanding work.

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A black and white portrait of President Philip W. Eaton, an older man with white hair, smiling and leaning forward with his hands clasped. He is wearing a dark suit, a white shirt, and a striped tie. A watch is visible on his left wrist.

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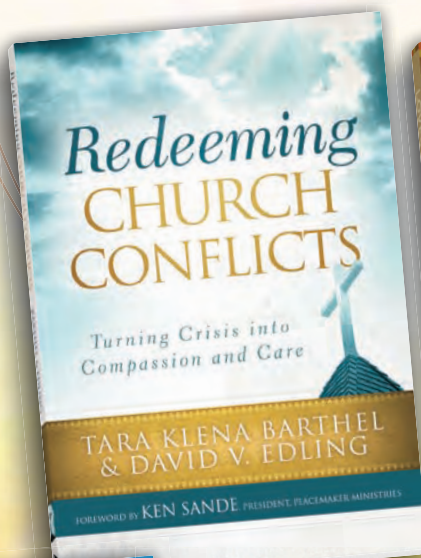


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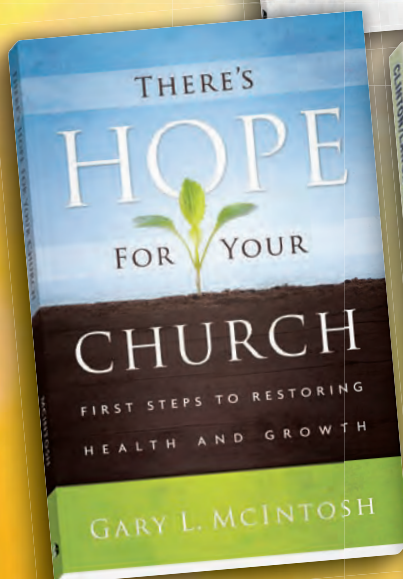
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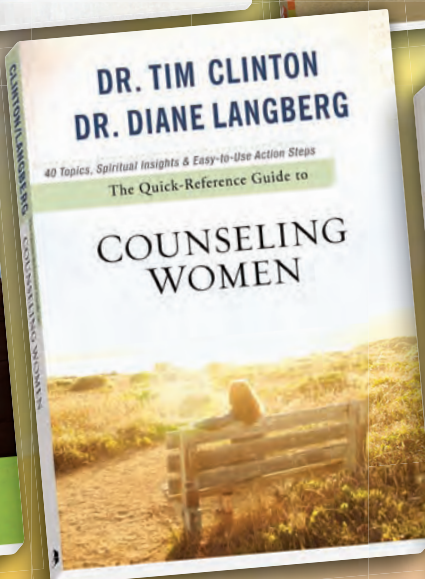
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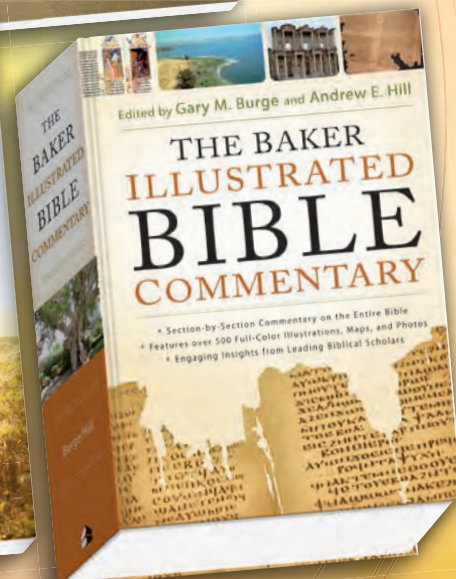
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Journaling Grief

How web-based publishing is changing everything.

It was a typical e-mail from Asbury Seminary professor Ben Witherington. It simply said, “What do you think?” followed by a link to his blog. Ben has written many pieces for me over the years, for *Christian History and Biography* and *Christianity Today*, so of course I was intrigued.

Like other readers, I was stunned and impressed and inspired. Ben was blogging about his 32-year-old daughter, Christy, who had died a couple of weeks earlier. I immediately thought, *So soon?* Then again, we each have our own ways of working through grief, and Ben is a voluminous writer. It only made sense that he would grieve through blogging.

What impressed me was this: Ben’s refusal to deny the pain and his refusal to deny his hope. I’ve read many accounts of grief, and some, like C. S. Lewis’s *A Grief Observed*, are superb at exeging the pain. Others wax eloquent about our hope in Christ. But here were reflections that both acknowledged the pain that will not be healed before our “glad heavenly reunion” and that refused to let go of God’s promises.

To say the least, I never broach publishing ideas with someone who is in the immediate throes of grief! But Ben had contacted me and asked for this editor’s thoughts, so I sensed he wanted to broaden his reach. Indeed, that was the case, and soon enough we were hammering out details of an article for CT and an eBook for Christianity Today Essentials.

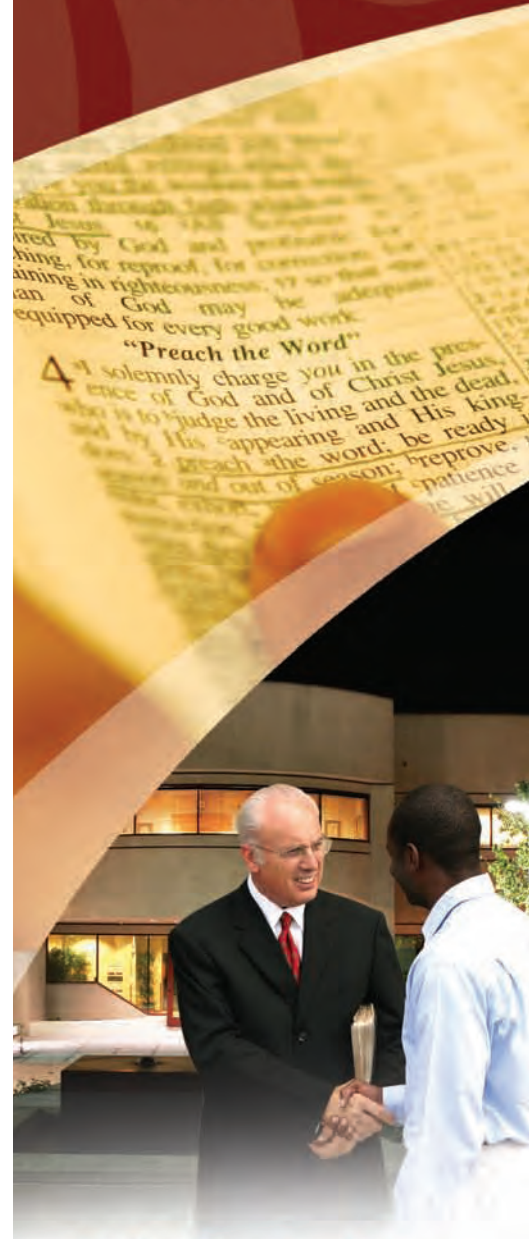
The article, which starts on page 36, gives a taste of the longer eBook, now available at *CTeBooks.com*. For the book, Ben and his wife, Ann, added personal reflections on Christy. We wanted to help readers get to know Christy, to deepen our sense of the contours of Ben and Ann’s grief. I also asked Ben to add even more theological reflection.

The whole process highlights the dynamics of web-based publishing today. No longer do we have to wait a year for a book to move from idea to publication. Nor does a book have to justify itself with 50,000 words to make economic sense. No more do you have to go to a bookstore or mail order a book and wait a couple of days to read it. Now we are able to publish natural-length eBooks nearly instantly; Ben’s 15,000-word book took about a month to produce. And you are able to read it within minutes of logging onto Amazon.com or BarnesandNoble.com. You don’t even need to buy an expensive eReader; both Kindle and the Nook have free apps for your PC.

This new e-world will allow CT to publish material that will inform and inspire in ways more timely and accessible than ever. What a great time to be in publishing!

Next month: We meet Heidi Baker, whose gifts of healing and church planting are reverberating throughout Mozambique; *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat talks to Sarah Pulliam Bailey about America’s “bad religion”; and Richard Mouw says we need more than *Christus Victor*. ☩

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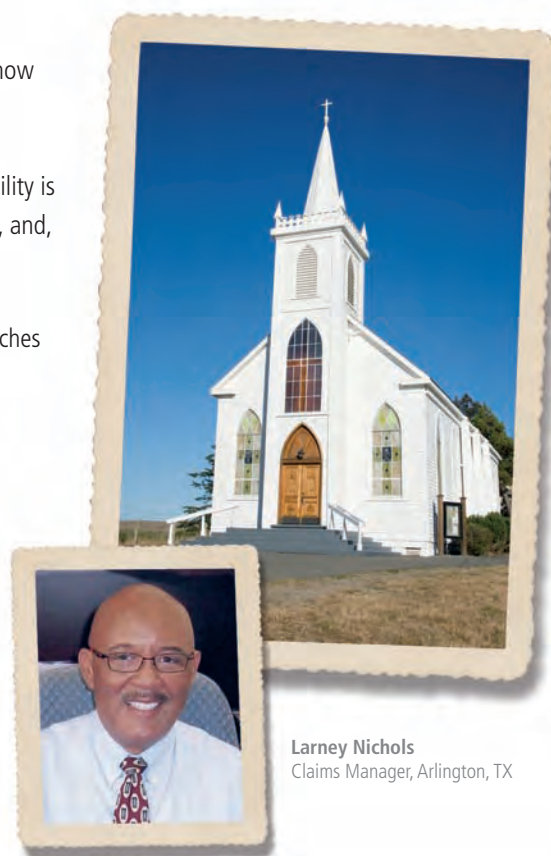
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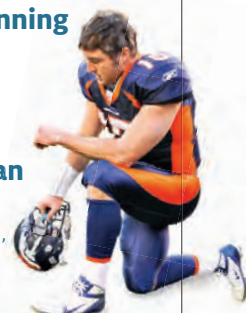
SPOTLIGHT: Muscular Christianity's Newest Heroes

➔ Even as Jeremy Lin's record-breaking NBA streak and Tim Tebow's NFL season ended, the two athletes and their Christian faith dominated sports coverage. Fans and journalists compared Lin's wristbands to eyeblack and debated players' Jesus talk. "It is kind of crazy," says *Sports Spectrum* managing editor Brett Honeycutt. "It's as if they were the first Christian athletes." Sociologist James Mathisen says it's been nearly 20 years since "jocks for Jesus" had this much attention.



"The religious lives of Tebow and Lin fit into a narrative of underdog, and they are both 'adamantly humble' in their mien. This gives their testimonies an unusual credibility. Of course, if the Knicks and Broncos hadn't had their winning streaks, we would have heard very little about their Christian faith."

Shirl James Hoffman, author, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports*



Holy Hall of Fame

1891: Outfielder Billy Sunday quits. Later, the famed evangelist would criticize baseball but load his sermons with sports references.

1952: Athlete evangelists get organized with Sports Ambassadors and Fellowship of Christian Athletes (1954).

1971: Amid San Francisco Giants "God squad" hype, Graham claims sports has "more really committed Christians . . . than any other occupation in America."

1890 | 1900 | 1910 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 |

1884: The "Cambridge Seven" cricket players respond to Dwight Moody's altar calls in England and become missionaries to China.

1945: Record miler Gil Dodds joins Billy Graham at the first Youth for Christ conference.

1969: Former Cleveland Browns defensive end Bill Glass forms what would become a leading prison ministry.

1997: Promise Keepers, brainchild of college football coach Bill McCartney, rallies nearly 1 million in D.C.

ATHLETES IN ACTION



TIM TEBOW: Given the popularity of "Tebowing," you'd think he invented praying on one knee. His faith even makes offseason headlines. In *GQ*, backup QB Brady Quinn worried about Tebow's humility, while earlier Christian celeb Kurt Warner called Tebow's story "biblical." And yes, he and Lin are hanging out (via phone).



JOSH HAMILTON: While Tebow and Lin represent one underdog narrative common among Christian athletes—the moral resister of temptation—Texas Rangers outfielder Josh Hamilton represents another: the penitent. "My recovery is Christ," he said in February after his latest slip with alcohol use. "It's an every-day process."



ALBERT PUJOLS: "My life's goal is to bring glory to Jesus," the first baseman says on his website. "Baseball is simply my platform to elevate . . . my Lord and Savior." It's also the source of his \$254 million contract. Pujols gives away a lot to his St. Louis-based charity, but biographer Scott Lamb thinks the contract "will hurt . . . his Christian testimony."



MARINO RIVERA: As pitchers and catchers reported for spring training, the famed Yankees reliever suggested that this season may be his last. He's said his retirement might mean going into full-time pastoral ministry. He's already planted (or at least funded the building of) one church in La Chorrera, Panama.



KAKÁ: Forget "Tebowing." The Brazilian soccer superstar pulls off his jersey after goals to reveal T-shirts declaring his love for Jesus. In October, he shocked his homeland by leaving the neo-Pentecostal church where his wife was a pastor. "It became a business," she complained. (And its leaders had recently served time for smuggling money.)



GLEANINGS

Important developments in the church and the world.

1 Employers can limit employees' speech

Your job may limit your freedom of speech. A federal court ruled in February that the University of Toledo was within its rights to fire human resources director Crystal Dixon in 2008 for a newspaper column questioning how homosexuals could be "civil rights victims." Her op-ed contradicted the university's stance. Because of Dixon's authority over university hiring and firing, wrote judge David Katz, her "interest in making a comment of public concern is clearly outweighed by the university's interest . . . in carrying out its own objectives."

had asked the publisher to remove the Bibles at its June convention. Committee chairman Adam Greenway emphasized that the decision was not an endorsement of the translation. "We do not believe the 2011 NIV rises to the level where it should be pulled or censored or not carried in our retail chain," he said.

4 Anglican clergy cannot sue God



GREAT BRITAIN Anglican clergy cannot sue their employer: God. An employment tribunal ruled in February that a former Worcester rector could not seek compensation from his bishop or diocese for resigning under duress. Church of England law states that clergy are office holders employed by God, not employees of the church. Judge Alan McCarry said the church is a central part of English society yet "has no legal personality. It cannot sue or be sued." Reverend Mark Sharpe alleges his bishop and diocese allowed parishioners to terrorize him for four years, including poisoning his dog and slashing his tires.

2 TBN embroiled in family lawsuit

Perhaps Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) should start carrying Family Feud re-runs. Brittany Koper, granddaughter of TBN founders Paul and Jan Crouch, has accused directors of illegally distributing \$50 million in "charitable assets" for personal use. She also claims she was fired as chief financial officer for refusing to cover up the scheme. Koper sued TBN attorneys over their role; her uncle, Joseph McVeigh, has filed a similar suit. The attorneys previously accused Koper of misappropriating funds but eventually dropped their suit.

5 Court rejects concerns of religious parents



CANADA Parents cannot prevent Quebec schools from teaching their children about other religions. Canada's Supreme Court has ruled that a mandatory Ethics and Religious Culture program does not infringe on parents' rights. The program, which exposes children to a variety of cultures, creeds, and religious traditions, replaced similar Catholic and Protestant programs in 2008. Two parents argued the program could affect the religious beliefs children were taught

3 LifeWay keeps new NIV on shelves

A disputed Bible translation will remain in Southern Baptist bookstores. The trustees of LifeWay Christian Resources unanimously voted to continue selling the 2011 New International Version, even though the Southern Baptist Convention

6 'Fake aid' may hamper relief workers

A new eBook says not all aid workers in Pakistan are what they seem. *The Command*, by *The Atlantic's* Marc Ambinder and D. B. Grady, claims the United States government used the chaos from the 2005 Kashmir earthquake to send dozens of CIA agents into Pakistan posing as aid workers. The claims are likely to strain already tense relations between genuine aid agencies and Pakistan; reports last July said the CIA ran a fake vaccination program in an attempt to gain DNA evidence from members of Osama bin Laden's family months before his death.

7 University cancels biblical finance class

Business and the Bible won't mix at Iowa State University. School officials canceled a proposed independent study course that would have examined how biblical principles can be applied to business management. Opponents argued the class, which would have used Dave Anderson's *How to Run Your Business by THE BOOK*, would have promoted one religion in violation of the Constitution. But finance professor Roger Stover, who proposed the course, said it was necessary because of the growth of companies like Hobby Lobby and Chick-fil-A that "openly display their use of spiritual and often Christian principles in their organization."

8 Religious education required in schools



RUSSIA Religion has returned to Russian classrooms 90 years after the Soviet revolution banned it. In 2010, Russia began requiring students at 20

GO FIGURE Missions

127,000
Missionaries sent from the U.S. in 2010. (Brazil is the second-largest sending country overall. South Korea is the second-largest if only Protestants are counted.)

32,400
Missionaries sent to the U.S. in 2010. The U.S. is the largest receiving country in the world.

Reuters / Center for the Study of Global Christianity



compiled by Ted Olsen

QUOTATION MARKS

"On the Origin of Species . . . uh . . . with . . . oh God."

Richard Dawkins, when asked for the full title of Charles Darwin's famous book (*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*). Dawkins was promoting a poll that found two-thirds of British Christians cannot name the first book of the New Testament.

BBC Radio 4

"To those Christians who have venomously and vomitously [sic] cursed the Court family and threatened bodily harm and assassination: In His name, I forgive you."

U.S. District Judge Fred Biery, approving the settlement of a Texas school board's prayer lawsuit. The settlement lets students lead prayer at graduation but not football games, and bars teachers from participating.

Religion Clause

"Changing the name of the convention would require a great cost in dollars and in energy."

Jimmy Draper, chairman of a Southern Baptist Convention task force that recommended keeping the denomination's name but encouraging the informal moniker "Great Commission Baptists."

Baptist Press

"I am overweight. I am a terrible example to our people."

Rick Warren, who lost 60 pounds last year and hopes to lose another 30 in 2012. He has encouraged his congregation to participate in a massive weight-loss campaign.

USA Today

"We seem to be the first."

Niklas Raadstroem, playwright for the Gothenburg City Theatre in Sweden, on performing both the Old and New Testaments. In *The Bible*, a five-hour production, 15 actors play about 90 roles.

AFF

11

percent of public schools to take courses in religion and ethics; in February, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin expanded the requirement to all Russian schools. Elementary and middle-school students can choose to study the history of one of four "traditional" religions (Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or Buddhism) or take a general course on the "fundamentals of public ethics" or the "foundations of religious culture." Critics do not want schoolchildren divided according to religion or exposed to proselytism.

9 Bar boots Catholic group

Barroom evangelism can be controversial for churches—and apparently for bars too. A Catholic outreach program hosted at a Denver bar had to find a new venue after a lecture on religious liberty stirred controversy among staff and patrons. Hosted by the Archdiocese of Denver, Theology on Tap is intended to provide a "nonthreatening" gathering place for those curious about Catholicism. But some at Stoney's Bar and Grill reportedly considered the January 26 lecture, "Atheocracy and the Battle for Religious Liberty in America," to be "too controversial." Some employees refused to work future events. The program moved to a nearby Irish-themed pub.

10 Tithes not exempt from garnishment

Debtors must render first to Caesar before God. A federal court has ruled a Mormon who owes \$1.86 million in restitution cannot exclude 10 percent of her monthly pay from garnishment for tithing purposes. Patricia Thomas was convicted of embezzling funds from her employer and ordered to have her wages garnished toward her restitution. The court ruled that Thomas failed to make a legal argument that refusing a tithing exemption would violate her First Amendment rights.

12

11 Flower order creates controversy

Controversy continued to stem from a federal court's decision to remove a prayer mural from a Rhode Island public high school. When the Freedom from Religion Foundation tried to send congratulatory flowers to the plaintiff, four different local florists refused to fill the order. The foundation, which finally ordered flowers from a store in Connecticut, filed a formal complaint with the Rhode Island Commission on Human Rights, alleging discrimination because of the plaintiff's atheism.

12 Extremists deface Christian holy site



ISRAEL In a rare attack on a Christian holy site, a Jerusalem monastery was defaced with the words "Death to Christians" in Hebrew, allegedly by militant Jewish settlers. The Monastery of the Cross is built where tradition holds the tree used to make Christ's cross stood. Two cars parked outside the monastery were also vandalized in the February attack with the words "Price Tag," referring to militant settlers' plans for retribution if the Israeli government tries to curb settlement in the West Bank. A prominent Baptist church was defaced with similar threats—including "We will crucify you"—weeks later.

13 Calvin considering football program

Calvin College needs a football team. That's the recommendation of a task force after spending 18 months researching the idea. It found a slim majority of students, staff, and alumni favor starting a football program, while nearly two-thirds of faculty members oppose it. Launching the program will cost an estimated \$10 million, including constructing a stadium. Calvin's athletic director said a final decision isn't expected until May.

GO FIGURE

Money

\$1.5 million

Estimated annual operating costs for a 217-acre campus in Northfield, Massachusetts, built by D. L. Moody.

\$0

Cost to acquire it from the Green family (owners of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain), which is offering the site to a Christian institution. The C. S. Lewis Foundation could not raise the \$3 million it planned to use for a college there.

Religion News Service



THEOLOGY

The Family Cleans House

Sex cult 'reboots,' adopts biblical authority.

By James A. Beverley

The Family International (TFI), a controversial Christian movement known for once using sexual favors to win converts, has launched significant reforms that have stunned cult watchers and followers alike.

Formerly the Children of God, the group began in 1968 as part of the Jesus People movement but became infamous for sexual libertarianism, prophetic obsession, and elitism.

Founder David Berg adopted evangelical views on many doctrines, but over time his teachings supplanted the Bible. Cult watchers criticized Berg's teaching that female disciples should use sexual favors—termed “flirty fishing”—to convert men to Jesus. More notoriously, the group once had an open attitude about sexual contact between adults and minors.

Both practices ceased by 1987,

but even after Berg's death in 1994, TFI leaders Peter (nee Steve Kelly) and Maria (nee Karen Zerby, Berg's widow) taught that consensual sex between nonmarried adults was permitted in Family homes.

The last time TFI made headlines was in January 2005, when Maria's son Ricky Rodriguez, the once-future leader who left in 2001, killed longtime member Angela Smith and then shot himself.

But a new vision for TFI, which peaked at 15,000 members and numbers 4,000 today, may lead to less shocking headlines.

In a 2010 document called “Change Journey Manifesto,” Peter (who married Maria after Berg died) announced that God said TFI needed to change direction in order to allow members to blossom as individuals. “We are standing at the edge of the cliff, poised to dive into the future,



Marching Onward: The former Children of God movement is leaving its sex cult history behind as it shifts from radical legalism to more biblical behavior.

into the new,” he wrote.

Spokesperson Claire Borowick told CT that what TFI today calls “the reboot” involves dismantling the group's worldwide structure and the breakup of much of its communal living. Doctrinal changes involve a stronger endorsement of biblical authority, the minimizing of Peter and Maria as sources of revelation, and more conservative sexuality.

The reboot also makes frequent mention of focusing on principles rather than rules. Peter apologizes that TFI felt less like “a spirit-led adventure” and more like “being bound to a works-based religion.”

Gary Shepherd, a leading scholar on TFI, expressed surprise. “I don't know of any comparable group that has changed so quickly or so fundamentally altered such a large number of its beliefs and practices,” said Shepherd, coauthor of *Talking with the Children of God*. He suspects the voices of second-generation members helped shape the reboot.

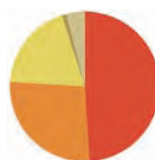
James Chancellor, author of *Life in the Family* and a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, was also caught “off guard,” particularly over the group's move away from communal living. “[Peter and Maria] may have come to some personal spiritual conclusions that there were serious errors that were endemic to the movement as it was.”

The reboot has been greeted with scorn on anti-Family websites. Some writers suggest that Peter and Maria are retiring with the group's money in the face of dwindling membership. Others say many Family members feel betrayed by the changes, speculating that “with their new-found freedom, it's only a matter of time before [TFI is] only a memory.”

Peter and Maria are far more optimistic. In his “Blueprint for the Future,” Peter wrote, “We envision the Family providing an empowering environment—one that infuses members with inspiration and confidence to enact their dreams and plans for God.”

GO FIGURE Church and State

New York State residents who say public schools . . .



49%
should rent to churches and other community groups.

27%
should rent to community groups but not churches.

19%
should not rent to any churches or community groups.

1%
should rent only to churches.

4%
Not sure

LifeWay Research

"[TFI] has always been innovative and adaptable," said Shepherd. "It will be fascinating to see whether this reboot brings more stability . . . and a greater peace with ex-members and the larger evangelical world." ⊕

BIBLE

The Problem 'Son'

Wycliffe translations challenged by Assemblies of God. By Collin Hansen

Wycliffe USA, faced with the possibility of losing support from the 3-million-member Assemblies of God, pulled one controversial Bible translation from circulation in February and halted publication of several others.

Critics have faulted the audio translation *Lives of the Prophets*, among others, for translating "Son" in reference to Jesus into the Arabic equivalent for "Messiah." Muslims object to Christian teaching that Jesus is the eternal Son of God.

"We are listening to those concerns," Wycliffe said in February, "and are seeking God's guidance as we re-evaluate our methodology."

Wycliffe says literal translations of divine familial terms should be preferred, but allows for nonliteral substitutes where translators determine the literal phrasing creates inaccurate meaning.

Wycliffe's statements followed two meetings with Assemblies of God World Mission (AGWM) leaders, who announced that they would spend the next four months reviewing their relationship with Wycliffe and international partner SIL. "We have done due diligence in researching, reflecting, and searching both the Scriptures and our hearts," said Greg Mundis, AGWM executive director. "We cannot agree with Wycliffe/SIL's [position]."

Currently 35 AGWM missionaries

work with Wycliffe in a partnership that goes back 25 years. But AGWM leaders will determine by May 15 whether they will continue approving personnel to serve with Wycliffe/SIL and endorsing the groups' support in more than 12,000 AG churches.

Last summer, the general assembly of the 347,000-member Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) declared "as unfaithful to God's revealed Word . . . [translations] that remove from the text references to God as 'Father' (*pater*) or Jesus as 'Son' (*huios*)."

PCA moderator Dan Carrell appointed a study committee that could recommend that the denomination's 1,750 churches withdraw support from Wycliffe/SIL.

Both Wycliffe and SIL have agreed to a formal review of their translation practices. The quadrennial meeting of SIL staff worldwide is scheduled for early May in East Asia. Freddy Boswell, executive director of SIL, told CT the groups hope to complete the review by the end of 2012. ⊕

CHURCH AND STATE

Contract Concern

USAID policy on hiring alarms charities. By Bobby Ross Jr.

Evangelical organizations that partner with Uncle Sam to deliver humanitarian aid overseas are voicing concern over a new federal policy that "strongly encourages" all contractors to develop anti-discrimination policies covering employees' sexual orientation.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) issued the policy statement in October, a week after the Supreme Court let stand an appellate court ruling that favored World Vision's faith-based hiring policies.

All World Vision U.S. employees must sign a statement of faith and

agree to a standard of conduct that limits sexuality to "a God-ordained covenant between a man and a woman," said senior vice president Kent Hill. "For a government agency to 'strongly encourage' us to abandon such core beliefs in our hiring policies is offensive and uncalled for," he said. Last year the 1,200-employee charity received nearly \$200 million in government grants—19 percent of its total budget.

In December, President Obama elevated the rights and treatment of LGBT people abroad as a priority in U.S. foreign policy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared in a Geneva speech that "gay rights are human rights, and human rights are gay rights."

That emphasis, combined with the USAID policy, has caught the attention of organizations that believe their religious liberty could be challenged, said Stanley Carlson-Thies, president of the Institutional Religious Freedom Alliance. "When you put all those things together, there is significant concern," he said.

Hill said the 1964 Civil Rights Act ensures faith-based organizations can remain faithful to their religious beliefs. "The new USAID contract language does not trump the [act] or the First Amendment," he said.

USAID press officer Drew Bailey denied any effort to impose on religious beliefs. "The [policy] is not binding," he said. "We have strong, productive relationships with many faith-based organizations, and [they] will not be adversely affected by this policy."

But the new policy could be a first step toward making such guidelines mandatory, say critics such as Chad Hayward, executive director of the Accord Network (formerly AERDO).

Hayward, a USAID appointee during George W. Bush's presidency, said the policy "might have a more chilling effect" on USAID funding recommendations. "If anyone on that [closed-door] panel already

PASSAGES



Censured
Jane Adams Spahr
Retired Presbyterian Church (USA) minister, for performing same-sex marriages in 2008. The ruling came from the PC(USA)'s highest court.



Retiring
Arlin and Rebekah Horton
Founders and leaders of textbook giant A Beka Book, Pensacola Christian College, and other ministries.



Murdered
Robinson Cavilcanti
Bishop of the Anglican Diocese of Recife, Brazil, by his 29-year-old adopted son. Cavilcanti had close ties to conservative U.S. Anglicans.

[continued on 16]

Briefing [from 15]

has an anti-faith bias," he said, "this language could be used to steer the panel against [such] funding."

Paul Bonicelli, executive vice president of Regent University and a USAID administrator during the Bush administration, echoed that warning. "While there is concern that this will become a mandate," he said, "the damage is already done because organizations fear that they will be tacitly ruled out of competition for funding."

LIFE ETHICS

Mass Appeal

Evangelicals copy more of Catholic playbook.

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey

Despite differences over contraception, evangelical leaders have fallen in step with Catholic bishops over what they see as federal compulsion to provide services against their conscience.

In 2011, the Obama administration ruled that religious institutions will be required to provide employees with free contraceptive coverage. President

Obama said in February that insurers will be responsible for paying for the contraception, but opponents suggest insurers could simply raise premiums to cover the cost.

Searching for strategies, some evangelicals filed lawsuits. Others followed Catholic bishops' lead, addressing the issue from the pulpit.

At least 117 Catholic bishops issued statements to their dioceses, asking for prayers and political opposition to the ruling. Many priests read the letter during Sunday Mass. Members of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) asked for advice on whether to distribute a similar letter, said Galen Carey, vice president of government relations. The organization decided not to take the unprecedented step.

While evangelicals do not oppose all contraception, they generally oppose forms of birth control that block uterine implantation.

Evangelical institutions Colorado Christian University, Louisiana College, and Geneva College joined Catholic universities in filing lawsuits to challenge the rule. More than 600 religious leaders and professors from Catholic and evangelical institutions signed a Becket Fund letter of protest.

"This is one of the more

DISCUSSION STARTER

Church and State

In *Mullin v. Sussex County, Delaware*, a U.S. District Court must answer whether the Lord's Prayer is sectarian. Four residents sued the county council for opening meetings with the prayer. The county says it's not Christian "because no Christian tradition existed" when Jesus prayed it. The judge called the case difficult "because there is no reference to Jesus or Allah."

remarkable displays of unity that I've seen in a long time," said Paul Kengor, a political science professor at Grove City College. "It's not that [Catholics and evangelicals] sought this issue; this came to them."

Evangelical leaders particularly noted that the administration did not widen an exemption that applied narrowly to churches.

"The administration anticipated and tried to address Catholic concerns more directly than they did evangelical concerns," said Carey, fearing a poor precedent for future rulings. "They're probably surprised at how important we think the issue is, even if we're talking about it from a different angle."

Catholicism's hierarchical structure carries advantages and disadvantages, said Francis Beckwith, who was president of the Evangelical Theological Society until he converted to Catholicism. Catholics bring institutional weight and have the President's ear, but often do not have evangelicals' flexibility or grassroots efforts.

"What began as a marriage of convenience has blossomed," said Robert George, a Princeton University professor. "We're united by common principles and common threat, and that's a powerful combination."

UNDER DISCUSSION Topics in the current debate.

compiled by Ruth Moon

Is the Lord's Prayer a Christian prayer?

YES

"The Lord's Prayer is 'the' Christian prayer. It comes up more than any other text in Christian liturgies since the first century. And its context in Matthew and Luke gives explicitly Christian meanings to terms such as *Father* and *kingdom*."

TELFORD WORK

author, *Ain't Too Proud to Beg*

"It is distinctly Christian. In the New Testament, it is Jesus who gives us the prayer. Throughout the Christian church—whether Catholics, Protestants, or Eastern Orthodox—people pray that prayer. You will not find it in a Jewish synagogue."

SIMON KISTEMAKER

New Testament professor, Reformed Theological Seminary

"It is a Christian prayer. Jesus was certainly influenced by certain Jewish models of prayer, but he gave it to his disciples specifically. So it's a direct inheritance for us as Christians."

ARTHUR BOERS

author, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*

"The Lord's Prayer is both Jewish and Christian. Jesus, a Jew, was teaching his Jewish followers to pray. But the fact that it is a part of both traditions fails to make it sufficiently nonsectarian to pass constitutional muster."

J. BRENT WALKER

executive director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

"You could consider it a prayer for multiple religions, because Jesus is considered to be a rabbi or a great teacher by many of the world's religions. It was not originally delivered as a Christian prayer; it was simply a teacher teaching his disciples a good way to pray."

CLAYTON SCHMIT

professor, Fuller Theological Seminary

"The prayer in and of itself does not explicitly espouse the precepts of Christianity. It recognizes God, but does not proselytize a particular religion. And case law does not support a mandatory total prohibition of prayer at public gatherings."

BRAD DACUS

president, Pacific Justice Institute

NO

Open-Air Worship: Borongajci members have moved out of the basement and into outdoor worship events. Evangelical growth is three times faster than Croatia's overall population growth.

MARIO MIHALJEVIC



CHURCH GROWTH CROATIA

Outside the God Box

Nontraditional believers recover Christian community in the post-war Balkans.

By Melody J. Wachsmuth in Zagreb, Croatia



Why do you want to fight in the war?

The blunt question sprang suddenly into Jasmin's mind, surprising the spiritually seeking Croatian soldier with its clarity. It happened in 1991, at the start of the war in the former Yugoslavia.

He responded, "I want to fight for good, to defend my country. I want to fight against evil." Somehow, he knew the question had not come from an earthly voice.

The unknown voice was penetrating and unforgettable. "If you want to take up a weapon, you will be killed by a weapon. But if you want to fight for good, then put off your weapon, and I will teach you how to fight for good."

A few months later, Jasmin turned in his rifle and uniform and began a three-year spiritual trek through Islam, astrology, numerology, meditation, and Christianity. One day as he studied the Sermon on the Mount, the words of Jesus captured his imagination. He thought, *If I submit under any authority, it would be Jesus.*

As he studied the Bible more intensively, other spiritual interests faded into insignificance. Eventually, in a quiet moment alone, he understood the gospel message in his heart and accepted it.

After the war for Croatian independence ended in 1995, such spontaneous conversion stories emerged in greater numbers. Local evangelical pastors found fresh openness to God as alienated

individuals wrestled with difficult questions about the war and grieved the devastating loss of 140,000 lives.

"You cannot imagine all that was happening here," one church leader told *Christianity Today*. "The whole nation was in a depression." Abuse of street drugs, especially heroin, skyrocketed right after the war, leveling off in 2006. People with post-traumatic stress disorder flooded treatment programs.

In time, many new Christians formed informal fellowships, often meeting in basements, coffee shops, or living rooms, rather than migrating into established Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox congregations. Of mixed backgrounds, the believers came together for worship, Bible study, and



MARIO MIHALJEVIC

New Life in Christ: Deaconess Anita Povalec (right) belongs to a new generation of Christian women leaders outside the traditional church hierarchy.

relationships not based on ethnic identity.

The groups operated without a name, without a pastor, without Western funding, and without ties to a denomination. But they shared a deep desire to know and obey God. A significant amount of new Christian growth in Zagreb has occurred within these informal fellowships, which are spreading beyond Zagreb into the coastal region. In a country of 4.4 million people, 87 percent are Roman Catholic. Less than 1 percent are evangelical.

NEED TO SHARE

In 1995, five young men in Zagreb, the capital of Croatia, sat expectantly around a pool table in a tiny basement—a place where they had previously gathered to play games and do drugs. A single hanging light bulb revealed a Bugs Bunny poster. Pool cues and games leaned carelessly against the walls.

Slowly, others trickled in, pulling up chairs. Some seemed nervous but curious, while others were old friends. The weekly meeting started informally, and everyone shared something, whether it was a poem, a Bible verse, or a personal testimony. At such sessions, participants said, there was

no particular program since no one had expertise in conducting a Christian worship service. But the Holy Spirit moved so tangibly that many people wept.

For many participants, these meetings marked the beginning of new life in Christ. But other spiritual seekers struggled with difficult feelings from the war years. After an initial encounter with Jesus, Ivana sank back into a destructive, abusive lifestyle and avoided the group.

“Hypocrisy was not in the community,” Ivana said. “There was so much [openness] there. You felt everyone could see right into your heart.” At the time, Ivana was in deep despair. But Jasmin doggedly sought her out. Finally, she agreed to attend another fellowship meeting.

“Again, I could feel this love drawing me—everything was melting,” Ivana said. At one meeting, she had a vision of herself, crushed by guilt, standing before Jesus on the cross. Deep in her spirit, she heard Jesus tell her that he knows and loves her. Long after the meeting concluded, she finally opened her eyes—tear-soaked and exhausted, but a new person. She freely confessed the sins of which she had previously been so ashamed.

As more Croatians joined these independent fellowships and experienced inner healing, controversy ensued. Croatian national identity is fused with Roman Catholicism—to be Croatian is to be Catholic. Some religious leaders branded the fellowships a “sect,” which stigmatized them. Established Protestant leaders expressed both curiosity and concern about the groups’ theological doctrine.

“We look back now and say, ‘Yes, we were very theologically incorrect,’” Karlo Biočina, one movement founder, told *CT*. He said they were spiritual babies with no other motivation than to listen to God and understand the Bible.

“We had no intention of having a church, but we had this need to share the gospel—we just wanted to be disciples,” said Jasmin, emphasizing their movement was responding to unmet spiritual needs of the unchurched.

AN UNEXPECTED ROLE MODEL

Over four years, the fellowship tripled in size. Up to 60 people crammed into the small basement. Onlookers gathered in the hallway and peered through windows.

People began referring to the attendees

as the *Borongajci* (pronounced *Boar-own-guy-tsee*), labeling them by their meeting location in a part of Zagreb called Borongaj. Rather than finding a bigger room to accommodate their growing numbers, the core group decided to send out smaller groups to meet in homes, each fellowship led by an elder.

This was a period of self-defining. As the group moved through it, they remained open to change. Often, they confessed their sins in front of the fellowship—a practice that the fellowship elders believed allowed God to move freely in their midst. Several times, Jasmin felt convicted to confess that he had pushed his own spiritual agenda on other people, hindering the freedom of their spiritual growth.

“It’s always hard to do this because of pride. But [the practice of confession] became the foundation of our fellowship so that there were no heroes or saints,” he said.

This regular confession included admitting doctrinal mistakes. Women had been tightly restricted in the early days to the point of wearing head coverings during prayer. However, the Borongajci’s ongoing Bible study and openness to the prompting of the Holy Spirit led to the appointment of the first deaconess in 2003.

Later, the elders announced a new doctrinal position that empowered women to preach and teach publicly. This announcement was soon followed up by a service in which women were completely in leadership, in order to “give radical proof that we had changed our minds,” said Jasmin.

In 2002, during another scorching summer, the Borongajci leaders took a big step forward. They conducted public evangelistic meetings on the banks of the Sava River, inviting established churches in Zagreb to share in the worship and preaching. The 70 consecutive meetings successfully reached people who would be unlikely to enter a church to worship.

These outdoor sessions strengthened the developing friendship between the Borongajci and other churches, including the Evangelical Pentecostal Church, one of Croatia’s largest Protestant groups. Borongajci elders began to understand that God was using them to “share the fragrance of Christian unity.” Barriers began to come down.

Mladen Jovanović, pastor of the Church of Christ in Zagreb and lecturer at the Biblical Institute of Zagreb, told CT that Protestant churches had rarely mingled before the war. In fact, it would have been difficult for a Pentecostal and a Baptist to marry without one person transferring their church allegiance and membership.

The causes of such territorialism are complex. The limits on freedom of religion from years of communist rule as well as the bonding of the Catholic-Croat identity played a role in creating barriers between Christians. But during the war, a new generation of Christian leaders emerged who were open to change and working toward new possibilities for all Christians and churches.

The Borongajci had little reason to be territorial. They invited three pastors from three different churches to preach in their fellowship. Seeking the pastors’ counsel about various issues resulted in a dynamic relational exchange.

“We have been blessed by them because it really doesn’t happen often in the Christian world [that] a new group would ask an old group to help,” Jovanović said. “When I come to their meetings, they reflect a love for God and serve people in need. They teach their members how to give; in this they are great examples to us in Croatia.”

THE ROAD AHEAD

Since 1995, the Borongajci movement has weathered difficult times, recently emerging from a painful five-year period of stunted church growth.

Opinions about the dropoff differ. Some think the zeal for holiness led to a legalism that deadened the church’s spirit. Others point to visiting international teachers, some of who offered numerous critiques without understanding the church’s context. In the words of one leader, many suggestions led them to “reject their spiritual DNA” and produced a disunity of beliefs in the church.

Although many things called for change, leaders knew the answer was not to return to the doctrines of the early days. “Our unity was never based on doctrine, but on lifestyle and mission,” Jasmin said.

Instead, Jasmin notes, God seems to be reshaping their structure. The now-seven local house churches have more freedom

to focus on their specific ministries even while aligning with the movement’s larger vision: holiness, evangelism, and unity.

Returning to their spiritual roots means renewing their larger vision for service to other churches for the sake of unity in the body of Christ. In 2011, the Borongajci elders sent a letter to all the pastors in Zagreb inviting them to meet for prayer and encouragement—something that had not happened for seven years. Now the pastors meet regularly.

The Borongajci’s relational focus is not restricted to Croatia. In 2007, the Borongajci began a partnership with the charismatic ministry World Trumpet Mission (WTM) in Kampala, Uganda. Borongajci leaders became convinced that there was a “spiritual bridge” stretching from Croatia to Uganda.

Several Borongajci traveled to Uganda to assist poor families, starting several small businesses. In turn, WTM had a vision of Croatia being the “spiritual door to Europe,” and for the past two years has sent prayer missionaries there.

The WTM missionaries pray and fast for God to bring about his purposes through the church in Croatia. Both WTM and the Borongajci believe Croatia is well situated to bring spiritual renewal to the region.

The Borongajci’s evangelistic vision cannot be separated from their call to facilitate unity in the body of Christ. Jovanović said, “How often do people make the decision for Christ by looking at us and how we live together?” Perhaps the story of the Borongajci—a community defined by their love and transparent humility—provides a good example.

A few years ago, a friend of the Borongajci shared a vision she had of three flames. Each flame represented a different kind of love. The first love was God, the second was the family of God, and the third was those who did not yet know Christ.

The elders understood the three loves as the source from which all activities should flow. “When we find ourselves moving in this direction,” said Biočina, “we are like fish in water.”

Melody J. Wachsmuth, who blogs at balkanvoices.wordpress.com, is a writer based in Croatia.

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School Choice of a Different Kind

Why Christians in Richmond, Virginia, and elsewhere are choosing to send their children to struggling public schools.

By Amy Julia Becker

WHEN CHERYL BURKE first walked into the dark lobby of Chimborazo Elementary School, where she had just been appointed principal, she noted the distinct smell of urine. Outside, the playground was littered with “40s,” large empty beer

bottles, and crack cocaine was stashed in one of the bathrooms.

“I just cried,” says Burke, recalling that day in 1996.

Sixteen years later, the brightly lit lobby sports two armchairs and a coffee table. Where black asphalt once surrounded the buildings, there is now green grass. Sterile white cinder-block hallways now vibrate with colorful stripes of paint. Over the years, “Miz Burke,” as she is known to staff, parents, and students alike, convinced the local faith community to pray for the school, raise funds, and counsel and tutor students. Chimborazo’s scores on the state Standard of Learning exam have climbed, and now the number of students declared “proficient” in math and reading

hovers around 60 percent.

Still, 88 percent of Chimborazo’s students are so poor they receive free or reduced-price lunches; with that poverty comes a litany of challenges for the PK-5 school. As bright and beautiful as Burke has made it, Chimborazo reflects its local community, with all its hurts and all its possibilities.

Many Americans, including many Christians, do not consider urban schools like Chimborazo good enough for their children. Despite federal programs such as George Bush’s No Child Left Behind and the Obama administration’s Race to the Top, American

KEVIN MORLEY / GENESIS PHOTOS





Principled Principal: Cheryl Burke has been a driving force behind moving the students at Chimborazo Elementary from 9 to about 60 percent proficiency on statewide tests.

students still struggle to achieve basic academic goals. The nonpartisan Broad Foundation for Education reports that 68 percent of American 8th graders can't read at their grade level, and most will never catch up. Nationally, 70 percent of students graduate from high school, and only 50 percent of African American and Latino students graduate on time.

But in recent years, a growing number of Christians across the country have felt called to take up the educational challenge in their own communities. In many of those communities, including Richmond, Virginia, the tide seems to be turning.

A DREAM REALIZED

Over the past decade, a group of mostly white, middle-class Christian couples have moved into Church Hill, the community served by Chimborazo Elementary School. Unlike most families in Church Hill, these four couples have the financial and social capital to send their kids to private schools or to homeschool. Yet they have chosen otherwise. Building on the firm foundation Principal Burke has laid, they want to help restore a community struggling against generational poverty, and they believe a key component is sending their own children to the community's public school.

Sophie, Luke, Jack, and Chanan are all kindergarteners at Chimborazo, but the story of how they arrived there begins before they were born.

In 1995, most of their parents met as first-year students at the University of Virginia (UVA) in Charlottesville. They lived together for their final years of college (along with seven other men, including my husband) as an unintentionally diverse cohort: Corey Widmer, a lanky blonde interested in missional theology, and Matt Illian, then a cross-country runner, are white; Danny Avula, a stocky man who is quick to smile, is Indian; and Romesh Wijesooriya, a Jefferson scholar with athletic gifts that earned him a spot on the college's nationally ranked soccer team, is Sri Lankan. As the men's friendships developed, so did their awareness of the ethnic segregation among UVA's Christians. They wanted to figure out a way to bridge those divides.

So, Wijesooriya led a group of white and black Christians on a spring-break trip to Jackson, Mississippi, to meet Christian community development "grandfather" John Perkins and serve at his Voice of Calvary ministries. The trip sparked a vision. Widmer says, "[We] wondered if one day we might do this together—move into an urban community together and live out the principles of the Christian Community Development Association."

For years, the vision remained dormant. Then a number of prerequisites fell together. Avula and Wijesooriya joined a residency program at the Medical College of Virginia in downtown Richmond. Illian, a private wealth manager who works from home, had enough job flexibility to move to Richmond. That same year, Widmer received the call to become a pastor in a Richmond church. By that time, each man had married a woman who shared the vision for planting roots deep in an urban community.

But they didn't want to set up shop in just any poor area.

"We wanted to be invited into the neighborhood, and we wanted to go to a place where

'What would it communicate to our neighbors if we said, "We're moving into your neighborhood, but we don't consider your schools and public institutions good enough for our families"?'

~ Corey Widmer, Richmond pastor

God was already at work," says Mary Kay Avula. When they visited Church Hill, they met with local Christians. Among them, provisionally, was Don Coleman, a local pastor. After they had talked, Coleman "claimed us as an answer to his prayer," says Avula. "He sensed that the Spirit was calling us long before we did."



Head Count: Principal Burke spent two years sorting out why 900 kids were at a school built for 500. Now, Chimborazo has 585.

When another Christian, Selena Ruffin, invited the couples to move to her street, three of the four families became her immediate neighbors. The Widmers moved in a few blocks away—all in Church Hill. They soon connected with Angie and Percy Strickland, another Christian couple who had arrived in Church Hill three years prior, setting up Church Hill Activities and Tutoring (CHAT).

Church Hill sits, literally, atop a hill overlooking Richmond's downtown. Once home to Richmond's upper class, it still features a number of historic churches. But the demographics have radically changed. It now hosts a majority African American population, and most residents live at or near the poverty line.

The UVA families quickly built relationships with their neighbors: The Wijesooriyas took in a young unmarried couple expecting

their first child, and the Widmers housed two high-school boys when their mother needed temporary support. But the UVA families soon realized the move would not come without costs. Catherine Illian, a petite woman with curly brown hair, recalls a time when she heard shouting and scuffling outside her door.

"I was ready to call the police when I looked outside and saw that it was just a group of men socializing and talking very loudly. . . . I am still learning the difference between loud friendly banter and something more aggressive."

Illian faced aggression head-on in August 2007, when she and Mary Kay Avula watched a man across the street firing a handgun. "I was scared," Avula recalls. "But I was also well aware that there were dangers associated with living here."

Despite the taste of violence, Avula says her family never considered leaving. "There are dangers no matter what path you choose in life. Some of them you think you can control, but you can't."

Each family took jobs that served Richmond's poor. Danny Avula became Richmond's deputy director of public health. Romesh Wijesooriya, a pediatrician at Virginia Commonwealth Uni-

versity, began studying childhood obesity, a chronic health problem in urban areas. With Ruffin, some of the families revived a local Christian nonprofit, Urban Hope, to ensure affordable housing throughout the neighborhood. And Mary Kay Avula started teaching at Chimborazo Elementary.

In 2007, John Perkins returned the visit and came to Church Hill. He encouraged the families, but voiced one concern, remembers Widmer: "The church is absent. Without worshipping together, you will become a loose, disconnected group of social activists rather than a Christ-centered community." That prompted Widmer and Pastor Coleman to form a weekly gathering for Christians and seekers called East End Fellowship.

But a test of their commitment was on its way.

KEVIN MORLEY / GENESIS PHOTOS

WHAT TO DO WITH THE KIDS?

Within a year or two of arriving in the neighborhood, the couples all had children of their own, and they began to talk about where to send them to school. The adults' own educational backgrounds were varied: four had attended public schools, three had attended private schools, and one, Catherine Illian, had been homeschooled through 10th grade. The friends talked about starting a charter school, or founding a Church Hill campus of a private school on Richmond's South Side. But as much as such schools might eventually benefit the community, they chose another option.

"Investing in the public school meant that we were investing in an existing institution that was trusted by the community," notes Matt Illian. "Anything else that we were to start would really take decades to build that same level of trust."

But gaining the trust of the community couldn't be their only concern. "After some pretty intense late-night crying sessions with God and Matt, I decided that Jack would be gaining more than he would be losing... the decision to send him to Chimborazo forced me to trust God in a way I hadn't before," says Catherine Illian, recalling her fears about sending their son to Chimborazo. "I grew up in a family where education was one of the most important things that we could do for our kids," says Danny Avula, who graduated from UVA at age 19, then finished medical school and earned a master's degree in public health. "But that attitude can become an idol."

Together the group decided to send their kids to Chimborazo. Corey Widmer asks, "What would it communicate to our neighbors if we said, 'We're moving into your neighborhood, but we don't consider your schools and public institutions good enough for our families'?"

These men and women in Richmond are not alone. Across the nation, Christians are in one way or another investing in local public schools, using a variety of strategies to help turn things around. Nicole Baker Fulgham, a Detroit native, for years taught with Teach for America, a nonprofit that trains teachers

to work in low-income communities. After serving as Teach for America's vice president of faith community relations, last fall she founded the Expectations Project, which equips churches, nonprofits, and individuals to help low-income public schools. "I've been blown away in the past couple of years by the receptivity and interest of the Christian community," says Fulgham, who is based in Washington, D.C. "We now have solutions to some of the problems and so we can mobilize faith communities to respond."

The Memphis Teacher Residency (MTR) is one such solution. It is the only urban teacher residency program in the country with a Christian identity. The nonprofit trains teachers in an intensive one-year residency, where they



Word Power: Scholars unanimously agree that reading skills are key to escaping poverty.

are paired with a teacher-mentor in a Memphis classroom. By the end, residents have earned a Masters of Arts in urban education through nearby Union University, and a Tennessee state teaching license. In return, residents teach in an underserved Memphis school for at least three years. Founder David Montague roots MTR's educational reform in a broader context. "We're only willing to do education reform within a community development approach," says Montague, "so that a child can be born in [a given neighborhood] and have a great teacher from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade."

Like the families in Richmond, some Christians begin by moving into low-income neighborhoods. After five years in a strong school district, Kirsten Strand and her husband moved to Aurora, Illinois, to serve in

an urban context. They had felt the call for years, but had put off moving because of the struggling school system. Ultimately, "we decided that our kids would receive a wonderful life and cultural education, even if the academic experience wasn't as enriched," says Strand. Her husband left his job in corporate America to become a third-grade teacher at the school. Other families moved to East Aurora for similar "missional" reasons. "We've found the schools here to be very open and eager to partner with our church, so we've been able to start tutoring and mentoring programs and engage in the schools in lots of ways," says Strand. "We really don't need to 'bring God' to East Aurora. We just need to join him in what he is already doing here."

Jake Medcalf describes his family's move into City Heights, California, as "the ministry God dragged us into." He and his wife, Joan, had been serving the affluent community in Pacific Beach. Jake oversaw youth ministry at a local church, and began forming relationships at the local Mission Beach High School. Only then did he realize that 90 percent of his students were bused to the school from 10 miles—and a socioeconomic world—away. A few years later, he and Joan moved into the kids' neighborhood, where the average income for a family of four is \$18,000. Jake's philosophy for doing so is simple: "If you're called to a people, you need to live among the people." The Medcalfs' daughter will begin kindergarten at the school next fall. "We could bus her out because our local schools are underperforming," says Jake. "But we are in the same boat as our neighbors."

Stephanie McLeish, a mother of three in New Orleans, echoes Medcalf's sentiments. McLeish's oldest son attends a local public school where he is the only white student in his class and where 89 percent of his peers receive free or reduced price lunch. McLeish and her husband belonged to a group of families representing four New Orleans neighborhood churches who met for a year to discuss starting a Christian school.

"In the end," McLeish says, "many of us



felt this was an excellent time for the church to engage the public schools of our city.” She explains the theological basis for her convictions: “Christ is at work redeeming all things, not just souls but also places, systems, business, and even education.” McLeish has lived in the neighborhood for a decade, and more recently, she and her husband have invested more deeply in the local school, volunteering regularly and hosting teachers for dinner. “The problems as well as the blessings of living in this impoverished community have become my own,” says McLeish.

‘A TENUOUS HOPE’

The families who moved into Church Hill have found that forces beyond their control continue to impede Chimborazo’s growth. Mary Kay Avula notes that “many families struggle to get their basic needs met, and some don’t have permanent residences. Many have witnessed acts of violence or have a family member who is incarcerated. Students need a great deal of support to be successful in school when they face the various risk factors associated with poverty.”

Catherine Illian, an active member of Chimborazo’s PTA, explains the challenges of engaging parents: “We have parents without transportation, parents working two jobs, single moms with multiple kids, grandparents as primary guardians, parents who work at night and sleep during the day and find coming to night meetings difficult, parents who didn’t do well in school themselves and are intimidated by school and what that represents.”

But other Christians in Church Hill have filled in the gaps. Principal Burke has organized buses to pick parents up for PTA meetings and found grant funding to host a food bank alongside the meetings. Pastor Coleman joined the Richmond City School Board as a way to represent his neighborhood’s needs. Michelle Macklin, PTA president, and Leon Warlington, another local parent, show up at Chimborazo every morning simply to help in whatever way is needed.

‘I’ve been blown away in the past couple of years by the receptivity and interest of the Christian community.’

~ Nicole Baker Fulgham,
the Expectations Project

CHAT has flourished in recent years and now operates at five different Church Hill locations, tutoring dozens of neighborhood kids one on one a few afternoons a week. Lawson Wijesooriya leads the Blue Sky Fund, a local nonprofit that gives youth from urban environments an outdoor experience. Part of her work involves monthly experiential learning projects with the third-grade students from Chimborazo Elementary.

But the most comprehensive effort to

children. All children [in the area] will receive a world-class education.” Illian’s taskforce has committed to raising over \$400,000 to fund the teacher training and media and material upgrades, in order to reach full authorization in May 2014.

As in East Aurora, New Orleans, and City Heights, Church Hill Christians have their sights set on more than education reform. After the birth of her and Danny’s first child, Mary Kay Avula stopped teaching at Chimborazo Elementary. But she invited all the girls from her third-grade class to her house for weekly Bible study. Now in high school, the girls still meet weekly. Mary Kay and Lawson co-lead the study, but also take the girls to doctors’ appointments, help their families pay the bills, and have recently begun steering them through the college admissions process. All girls in the original group have “a sincere faith in the Lord,” says Mary Kay.

Meanwhile, East End Fellowship’s congregation has grown. Corey Widmer describes the 200 congregants who show up every Sunday afternoon as a “pretty amazing mix of people—rich and poor, black and white. . . . Literally there are homeless people and partners in major law firms sitting in the same room together.”

The couples are quick to point out that while they hope to serve the community, they

also assume that they and their families will be blessed by living there. Danny Avula says, “Our neighbors don’t just need us—we need them. In the context of these diverse, complex, and beautiful relationships, we find our wholeness.” They look to the future with what Avula calls “a tenuous hope”—a hope that generations of suffering will be undone by the power of God’s Spirit, at work in believers who continue to pray and look for God’s kingdom to come among them. ☩

Amy Julia Becker, a writer and speaker based in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, is the author of *A Good and Perfect Gift: Faith, Expectations, and a Little Girl Named Penny*. She writes regularly for *Her.meneutics*, *Christianity Today*’s women’s blog.



Kingdom Classroom: Richmond school-board member Don Coleman says, ‘Not just in our homes and families, but in the entire community, Christians should be the ones serving.’

address the academic needs of students in the neighborhood has been spearheaded by Matt Illian. He has assembled a taskforce of current and future parents to make Chimborazo the first Richmond City elementary school that follows the International Baccalaureate methodology. The IB initiative would involve overhauling the entire curriculum and training every teacher. But Principal Burke has championed the initiative from its inception, and the vast majority of Burke’s staff voted in support of the curriculum change. The Richmond School Board unanimously supported it.

As Illian says, “We got momentum going because we wanted to support the local elementary school. This wasn’t just for our



Treating
Richmond's

Fatherless Epidemic

How local Christians are building
human capital through public
health—one man at a time.

By Katelyn Beaty

Family Doctors:
Pastor Brian
Gullins (right)
and Dr. Donald
Stern see their
patient as metro
Richmond, where
65 percent of
children are born
to single mothers.

O

IN THE FOURTH FLOOR of the Health District Building in downtown Richmond, Donald Stern's office is beginning to resemble a library with an unusual collection. On his desk, next to new editions of the *World Health*

Report and Control of Communicable Diseases, are *Race Matters* by philosopher Cornel West, *Was Bill Cosby Right?* by Michael Eric

Dyson, and the Moynihan Report, a controversial 1965 federal document that detailed crumbling relations in the African American family. Nearly 50 years after its publication, Stern says, it has proven "prophetic" in the former seat of the Confederacy.

Stern became Richmond's public health director after his boss urgently called him there in December 2006. He had spent the previous 25 years in some capacity in Virginia public health, tracking infection rates, administering flu shots, inspecting nursing homes—"I've done about every job a physician could do in Virginia public health," says Stern, an affable, mustached doctor trained in maternal

and child health. But all that, he says, “was God’s means of preparing me for my most challenging role,” centered in Richmond.

“Here’s some light reading for you,” Stern says as he hands me *Winning the Race: Beyond the Crisis in Black America*, historian John McWhorter’s landmark study on the effects of welfare reform since the 1960s. “Forty years of public policy around poverty and the war on drugs have, in McWhorter’s words, sent the black community to hell.”

That hell was clear to Stern when he, like any good doctor with a new patient, examined Richmond’s vital signs. “Every health status indicator was worse than the state average. Then we looked at the

youth pastor and schoolteacher from Norfolk, two hours southeast of Richmond. “I had never heard that before. As I saw the tears well up in his eyes, I knew I had to be a part.”

With Stern, Gullins convened a Core Team of local nonprofit heads, pastors, and doctors who understood the root causes of father absence. Using the research model of Benjamin Scafidi, a Georgia economist and author of the 2008 report “The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing,” the team produced a “costs and solutions document” that translated Richmond’s family fragmentation into raw taxpayer costs. “When we’re talking with politicians, it’s always important to understand the bottom line,” says Gullins. “We needed to know how to talk their language, to get a handle on the cost.”

‘People in stable families with a married mother and father have higher high-school graduation rates and income. It’s not only about the theological basis for the design of a man and a woman. When you look at outcomes, it’s a no-brainer.’

~ Danny Avula, Richmond deputy public health director

indicators that were twice as high as the Virginia average: teen pregnancy, infant mortality, out-of-wedlock births, STD infections, and lead poisoning. The first four are all a function of relationships between men and women.”

The numbers led Stern to the same “inescapable conclusion” made by scores of sociologists, pastors, and pundits observing the post-Jim Crow black family: “There is a crisis in gender relations in the African American community. This is a painful reality.”

Should a public health department—perceived as a government monolith unqualified to counsel individual men and women—try to change citizens’ gender relations, encouraging fidelity, responsibility, and stable two-parent families?

When it costs a city \$205 million every year in taxpayer dollars, say Stern and a number of Christians in Richmond, the answer is clear.

NUCLEAR FAMILY BY THE NUMBERS

With a bottom-line, preventive approach, Richmond has since 2009 hosted one of the few U.S. public health programs whose mantra is “create a community culture connecting fathers to their families.” Unlike most city governments, which respond to father absence by increasing aid to single women, the Richmond Family and Fatherhood Initiative (RFFI) uses ad campaigns, legislation, and partnerships with Richmond’s sizable Christian community to reach its goal: Decrease the nonmarital birthrate, reconnect fathers to their children, and foster strong two-parent families—all for the future health of Richmond.

All 13 of RFFI’s founders are committed Christians, including Brian Gullins, a black pastor who arrived in Richmond to plant a church in 2008. When Gullins needed a second job, Ron Clark, director of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, encouraged him to apply to become coordinator for “Man Up Richmond,” a then-new program with the health district. After a series of interviews, Gullins met with Stern for lunch.

“I always thought father absence was a social services issue, but Dr. Stern elevated it to a public health issue,” says Gullins, a former

stamps, housing assistance, and school meals, among others—were alone costing the city over \$50 million annually. Martin Brown, Virginia Commissioner of Social Services and Core Team member, says the document revealed how much the God-ordained institutions of family and government had gotten entangled. “Each institution has either acquiesced or taken responsibility away from the other, and we’ve grown dysfunctional in solving some of our problems,” says Brown. (Using Scafidi’s model, Brown calculates that father absence costs the state \$2 billion annually.)

The report also revealed how incarcerating men without offering rehabilitation has fragmented Richmond’s families, costing \$35 million annually in the process. (All interviewees for this story said the country’s gross incarceration rates among black men amount to “the new Jim Crow,” and recommended Michelle Alexander’s new book of the same name.) “Those of us in public health apply preventive more than curative strategies,” says Stern. “The curative strategy puts more money in jails. The preventive strategy asks, ‘Wait a minute, why are these young men dropping out of school? What’s happening to the father of this baby?’ We’re raising questions about the more fundamental elements.”

Stern is clear that RFFI is about aligning Richmond’s health stats with the state average, not about making “a religious, right-ring, Republican statement,” as some have charged. “This is what the research shows.”

“If you look at health, education, and poverty indicators, people in stable families with a married mother and father have higher high-school graduation rates and income,” says Danny Avula, Richmond’s deputy health director and Core Team member. “It’s not only about the theological basis for the design of a man and a woman. When you look at outcomes, it’s a no-brainer.”

THE GOVERNMENT CAN’T CHANGE A HEART

But it’s also been a no-brainer for Richmond’s faith-based community, which Gullins says has responded overwhelmingly to RFFI.

Six years ago, Owen Cardwell started tackling family disintegration

using a tv in the basement of his small church in the East Highland Park neighborhood. Moms and kids and aunts would arrive at New Canaan International and pay \$30 to “visit” an incarcerated family member, sitting in front of a camcorder at one of nine state prisons. “Over six years, we’ve seen how impacting it is for children to visit with their fathers,” says Cardwell, a Core Team member.

Starting in 2011—with training from RFFI and a \$50,000 grant from Strengthening Families Initiative, a similar statewide program—Cardwell has been working to stop youth from going to jail in the first place. Every week, he and male volunteers from eight churches meet with 36 9th-grade boys at Armstrong High School to talk about healthy relationships, real heroes (as opposed to “media-created idols like Beyonce and Jay-Z”), and “character development,” a sanctioned way to teach biblical values in the public schools.

“This is a dropout prevention strategy,” says Cardwell, a Virginia civil rights hero for desegregating his Lynchburg high school at age 14. “If you work backwards, you find that 70 to 80 percent of persons who are incarcerated have a GED or less. At 14, the boys are not quite jaded enough to disregard us,” noting the boys were captivated during a recent trip to the Black Caucus Expo in Washington, D.C.

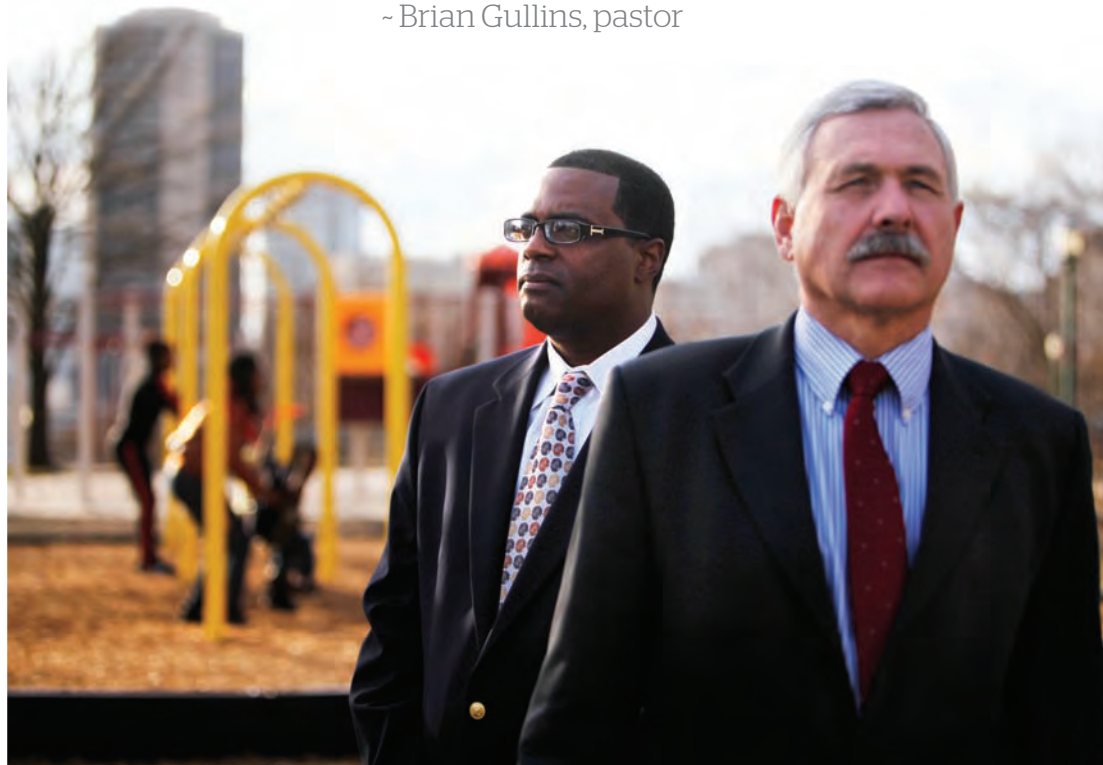
Another faith-based group, First Things First Richmond, meets with incarcerated men to encourage “manning up” and returning to their families after their sentence is over. Every Friday, staff teach inmates about relating to their kids and developing skills to enter the workforce. RFFI reached out to jail staff and provided curriculum from the National Fatherhood Initiative.

Due to the response from Richmond churches and nonprofits, Gullins is now working to replicate the RFFI model in five other cities with high nonmarital birthrates, incubating “consortiums” of Virginia churches to work with men in each city. Regent University law students are compiling costs and solutions documents for the consortiums’ use over the next two years. But city council members, school principals, and even business leaders are showing interest as well. “We’ve seen so many people from those institutions coming together,” says Gullins. “Richmond is still a small city [about 200,000 in the city limits], and if you target the right people, you can create a cultural shift.”

Avula attributes RFFI’s success in part to the fact that Richmond “is a very religious, conservative town,” noting that its mayor is an ordained black pastor. But a vocal minority says government should focus on upping support for single mothers, not getting dads back in the mix. “Stern is at a distinct disadvantage because he’s an older

‘I always thought father absence was a social services issue, but Dr. Stern elevated it to a public health issue. As I saw the tears well up in his eyes, I knew I had to be a part.’

~ Brian Gullins, pastor



white man,” says Avula. “Bill Cosby got crucified a few years ago, and he was an icon in the black community. That’s as clear an example as possible as to how countercultural this message is.”

But the message seems to be resonating, however slowly. Gale Grant, adolescent health coordinator for the city, says her teachers address father absence indirectly, teaching teens in the local high schools about paternity laws and child support enforcement. “We say things like, ‘For those of you who’ve grown up without a father, think how you feel.’ We try to connect the dots on the emotional level,” says Grant, a Core Team member. In 2011, she learned that the year prior, Richmond had the lowest teen pregnancy rate in over 20 years, at 61 births per 1,000 teens. (The abortion rate also decreased.)

In the meantime, RFFI’s success in keeping the black family intact remains to be seen, evident after years of tracking welfare and incarceration rates. Right now, its impact may be known only to the on-the-ground Christian leaders building relationships.

“The government can provide research, resources, and training, but that’s where we stop at the door,” says Gullins. “When it comes to transforming a heart, we try to set the table for the faith community to do transformative work that comes through Jesus Christ. We’re just the kingdom of God behind government lines.”

Katelyn Beaty, CT associate editor, is editorial director for This Is Our City.

Creative Discipleship

Five Richmonders you should know about. By Katelyn Beaty

In many ways, the first two metro areas featured in the This Is Our City series couldn't be farther apart—and not just on a United States map. While Portland, Oregon's Christians compose a narrow, vibrant slice of their post-Christian home, Richmond, Virginia's Christianity is so deeply embedded as to be taken for granted. The place where Thomas Jefferson in 1786 forged his budding country's commitment to religious freedom, Richmond is home to over 800 churches and 4 seminaries in a relatively small city of 1.2 million. Its current mayor, Dwight Jones, is an ordained Baptist minister, and at the time of this writing, it stood at the center of a pro-life personhood bill, one of only two in the country, sponsored by a Baptist delegate.

Thankfully, the following five Richmond Christians transcend cultural Christianity by serving the City on the James through sacrificial, creative vocations.

Lawson Wijesooriya | SOLVING THE NATURE DEFICIT

Educators lament the “nature deficit” among today’s children, who are more likely to watch the Discovery Channel than discover their own backyard. In Richmond, which flanks the James River, the deficit is deep in the red. But Lawson Wijesooriya (pictured here with husband Romesh) is working to change that through Blue Sky Fund (BSF): a year-long educational program that gets youth out in the woods and into experiential learning. Wijesooriya, who fondly remembers backpacking in Wyoming as a girl, says the trips reconnect the 900 at-risk children participating with their own place: “We have many 3rd graders who will ask if the James River is the ocean . . . they have lived two miles from the James their entire lives.”

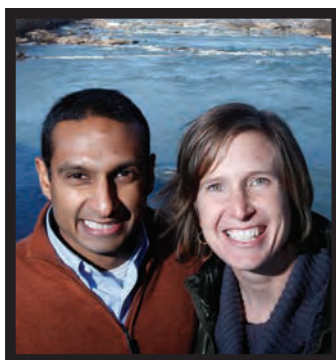
It may also offer an unlikely escape route out of poverty. Through taking kids rock climbing and backpacking, BSF hopes to strengthen their

“resiliency”—the strength to overcome obstacles—and apply it elsewhere. Wijesooriya explains: “We had a 9th-grade girl tell us, ‘I did not want to go camping. I was afraid and nervous. But after the hike, I realized I could do it. I realize that is true at school and at home too.’” Ultimately BSF is an outgrowth of Lawson and Romesh’s calling:

to share Christ’s love with an underserved generation. As a pediatrician studying childhood obesity, Romesh partners with Lawson to fight sedentary childhoods. “I had been developing vision for Blue Sky long before I knew it existed,” says Lawson, 31. “But I could have never made a living working for a young nonprofit [without Romesh] supporting our household.”

HERO John Perkins

READING NOW *A Good and Perfect Gift*, by Amy Julia Becker



PHOTOS • KEVIN MORLEY

Chris Payne | MAKING SPACE FOR MUSIC

If you’re a musician breaking into the local scene, you likely loathe the inroads: smoky bars where your hard-earned craft becomes background noise for drunken patrons. Christopher Payne knows the pain; in 2009, he and another Richmond singer-songwriter “were getting tired of competing with the loud bar scene.” In response, they founded the Listening Room, an intentionally small, growing music venue where the keyword is *connection* between songwriter and audience. “Without an audience, the performance and craft is pointless. One cannot exist without the other,” says Payne, a Virginia native and owner of Church Hill Records. “By taking music out of the normal loud places, you allow that transcendental, transactional

element of music to flourish.” Now in its third year, the Listening Room has become a central player in Richmond’s underground acoustic scene. Tyler Crowley, a local musician, says the Room has a profound effect on performers. “They always comment on the quietness of the room, the respectfulness,” says Crowley, a worship leader at Hope Church. “And when a song ends there’s a hush in the room—a holy moment.” “Regardless of background,” says Payne, “audiences leave having experienced the splendor of the Creator God.”

HERO Abraham Lincoln

READING NOW *The Meaning of Marriage*, by Tim Keller



David Bailey | RECONCILING COMPOSER

David Bailey is a regular diplomat in the “worship wars”—and not the ones you’re thinking of. In Richmond, where history draws sharp lines of race and class, the saying about the most segregated hour in America still rings true. Under the auspices of *Making a Melody*, Bailey, a pianist-producer, leads worship in churches to bridge racial gaps and teach rich theology in the process. He calls it *ethnodoxology*: writing music, the “heart language” of a people group, that lets them worship in a culturally sensible way. The results are surprising: At a recent service at a majority-white church, for example, Bailey led “In Christ Alone.” Two young men had dropped in from the neighborhood. “They didn’t get it; their eyes glazed over,” recalls Bailey. Then the band introduced hip-hop beats to the Keith Getty/Stuart Townend classic, and the two men perked up. That was “one measure of *Making a Melody*’s success for me,” says Bailey.



Now Bailey is training young believers to do the same. The Urban Worship Songwriting Institute, hosted at East End Fellowship, teaches interns to compose ethnically fitting, theologically rich music for use in urban churches. But how effectively does worship foster racial unity—and is that what worship is about? For Bailey, 30, the mission is biblical: It’s “not about getting people of different cultural backgrounds together to sing ‘Kumbaya.’ When Christians apply Philippians 2—‘Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others’—to worship music, we get a foretaste of Revelation 7:9–10, where ‘a great multitude . . . from every nation, tribe, people, and language’ worship God.”

HERO Quincy Jones

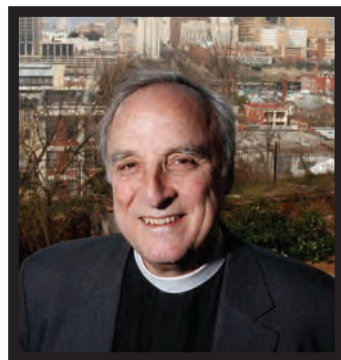
READING NOW *Building a Discipleship Culture*, by Mike Breen

Ben Campbell | CITY INTERCESSOR

Last year kicked off Richmond’s Civil War sesquicentennial celebration, and the party won’t stop until 2015. But atop the city’s highest point, Ben Campbell will be leading a quieter celebration. Richmond Hill—an urban monastery founded when nuns began praying for their war-torn city in 1866—hosts retreats and classes that attract the city’s 800-plus churches. The key to its interdenominational success? Prayer for the healing of metro Richmond, three times daily for the past 22 years. “That’s where we are all most united,” says Campbell, director since 1985. “We’re praying God’s agenda, as it were, which is the coming of his kingdom, the transformation of cities.”

That agenda includes helping evangelicals, Catholics, and mainliners confront nearly every social

malady. With direct input from Richmond’s mayor, school superintendent, and director of social services, the center equips churches for school tutoring, prison visits, and feeding programs. It hosts annual summer camps training black and white church leaders to serve at-risk children. And its Armstrong Leadership Program annually prepares 36 teens for college, then employment. But intercession remains the heartbeat of the ministry, says Campbell, 71, author most recently of *Richmond’s Unhealed History*. “If you aren’t driven to prayer, you may not be engaged in the transforming work of Christ. When we pray, we are brought into God’s agenda.”



HERO Edmund D. Campbell (father)

READING NOW *Augustine’s Confessions*

Shunda Giles | REPRESENTING KIDS IN COURT

Shunda Giles has one of the hardest jobs you’ve never heard of. As a city attorney representing Richmond’s social workers, the Virginia native encounters “some of the worst of the worst of humanity”: stories of children abused by their families, then taken by DSS to the hospital or placed in group homes. Lawyers in her field generally last only 18 months; Giles, whose goal “as an intern was to practice tax law so I could become wealthy,” has been at it for 15 years. “I have a heart for missions, which means being a servant,” says the 38-year-old. “Whether that’s serving social workers, the court, or my city in protecting its kids, my calling comes in that I get to serve. This is my mission field.”

Giles says that her mission field matches that of her grandfather, local legend Bernard Sylvester

Giles. Pastor of First Union Baptist Church for 51 years, Giles also taught at the Hanover School for Boys and the Virginia Home for Boys and Girls, and chaired the board of the Virginia Baptist Children’s Home—all ministries to foster care children. “I’ve delved deeper in a different form of advocacy, but I’m carrying his mantle,” says Giles, also a member of Richmond City’s Best Practices Court, missions director at House of Prayer in Chesterfield, and leader with the Richmond Christian Leadership Institute. “One day the fulfillment will come in realizing, ‘These kids’ lives were saved because of the work we’ve done.’”



HERO Dynevia Quarles (mother)

READING NOW *The Shack*, by William P. Young

‘Crucified Under Pontius Pilate’

Why this phrase from the Nicene Creed is key to ending our doubts about the goodness of God. By Mark Galli

ROB BELL'S *Love Wins* attracted a great deal of attention last year partly because of the questions he raised. They are not just Bell's questions, but questions all of us have. Take these, raised twice in the book:

Of all the billions of people who have ever lived, will only a select number “make it to a better place” and every single other person suffer in torment and punishment forever? Is this acceptable to God? Has God created millions of people over tens of thousands of years who are going to spend eternity in anguish? Can God do this, or even allow this, and still claim to be a loving God?

These questions come in many forms today, and range from the theoretical to

the personal: The Buddhist child who dies in some remote corner of China, having never heard the gospel—is she going to hell? Why would a good God allow my wife to get cancer? And so forth.

No matter how or why it is asked, its basic form is this: How do we know that God can be trusted to be good?

That question usually comes with a partial answer, which also depends on the particular concerns of the questioner. It often goes like this: “Well, I know one thing for sure, I could never believe in a God who would ____.” Fill in the blank. Like: “I could never believe in a God who would condemn the Buddhist child to hell.”

This is one way we shape our faith as we stand in the shadows of one of these dark scenarios. Faith becomes not confidence in the love of God but mostly a defensive bulwark against our nightmares, against the haunting possibility that God may be unjust and arbitrary.



MICHAEL MULLAN



Michael Mulligan

the drawn up of the supernatural l

But can we do better than this? Is there a way to face this question squarely—is God good?—and come away with even more confidence in the love of God?

JOB’S GOSPEL

A faith that defends itself against the nightmare with “I could never believe in a God who would ____” is not much of a comfort in the end, because we know we’re just making things up. Whether we happen to believe in a God who would do this or that has no bearing on who God actually is. Our belief about what is or is not possible with God cannot make him into the being we want him to be.

We’ve known too many unbelievable scenarios to have any such confidence. “I could never believe my husband would run off with another woman,” says the astonished wife. And yet her husband did just that. The wife’s belief had no bearing on the character of her husband. All well and good that we could never believe in a God who would do *x*, but it may make no difference. God may do it anyway.

To that, many reply, “Well, I’d rather spend an eternity in hell than worship a God who would ____.”

This strikes some as foolish, given who we’re talking about: the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. They too may feel troubled by questions and answers surrounding God’s goodness, but they reply, “Well, I may not like a God who would do *x*. But better to submit to this all-powerful, if sometimes arbitrary deity and take my chances!”

They are no doubt thinking of Job, who after shaking his fist at God for the injustices perpetrated upon him, is interrogated by God with, “Who do you think you are, questioning the Creator of heaven and earth?”

At which point, Job submits in abject fear and humility: “I didn’t know what I was talking about. Of course, I worship you, Lord” (to paraphrase Job 40–42).

Many Christians imagine this is the only way out of this dilemma, and they put their hope in the gospel according to Job: “The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21, *NASB*). Fortunately, that is not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is only when we look at Jesus—at his incarnation but especially his crucifixion—that we are able to hear some really good news.

CRUCIFIED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE

The problem with the way we sometimes frame both the question and the answer is that Jesus Christ never makes an appearance in either. When Jesus Christ is not a part of this conversation, the conversation becomes abstract. In such conversations, God is said to be *good*. Or *powerful*. Or *evil*. Or *impotent*. Or whatever we conclude, based on our understanding of these abstract words, which we apply to another abstract word—*God*.

From a variety of sources, we’ve come up with a working definition of these abstract words and this abstract God—the God of logic, who must do *y* if in fact he is *x*. So when we are told not only to believe in this abstract God but also to give every part of ourselves to him, to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength—well, *faith* or *trust* is hardly the word to describe what we do. It’s more like “cross my fingers,” “hope against hope” that he’ll turn out to be a good God.

In the Gospels and the Epistles, we are never called to believe in a God who would or would not do *x*. The New Testament does not begin with the abstract. It does not give us words like *good* or *power* or even *God*, then ask us to trust in those words or ideas. Paul

teaches that, in fact, God is not the God of our imaginations or of our logic, who must do *y* if in fact he is *x*. No, we’re talking about a righteous and holy God who justifies sinners. This is a God whose workings are more wonderful and concrete than we can imagine.

Our God is not the God of philosophers, the God of metaphysicians. In the New Testament, God is first and foremost the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, as the Nicene Creed puts it with great specificity, “was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.”

Only when we fully grasp the historic, concrete, fleshly, and deathly nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ—the one crucified under Pontius Pilate—can we turn the corner on the question that so plagues our age.

The message of the gospel is decidedly not: “Buddhist children who die without hearing the name of Jesus Christ are going to hell; repent and believe in the gospel!”

It is not, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” No, the gospel, the good and specific news, is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ, was crucified under Pontius Pilate—a particular magistrate at a particular time and place—died, and was buried.

The New Testament, of course, is the revelation of the meaning of this event: God has looked upon his miserable creatures, rebels against his goodness, defiant in the face of his love, trapped in the nexus of sin and death, fully deserving every evil that comes their way in this life and the next—this God has looked upon all this in his holy righteousness and righteous holiness and has said, “Enough!” And he came to live among us, taking on not just a human body, but flesh, that is, the brokenness and the sinfulness of humanity. He has become *the* sinner who deserves to die, and he has died on the cross, for the very people who put him on the cross, that they might know who he really is.

This is a startling and counterintuitive revelation; this is not a grand religious idea one can logically work toward, but an event that occurred under Pontius Pilate, not a theology but God caught in the act of loving us. This factoid and its revealed meaning are what we are called to believe and to proclaim, not what God might or might



We are not called to reject or believe in a God who would do this or that to a Buddhist child—or whatever other scenario whose possibilities alarm us. We are called to believe in the God who has died for us in Christ.

not do in this or that situation. We are asked not to preach according to our imaginations or our nightmares, but according to what God has, in fact, done for us in Jesus Christ.

This is the God we are asked to trust. Not the God who is said to be *good* or *loving* or *powerful* by some definition we might put on those words. We're asked to trust in the God who gave himself for us on the cross in Jesus Christ.

'I'LL LET IT SIT WITH HIM'

At one point in the movie *Patton*, General Omar Bradley tells General George Patton that Patton may be given a crucial assignment: leading troops in the invasion of Europe. Though he had played a decisive role in the battle for Africa and in the invasion of Sicily, Patton at the time was cooling his heels in England, having been disciplined for slapping a soldier in a field hospital. So Patton is anxious to get back into the thick of battle, and when he hears about the possible assignment, he can hardly contain himself.

Bradley tells him no decision has been made, that it's in the hands of General George Marshall. Patton is a man of action, who took initiative while others stood around deliberating their options. But when he heard that his fate lay in the hands of Marshall, he calmed down. "He's a good man," he said of Marshall. "At least he's a fair man. I'll let it sit with him." He said this based on his knowledge of who Marshall in fact was and how he comported himself in action.

The God we know, the God we've seen in action has done this: He died for us. It is because of this that we say with confidence, "He's a good God. He's a fair God. All these questions that torment us—we can let those sit with this God."

That means we don't have to go with our fear: "The Buddhist child is definitely going to hell." Nor do we have to make stuff up, like, "The Buddhist child is definitely going to heaven." We do not have to begin with the cold logic of God's righteousness or the feel-good theology of sentimental love. In fact, the Bible simply shows no interest in our speculative questions or our sentimental theology.

Instead it reveals a God who, in fact, is perfectly just and perfectly merciful, not in the abstract but in the flesh. Jonathan Edwards, the great American theologian, put it this way:

There meet in Jesus Christ, infinite justice, and infinite grace. As Christ is a divine person, he is infinitely holy and just; hating sin, and disposed to execute condign punishment for sin. He is the Judge of the world, and the infinitely just Judge of it, and will not at all acquit the wicked, or by any means clear the guilty.

And yet he is infinitely gracious and merciful. Though his justice be so strict with respect to all sin, and every breach of the law, yet he has grace sufficient for every sinner, and even the chief of sinners. And it is not only sufficient for the most unworthy to show them mercy, and bestow some good upon them, but to bestow the greatest good. . . .

Not only is this not abstract in content, it is not abstract in direction. This is the gospel *for us*. It is the good news regarding what God in Christ has done *for us*. That he came to save us from our sins, and not just us, but the whole world (1 John 2). That he was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Cor. 5). That in Adam all have died, but in Christ all

are made alive (Rom. 5). And that we are all called to repent—to turn around, turn away from all the speculation and nightmares that fill our imaginations that make us fear and doubt God's goodness—and believe in this astounding news.

When it comes to that Buddhist child, what will God do? We don't know. This has not been revealed to us. What has been revealed is that God has come to us in Jesus Christ and shown himself to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful.

This is the God who is in charge of all those scenarios that keep us awake at night. We are not called to reject or believe in a God who would do this or that to a Buddhist child—or whatever other scenario whose possibilities alarm us. We are called to believe in the God who has died for us in Christ, and trust him to do what is just and merciful for all.

During the fascist rule in Nazi Germany, many Christian leaders were killed—some in war, some while resisting Hitler. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian famous for his radical commitment to Christ and his own courageous (and ultimately fatal) resistance to Hitler, once comforted his fellow believers upon hearing of another spate of deaths:

Who can comprehend how those whom God takes so early are chosen? Does not the early death of young Christians always appear to us as if God were plundering his own best instruments in a time in which they are most needed? Yet the Lord makes no mistakes. . . . We should put an end to our human thoughts, which always wish to know more than they can, and cling to that which is certain.

Coming from the lips of some people, this advice could be scoffed at as simplistic or naive. But Bonhoeffer was neither; he was one of the most realistic Christian theologians the church has known. In fact, Bonhoeffer expressed a biblically informed response to our nightmares about God's apparent injustice: the one who has shown himself in Jesus Christ to be perfectly just and perfectly merciful will do what is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. We can let it rest with him. Thus we can pray not hoping against hope but with abiding confidence, like the Psalmist:

Lord, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty.
I don't concern myself with matters too great or too awesome
for me to grasp.
Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned
child who no longer cries for its mother's milk.
Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, put your hope in the Lord—now and always.
(Ps. 131, NLT)

In the face of the most perplexing questions, we put our hope not in the God of our nightmares or our dreams, but in the God who came to us in Christ and died under Pontius Pilate, died not only for our sins, but for the sins of the world. To whom can we go if we cannot wholly and completely trust *this* God to be good? ☩

Mark Galli is senior managing editor of *Christianity Today*. He is author of *God Wins: Heaven, Hell, and Why the Good News Is Even Better Than Love Wins* (Tyndale, 2011), from which part of this article was adapted.

When a Daughter

Walking the way of grace in the midst of my grief.

By Ben Witherington

T

HE PHONE RANG late Wednesday night near the beginning of the New Year, January 11, 2012. It was

Sarangan Sankar, Christy's boyfriend. He was barely intelligible because he was crying so much. He had just been on the phone with the Durham, North Carolina, police who had cordoned off Christy's home. The words he spoke were, "Christy is gone.

She was found dead in the house. Christy has passed away."

I was desperate for more information. But Sara was in Philadelphia trying to board a plane for Durham, so I had to let him go. He didn't know any more at that point anyway, and it would have been unkind to press him for details. What did details matter if the fact was certain? Christy was dead.

I hollered to Ann, my wife, who was downstairs in our Lexington, Kentucky, home. Suddenly we were hugging each other for dear life. Ann kept saying, "I knew! In my heart, I knew!"

Since Monday she had been carrying around a premonition that something was wrong. On that day, she listened to a voicemail from Christy's boss at IBM, Paul Haberman, who said Christy had left a message for him saying she wasn't feeling well. Attempts to call her had failed. That wasn't terribly unusual, but worries arise when you know your child is home alone.

Later we learned that Sara had talked to Christy Monday night, and she had seemed fine then. But she did not show up for the weekly Tuesday night board game party that she so enjoyed. By

Wednesday, Sara was worried and asked a close friend to break into the house if necessary. James climbed in through a window. He found Christy lying on the floor upstairs and called 911, but he knew she was gone. Sara arrived at midnight, but he wasn't allowed in the house, a potential crime scene. All he could do was stand outside and talk with the police chaplain. Finally, around 3 in the morning, officials decided there had been no foul play or crime, so they removed the body and took it to the medical examiner's office in Chapel Hill.

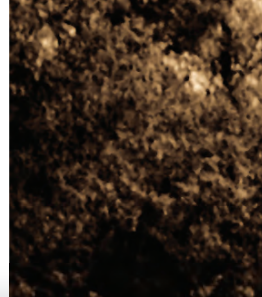
We felt a deep need for companionship. Given that we have no family within 500 miles, we called our dear friends, Bill and Susan Arnold, who stayed and prayed with us until midnight. Finally, we lay down in our bed, trying to comprehend the reality until the dawn. My heart was pounding; my breath was short. We both cried; we both prayed. Every parent's worst nightmare had come to pass.

So many thoughts and feelings run through your head and heart when you get a phone call like that. My mind darted through instant replays, from waving goodbye to Christy as she drove off to North Carolina on December 31 to holding her after her birth on August 14, 1979, in Durham, England. She is gone from this earth until the Resurrection. Until then, she will not come back except in the form of memories.

WAS THIS GOD'S WILL?

From the day Christy died, I was determined to be open to whatever positive thing there might be to glean from this seeming tragedy. I clung to the promise of Romans 8:28, that "God works all things together for good for those who love him."

The first point immediately confirmed in my heart was theological:





Paddling Upstream: Christy Witherington, here on a trip in England, died suddenly at age 32 after rowing 'against the forces in life that would hold her back or down,' says her father.

Dies

God did not do this to my child. God is not the author of evil. God does not terminate sweet lives with a pulmonary embolism. Pulmonary embolisms are a result of the bent nature of this world. As Ann kept repeating, "God is not the problem; he is the solution."

One primary reason I am not a Calvinist is that I do not believe in God's detailed control of all events. Why? First, because I find it impossible to believe that I am more merciful or compassionate than God. Second, because the biblical portrait shows that God is pure light and holy love. In him there is no darkness, nothing other than light and love. And third, the words, "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away," from the lips of Job (1:20), are not good theology. According to Job 1, it was not God but the Devil who took away Job's children, health, and wealth. God allowed it to happen, but when Job said these words, as the rest of the story shows, he was not yet enlightened about the true nature of the source of his calamity and God's actual will for his life. God's will for him was for good and not for harm.

The beginning of "good grief" starts with the premise of a good God. Otherwise, all bets are off. If God is almighty and malevolent, then there is no solace to be found in him. If God is the author of sin, evil, suffering, the Fall, and death, then the Bible makes no sense when

it tells us that God tempts no one, that God's will is that none should perish but have everlasting life, and that death is the very enemy of God and humankind that Jesus, who is life, came to abolish and destroy.

Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). If there are promises I cling to as I weep for our Christy, it is this promise, not the sorry solace and cold comfort of, "God did this but we do not know why." No! A thousand times, no. God and his will are aligned with what is good and true and beautiful and loving and holy.

Days later, as I stood before the casket and stared at our "Christy girl," as we called her, I was so thankful that the God of the Resurrection had a better plan for her. Her lifeless body was so cold, so empty. The phrase, "It's all God's will," is cold comfort. I believe in a God whose "Yes!" to life is louder than death's "No!" Death is not God's will. On the contrary, God is in the trenches with us, fighting the very same evils we fight in this world—disease, suffering, sorrow, sin, and death itself. He cries with us.

WHAT GOOD GRIEF LOOKS LIKE

For some, the phrase "good grief" (if not immediately associated with the *Peanuts* cartoon strip) seems something of an oxymoron.

What can be good about grieving a departed loved one? In the first place, there is such a thing as bad grief: inconsolable grief, grief that consumes the griever, or grieving without hope. The Bible doesn't commend or command that sort of grieving.

Paul discusses good and bad grief in 1 Corinthians 15. He tells us that grieving is both normal and natural even for Christians. In Christy's eulogy, we wrote,

It was C. S. Lewis who said that you can tell the depth of how much someone loved and was loved by the depth of the grief when that person goes on. Christy loved us deeply, and we grieve deeply. But we will continue to remember her sparkling smile, and cherish personal memories we hold close in our hearts.

Just so. It is right for Christians to grieve. Those who have loved and been loved much, grieve much. However, Paul adds a proviso: "But do not grieve like those who have no hope."

I have met Christians who thought they had to be Stoics, to pretend they didn't hurt. Strong people (especially men), they believe, should not allow themselves to grieve deeply and should certainly not let their grief show. Wrong. That's Stoic *apatheia*: the aim of avoiding deeper emotion or pathos. That is not Christian theology at all. Christians are the very ones to grieve deeply because they have loved and been loved deeply.

One thing I have noticed about this unfathomable good grief is that any little incident can trigger it. When I see a party, I think of the

one Christy gave me for my 60th birthday, and I cry. When I walk by her room and see the glitter stars on the ceiling glowing at night, I cry. When I see her picture, any picture, I cry. When I walk in the house from our garage, I see the pencil marks where we measured Christy's and David's heights as they grew, and I cry. And it's okay. Men need to let themselves grieve just as much as women do.

Here is one paradox of grieving. Grieving, for a Christian, is about *you*. We are not grieving because someone is pain-free in heaven with the Lord! That's cause for celebration! We are not grieving the condition of the Christian loved one who is deceased. For the Christian, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. There is nothing grave in that. No, we are grieving for our own sense of loss, our own sorrow over the sudden departure, our own feelings of being alone. Grief is the self's shock over what has happened to itself, and the shock is both physical and emotional.

Something is wrong, terribly and profoundly wrong, if we have no capacity to mourn the passing of someone we have loved with all our heart. In other words, it takes a strong person to weep and not be afraid to show your mortality and vulnerability. Our macho culture doesn't get that. There may be "no crying in baseball," but there is in life. We need to let ourselves grieve. Among other things it makes us more humane and compassionate with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that others experience.

So, if you see me and I am a bit teary, it's okay. God is reminding me of the eternity he's placed in my heart. And he's helping me appreciate the depths of what I miss: Christy.



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Rhonda Stapleton, Asbury Seminary M.Div. graduate, is impacting the world through Samaritan Village, a residential home for women trapped in prostitution and drugs in Orlando, Florida. Her education at Asbury Seminary helped her develop a faith-based, nine-month program to help women break the cycle. As part of this program, Stapleton has opened a thrift store called Transitions, to teach the women business skills. People's lives are being changed.

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Yes, if a Christian's grieving goes on perpetually, it becomes apparent that the person is too self-absorbed. Perhaps you are enjoying a pity party, enjoying all the attention and sympathy it brings not to your departed loved one but to you! I have ministered to people like that. I remember an elderly woman who, even though her husband had died 30 years previously, still had not gotten beyond his passing. Instead, she was dwelling on the past wistfully while missing the opportunity to go on living positively. Much though I tried, I couldn't talk or pray her out of her funk. Her experience of grief had made her bitter, not better.

What does it mean, then, to grieve as one who has hope? It means we grieve with one eye forever fixed on the eschatological horizon—that is, looking to the end of history. It means we grieve knowing that resurrection will reverse death. It means we grieve knowing that death will not have the last word. Paul reminds us of the old saying, "Who hopes for what they already have?" (Rom. 8:24). The hope to which he refers is not something we possess now in a fully realized form. While I may have comfort and solace and peace now, none of this is my hope.

My hope is in nothing less than a dramatic reversal of death in the flesh. My hope is not even just in the Risen One, though that is true enough, but in his promise to raise from the dead those who are in

Christ. Nothing less than this is my hope. So as I grieve for Christy, I do so in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection. I cannot wait to see her new resurrection form! If she is any more bright and beautiful than she is in the photo here, I will need strong sunglasses to view her.

Death has a way of convincing us of what matters in life. It shuts up our squabbles and complaints. What really matters about the future is our bodily resurrection—not harps and clouds, not celestial music and comfort.

That is my hope, and that is my faith, and there are reasons I hold to this. It is not a blind or illogical faith, or one unfounded on evidence. I hold to this not simply because Jesus rose from the grave but also because I remember that Jesus raised Jairus's daughter from the dead. I can hear

him say at the end times to my Christy girl, *Talitha kumi*—"Little girl, arise!"

Although I am tearing up as I write this, Paul's words remind me that it's okay to have tears in our eyes as long as we have hope in our hearts. ✚

Ben Witherington is professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. The Christy Ann Witherington scholarship has been set up in her memory at Asbury Seminary. To make a tax-deductible contribution, contact Jay Endicott at the seminary.

New from Christianity Today



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[THE ARTS]

Disciplining *the* Eyes

The visual arts can play a powerful role in worship—if we look closely enough.

By W. David O. Taylor

W

HAT IF WE SAW the arts in worship as part of discipleship? What if we saw the arts as essential, rather than optional, to the Spirit's work of forming us in the image of Christ when we gather as a corporate body? What if a carefully crafted work of visual art enabled a congregation to see its mission in a radically new light? What if art in worship could yield a substantively formative experience?

These are the types of questions we were asking several years ago when I was a pastor at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. We invited Laura Jennings, one of our members, to exhibit art she had created while pursuing her master's degree at the University of North Texas. Our church, broadly situated in the stream of evangelical

Pentecostalism, had "sent" her off three years earlier, and now she returned with a fresh body of work. And while it was designed for her Master of Fine Arts, we felt it would serve our context too.

When her art first appeared in the sanctuary, I explained to the congregation that, as with all the visual art that hung there, Laura's work was not here merely to ornament our space (though it did that). It was here to help us to see the gospel afresh, and as it did so, we hoped it would inspire us to live out the gospel afresh. Just as Jesus repeatedly directed his disciples to notice things that society ignored, so Laura's work accentuated groups we frequently overlooked: the Dalits of India and victims of war violence.

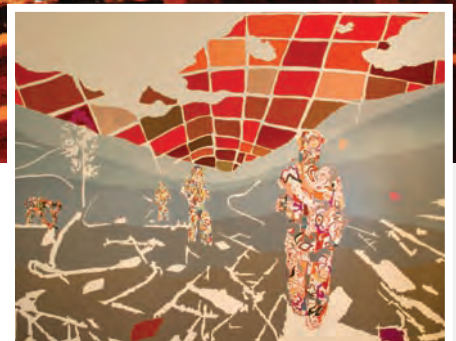
But it was more than the subject matter that challenged us. It was the style, more abstract than literal. The work did not yield its



ABOVE • COURTESY OF REDEEMER PRESBYTERIAN



Hover Crafts: At Redeemer Presbyterian in Indianapolis, a multimedia display including Bibles, live plants, candles, and more graces the sanctuary, seemingly floating above the altar.



Habit Forming: More abstract than literal, Laura Jennings's art in Austin, Texas, encourages viewers to linger and really see.

meaning easily. Some folks saw only strange figural shapes in vibrant colors. Some perhaps saw nothing but a token of decoration to the sanctuary. Some, though, took time to look, to look again and yet again, to persevere with the abstraction. With time, meaning unfolded. In Laura's envisioned world, unseen things resolved into material shapes, whose content could only be recognized with difficulty. For many at Hope Chapel, this art formed habits of sight.

As I reflect on the experience, I see two significant shifts in my thinking: one about worship, the other about the worship arts.

First, we are right to view worship as a setting where we declare truths about God and express our feelings to God, but we should also see it as a set of actions, words, and spaces that form us. If we are what we repeatedly do, as Paul insists, then what we do week after week in

corporate worship forms us to be a certain kind of Christian. What we want, then, as John Witvliet, director of the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, reminds us, is "to become self-conscious about the good and bad ways that we are being formed in worship." To reduce corporate worship to acts chiefly of "thinking" or "feeling" fails to reflect the richly multisensory worship we see from Genesis to Revelation. And it falls short of the kind of holistic humanity the Scriptures commend to us and which Jesus supremely embodies.

Second, if our whole person is broken, then the worship arts can become a unique way to promote the sanctification of our affective, physical, and imaginative faculties, which are often ignored in Protestant worship. In worship, our emotions, bodies, and imaginations have a vital role, and the arts serve to bring them into an intentional and intensive participation.

A FORMATIVE POWER

How might the visual arts in particular contribute to our formation in worship?

One way is by training our sight. As theologian Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, “We do not see reality by just opening our eyes.” Our sight is broken and therefore requires training to see God’s world rightly. As an act of the imagination, the visual arts can enable us to see the world, for example, not as opaque to God’s presence but as charged with it. C. S. Lewis writes, “My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others.” All of us need this help. The visual arts, by fixing our sight on concrete objects—canvases, sculptures, installations, architecture—invite us to look at the world as it is or maybe as it shouldn’t be. At times they urge us to see it as it might be.

Another way the visual arts form us is by helping us to pay attention—careful attention. A good work of art asks us to look slowly, repeatedly. Often it will even implicate us in the subject matter in view. A good work will encourage us to focus our attention on one thing at a time, plying us with questions like: “Is the color red just red? Or is it the-world-could-have-existed-without-it-but-God-made-it-wondrously red?” “Are you really alone? Or are you surrounded by an invisible communion of saints?” “Is that man your neighbor?” “Was Jesus white?” By questioning our habits of sight, the visual arts can train muscles of attentive perception.

In sum, to see reality rightly, our eyes need to be disciplined, and the visual arts come along and serve this purpose well, including in the context of corporate worship.

Without getting into too many knotty issues surrounding the place of visual arts in worship, let me briefly note five ways in which they form us. (I’ll restrict my comments to 2D and 3D art, leaving “moving pictures” to another essay.)

Theologically. At Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois, when a 16x40-foot banner portraying the resurrected Christ was raised at Easter in 2011, it was a way to affirm, as they often say, that “matter matters.” Or, as Christians of the patristic period might put it, the banner was theology in visual form. The art became a way for the church to insist not only on the full humanity of Christ, but also on our own embodied humanity. To see this iconic image was a way to say, “Our sight matters, and it has a positive role to play in our worship. How we see this vividly colored, Middle Eastern-looking Christ, trampling the gates of hell, should inform how we live throughout the week.”

Morally. In certain churches, whether Orthodox or “emergent,” icons hang inside the sanctuary, and such icons will form the congregation at multiple levels. For example, an icon of Daniel in the



lions’ den will, at one level, remind worshipers that Daniel was in fact a historical person. At another level, it will remind worshipers that Daniel’s “fiery” lot in life is a type of their lot in life. At still another, it will encourage worshipers to practice the kind of courage that he exhibited. And at a final level, it will remind them that while God may not deliver them from tribulation in this world, he will deliver them at the consummation of history. In all these ways, the worshiper will be invited to draw the moral shape of their lives from Daniel’s faithful life: “Look at Daniel. Live like Daniel.”

Missionally. At First Baptist in Edmonton, Ontario, three banners hang high above and behind the pulpit. The one on the right represents an angelic being enflaming the city; former pastor Gary Nelson says its intent was to capture the church’s commitment to the city. The congregation would be persistently reminded, by what they saw Sunday after Sunday, that God through his Spirit desires to bring

Banner Events: The 40-foot-high banner at Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois, portraying the risen Christ, was unveiled at Easter last year (above), while the three banners at First Baptist in Edmonton, Ontario, encourage congregants to embrace the city as a mission field.

life to the heart of the city, and that each member has a role to play in that work—a work that is grounded in the Lord's Supper, where bread is broken and wine is poured out for the sake of the world.

Didactically. At other times the visual arts instruct us in the teachings of Christian faith. In Indianapolis, Redeemer Presbyterian Church recently created an

art installation whose intention was to accompany a sermon series during Advent. A key idea was that life springs forth from the Word of Light. Stacks of Bibles, paper-collage banners embedded with live plants, jasmine set in the windows, tall glass candles, pink lanterns, and encaustic (painted with hot wax) paper hovering fantastically over the stage communicated a visual dimension of this idea. The installation also contributed aesthetic beauty to the space—a delight in line, color, smell, and texture.

To see reality rightly, our eyes need to be disciplined, and the visual arts serve this purpose well, including in the context of corporate worship.

Symbolically. In an example from the early church, we see how catacomb art formed the way Christians perceived what went on above ground. They saw images of Christ the Good Shepherd and of Jonah in the whale's belly. Such images functioned symbolically as counternarratives to the cult of the emperor. They reinterpreted reality as Christians daily experienced it. And while the images could not prevent the community from suffering, they charged the community's imagination with a prophetic vision that sustained it in the face of death. There was an Emperor, seated at the right hand of the Father, who would put the world to rights once and for all.

In sum, when we think of the visual arts as formative, it helps us pay attention to the ways in which our sight is formed—or malformed—in worship. The hope is that these artistic experiences will form a holistic, Christlike view in all of our lives.

A RE-FORMED SIGHT

I think some members at Hope Chapel had a formative experience with Laura's art. By showing us pixelated bodies rather than solid ones, the work reminded us that we do not see people rightly simply by looking at them; our sight is damaged and needs mending. Also, by bringing experiences of hardship to our awareness, the art showed us that these were things that we could feel sad or angry about. Even better, God had provided the Psalms to show us how to pray with sanctified and deeply felt emotion about these matters.

Against the temptation to despair that suffering will have the last word, the art invited us to imagine what often feels impossible: that God is in fact present to our suffering. It invited us to hope in a God who has borne our sufferings with us, for us. And, finally, the art challenged us to love the poor and needy. It stirred us to consider how with our own hands and feet we might love those far from home as well as those close by.

In experiencing Laura's art over seven weeks, our congregation was given the opportunity to perceive the poor and the needy in gospel ways. We "prayed with the eyes" and were changed accordingly. Did this transformation come about automatically? No. Did a re-formed habit of sight occur immediately? No again. It was a slow, uneven process, and if the art formed sanctified habits of sight, that was due in no small part to a long and purposeful "training" period. Our congregation had already been exposed to a considerable amount of visual art, and both pastors and artists had made good teaching a priority. We recognized, furthermore, that the sanctification of our eyes would occur over a great deal of time; we would need a culture to help us engage visual art in a transformative fashion.

If Laura's art disciplined us in anything particular, however, it disciplined us to re-see the people who sat in the pews nearby, whose brokenness on certain days (if we were honest) we often had no interest in seeing. With the aid of this art, though, we were given an invaluable opportunity, to see them with a hopeful love. ✚

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JESUS DISAPPOINTS EVERYONE

Our Savior has come,
but we're often blind to his purposes.

By John Koessler

IT WAS EARLY IN THE FALL SEMESTER. Ken and I were getting acquainted over lunch. I could tell by his incandescent grin that he was a freshman. “I’m going to be a pastor,” Ken said. “It’s going to be cool!” “What makes you so sure it’s going to be cool?” I tried not to look amused. He seemed shocked by the question. The radiant glow of his smile dimmed momentarily, and he looked as if I had muttered an unexpected indecency. But the grin quickly returned to his face, and he dismissed my question with a shake of his head. “I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s going to be cool!”

Several years later, I had lunch with Ken again. He was a senior by then, and his enthusiasm had dampened. He had not quite reached the low ebb that Job’s wife did. That is to say, he was not ready to curse God and die. But he did seem genuinely disappointed—with his college experience, his church, and, I think, with God.

As I listened to him talk, it was my turn to be disturbed. I thought back to our first lunch together and wondered what had soured his disposition. He did not want to talk about it. He muttered something vague and recriminating about the church. He stared darkly at his plate, and I tried to lighten the mood with small talk and encouragement. But it was no use. Try as I might, I could not resuscitate the rosy-cheeked freshman. I ate quickly and wished him the best. A few weeks later, I watched him walk across the platform and receive his diploma, wondering whether his disposition would eventually improve.

It might not. Those who serve Christ are as prone to disappointment as anyone else. If the Gospels are any indication, we might even say that disappointment is a certainty. Read the Gospels with all their sharp edges intact. What are they but a record of disappointment with Jesus on a grand scale?

Just ask John the Baptist.

Ill at ease in Herod’s prison, John sent messengers to Jesus with a question: “Are you the one

Illustration by Rick Beerhorst



who is to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matt. 11:3). The question comes as something of a surprise. After all, John was one of the first to publicly identify Jesus as “the one who comes after me” (John 1:27). It was John who told Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you” (Matt. 3:14). John saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus at his baptism and heard the voice from heaven say, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). If anyone had known the answer to this question, it would have been John.

It is possible that John had grown discouraged with the way his circumstances had turned out. Perhaps the darkness of Herod’s prison had dimmed John’s confidence in Jesus and his mission. But this too seems unlikely. John was used to a life of hardship. He dressed like a nomad and lived like a wild man of the desert, surviving on insects and honey (Matt. 3:4). Do we really believe that a prison cell could break his spirit? What is more, John would not have been surprised to find himself Herod’s prisoner. He was a student of Scripture. He knew what happens to prophets. Nine times out of ten, the prophet’s fate is a bad one. John would hardly have been shocked by his experience.

SETTING GOALS FOR GOD

John’s question signals his disappointment over the report he had received of Jesus’ ministry. The broad contours of John’s expectations were marked out in his warning to the religious leaders when they came to him for baptism. “You brood of vipers!” John thundered. “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7–9).

According to John, Jesus had come to winnow the harvest. He would gather the grain and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:7–12). Instead, Jesus was roaming the hills of Galilee, preaching the gospel and healing the sick. The ax had been sharpened and the fire kindled, but Jesus did not seem interested in either. This was so at odds with John’s understanding of what the Messiah would do that he couldn’t help questioning it. It is disappointment, not doubt, that lies behind John’s question.

Failed expectation lies at the heart of every disappointment. We expect one thing and get something else. We expect beef for dinner and get chicken. We thought we would get a refund from the IRS, and we end up owing money. The weather report promised sunshine for the weekend, but it rains. Disappointments like these are so common you would think that we would be used to them.

But things are different with God. We expect better

treatment from him. We know that people will let us down (though this knowledge does not lessen our disappointment when they do). God is not like that. We may not know much about theology, but at least we know that God does not lie. There is no variableness or shadow of turning with him. He is *reliable*.

Yet this good theology sometimes leads to bad practice. It causes us to confuse reliability with predictability. Because we think that God’s mind and ours are the same, we set goals for God. We know what we want, and so we put it in the mouth of God. We let our desires govern our expectations.

Sometimes the goals we set actually align with what God intends. When that happens, we can become so encouraged that we set more goals for God. But sooner or later—and probably sooner rather than later—what God does is so at odds with our expectation that we hardly know what to think.

We pray for healing and the patient dies. The job that seemed so perfect goes to someone else.

That person who would have been the perfect spouse does not return our affection.

The result is more than a crisis of faith, at least as we usually define faith. Our difficulty is not that we have set the bar so high that we must now come to terms with God’s inability to come through. We know what God can do. We believe he can meet our high expectations. No, the problem is just the opposite. What really bothers us is that we have misread God’s purposes. We are deeply disturbed, and not merely because he has failed to do what we wanted or even expected him to do. We are haunted, instead, by the fact that God hasn’t done what we believe in our hearts he *should* have done.

OUTRAGED AND DISTRESSED

Of course, not all disappointments are equal. Most are minor and easily forgotten. Some are more serious. A few haunt us all our days. John’s disappointment was the more serious kind. It was the sort of disappointment Jonah felt when he saw that the people of Nineveh were to be spared (Jonah 4:1–2). It was the disappointment of Habakkuk, who cried, “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” (Hab. 1:3) It is the same disappointment you and I feel when we see injustice around us. Oppression and evil seem to be on every side, and God appears to do little or nothing about it.

Since we are people of action as well as faith, we do what we can to make a difference. We take to the streets and befriend the homeless. We give our money to organizations that work for justice. We register to vote and try to change the system. Yet no matter what we do, the problems multiply. We keep looking for reinforcement, but no cavalry appears on the horizon. What good is the gospel if it allows a wicked ruler like Herod to treat God’s prophet like his personal plaything? We are disappointed with God because he allows the guilty to go unpunished.

But just as many, it seems, wrestle not with the outrage

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of Jonah but with the distress of Abraham (Gen. 18:25). What disturbs them is the possibility that God might cast anyone into hell. Many evangelicals, especially younger evangelicals, see the notion of hell as cruel and barbarous. They wonder whether such an idea is consistent with a God of mercy and grace. How can a God who “so loved the world” bear to watch his creatures suffer for eternity? If he means to teach sinners a lesson, couldn’t he think of a better punishment than casting them into a lake of burning sulfur?

Oddly enough, it is common to find both dispositions—outrage and distress—in the same person. Such people are simultaneously frustrated with God for leaving the guilty unpunished and distressed at the thought that he would condemn anyone. They are like the people Jesus describes after John’s messengers leave: “To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ But wisdom is proved right by her deeds” (Matt. 11:16–19). When Jesus condemns John’s generation with these words, he also condemns ours and offers a frank assessment of our ambivalence. What do we really want from God? Do we want justice or mercy? It would seem that we want justice without judgment and mercy without justice.

YOUR GOD HAS COME TO SAVE YOU

Jesus’ condemnations reveal an even more disconcerting truth. They suggest that on some level, Jesus disappoints everyone. Jesus is an equal opportunity disappointer. He disappoints not only the people of Nazareth who drove him out of the synagogue and tried to throw him off a cliff because he wouldn’t perform miracles for them, but also people like those in Korazin and Bethsaida, where he *did* perform miracles. Jesus disappointed friends and foes alike.

Jesus’ reply to John’s question should be a clue that we have missed something. Our disappointment is mainly a problem of perception. Most striking about Jesus’ answer is that he provides no new information. John already knows everything that Jesus tells him. Even the description of Jesus’ miracles merely reminds John what he has already been told. So how does Jesus’ answer help? It alludes to a passage in Isaiah, set in the context of a promise that John, as a student of Scripture, would have recognized immediately: “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be



strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you” (Isa. 35:3–4).

What is Jesus’ answer to John’s messengers? “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor”

(Matt 11:4–5). In effect, Jesus is saying: *Tell John*

that your God has come—that he has come with a ven-

geance. John, your God has come to save you.

In other words, like John we are disappointed with Jesus because we do not see what he is *really* doing. It turns out that we have been laboring under a major misapprehension. Jesus came *for* us, but that does not mean that he came to *please* us. Jesus came *for* us, but he does not answer *to* us. He will not subject himself to our agenda, no matter how good that agenda might be. Instead, Jesus demands that we submit ourselves to his agenda.

Is the solution to our disappointment, then, to “suck it up”

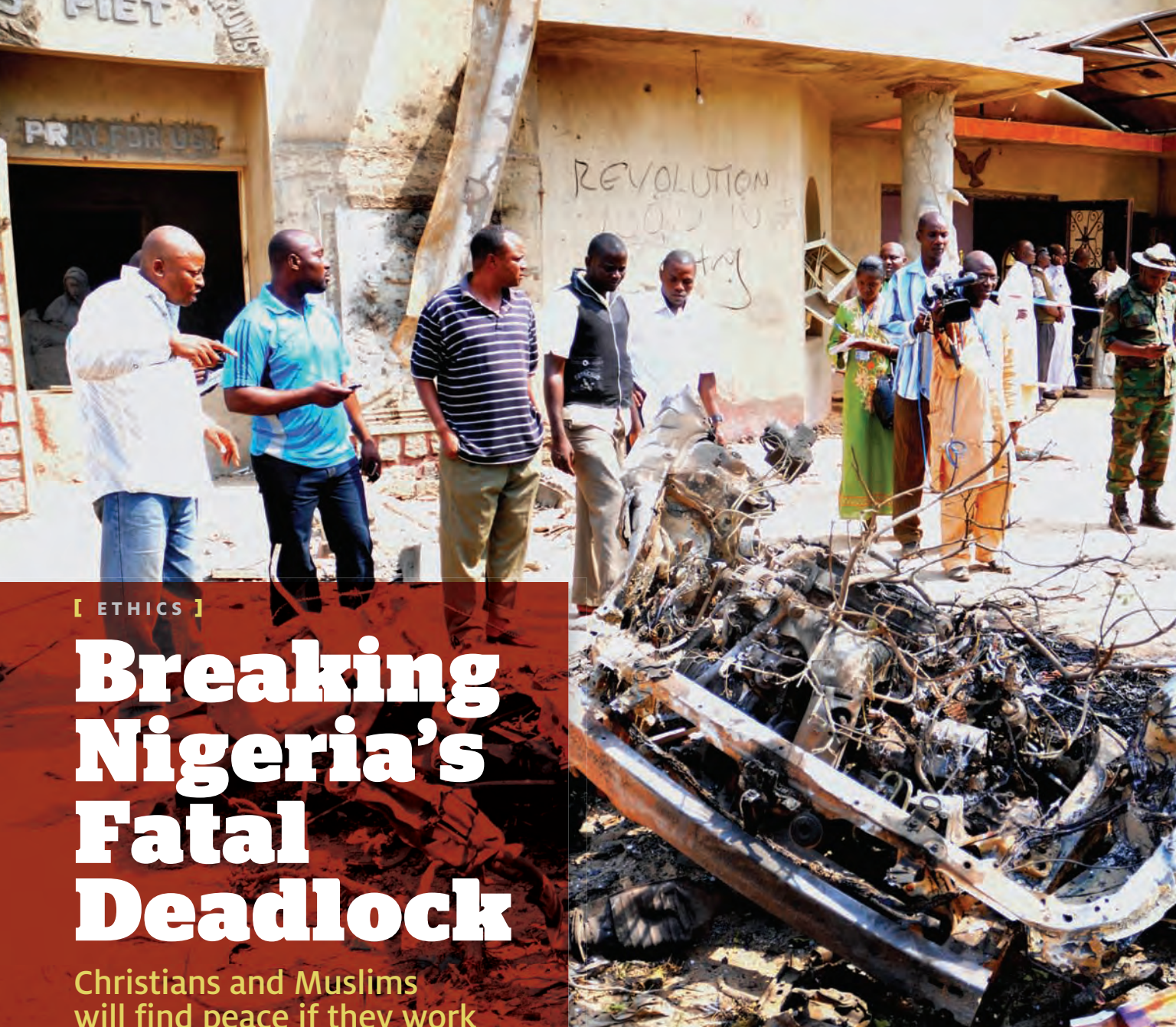
and “tough it out”? Or to admit that “life is disappointing” and resolve to “get over it”? No, just the opposite. Jesus’ parting words to John’s disciples were words of both blessing and warning: “Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me” (Matt. 11:6). These were the last words that John would hear from Jesus before his death, and they are Jesus’ last words to us in our disappointment—no matter what the cause.

In the face of great disappointment, we usually ask for an explanation. This is because we foolishly think that an explanation will make us feel better. Has it ever occurred to us that it might do the opposite? Instead of an explanation, Jesus offers something far superior: himself. When it comes to disappointment, there is no other remedy. It is the nature of disappointment to match us measure for measure. As long as we hold on to it, disappointment will wrap itself around our heart like a great snake. The tighter we hold on to it, the tighter it will grip us. The only way to free ourselves is to bow the knee to Christ.

We can hold on to disappointment, or we can hold on to Christ. We can place our disappointment under the power of the Cross and hold on to hope. When we offer our disappointment to Christ, we really offer ourselves to him. As long as we hold on to hope, we surrender ourselves to the grip of God’s grace. John should have known. This is what the voice from heaven had said all along: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). Jesus disappoints everybody. Everybody except for One.



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[ETHICS]

Breaking Nigeria's Fatal Deadlock

Christians and Muslims will find peace if they work together for justice. By Sunday Agang in Kagoro, Nigeria

WHEN A SUICIDE bomber drove an explosives-packed car into the flagship church of one of Nigeria's largest denominations, angry Christian youth retaliated by burning Muslim shops and killing nearby motorcycle riders.

The February incident, which killed 12 and injured 40 at the Church of Christ in Nigeria's Jos headquarters, fueled the global debate over whether Nigeria will erupt

into a religious civil war. Christmas Day bombings of northern churches by Islamist extremists, which killed 44, also fueled such fears. The headlines haven't stopped since.

Missing from all the analysis and commentary on the ethnic, political, and economic causes of such violence was one crucial element: theology.

Decades of violence have tested the faith of Nigerian Christians, but have also warped their theology. Too many of them now believe that violence is more redemptive than nonviolence; in other words, they resort to human efforts—traditional retaliation—when seeking justice. Correcting this

warped theology offers the best way forward. Violence is a moral problem that challenges the core of the nature, presence, and power of the gospel in any environment.

Nigeria began the 21st century with the February 2000 slaughter of thousands in Kaduna over the introduction of Shari'ah law, and September 2001 saw a spree of church and mosque burnings in Jos. In November 2008, disputed local elections triggered clashes between Muslim and Christian youth in Jos. Hundreds died. In April 2011, riots following the controversial election of Christian president Goodluck Jonathan killed an estimated 800 people. Hundreds more have died in 2012 since Boko Haram militants urged Christians to leave the north.



Fanning the Flames: The suicide bombing of a Christmas Day Mass fueled fears that Nigeria would descend into civil war.

dwindling. However, both arguments challenge the core teaching of Christian faith and theology, resulting in a deadlock. Rather than fighting back or folding our hands, Christianity teaches us to leave vengeance to God while taking concrete steps to bring peace. Scripture says, “Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

After years of researching, writing, and living in two flashpoints—Kaduna and Jos—on Nigeria’s fault line between its mostly Christian south and mostly Muslim north, I argue for a third response that will finally bring healing: just peacemaking.

In the book *The Impact of Ethnic, Political, and Religious Violence, and a Theological Reflection on Its Healing*, I outline the salient reasons why just peacemaking is the solution to Nigeria’s cycles of sectarian strife. My research shows that both Muslims and Christians fall victim to the Devil’s scheme of using human agents to perpetuate moral excess and corruption. For example, in order to maintain the status quo of systemic injustice and structural inequality, the Nigerian political elite pit the poor from both faith communities—Islam and Christianity—against each other. They do so by creating an environment of political, social, economic, and ethnic dissatisfaction. The resulting violence has affected both the way Christians and Muslims relate to one another, and also the way Christians do theology in Nigeria.

THE LANGUAGE OF VIOLENCE

The loss of ethical perspective stems from a reactionary theological method prevalent during the heyday of African independence in the late 1950s and early ’60s. It prompted political and cultural criticism of the West and caused African theologians to engage in a hermeneutic of suspicion. Their theology began with the burden of trying to indigenize Christianity so that Africans who saw it as foreign would accept it. They criticized Western imperialism on one hand and Islam or traditional African religions on the other.

This approach did more harm than good. African theologians spent too much energy

judging Western theologians, and spent little time developing theology to benefit God’s kingdom in the African context. This impaired dialogue with the global community and other faiths. It censured society without equally criticizing itself. Consequently, in Nigeria today, “The land is full of bloodshed and the city is full of violence” (Ezek. 7:23). The Christian community has been lured into the language of violence instead of the language of dialogue, love, and compassion. Christians lack the antibodies to resist the temptation to fight back when attacked.

Christian leaders across the country argue that the Christmas Day bombings were a declaration of war on Christianity. “Nigerian Christians may have no other option than to fight back their attackers,” the Christian Association of Nigeria recently told President Jonathan. Pastor Philip Mwelbush, the association’s leader for Plateau State, told the Associated Press, “We have a proverb in Nigeria: ‘If you push a goat to the wall, he will bite you.’ [Muslims] have pushed us to the wall.”

But do Nigerian Christians truly have no other option than to respond with the same violence meted out by Muslim extremists?

The unfortunate truth is that after decades of religious violence, many Nigerian Christians are no longer willing to listen to Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek. Feeling that Muslim extremists have had enough of a field day, these Christians have placed their hope for redemption in violence because they misinterpret Jesus’ cheek-turning as mere passivity. What they don’t realize is that what violence cannot do, *active nonviolence*—just peacemaking—can do. “Violence begets violence,” said Martin Luther King Jr. But active nonviolence begets justice, love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace.

Just peacemaking requires dialogue and reconciliation. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples the principle of just peacemaking. Many think that just peacemaking is an impossible ideal. But that is misreading the text—one of many effects of violence upon the clarity of the gospel in Nigeria. Close attention to the text shows that Jesus was offering something else: a “transforming initiative,” in the words of ethicist Glen Stassen.

Christians need to understand that the central message of the Sermon on the Mount is a protest against the socioeconomic and sociopolitical injustices of Jesus’ day. In preaching this sermon, Jesus demonstrates that he loves righteousness, justice, and

The escalating attacks on churches and their members have prompted two main reactions. Some church leaders proclaim that Christians have the right to fight back against such evil. “We have turned both [cheeks], and they have slapped us. There is nothing else to turn,” says John Praise, general overseer of Dominion Chapel International Churches. Other church leaders argue that, based on Jesus’ teachings, Christians must always turn another cheek. “[Jesus] did that when he was arrested. It was what he used to conquer the world,” says Bishop Wale Oke, a national vice president of the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria.

Today the eye-for-an-eye camp is growing in numbers, while the cheek-turners are

human flourishing.

God desires that the church should model and call the world to its God-given vocation: creating a humane society where justice, love, kindness, compassion, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation are a way of life. This is why the biblical concept of righteousness emphasizes interpersonal relationship, creating community, and hope for the future. The church's understanding of God's justice should shape its relationship with the rest of the world, particularly other faiths that do not share its perspectives. God is just because he brings justice to unjust men and women and makes them right. His justice is a saving justice (Ps. 31:2; 146:7). Through this justice, God creates peace—a *shalom* that lasts.

The enemy of humanity is the Devil's schemes cast in social and political injustices. Nigeria's elite perpetuate moral excesses, encouraging a vicious cycle of violence that helps them to preserve their power. As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann aptly observed in *Creating a Just Future*, "Unjust

systems can be kept alive only through violence. Where there is violence there is no peace; for where violence reigns, it is death that reigns and not life."

Just peacemaking focuses on the God of justice, love, patience, and compassion who

The cloud of fear hovering over Nigeria has kept Christian leaders from grasping a central aspect of Jesus' teaching.

gives every human being dignity. That dignity is at the heart of Jesus' teaching on turning the other cheek. Jesus was introducing a transforming initiative that could return dignity to the poor. Theologian Walter Wink has argued that, based on the social and cultural context of Jesus' day, his message is far from passive. It is active. Jesus was teaching his disciples how to take back their human dignity in a Greco-Roman society where dehumanization was rampant.

Greco-Roman culture recognized the right hand as a hand of honor and the left hand as

a hand of dishonor. In that context, whoever used their right hand to beat someone reduced their victim to nothing. But if the victim forced his or her oppressor to use the left hand, then the oppressor reduced himself to nothing. This turned the tables on the oppressors. They would not only realize that they had just dehumanized themselves. They would also abruptly recognize the humanity of the marginalized person.

Jesus was telling the poor that it was possible to nonviolently force persecutors to recognize their human dignity by turning the other cheek. The poor needed to remember that there was always an option; nonviolent initiatives would enable them to help oppressors recognize that the oppressed were fellow humans, not infidels. Jesus was teaching the church a powerful principle: Creative methods can end vicious cycles of violence.

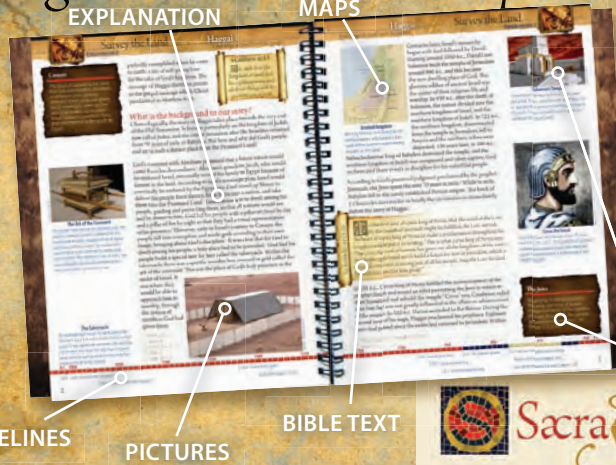
ALTERNATIVE TO RETALIATION

Unfortunately, the cloud of fear hovering over Nigeria has kept Christian leaders and their

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followers from grasping this aspect of Jesus' teaching. Their assumption that "turning the other cheek" means passivity has led to revolts whenever violent attacks by Muslims occur. Christians seem to have no message for Muslims other than fighting back.

In Kaduna and Jos, I have proposed just peacemaking as an alternative to retaliation. I have been working with two groups—Ganty's Aid for Widows and Orphans (GAWON) and Global Relief and Development Mission (GRDM)—to demonstrate that just peacemaking is a viable option and to show how to practice this theology. I believe that Christians need to reach out to their Muslim brothers and sisters as fellow victims of the systemic injustices perpetuated by the rich elite. Through this process, Muslims who assume that all non-Muslims are infidels will recognize the fellow humanity of Christians.

In Kaduna, GAWON introduced a revolving loan program based on Jesus' principle that creative initiatives can reduce threats to human dignity. The loans empower Muslims and Christians widowed or orphaned by the sectarian violence that killed thousands in

2000. GAWON believes the best way to help Christian victims overcome retaliatory violence is to create opportunities for them to work alongside Muslim victims in order to build trust and confidence. Widows work on income-generating projects in groups of 10 based on their needs and interests. They hold each other accountable and support and encourage each other. The loan program launched in 2002 in the Moro'a chiefdom of southern Kaduna State. Since then, the community has enjoyed stability and peaceful coexistence. It has even provided refuge to Hausa-Fulani tribesmen forced to leave nearby communities where just peacemaking has not been practiced.

In Jos, GRDM gives loans and relief materials to both Christian and Muslim women in order to break the wall of partition between the two faiths. Because conflicts that emanate from differences are often very costly—destroying human lives as well as the material resources desperately needed by those who survive—GRDM collaborates with other NGOs and local governments to encourage the spirit of just peacemaking in Plateau State through

workshops, seminars, and parleys.

In a Nigeria confronted with myriads of problems that perpetuate the vicious cycle of retaliatory violence, the way out is to adopt Jesus' active principle of just peacemaking. Because sectarian violence heavily affects both the Muslim and Christian poor in northern Nigeria, they need each other. Christians should make every effort to work with poor Muslims in the north who suffer the same oppression and exploitation. Both need a new affection for God, for justice, for checks and balances, for accountability, and for a free press and an independent judiciary.

Fighting back or passively turning the other cheek will fail both Christians and Muslims. But just peacemaking, as a principle rooted in the theology of nonviolent reaction to hostility, provides a biblical alternative to retaliation. As the apostle Paul advised the Roman church, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." ✚

Sunday Agang is provost of ECWA Theological Seminary in Kagoro, Kaduna State, and a John Stott Ministries—Langham scholar.

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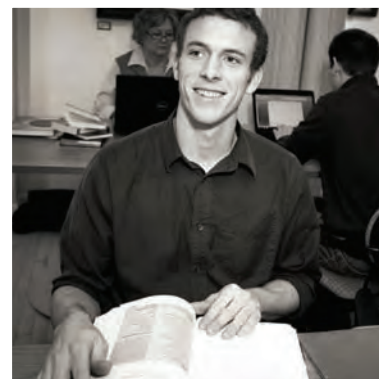
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Jesus Through Jewish Eyes

Why Jewish New Testament professor **Amy-Jill Levine** thinks Jews should know more about Jesus, and Christians more about first-century Judaism. Interview by David Neff



A

MY-JILL LEVINE, a professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University, has teamed up with Marc Z. Brettler of Brandeis University and 34 other Jewish scholars to produce the *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford University Press). Levine, who teaches students preparing for Christian ministry at Vanderbilt Divinity School, hopes *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* will help Christians understand the Jewish context of their faith and help Jews see that the Christian Scriptures are not only informative about Jewish history, but are also in many places “beautiful and profound.”

CT editor in chief David Neff recently talked with Levine about this first-of-its-kind study Bible.

Why publish *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* now?

The publication is certainly timely; as several friends, both Jews and Christians, have suggested to me: “It’s about time!” For Jews, looking at the New Testament is a recovery of part of our own tradition. Indeed, the more I study the New Testament, the more I learn about early Judaism, and consequently the better Jew I become.

For Christians and Jews both, it’s always helpful to know the common roots of church and synagogue, to understand what we share and how we came to separate. The annotations, which draw from contemporaneous Jewish sources as well as discuss later rabbinic views on the topics in question, provide this information.

In working with Christian congregations and clergy groups, I find an enormous interest in Jesus’ Jewish context—how the parables would have sounded in Jewish ears and what the controversy stories suggest about early Jewish practice. I think that if Christians want to take the Incarnation seriously, they should also take seriously where and when and to whom it occurred. Hence the volume has 30 short essays on such topics as the Pharisees, the temple, the ancient synagogue, Jewish parables, Jewish miracle workers, Jewish beliefs



in angels and the afterlife, Jewish family life, and so on.

The Jewish Annotated New Testament also serves to correct unfortunate stereotypes of early Judaism that sometimes find their way into Christian preaching and teaching. It also addresses anti-Jewish teachings such as that all Jews are “Christ killers” or lovers of money or children of the Devil. The annotations provide historical contexts for the passages that give rise to such canards as well as note that the vast majority of Christians read their Bible as a text of love, not hate.

What are the key stereotypes that you wanted to clear up?

I find a fair number of Christians tend to look at early Judaism as comparable to the Taliban. That’s a gross misperception.

As is [the misperception] that all early Jews were looking for a warrior Messiah, and they rejected Jesus because he counseled peace.

As is [the misperception] that early Jews are so extraordinarily legalistic that they’re all sanctimonious and neurotic; then Jesus comes along and says, “Really, you don’t have to worry about the Law. Just love God and love neighbor. Be happy.” This stereotype doesn’t recognize that

for Jews, following Torah is a way of sanctifying the body, of sanctifying time, of preventing assimilation, of celebrating their own identity. Jews then, and now, looked at following the Torah as a blessing and a joy rather than a burden.

How widespread among Jewish scholars is interest in Jesus as a Jew?

For people of my parents’ generation, the New Testament was substantially a forbidden book, but now we have Jewish students taking courses in New Testament on college campuses. The Reform Jewish movement requires its rabbinical candidates to take a course on Christian origins/the New Testament.

I think it is essential for Jews to understand Christianity. If we Jews want Christians to respect us—which means knowing about our traditions, our Scripture, our practices, and our beliefs—then we owe Christians the same courtesy. That means not only knowing what is in the Scripture of the church, but also knowing how Christians have interpreted that text over time. It means recognizing that the vast majority of Christians do not read their New Testament and

come out as anti-Semites, that most of us read our texts graciously as texts of love rather than as texts of hate.

Since we Jews live in a predominantly Christian culture, knowing the New Testament also helps us understand art, music, literature, and political references.

If some rabbinical schools are requiring study of the New Testament, what should Christian seminaries do?

A number of years ago, I requested the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) put into a best practices recommendation that all candidates for Christian ministry have direct instruction on how to avoid anti-Jewish teaching and preaching. The ATS did not accept the request. So I work both nationally and internationally with clergy groups, seminarians, and religious educators to correct the major mistakes that are made—not because of bigotry, but because of ignorance. I show how knowing about first-century Judaism can help them not only avoid unintended anti-Jewish commentary but can also make their preaching more historically accurate and profound.

Were Jesus’ relationships to women as revolutionary as some have claimed?

Jesus has women followers and, indeed, women patrons, according to Luke 8. It’s women who were supporting the movement, and that would not be surprising. We have evidence of women serving as patrons of some Pharisaic movements, and we have evidence of women serving as patrons of Gentile figures as well.

The New Testament is a fabulous source for reconstructing Jewish women’s history. It tells us that women owned their own homes. For example, Martha welcomed Jesus into *her* home, and the house church in Jerusalem is at the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark.

It tells us that women have freedom to travel. Hence, they can follow Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, or appear at the feeding of the 5,000 (the demographics are low: it was 5,000 “besides women and children,” as Matthew tells us). It tells us that they have use of their own funds—for example, the woman who spent all her money on physicians, the widow who put her coins in the temple treasury, the woman searching for the lost coin. Women show up in religious and civic institutions. Jesus tells a parable about a widow who has access to a judge. We know about women in the synagogue and women in the temple.

Women followed Jesus for the same reason that their fathers, their sons, their husbands, and their brothers followed him: They found his message compelling.

Jesus is not anomalous in having women followers, and he’s not anomalous in speaking to women. But the one place where he’s distinct is that the women surrounding him and, indeed, the men as well, are predominantly celibate. It’s difficult to name a married couple, with the exception of Mary and Joseph, who are together when Jesus talks to them. The only couple we have, with the possible exception of the two on the Emmaus Road, are Jairus and his wife. When we think about the women in the Gospels—the Samaritan woman at the well, the bent-over lady, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Joanna, Susannah, the Canaanite mother with the demon-possessed daughter, and so on—none of them is accompanied by a spouse, and some of them have actually left their spouses. This leads me to suspect that women outside traditional domestic arrangements may have found a special place in Jesus’ movement, because he talks about a



his followers such that they were willing to leave their homes and families to follow him and give up their lives for him. In that particular time and place, he was able to give fellow Jews a certain hope that some of them did not find elsewhere. To look at any one aspect of his tradition does not give us the full impact that he would have made on his followers.

We must also talk about Paul. Evangelical Protestants debate the New Perspective on Paul because it seems in tension with our 16th-century Reformation interpretations. At the same time, we really appreciate scholars like N. T. Wright.

The New Perspective allows us to see Paul operating within his Jewish context rather than against it. Since Paul claims that context—“a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, . . . as to righteousness under the law, blameless”—and since Paul is continuing to interpret Torah, I think the New Perspective is helpful.

I think it behooves anyone who takes Scripture seriously to continue to look at the history involved, to continue to question our own religious traditions over time, and to put our theologies in dialogue with what history can tell us.

One legacy of the Reformation is understanding Paul to say that his fellow Jews claimed law-keeping could lead to salvation—what we’ve come to call “works righteousness.” How did Jews in the first century think about why and how they would enjoy the world to come?

There’s no single party line held by all Jews in the first century. We don’t have a head Jew to tell us what to believe. Even if there were, we probably wouldn’t listen.

new family of faith. “Who are my mother and brothers and sisters? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Perhaps women who have never married, widows, women who have been deserted by their husbands or divorced—perhaps they found a special role in the new kinship group Jesus was establishing.

So what was truly original about Jesus?

He’s the only person I can find in antiquity who says you have to love your *enemy*. But you have to look at the entire person to see his distinctiveness. Other people told parables. Other people referred to God as Father. Other people debated how to follow Torah. Other people lost their lives on Roman crosses. Other people proclaimed that God’s justice will be breaking in, and that we can live as if we’ve got one foot in that world to come.

But the way Jesus puts it together makes him distinctive: the striking images that he gives, the loyalty that he engendered from

There’s no single party line held by all Jews in the first century. We don’t have a head Jew to tell us what to believe. Even if there were, we probably wouldn’t listen anyway.

Jews were not, and are not, following Torah in order to earn God’s love or in order to earn a place in the world to come. God’s love is already in place. That’s how Jews came into the covenant, for the covenant is a sign of divine love. Tractate *Sanhedrin* in the Mishna says all Israel has a share in the world to come (and then it has a few exception clauses). Jews are following Torah because that’s part of their covenant with God, and it’s how they return God’s love as well as show love of neighbor and love of stranger.

What are the really important Jewish themes that Christians tend to miss in the New Testament?

The really important Jewish themes are also themes in the church, so I don’t think Christians are missing them. These include the love of God (Deut. 6) and love of neighbor (Lev. 19).

There is a strong concern in both the Jewish tradition and in the New Testament for correct behavior. Jews are very much concerned with how one acts, with how one lives one’s life, and not just with belief. Throughout the New Testament, the issue is not only what one should believe, but also what one should do. Paul always ends his letters with ethical exhortation. So the Jewish concern for how you sanctify daily life carries on into the New Testament. ☪



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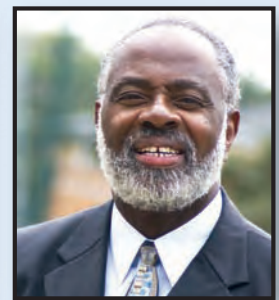
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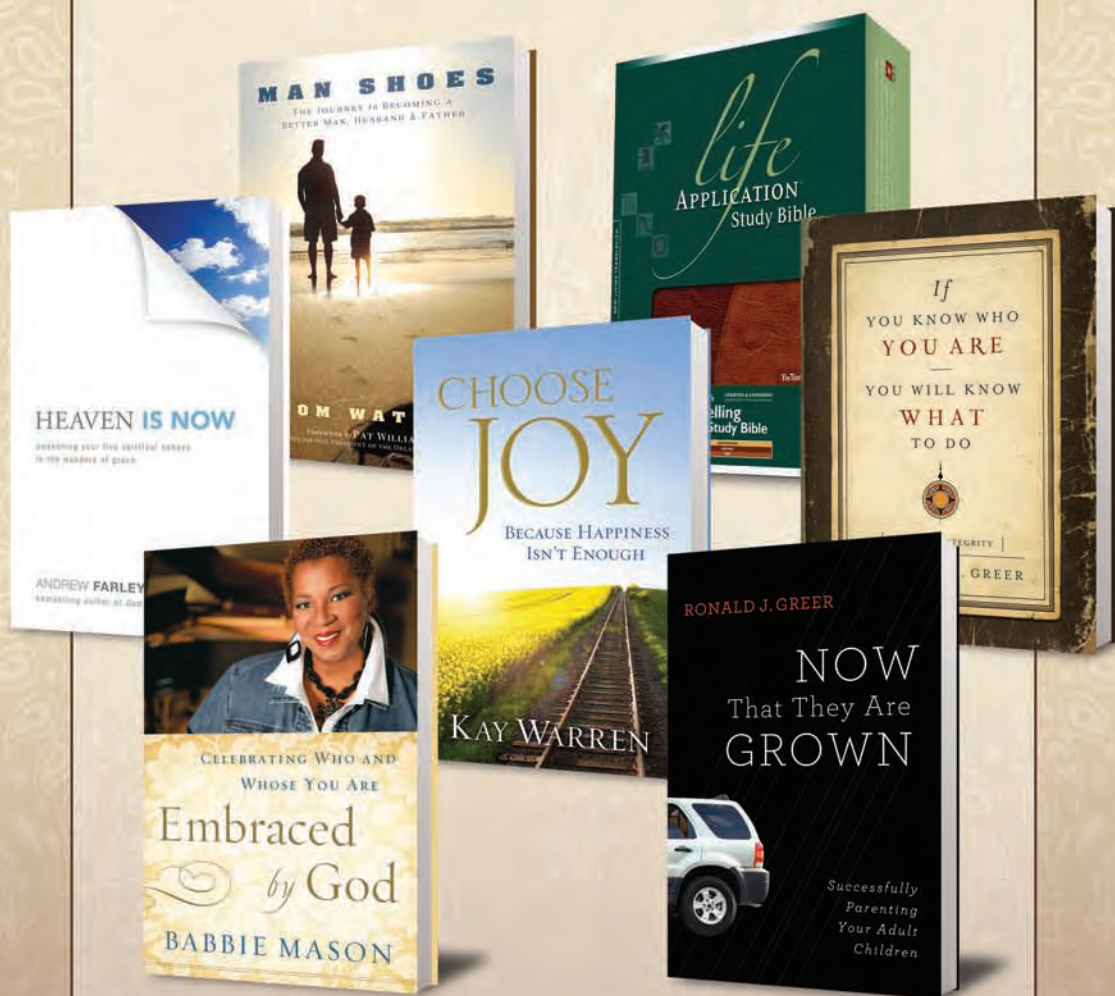


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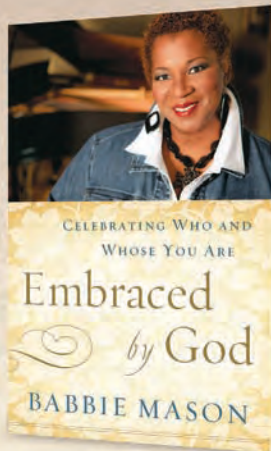
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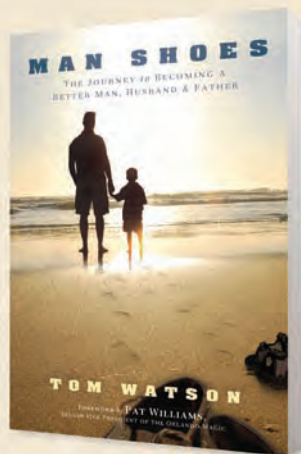
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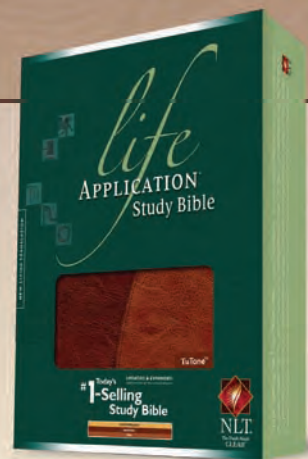
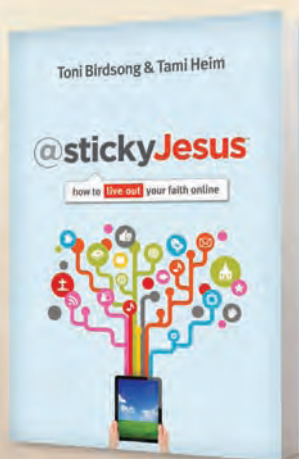


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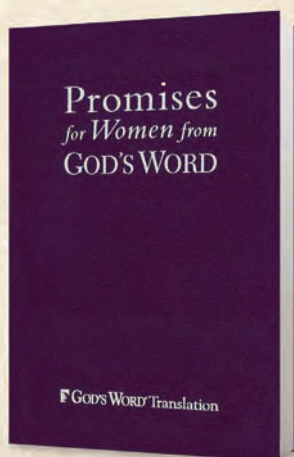
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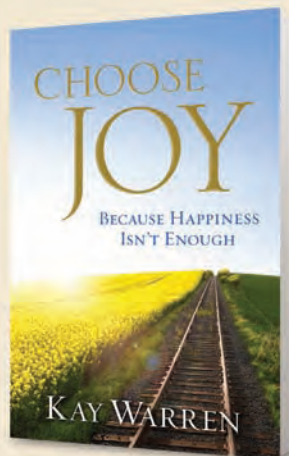
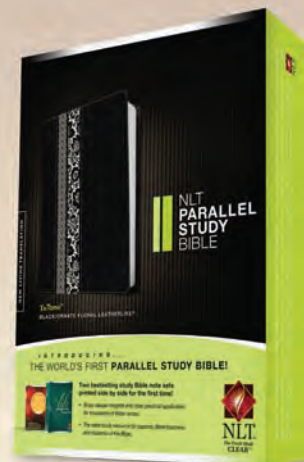


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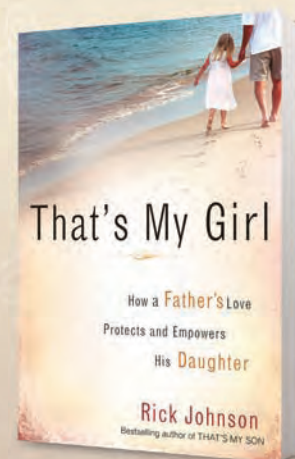


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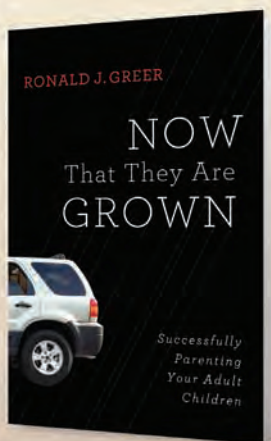


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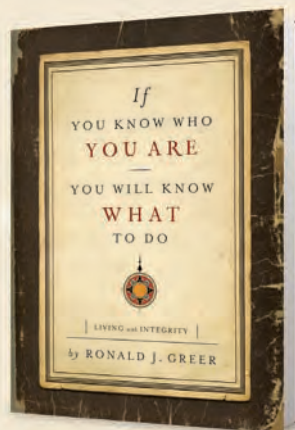
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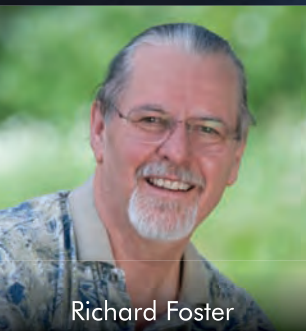
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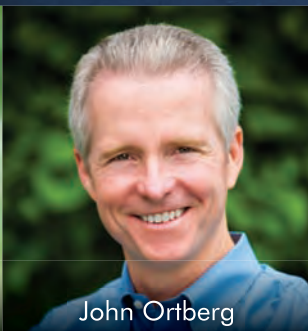
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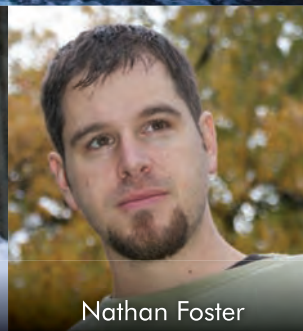
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There is so much potential for Christ-centered microfinance as we address a basic component of poverty alleviation—helping the financially poor find jobs.

Peter Greer

President and CEO, HOPE International

Helping the Poor

Christianity Today's recent cover story "Cost-Effective Compassion" [February] sought to delineate the best ways to eliminate poverty. All the strategies listed have merit and value, but the reality is much more complicated.

Without broadening the poor's understanding of the "why," the proposed solutions do not help much. The head of our nonprofit told me to forgo physical development. He could get plenty of groups to focus on clean water, nets, child sponsors, and so on. Instead, he suggested I focus on what we call "human resource development": long-term investment in working directly with the people. Often the gains are imperceptible, but without it, physical development quickly becomes what the locals call "monuments" to those who built them.

NEIL JOHNSTON
Grand Prairie, Texas

I was surprised that in your list of the top 10 strategies for poverty alleviation, only one directly relates to job creation. Ward Brehm, author of *White Man Walking*, wrote, "The best way to help the poor is to help them not be poor anymore."

Wouldn't job creation and employment be the most fundamental part of accomplishing this?

Job creation is the engine of economic growth and organizations. There is so much more potential for Christ-centered microfinance (including not just small loans but also entrepreneurship training and savings services) and other employment-based solutions to be embraced by the church as we address a basic component of poverty alleviation: helping the financially poor find jobs.

PETER GREER
President, HOPE International
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

Editor's Note: For more responses to our February package on poverty, visit MoreCT.com/morepoor.

Naming the Blame

I appreciated the article about the rising sea level around Tuvalu and the theological questions it raises for Christian inhabitants ["Natural Theology," Briefing, February]. However, I was disheartened that one professor blamed "human behavior and injustice" for the destruction. Global climate change is not proven to be

the cause of Tuvalu's problems. Some scientists say the cause is rather coral growth, land reclamation, and deposits of sediment.

It bothers me to see this allegation printed unchallenged, as if it's established fact. What makes it so dangerous is that the prescriptions for "fixing" this supposedly human-caused problem will impoverish and steal the liberties of countless millions through regulation and taxation.

LYNN BARTON
Medford, Oregon

Health Crisis

At last, some real inroads into the brutal trade of abortion ["Un-Planned Parenthood," February]. But the question remains: How will pro-lifers provide some of the services (outside of abortion, of course) now provided at low cost by

Planned Parenthood? It's okay to win a victory like this, but are we, as advocates for an abortion-free world, prepared to pick up the slack and help women in trouble no matter the cost?

RICHARD STANDLEY

E-mail

Two Thumbs Up

The "Critics' Choice Awards of 2011" [February] is a great list. I am always encouraged by CT's good taste and high level of engagement with the arts. Christians

TOP 3 What got the most comments in February's CT

40%
**Cost-Effective
Compassion**
Bruce Wydick

14%
**A Most
Personal Touch**
Mark Galli

9%
**The 2011 CT
Movie Awards**

READERS' PICK The most praised piece in February's CT



**Cost-Effective
Compassion**
By Bruce Wydick

COMMENTS? QUESTIONS?

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need more of that—a willingness to see film as art and evaluate it on proper artistic terms, instead of constantly moralizing over whether scenes are “appropriate.”

STEPHEN M.
E-mail

Defining Worship

CT's February editorial, “You Can't Worship Here,” makes a valid theological point, one made by a court which is thus “establishing religion.” But the editorial failed to note that neither a court, nor a school system, nor a government entity can or should determine church theology. The church must determine its own theology based, of course, on the Word of God. That the church should take the theological position that you point out the court came to is a valid point to make. But let us not confuse that with empowering courts or other government entities to determine or make decisions based on their view of church theology.

KENNETH HENES
Cottage Grove, Wisconsin

Graham and Stott Agree

The review of Alister Chapman's *Godly Ambition* [“Stott Life Portrait,” CT Review, February] states that Billy Graham disagreed with John Stott with regard to the Lausanne Covenant's affirmation that sociopolitical involvement is a Christian

duty. This is misleading. Graham signed the Lausanne Covenant publicly. He certainly affirmed the entire covenant, including the statement that “evangelism and social-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”

There was disagreement several months later at the initial meeting of the Lausanne Continuation Committee in Mexico City, as to our mandate. Was it to promote evangelism pure and simple (a “narrower” purpose), or the whole biblical mission of the church (a “wider” mandate)? Graham and Stott did initially differ on this. The disagreement, however, was not over sociopolitical involvement as a Christian duty, but about the particular focus of the committee.

In the end it was formally—and, I believe, wisely—agreed that the mandate of the Lausanne Committee was to further the total biblical mission of the church, recognizing the central place of evangelism in that mission.

Graham and Stott may have had different approaches and emphases in these matters and in their respective callings, but the statement in the review is not correct.

LEIGHTON FORD
Honorary Lifetime Executive Chair
The Lausanne Movement
Charlotte, North Carolina



ONLINE POLL

DENYING OURSELVES
Did you give up anything for Lent?

37%

Yes, I gave up something material, like food.

18%

Yes, but I gave up something that is not material, like an activity.

20%

No, but I recognize the season in other ways.

25%

No, I didn't observe Lent.

Total votes: 353

(Online polls do not represent a scientific sample.)

compiled by Elissa Cooper

WORTH REPEATING

Things overheard at CT online.

“I see a combination of masculine and feminine attributes in Jesus. Are we to reject his feminine side?”

vrob125, pondering John Piper's recent statement that “God gave Christianity a masculine feel.”

Her.meneutics: “John Piper and the Rise of Biblical Masculinity,” by Rachel Stone

“The only thing established was that one man has a wavering opinion about who God is.”

Lynette, following the second annual Elephant Room, at which pastor T. D. Jakes talked about his own change in beliefs on the Trinity.

CT Liveblog: “T. D. Jakes Embraces Doctrine of the Trinity, Moves Away from ‘Oneness’ View,” by Michael Foust, Baptist Press

“It keeps us from supporting something in which we should be ahead of the world, not trailing.”

Phillip, expressing disappointment that Christians have difficulty appreciating art and artists.

CT Entertainment Blog: “Derek Webb's Feedback Film: What Just Happened?” by Mark Moring

“Doug Moo and his team have been extremely transparent about past mistakes in the process, but as far as the translation itself, it is still the most readable and balanced in terms of accuracy and clarity.”

Jamie, applauding LifeWay for committing to keep the 2011 NIV translation in stores.

CT Liveblog: “Lifeway Declines SBC Request to Bar NIV from Stores,” by Morgan Feddes

TIM DAVIS



Davis

Pastors' Ponzis

A rash of pastor-endorsed fraud taints our gospel witness.

It begins with a seemingly sincere offer of help from a trusted, Jesus-loving voice. But the conversation always dead-ends in perdition.

Case in point: The New Covenant Christian Center, a Seattle-area independent church, was the setting where a tragically familiar Ponzi scheme took root in 2003. The scheme's organizer offered to double or triple invested money in a matter of weeks through an overseas trading program. In total, 24 church members handed over \$1.6 million until law enforcement intervened in 2011 as the fraud collapsed. Who was that trusted voice behind this Ponzi? Anthony C. Morris, the pastor.

In recent years, Ponzi frauds that prey on the naïve, innocent, and trusting have lost billions. The Madoff Ponzi's price tag alone was \$20 billion. In these schemes, the organizer offers a high return rate at low risk, but in reality he pays existing investors with funds collected from new investors.

Prosecutors have uncovered more financial fraud in church networks than they ever imagined. "It took the financial downturn. Money was drying up—the new investors were not coming in, so Ponzi schemes collapsed," IRS Special Agent in Charge for Criminal Investigations Ken Hines told *Christianity Today*.

Hines, based in Seattle, has helped expose Ponzis for more than 20 years. He has seen first-hand how the church environment has proven to be an ideal context for affinity fraud. "When you go to church, you don't expect to get lied to or deceived or manipulated into losing your life's savings."

The New Covenant Ponzi was no isolated event. The stain of fraud that may have started in the pew has now spread to the pulpit. More pastors, elders, and other spiritual leaders are engaged in or endorse investments that later turn out to be Ponzis. Unfortunately, there are too many examples

to cite. Here are three:

- In the Ukraine, Nigerian megachurch pastor Sunday Adelaja faces a civil suit that he took a leadership role in the \$100 million Kings Capital fund, which turned out to be a Ponzi. There are hundreds of victims.

- Under the sponsorship of pastor Eddie Long and New Birth Missionary Baptist Church near Atlanta, lay minister and business executive Ephren Taylor persuaded church members to invest in City Capital Corp. for a "guaranteed 20 percent return." But investors, who have filed suit alleging a Ponzi scheme, may have lost more than \$1 million.

- A federal judge in Portland recently sentenced a former preacher, Johnny "Mickey" Brown, to almost 11 years in prison for a Ponzi fraud in which he misused the credit cards of mostly elderly church members and others. Losses may exceed \$4 million.

The sickening net effect of fraud puts a dark cloud over pastors and other leaders in local churches. Very few pastors will ever become certified financial planners. The issue is honesty and integrity, not investment advice per se. If a faithful church member cannot trust his or her own pastor, whom can they trust?

This is why when it comes to investment advice (not advice about the family budget or paying off your credit card debt) a pastor should stay two steps away from any investment plan under discussion. At the practical level, that means no endorsement or involvement of church or personal funds. Remove all appearances of conflict of interest so that

public trust can thrive.

Pastors can also help church members use unbiased third parties to evaluate investments. We should be skeptical of returns exceeding 8 to 12 percent annually and avoid secretive or highly exclusive investments.

Nearly one quarter of today's Ponzi schemes exploit friendships and mutual interests. When a church community is defrauded,

the ripple effects are deadly. Agent Hines said one fraud in San Diego "devastated that church community, broke that parish up—financially, emotionally, and spiritually."

Hines said many people who operate these frauds have no criminal record, not even a speeding ticket. He has no trouble pointing the finger at the human heart as an underlying cause. "What kicks in is the greed factor," he said. "Good

people go bad and it's always the greed factor or self-preservation. It clouds their judgment."

The spate of pastor-endorsed Ponzi schemes adds to the other pastor and priest scandals that have been in the news in recent years. Unfortunately, we're in a time when even honest pastors with deep integrity have to earn the community's trust by following the strictest of ethical guidelines. That may be burdensome, but it is a relatively easy yoke that will in the end lead to a hearing for the gospel.

In a Seattle courtroom in January, Morris pleaded guilty to fraud and money laundering charges. He agreed to restitution. Court-ordered financial restitution is great. But restoring our witness will take more than a repentant pastor. Visible, public accountability is vital to the gospel. ✚



The sickening net effect of fraud puts a dark cloud over pastors and other leaders in local churches.

*Animals and
the Afterlife*

Do pets go to heaven?

MANY OF US HOPE SO

Wesley Smith is a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute's Center on Human Exceptionalism and author of *A Rat Is a Pig Is a Dog Is a Boy: The Human Cost of the Animal Rights Movement* (Encounter, 2010).

We have come a long way since Descartes claimed that animals are mere automatons without the capacity for pleasure or pain. We now know the contrary is true: They experience. They suffer. They grieve. They love.

When it comes to our relationships with pets, we not only take them into our homes: We welcome them deep within our hearts. In fact, some become so attached that they yearn to be with their pets throughout eternity. C. S. Lewis speculated on the eternal fate of animals in *The Problem of Pain*, suggesting that at least tame animals might enter heaven through their relationship with humans, in the same way that humans do through their relationship with Christ.

But I worry that the question of pets in heaven could distort our understanding of eternal life as described in Scripture and Christian tradition. If we are not careful, we could cross the line into a sentimentality that shrinks our eschatological expectation. Our human idea of heaven might be walking an adored dog in the forest, but there is no indication that is anything like God's plan. The question of whether our pets go to heaven requires an examination of the natures of animals, of humans, and of God. Animals have their lives in God. In Psalm 104 we read that animals look to God for their food and that when he withdraws his spirit, they return to the dust. God marks the dropping of every sparrow.

But John 3:16 makes no mention of animals. Only humans are made in the divine likeness. Unlike animals, we are moral agents capable of sinning by commission and omission. That makes ours a completely different nature of being.

Here's an illustration: My late cat once raided a nest and I found her happily batting a helpless, now dying chick around the backyard. She was just being a cat. Had I done that, I would be rightly branded a monster. I also knew my human duty. I put the poor chick out of its misery with a heavy work boot and removed the carcass. Doing the right thing came at a cost: Chloe was so angry I spoiled her fun that she refused to look at me for the rest of the day.

God's love is unlimited, unconditional, and eternal. When we witness the very face of God and participate through constant worship in his ineffable essence—which we are told is the neverending

activity of heaven—it will at the very least include all we yearn for when desiring to be with our pets forever.

So do pets have souls? Do they go to heaven? God knows. For now, “we see through a glass darkly.” Instead of speculating or making strained proof-texts, let us instead give thanks to God for the great gift of joy he has given us in our pets. Let us be confident in the knowledge that whatever his plans for our animal friends, all will be perfection and light.

VIA THE COVENANT

Karen Swallow Prior is a professor at Liberty University and has written on animal welfare for *CT's Her.meneutics* blog and other publications.

When I was young and gnostic, I was certain that pets do not go to heaven. I didn't know I was gnostic, of course. I simply thought that life on earth was about bicycles and ice cream and books and not saying certain words or smoking behind the barn with my cousins.

Heaven was about being with God and angels singing and seeing great-grandma again and not being in hell.

You only got to heaven if you were saved, and I hadn't seen any animals go to church, let alone go forward during an altar call. In the old days, I was told, a nearby farmer used to ride his horse to church, where he'd hitch her up to the iron rail that still stood outside the one-room country church in Maine where my family worshiped. I never imagined a horse coming inside to get saved.

Yet the Bible teaches that God does save animals. For example, God brought Noah two of each kind of living creature in order to save them from the Flood. God chastised reluctant Jonah about the need to save not only the human inhabitants of Nineveh, but also its many animals. Such salvation is not, of course, quite the kind invited by the altar call. Even so, it should not be overlooked.



God not only saves animals. At times, his covenants include them. God's covenant with Noah included "every living thing of all flesh" (Gen. 6:18–19, *KJV*). In Hosea, God proclaimed a covenant "with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky and the creatures that move along the ground" (2:18, *NIV*).

When God made a covenant with one of his chosen ones, he often marked it by assigning them a particular name: Abraham, Sarah, Israel, Jesus, Paul. God told Adam to name the animals and, in so doing, Adam reflected God's acts of naming. When we choose to take into our household creatures that share with us the breath of life and bestow them with names, perhaps we enter into a kind of covenantal relationship with them too. To echo C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, perhaps when we name animals, they "become themselves" and our salvation "flows over into them."

I have put away my childish thinking about heaven. Scripture describes eternity not as an ethereal cloud-top existence, but as both spiritual and material, just as our life is now. It is a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13) where "creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). As foretold in Isaiah, animals will be there. "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat . . . and a little child will lead them" (11:6). Perhaps God

will honor my acts of naming the animals by bringing Gracie, Kasey, Myrtle, Peter, Oscar, and so many more there, too.

I WISH WE KNEW

Ben DeVries is founder and administrator of Not One Sparrow, a Christian voice for animals.

Oddly enough, I was part of the animal advocacy community for several months before I took the question of whether animals have souls seriously. I had even written my seminary capstone paper on a biblical-theological foundation for animal welfare, and didn't feel compelled to address the subject directly.

When I heard others speak confidently of seeing their animal companions again, often "just over the rainbow bridge," I sympathized with their loss and the natural desire that arose out of it. But the hope of reuniting with our pets seemed more based in wishful thinking and eclectic spirituality than in a confessional hermeneutic. As a result, it seemed to compromise the clear scriptural calling, which does exist, to care for God's creatures.

Just over two years ago, when one of our own cats died suddenly from an unexpected complication after an otherwise successful surgery, I found myself looking at the question of animal souls in a much more personal light. Bubba had been a constant and beloved companion since we brought him home from an adoption center four years earlier. He was wonderfully affable, as his name suggests, and the perfect pet for our newborn son to grow up with. I took his loss hard, heartbroken as my wife and I said goodbye at the vet's office, and still sobbing as I buried him in pouring rain later that night. I wrote in my journal: "It's been a gut-wrenching couple of days . . . I miss him everywhere I look in the house . . . And I feel such a hole, especially not knowing if God has taken him back to himself for us to meet again or not. I so badly want to know if I'll see him again."

It occurred to me from time to time in my grief that if God had made Bubba, and knew and loved him even more than my family did, he could very well have some desire to bring his own treasured creation back to life someday.

The same might go for many other creatures with which God has a relationship as their Creator and Sustainer, whether we humans happened to share in that relationship or not. After all, our Savior said that not even one sparrow is ever forgotten by him.

But even if this is a reasonable conjecture, I have to come back to what the Bible does and does not say on the possibility. We know that death of any kind was never part of God's original plan, and that animals will certainly be part of the new heaven and earth, where death and tears will be no more. What we don't know is whether these will be specific animals from the old creation, including those we've known and loved.

I wish we knew.

In the meantime, it seems okay to ask God if his grace might extend that far, while doing my best to trust that heaven won't seem anything but complete regardless.





Defending Scripture. Literally.

And sometimes metaphorically, too.

I attended a Christian university in the long ago days of acid wash denim and Commodore 64s. One of my classmates, Ken Jacobsen, had a gift for impersonation. He was renowned for his imitation of Bono on the U2 song “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” “I have spoke with the tongue of angels,” he’d croon when he got to the fourth verse. “I have held the hand of a devil.” But then he’d alter the lyric and sing, “N-o-t literally. It’s only a metaphor.” That always got a huge laugh.

It’s been decades, but I still remember the joke. I realize now it was humorous not only for its inherent silliness, but also for the way it held up a mirror to something funny about ourselves.

Most of us were earnest, sincere evangelicals. We weren’t biblical studies majors, but we saw the defense of the Bible as our sworn duty. Against the onslaught of those who sought to undermine Scripture’s authority, we committed ourselves to upholding it as the reliable Word of God.

One of the unintended side effects of our fervor was that we took almost everything literally, at least in spiritual matters. Generally, we weren’t very good with oblique metaphors and analogies. And if, like Bono, you talked about spiritual things in a seemingly unorthodox way, well, we worried.

There was much that was good about our impulses, and maybe they were necessary in a time when the “battle for the Bible” was raging. But for me, and, I suspect, others like me, our “literalist” convictions left us confused in significant ways—not only about song lyrics, but, much more tragically, about Scripture itself.

All these years later, I’m learning that understanding the literal meaning of the Bible is a more nuanced adventure than my college friends and I imagined. We’d been blithely unaware that there is more than one genre in the Bible, or that literary context profoundly matters to meaning. We didn’t understand that when we read ancient Hebrew prose

poems (like Genesis 1), wisdom literature (like Proverbs), or apocalyptic literature (like Revelation) as if they were science textbooks, we were actually obscuring their meaning.

For me, the most negative consequence of all that well-intentioned literalism was the conviction that Yahweh, having given us his straightforward Word, was completely comprehensible. This paradigm both diminished my perception of God and set up my faith for crisis when I discovered aspects of God that remain stubbornly shrouded in mystery.

If you’d told me back then that the language we have for God—even (especially) much of our biblical language—must be understood *analogically*, I would have prayed for you and backed away slowly. I

wouldn’t have understood that there are no words that can be applied to God exactly the same way they are applied to creaturely things, no language that can be used “univocally.”

When I say that I am “alive” and God is “alive,” the word “alive” is analogical, not univocal—it does not apply to me (a temporal creature) the same way it applies to God (who is eternal). The same goes for words like “good” or “powerful.” Connotations of *imperfection* or *limitation* must be deleted from any word when it is applied to God, and the notions (as best as we can conceive them) of total perfection and completion must be added.

Understanding this sooner would have helped me with biblical descriptions of God’s “wrath.” I can only get a glimmer of what God’s wrath looks like when I divest the word of

the human implications of self-centered, reactionary anger, and condition it with the unchanging goodness that must clarify all of God’s attributes. Or take the word “Father.” The claim that God is our heavenly “Father” can ultimately mean something wonderful, even to my friends who had terrible human dads, because the word is not used univocally when it’s applied to God.

J. I. Packer likens our relationship with God to that of a two-year-old with a father who has a brain of Einsteinian proportions.

To make relationship possible, the father will have to accommodate himself to the toddler he loves. The child will know her daddy, but she won’t completely comprehend him.

What the father reveals

to the daughter will be true, as far as it goes. But there will always be more.

We shouldn’t be surprised (or worried) that in his overtures to us God uses every kind of language available—straightforward (but culturally lensed) historical narrative, analogy, metaphor, parable, poetry, apocalyptic vision, and, hallelujah, the Word made flesh, Jesus. The best way to receive his Word is with the humble conviction that not only can we find what we’re looking for, it (he) will be more than we could hope for, imagine, or fully comprehend. That’s the best news there is.

Literally. 

Go to ChristianBibleStudies.com for “Defending Scripture. Literally,” a Bible study based on this article.

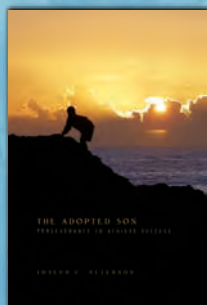


An unintended side effect of our fervor for Scripture was that we took almost everything literally. We weren’t very good with metaphors and analogies.

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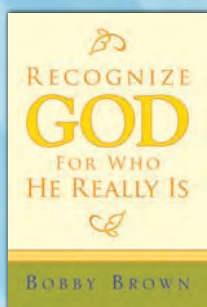
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Uniters, Not Dividers

Why evangelicals need to redefine themselves and reform the whole church.

Just what is an evangelical, anyway? The picture painted by the media—especially now that it's election time again—is confused and often unflattering. From the infamous “poor, uneducated, and easy to command” label hung on us by *The Washington Post* years ago, to the perception that we are gay-hating political maniacs in the hip pocket of the Republican Party today, it's not hard to understand that we have an image problem—and that we've let others define us.

Of course, we ourselves are part of the problem. Like those well-intentioned activists who met at a Texas ranch to anoint one of the presidential candidates in the Republican primaries. Or the pair of evangelical professors who wrote an article in *The New York Times*, criticizing evangelical leaders for their “rejection of knowledge” and for embracing “discredited, ridiculous and even dangerous ideas”—such as believing that homosexual behavior is sinful and that Darwin was wrong.

Perhaps it is time to step back and ask once again what an evangelical is.

It may seem that the word *evangelical* has been defined nearly to death, but a few answers bear repeating. First is Scottish historian David Bebbington's oft-quoted quadrilateral. Evangelicals, he says, can be recognized by these four traits: they are *biblical* Christians who proclaim the centrality of the Cross, emphasize the necessity of personal *conversion*, and do all of this with zealous *activism*.

Then there was Carl F. H. Henry's helpful use of the term “the evangelical church,” by which he meant that coalition of Bible-believing, gospel-centered Christians that stood against Roman Catholicism (which seemed monolithic in the 1950s) and liberal Protestantism (which in those days was “mainline” in more than name only).

There have been other concerted attempts, such as the Evangelical Manifesto, to define evangelicalism (its theology, its

positive, transdenominational nature) and to declare what it is not (a political movement, neither theologically liberal nor fundamentalist). Although these efforts contributed to the discussion, in the end they had little impact on the public and are relegated to search engines on the Internet.

One thing is clear: Serious evangelicals acknowledge certain “moments” that have decisively shaped our identity. First, we stand in continuity with the Trinitarian and Christological consensus of the early church. Billy Graham once said that the teachings of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds were central to being an evangelical. We agree. (Chuck made this point in his book *The Faith: What Christians Believe, Why They Believe It, and Why It Matters*, and Timothy in his *Evangelicals and Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness*.)

Evangelicals also accept the formal and material principles of the Protestant Reformation. The authority and sufficiency of the Bible on one hand and justification by faith alone on the other are core evangelical beliefs. But we also joyfully recognize that the Spirit continued to breathe life into the church long after Luther and Calvin were gone. Puritanism, Pietism, and Pentecostalism are all historic expressions of the spiritual awakenings that decisively shaped and continue to direct the future of the worldwide evangelical movement. A movement, by the way, which truly is worldwide, given the dramatic rise of evangelical believers in the Global South. This demographic shift makes the global evangelical movement, along with Roman Catholicism

and Orthodoxy, one of three vital, resilient forces of 21st-century Christianity.

What all this boils down to is that we evangelicals are heirs of the Reformation and that we best understand evangelicalism as a reform movement seeking to renew and strengthen orthodox faith within the holy, catholic, and apostolic church to which we belong and whose creeds we embrace. The

church is one because it is centered in Jesus Christ; holy not because its members are perfect but because Christ is pure and spotless; catholic not through allegiance to an earthly magisterium but because it is universal in mission and outreach; and apostolic because it is faithful to the teaching of the prophets and apostles found in Scripture.

When we realize we are seeking to reform the whole church, not just evangelicalism, we show the world that we are uniters, not dividers. The Manhattan Declaration is a great example of this approach. Evangelicals joined with Catholics and Orthodox to address the most pressing moral issues of our day: the defense of human life, traditional marriage, and religious liberty. We come from different traditions, but we chose to focus on our oneness in Christ as members of his body, the church—not on our theological distinctives or political differences. The result was half a million signers and a reshaping of the debate over these critical issues.

We can see more of the same if we remain faithful to the evangelical vision of a renewed, reinvigorated church, firm in its orthodox faith, bearing a positive witness both to individuals and in the public square.



We best understand evangelicalism as a reform movement that seeks to strengthen and renew orthodox faith.

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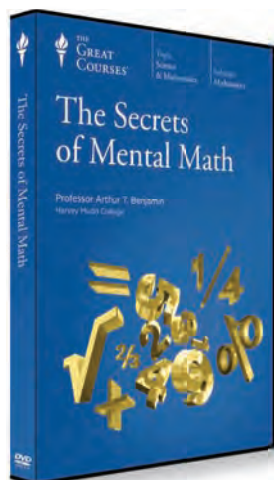
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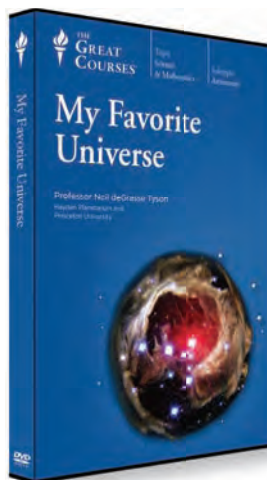
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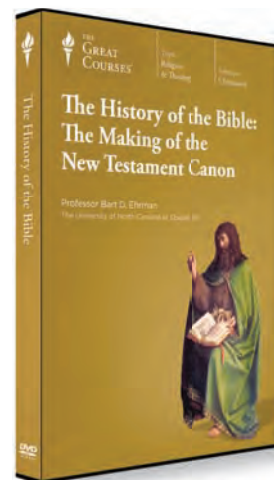
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CT REVIEW

BOOKS, MOVIES,
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Defending the Declaration

Social conservatism draws its viability from America's founding principles. By Andrew Walker

A

mericans have soured on social conservatism, if we're to believe many media pundits. Some see a hopelessly retrograde movement stubbornly clinging to outmoded attitudes that younger generations will inevitably reject. Others wonder why anyone would fixate on the "culture wars" when so many people are out of work, drowning in debt, and losing their homes to foreclosure.

And secular elites aren't the only ones writing social conservatism's obituary, or lamenting its influence. Liberal evangelicals

like Jim Wallis insist that younger evangelicals have moved beyond abortion and gay marriage to matters of immigration and economic justice. Many mainstream Republicans complain that social conservatives hold the party hostage to a divisive agenda. Happy to court social conservative votes, they sweep social conservative causes under the political rug once victory has been attained.

In ***The Case for Polarized Politics: Why America Needs Social Conservatism*** (Encounter) ★★★★★,

Jeffrey Bell, a former policy adviser to Ronald Reagan, stands this conventional wisdom on its head. Social conservatism, argues Bell, is too firmly rooted in America's founding ideals to become obsolete.

'WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS . . .'

Social conservatism is a relatively recent development in American history. It emerged, Bell says, as a response to the sexual revolution and cultural tumult of the 1960s, a decade marked by withering assaults on the institutions of church and family.

Bell ably demonstrates that social conservatism has continued to play an influential role in American politics, from the Reagan Revolution up to the present day, despite recurring protestations that the movement is on life support. He cites the political architecture Karl Rove built around social conservatism as an arguable reason that George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism" commanded such large evangelical support and won two presidential elections.

But what explains this continued vitality, given all the confident predictions of demise? No other affluent Western country has witnessed the development of a similar political movement. This, argues Bell, is no accident, but rather can be traced to the divergent paths taken by the 18th-century European Enlightenment.

The French Enlightenment, shaped by thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, represented a radical break with traditional norms and values rooted in a Christian worldview.

Its proponents sought liberation from biblical religion, which they regarded as a tyrannical force to be overthrown. True freedom, in this vein, is freedom from constraints on appetite and action.

By contrast, the British Enlightenment had a more conservative orientation and generally remained within the confines of



Europe's "age-old monotheistic framework." It did not categorically reject the very notion of divine authority, or treat moral norms as irreconcilable with human freedom.

Steeped in the more conservative tradition of the British Enlightenment, America's founders grounded important liberties in a truth proposition unmistakably religious in character. Our Declaration of Independence famously holds that "all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator" with unalienable rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The founding documents of other countries, Bell notes, lack this theological emphasis.

The Declaration's insistence upon self-evident truths and rights derived from God, not government, has given social conservatism its philosophical grounding and a prolonged staying power in American political life. "What divides social conservatives from social liberals," writes Bell, "is this: Most—not all—social conservatives believe the words in [the Declaration] are literally true. Most—not all—opponents of social conservatism do not believe those words are literally true."

According to Bell, this basic difference underlies the "polarization" to which the title of his book alludes. The advancement of social liberalism, Bell notes, comes without exception from legal maneuvering. Social liberals, largely disagreeing with the

Undoubtedly, evangelicals hold to certain religious truths that ought to undergird the American political order. Whether they hold these truths to be 'self-evident' is another matter.

proposition that rights come from God, pressure the judiciary to invent new "rights"—for instance, a right to "privacy," encompassing the decision to kill one's unborn child, or a right to "marry" a partner of the same sex. Social conservatives, as the natural heirs to America's conservative founding, look to defend a treasured inheritance from such incursions.

For this, they are often attacked as paternalistic chauvinists or divisive bigots. But if they, and not their opponents, lay the strongest claim to the American founding, then we need to rethink the commonplace observation that social conservatives are aggressors in the culture wars. Social liberals are the real revolutionaries, harnessing government power to radically redefine society's values. But social conservatives—far from being intolerant "theocrats"—seek merely to preserve the religious heritage articulated,

however imperfectly, by the Declaration of Independence.

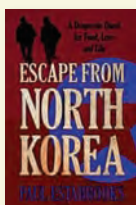
'... TO BE SELF-EVIDENT'

According to Bell, then, "social conservatism is more accurately seen as the application of natural law to politics—the self-evident truths of the Declaration—rather than as a political manifestation of religious revelation."

"Natural law" claims that certain truths are, in the Declaration's wording, "self-evident"—that is, accessible through human reason, without the aid of external revelation. Bell references Russell Kirk, the father of traditionalist conservatism, who understood there to be a moral order woven into the very fabric of existence, against which all manmade laws must be judged. According to Kirk and natural law theory, societies flourish most when universal principles are acknowledged *and* obeyed.

MY TOP 5 BOOKS ON NORTH KOREA

By Carl Moeller, CEO of Open Doors USA and coauthor of *The Privilege of Persecution* (Moody, 2011)



ESCAPE FROM NORTH KOREA

A Desperate Quest for Food, Love and Life

PAUL ESTABROOKS
(OPEN DOORS)

This true, riveting story documents a North Korean family's improbable journey from life under the brutal regime of the late Kim Jong-Il to freedom and newfound faith in Jesus Christ.



ESCAPING NORTH KOREA

Defiance and Hope in the World's Most Repressive Country

MIKE KIM
(ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD)

The author vividly describes his work with refugees along the North Korean/Chinese border and Christians' role in bringing light to this dark country.



THE ORPHAN MASTER'S SON

A Novel

ADAM JOHNSON
(RANDOM HOUSE)

This secular narrative reveals that Christian ministries impacted Kim Jong-Il's innermost circles. It poignantly describes a woman captured smuggling Bibles who sings Jesus songs while tortured.



NOTHING TO ENVY

Ordinary Lives in North Korea

BARBARA DEMICK
(SPIEGEL & GRAU)

Demick, the *Los Angeles Times*'s Seoul bureau chief, narrates North Korean defectors' lives over 15 years. An Open Doors colleague recommends this as a primer on the world's number one persecutor of Christians.



THE GOOD DOCTOR

Bringing Healing to the Hopeless

SAI R. PARK, M.D.
(BIBLICA PUBLISHING)

This hope-filled story of a Christian Korean American doctor who built and staffed a hospital in Pyongyang offers proof that Christians can still significantly impact the people of the world's most restricted country.

Natural law can provide a moral grammar for bringing Christian truth claims to a pluralistic populace. If, however, natural law reasoning is essential to the social conservative project, then what about the many evangelical Christians who identify as social conservatives while remaining skeptical of natural law? Certainly, evangelicals affirm an active Creator God who endows his people with a dignity that human laws are obliged to respect. They affirm, as well, a basic moral order to the universe, grounded in God's character and binding upon both individual consciences and public authorities.

Evangelicals, however, tend to combine these affirmations with an appreciation for the depth of human sinfulness. They distrust the capacity of fallen human reason to apprehend moral truths apart from the testimony of Scripture. Undoubtedly, evangelicals hold to certain religious truths that ought to undergird the American political order. Whether they hold these truths to be "self-evident" is another matter. Perhaps Bell has underestimated the extent to which evangelical social conservatives take their bearings, in politics as elsewhere, from explicitly biblical teachings.

It seems, then, like quite a leap to base the movement almost entirely on the Declaration of Independence. Yet, the Declaration does speak clearly on the Judeo-Christian moorings of our founding. Social conservatism, in defending this founding, represents a profound connection to our past and recalls an identity the American people need to reaffirm more often.

The future of social conservatism is far from settled. Will it remain a source of "palpable discomfort and disdain"? Almost certainly. But as long as a significant number of Americans continue to see God, rather than government, as the guarantor of rights and liberties, social conservative causes will resonate widely.

The elite media may loathe social conservatives. Republicans may find their continued presence an embarrassment and a hindrance. But if Bell is right that social conservatism is a force "increasingly unified and coherent," then surely it cannot be ignored. ➤

Andrew Walker is a policy analyst for the Family Foundation of Kentucky. He blogs at MereOrthodoxy.com.

Tolerance—Or Else

D. A. Carson warns of coercive attempts to impose secular beliefs. By Mollie Ziegler Hemingway

Tolerance is our culture's supreme virtue. Whether it is *Glee* plot lines about homosexual children or battles about the role religion may play in the public square—from Christmas trees to Catholic Charities—the buzzword is "tolerance."

Casual observers might note, however, that tolerance has undergone a change in meaning. What once meant recognizing other people's right to have different beliefs and practices now means accepting the differing views themselves. Vestiges of the old tolerance—conscience protections for medical professionals, religious liberty, and open discussions—are on the way out. Nowadays, conscience protections are frowned upon, threats to religious freedom prompt Congressional hearings, and "glitter bombs" replace meaningful debate.

This shift from accepting the existence of different views to believing that all views are equally valid is "subtle in form, but massive in substance," explains D. A. Carson in his new book, **The Intolerance of Tolerance** (Eerdmans) ★★★★★. And it comes with a huge caveat: Under the "new tolerance," it's a sin not to accept the new definition. Sanctions can and will be imposed.

"What the new tolerance means," Carson writes, "is that the government must be intolerant of those who do not accept the new definition of tolerance." In this vein, tolerance becomes an absolute good with the power to erode moral and religious distinctives. Or, as the United Nations Declaration of Principles on Tolerance puts it, "Tolerance . . . involves the rejection of dogmatism and absolutism." Leave it to the U.N. to come up with a dogmatic and absolutist rejection of dogma and absolutism!

Take, for example, the growing phenomenon of campus policies requiring student organizations to allow practicing homosexuals to be leaders. Efforts to enforce inclusion result in excluding groups that, as a matter of conscience, can't submit to the secular doctrine. Complex moral

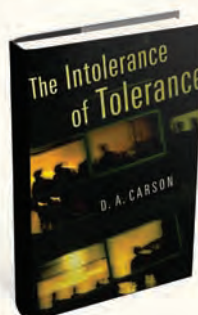
issues can't be discussed when everything is mapped on the tolerant/intolerant axis.

But the tolerance mandate only applies selectively, in protection of certain secular values. Adherents of the new tolerance, thinking themselves free from any binding ethical, moral, and religious systems of thought, assume the secular frame of reference to be morally neutral. On this understanding, imposing their values cannot possibly *impose* upon anyone. In the name of tolerance, Carson writes, the secularists assert that "they have the right to control the public sphere because they are right—completely unaware that they are trying to impose their worldview on others who disagree with it."

Carson shows the structural flaws and inconsistency of modern tolerance and its fixation on opposing traditional Christianity. By tracing its path through civic institutions, public discourse, academia, the government, and finally the church, Carson demonstrates "how controlling the discussions of tolerance and intolerance can be, precisely because there are no other widely agreed categories for right and wrong."

The Intolerance of Tolerance is not a political jeremiad so much as a call for Christians to fight for the value of truth. He shows how Christianity doesn't fit into the world of new tolerance and, when it tries, ends up paying too high a price. The result is a dumbed-down, diluted, and minimized gospel.

While the book is bracing, Carson ends on a hopeful note. He gives Christians 10 suggestions for dealing with intolerant tolerance, from simply exposing its arrogance and internal inconsistencies to speaking truthfully and civilly. He reminds Christians that they should be prepared to suffer in defense of the faith, before ending on a joyful note about trusting in God over government. ➤



Mollie Ziegler Hemingway is a contributing writer at GetReligion.org.

CONNECTING CHRIST

How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths

PAUL LOUIS METZGER

(THOMAS NELSON, 348 PAGES)

Have you ever seen the movie *As Good As It Gets*, starring Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt? Nicholson plays Melvin Udall, a man who pursues “Carol the Waitress,” played by Hunt. Until he falls in love, Melvin is rude, insensitive, racially bigoted, homophobic, and severely obsessive-compulsive. As his gay neighbor Simon Bishop explains, so it is: Melvin is the worst kind of human. As difficult as it is to deal with Melvin, it is perhaps even more difficult to imagine that this man is a best-selling author of romance novels. In fact, when a young unknown female fan who is the receptionist at his publishing house asks him how he is able to portray women so accurately in his works, Melvin tells her that women are like men, only without reason and accountability.

But what does all this have to do with apologetics? Everything. Everything, that is, if you want to engage people truthfully and relationally—and not treat them dismissively. So often I am like Melvin. I talk about romance novels—usually God’s love letter to us recorded as the Bible—but I’ll never understand the depth of his love. I talk about relationships with people, but I rarely develop them myself. I lecture on incarnational, life-on-life apologetic engagement, but I often fail to respond to people life-on-life, keeping them at a distance. . . .

Conservative Christians often approach people as Melvin Udall does. We can wax eloquent on romance and relationships, but we rarely experience them. We approach Mormons, Buddhists, and homosexuals as Melvin does: categorizing and dehumanizing them until we are forced to deal with them face-to-face. Only then do we see that they are humans and not stereotypes. . . . In other words, we can know about homosexuals or Buddhists or Mormons as groups, but never really know or engage the individuals. Instead we simply lump them all into one category, as Melvin unceremoniously labels Carol as a waitress and Simon as a fag. But it isn’t so easy to label others once we find out who they really are.

People are complex, mysterious, inconsistent, contradictory, wart-infested, and wondrous to behold. In keeping with how Simon views the matter, the longer you gaze at someone . . . that individual becomes more than just his or her worldview or demographic. Like God, in whose image everyone is created, each human is too complex to be classified. True understanding requires what Atticus Finch says in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: “. . . You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

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THE MONKS OF TIBHIRINE

Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria

JOHN W. KISER (ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN)



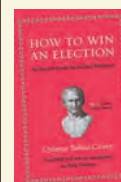
The most memorable film my wife Wendy and I saw last year—we’ve watched it three times now—was *Of Gods and Men*. If you also have been moved by the film and want to know more about the events on which it was

based, a good place to go is *The Monks of Tibhirine*. John Kiser’s book is as timely today as it was when it was first published, just a few months after 9/11.

HOW TO WIN AN ELECTION

An Ancient Guide for Modern Politicians

QUINTUS TULLIUS CICERO, TRANSLATED BY PHILIP FREEMAN (PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS)



Weary unto death (already) of the 2012 presidential campaign? Do not despair. There is solace at hand in this little book, which takes only a few minutes to read. It consists of a letter written in 64 B.C. by Quintus Tullius Cicero to his more famous brother, Marcus Tullius Cicero, who was running for the office of consul of the Roman Republic. Translated (the Latin text appears on facing pages) and put in context by Philip Freeman, whose biography of Julius Caesar was widely praised, the letter is cynical, worldly wise, and oddly reassuring.

WRIGHT MORRIS TERRITORY

A Treasury of Work

WRIGHT MORRIS

EDITED BY DAVID MADDEN WITH ALICIA CHRISTENSEN (UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS)



It’s a melancholy affair to see, over the years, an artist you’ve greatly admired disappearing from the conversation. No one, it seems, is talking about him. A case in point is Wright Morris, one of the finest American

novelists in the second half of the 20th century and, on top of that, an exceptionally good photographer. This anthology, which includes a biographical sketch by Joseph J. Wydeven, is indeed a treasury. I hope it will fall into the hands of young readers who have never even heard of Morris, sending them on a voyage of discovery.

'God Is Not a Genie in a Bottle'

Why we must avoid misusing Bible verses for our own advantage. Interview by Owen Strachan



What does the text mean to me?

This question, asked in Bible studies and sermons around the world, can lead believers to spiritual renewal. When it is the *only* question Christians ask of the Bible, warns Eric J. Bargerhuff, faith in Christ can become disconnected from the meaning of given passages. In **The Most Misused Verses in the Bible: Surprising Ways God's Word Is Misunderstood** (Bethany House), Bargerhuff, until recently a Florida pastor, advocates careful interpretation of Scripture based on attention to context. Owen Strachan, Christian theology and church history professor at Boyce College, spoke with Bargerhuff about how the Bible becomes a mere handbook, and its verses a talisman, when our desires crowd out sound interpretive practices.

Are there specific categories of verses that evangelicals tend to misinterpret?

Our temptation is to interpret the promises of God materially and temporally instead of spiritually and eternally. We Americans have bought into a materialistic, right-now mindset, and so we're tempted to pull verses out of context to fit that mindset. We need to understand that God's greatest desire is to glorify his name. Too often, we interpret God's promises in a way that is appealing to our sinful side. We often grab things out of Scripture and try to use them for our own benefit, instead of taking the necessary steps to submit to Scripture, to be humbled by it.

You critique prayers that uncritically expect God to grant us, well, anything. Like John 14:13: "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son."

God is not a genie in a bottle. Yes, he has a good, pleasing, and perfect

will. But this doesn't mean we should pray for whatever we want. We are sinful people and don't even know what's best for us, as the Book of Romans says. Sometimes we pray with wrong motives. Praying random prayers that are self-centered is not God-honoring. We should seek his will when we pray.

What would you say to athletes who latch onto Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all this through him who gives me strength")?

In that passage, Paul is teaching on contentment and arguing that no matter what our situation is, we should learn to be content. The ability to be content, whatever the situation, is contingent on what Jesus gives us. This verse doesn't necessarily mean that Jesus will give the player victory, but rather that he can be content either way because of God's strength in him. It's not about God giving you the strength to dunk the basketball as much as it is him working in you to be content no matter what happens in the game.

Why is Jeremiah 29:11–13 ("For I know the plans I have for you . . .") commonly misinterpreted?

Most people overlook the context of the verse because it speaks to what they want to hear for their life. This was a corporate promise given to the nation of Israel, to a generation

that came out of 70 years of captivity in Babylon. We think through an Americanized filter based on our preconceived notions of what blessing is. But God's promises are spiritual promises, not promises of instant gratification. Though God does bless us in many ways, he has not promised us our best life now. This world is not our home,

and we should long for a better country.

Is there a danger, when reading Acts 2:38 ("Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'"), of thinking that baptism is a precondition of salvation?

This was a specific command given to a specific group of people who were to *express* their salvation through baptism. There is a difference between the *means* of salvation and an *obedient response* to salvation. Baptism was an expression of what had already happened in the heart. Baptism was not to be linked with salvation, because that would make salvation the product of a specific action, contradicting the teaching that salvation comes through faith, not works.

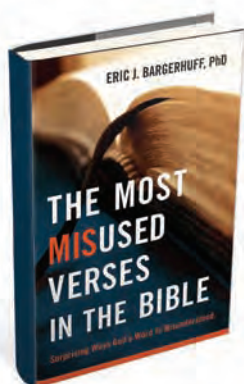
What principles can guide careful interpretation of Scripture?

There are several: understanding the Bible's various literary genres, understanding historical context, discerning the author's intent, carefully defining the meaning of words, looking at grammatical relationships, reflecting on the church's history of interpretation, and always adhering to the principle that the Bible never contradicts itself. These elements are very important to understanding what Bible passages really mean. There are plenty of resources today—Bible dictionaries, commentaries, lexicons, and more—to help ordinary Christians gain a better understanding.

Could evangelicals ever become so focused on getting texts exactly right that they end up debating how many angels can dance on a pin?

Anyone who engages the study of mathematics or architecture knows that even one slightly off-balance angle can distort the whole picture. Theologians who are trying to build an overview of what the Bible says know that we have to get things right. Satan, in the garden, twisted the Word of God ever so slightly. We must understand that God has embodied his will and his nature in these texts. If we skew them even ever so slightly, we will misunderstand him. ✚

Go to ChristianityBibleStudies.com for "Misusing the Bible," a Bible study based on this article.



Fuzzy Jazz

Blue Like Jazz pretty much delivers on the book's subtitle. By Josh Hurst

Blue Like Jazz (Roadside Attractions) ★★★★★ is based on Donald Miller's best seller of the same title. I don't know if Miller is comfortable with the "Christian book" label, but it was released by a Christian publisher (Thomas Nelson), and a lot of evangelicals bought it. What the film ultimately delivers is pretty much an adaptation of the book's subtitle: "Nonreligious thoughts on Christian spirituality."

On the plus side, *Jazz*, like the book, is not a typical "Christian movie." Director Steve Taylor, a longtime rocker known for irreverent satire and disdain of schmaltz, has rarely done anything typically "Christian." Taylor brings the kind of grit (off-color humor, brutal satirizations of evangelical culture, even some four-letter words) that you won't find in, say, *Courageous*. And he does a lot with a little, budget-wise; while the production values are not high, it is a quirky and genuinely funny indie.

The downside? Separating "Christian spirituality" from the fundamentals of the gospel message means an emphasis on feelings and experience, on social justice and an individual search for truth. Little traction is

given to the mortification of sin, to the atoning significance of the Cross, and so forth. We get a vivid portrait of where evangelical culture has gone wrong, but the alternative is a "Christian spirituality" that pretty much excludes Christ himself.

Not that it falls on the film to lay out a full gospel presentation. *Blue Like Jazz*, the movie, illuminates some ways in which some churches—and churchgoers—have lost the plot. But, like the book, the film fumbles in vain to find that plot.

Jazz translates the book's interior monologues into a narrative about a young man who flees the church culture of his youth in abject disillusionment. The hypocrisies of the faithful have grown too burdensome, and his own faith too malnourished, for him to bear it any longer. Miller (Marshall Allman, page 88) escapes to a secular university—Reed College in Portland, Oregon—where he's bombarded with the antifaith screeds of professors and classmates. Naturally, these add fuel to the fire of Miller's unbelief, but where the film

works best is in showing how the church itself failed him.

In an early scene, set in a Baptist church, young Miller stands in front of the congregation wearing the full "armor of God"—helmet, shield, breastplate, sword, the works, all rendered in glorious plastic—while cheesy organ music plays. The youth pastor talks about "how the Cross can make [one] happy," before bringing out a piñata to illustrate how Jesus showers us with goodies. It's savage because it's true: How many

of our churches basically take a similar approach, that the Crucifixion makes us happy, and we need only make a mad grab for Christ's sweet blessings?

It's only logical that Miller would abandon his faith the minute his happiness runs out, heading to a secular school and plunging into drinking, partying, and atheism.

Miller gives voice to a cynicism that many young evangelicals will relate to, and the movie's knocks on some of the cultural trappings of Christianity are probably deserved. As a satire, it works. But we also realize Miller has never been given a good picture of what true Christian faith looks like—even as he befriends a girl named Penny. She's clearly depicted as a Christ follower in the book, but less explicitly so in the film. She mentions "liking" Jesus, but most of her piety is wrapped up in good works. Miller lands on a spiritual identity characterized by the apologies he offers on behalf of Christianity's history of hypocrisy.

But Christ and the Cross don't much factor into the story, making it seem like a big swing of the pendulum, from the legalism of the Christian Right to the social causes of the Christian Left. Christian moviegoers will find much to challenge them, but those hoping Miller's journey leads him to a clear understanding of the gospel might find *Blue Like Jazz* a bit unsatisfying.

Josh Hurst, a CT music and film critic, blogs



Redeeming a Botched Abortion

October Baby (Provident Films) ★★★★★ centers on 19-year-old Hannah, who learns that her parents adopted her, as a vulnerable preemie, after she survived a botched abortion. Determined to find her birthmother, she takes a road trip against her father's wishes. She finds the nurse who was working at the clinic the day she was born, and learns another devastating secret her parents kept from her. When Hannah finds her birthmother, it doesn't bring the closure she seeks; she returns home more lost and broken than when she left. It isn't until she wanders into a cathedral and speaks with a priest about her feelings that she can begin to forgive her parents, her birthmother, and herself.

Pro-life films are often heavy-handed, but directors Jon and Andrew Erwin avoid that. This is a coming-of-age movie, not propaganda disguised as a docudrama. The story focuses on Hannah's journey and on the power of forgiveness. References to faith are subtle, making that moment in the cathedral, and the moment when Hannah is faced with the opportunity to forgive her birthmother, all the more powerful. —Morgan Feddes, CT editorial resident



TWO MINUTES WITH...

Sarah Macintosh



A decade ago, Sarah Macintosh essentially cut ties with the Christian music industry after her band, Chasing Furies, bombed despite critical acclaim. Discouraged, she asked

Sparrow to release her from her contract, and she moved to California to cut a few solo albums. Fast forward to *Current*. That's the title of her new album, and catch the irony: She's back in Nashville, and on a ccm label—this time, Integrity Music, known for its worship catalog. Macintosh spoke to CT's Mark Moring.

How did you end up with Integrity?

I released *Current* independently last year, but Integrity wanted to jump on board with this CD, just as it was, with no changes. That shows me that they believe in my vision for this album and they support me as an artist. So I was more than thrilled to be able to lock arms with them.

It's a worship album, but there are songs of lament.

As a songwriter, I want to be able to express everything to the Lord, and a lot of times there are songs that are dark and questioning. One, called "The Damaged," was sparked by seeing a woman from a third-world country with a broken arm that's barely useable, only because she couldn't get the treatment she needed. It made me think that often people go through trials without realizing they can get that broken thing reset. As a Christian, I can cry out to a Savior, "Don't let me be broken. Don't let me be damaged by these things that are pulling so heavily on me."

Is that song autobiographical?

Yes. For a long time, my husband and I were unable to get pregnant because there was something wrong with my body. There was a lot of heartbreak. We finally just decided, "Okay, let's try not to worry about it anymore." We went on the road for a tour and essentially stopped trying. Well, a month later I got pregnant, and we had our daughter Scarlett, who's now 3. The Savior gave her to us out of nowhere; she burst on the scene, this bundle of joy.



Rage and Hope

Springsteen vents on *Wrecking Ball*. By Andy Whitman



After 2009's perfunctory *Working on a Dream*, Bruce Springsteen seemed in danger of becoming a caricature of himself; the Boss punching the clock and delivering uninspired couplets from the comfort of a lush corner office instead of trafficking in the blood and sweat of the factory floor.

But *Wrecking Ball* (Columbia) ★★★★★, Springsteen's finest album in a decade, gives the lie to the notion of rock legends coasting on past glories. It is a synthesis of Springsteen sounds old and new, with muscular rockers shouldering up next to atmospheric ballads and raucous folk hootenannies. It is fueled by compassion for working-class Americans, and in the best tradition of protest music, it is mad as hell. But it is an anger balanced by faith and hope; there's more spiritual imagery here than Springsteen has used in a long time.

In a world of fat-cat bankers and robber barons in corporate boardrooms, in a time when too many people struggle merely to survive, Springsteen surveys the carnage. The Celtic-influenced "Shackled and Drawn" and the bleak, beautiful ballad "Jack of All Trades" explore the deep resignation and

world-weariness of people too worn down to fight anymore. But there is anger and seething resentment too, particularly on the defiant title track and on the first single, "We Take Care of Our Own," in which Springsteen probes vast societal indifference to the plight of the poor.

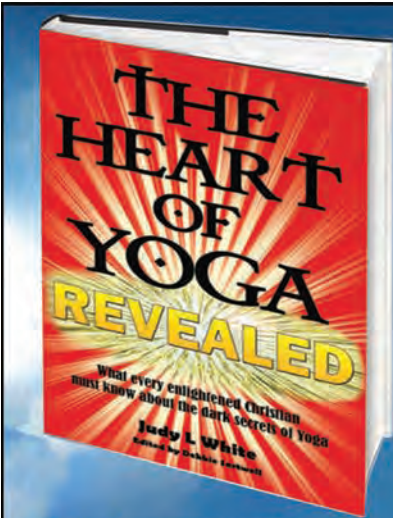
But then there's the optimism of the glorious "Land of Hope and Dreams," long a staple of Springsteen's concerts. Featuring the late Clarence Clemons's last recorded sax solo, this is gospel music in all senses of

the term, as Springsteen envisions a coming world where faith will be rewarded, where social divisions will be broken down, and where fools and kings alike will find welcome. And on "Rocky Ground," he beseeches, "Rise up, Shepherd, rise up / Find your flock, get them to higher ground / Flood waters rising, Canaan bound."

A few songs are saddled with clichés, so the album falls just short of being a classic. But half a dozen songs here are as incisive and powerful as anything Springsteen has ever written. It's great to have him back, and thundering prophetically. ✦

Andy Whitman is a regular contributor to *Paste* magazine and *Image* journal.





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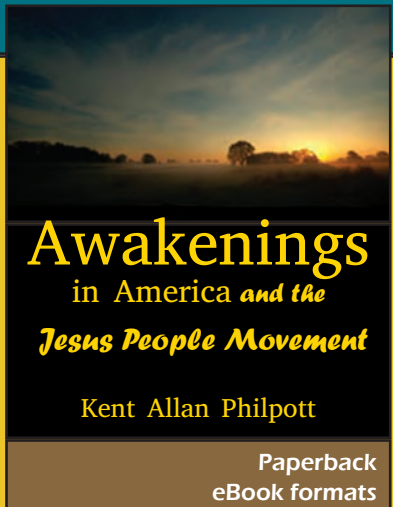
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EDITED BY BRUCE ELLIS BENSON, MALINDA ELIZABETH BERRY, AND PETER GOODWIN HELTZEL (EERDMANS)

★★★★★ Evangelicals tend to reinvent themselves. The authors of this book are no exception. Unlike presumably Western, white, patriarchal, pietistic evangelicals, these "prophetic evangelicals" follow the *shalom* politics of Jewish prophet Jesus; emphasize deeds—"neighbor love, hospitality to the stranger, and the ministry of peace and justice"—over creeds; conceive of the church as *mission* more than *polis*; and envision a new social order, inspired by the abolitionist and civil rights movements, that challenges empire. Their minority report may be commended for its improvisational interpretation of Scripture and confession of Christian culpability in historic cruelties, but it goes overboard in its activism, reducing the biblical religion to a justice movement. —*Christopher Benson*

► THE EXPLICIT GOSPEL

MATT CHANDLER WITH JARED WILSON (CROSSWAY)

★★★★★ In his debut book, popular Dallas pastor Matt Chandler reaches out to those weaned on what Reformed theologian Michael Horton once called "Christless Christianity": the man-centered, semi-Pelagian, therapeutic pseudoreligion all too prevalent in contemporary evangelical churches. Shunning this false gospel of self-improvement starring Jesus as life coach, Chandler walks readers through the "gospel on the ground" (God's work to redeem sinners) and the "gospel in the air" (God's work to restore the entire cosmos). —*Matt Reynolds*

► WINNING THE FOOD FIGHT

Victory in the Physical and Spiritual Battle for Good Food and a Healthy Lifestyle

STEVE WILLIS WITH KEN WALKER (REGAL)

★★★★★ Pastor Steve Willis took it as a sign from God when celebrity chef Jamie Oliver brought his "Food Revolution" to Willis's small West Virginia community—one of the poorest and fattest in the nation. Faith-based diet books are nothing new for American evangelicals, but Willis breaks new ground by making the connection between poverty and obesity (as well as the unbalanced farm subsidies that make chips cheaper per calorie than carrots), and aiming more deliberately at masculine readers (he narrates a "battle" with 12 "rounds" in place of chapters). —*Rachel Stone*

MUSIC

BOWERBIRDS

► THE CLEARING

(DEAD OCEANS)

★★★★★ After a "disaster chapter" (so named in a video promoting this album), Phil Moore and Beth Tacular, better known as the Bowerbirds, have produced a memento of their experiences aptly called *The Clearing*. With lilting phrases, they create soundscapes sometimes stark and percussive, sometimes lush with haunting strings, guitar, and vocal harmonies, and always unfailingly organic and free. Exploring the duality of darkness and light, the nature of seasons, and the inevitable movement of time, they express an understanding that "I'm dust and you're dust" in "a world half-broken"—but its inherent beauty is no accident, and is meant to be savored. —*Kristin Garrett*

RACHEL HARLOW

► FEATHERS & TWINE

(RAINFATHER RECORDS)

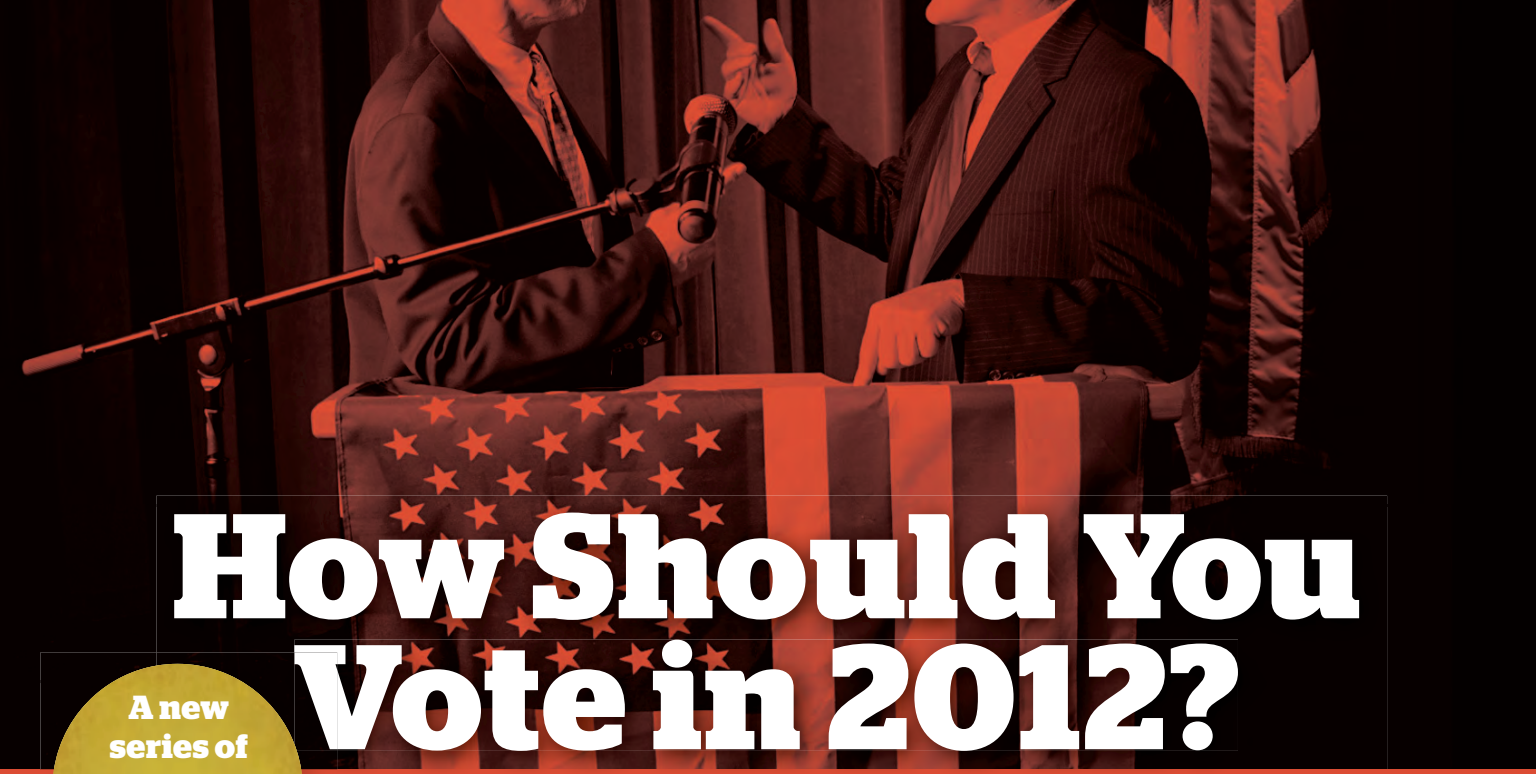
★★★★★ Formerly of Mosaic, Nashville's Rachel Harlow continues in that group's folk/acoustic pop/Americana tradition, while evoking classic songwriters from yesteryear. Though the disc covers a few everyday subjects (marriage, brokenness), she also offers clever observations on the ordinary. With her gloriously earthy vocals and understated but often poignant instrumentation, Harlow goes out on a limb on several occasions—the scars of South African apartheid on "Cain" and the story of a foreigner who feels like a second-class citizen in "Nohemy"—all while balancing feelings of hope with empathy. —*Andy Argyrakis*

CHRISTOPHER PAUL STELLING

► SONGS OF PRAISE & SCORN

(MECCA LECCA)

★★★★★ Christopher Paul Stelling's album, both haunting and haunted, was recorded in an apartment above a funeral home that has been in operation since 1848. Apparently, the setting provided the perfect recipe for these intensely crafted grapplings with life and death. As for the title, it is more scorn than praise, more lost than found. Yet its doubts and laments are seasoned with spiritual yearning. Stelling mourns, "Ain't it a shame all the people on this earth they have to die" ("Mourning Train to Memphis"), but he also prays, "But if we must burn then, Lord, let us burn bright" ("Solar Flares"). His lyrics and delivery leave no doubt that he's willing to stare down the sun to come to grips with the forces of the universe. —*Jeremy V. Jones*



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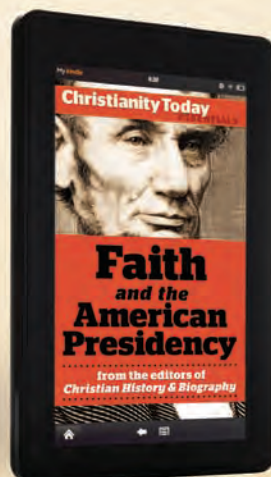
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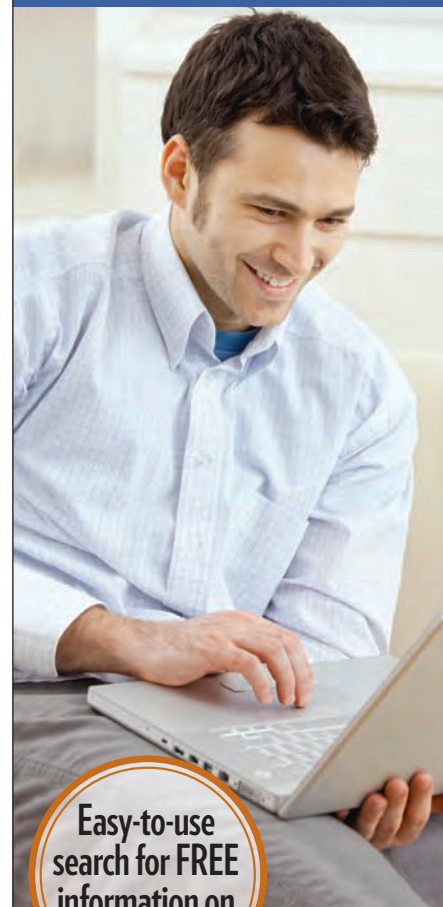
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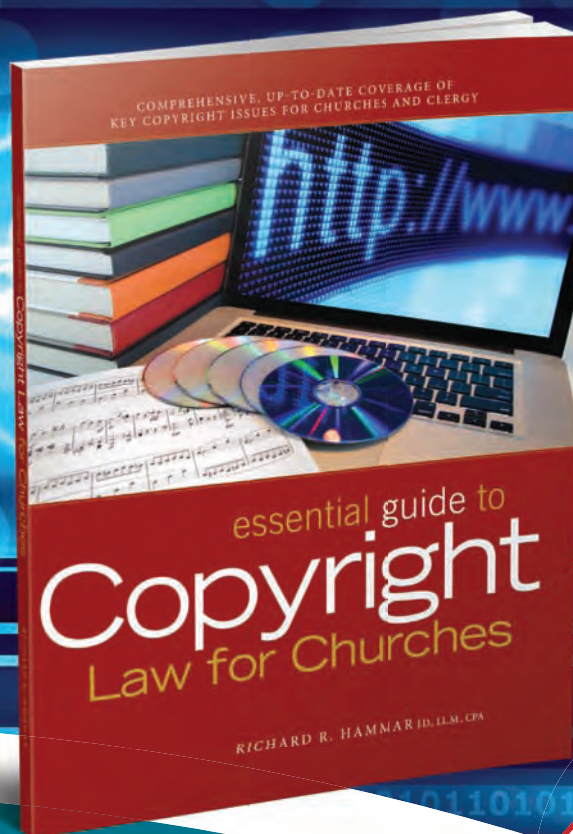
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All That Jazz: Allman, who loves Miller's "razor sharp sense of humor," in the lead role.



Becoming Donald

Marshall Allman plays the author of *Blue Like Jazz*.

W

hile filming *Blue Like Jazz* (see our review on page 80), Marshall Allman—who plays the Donald Miller character at the center of the story—was to ride an unsteady “tall bike” across Portland, Oregon’s Hawthorne Bridge. Director Steve Taylor, concerned that Allman might “plunge over the rail” into the Willamette River, considered a stunt double, but Allman declined. Says Taylor, “For Marshall, it’s all just part of the work, and he approaches it with both a singular intensity and a great sense of play.”

Allman, 28, has received thumbs-up for his acting—for *Blue Like Jazz* as well as recurring roles in TV’s *Prison Break* and *True Blood*. He recently finished filming *Jayne Mansfield’s Car*, a 1960s-era drama starring Robert Duvall, John Hurt, Kevin Bacon, and Billy Bob Thornton. Taylor believes Allman can go a long way: “He takes the craft of acting very seriously, and he wants to get the role right.”

Allman was a soccer star and award-winning art student in high school, but ultimately pursued acting instead because of a knee injury and the likelihood of earning a steadier income in acting than as an artist. “When I discovered the art of acting, and that it combined the physicality of soccer with the craftsmanship of art, I thought, *Why paint when I can be the painting?* For me that was enough.”

- **Hometown** Los Angeles
- **Family** Jamie Anne (wife)
- **Reading now** Lots of scripts
- **On your iPod** Gary Clark Jr., Foster the People, Menomena
- **Favorite movie** *The Princess Bride*
- **Favorite book** *A Confederacy of Dunces*, by John Kennedy Toole
- **Favorite Bible verse** Hebrews 4:12
- **Your hero** Brad Bird or Stanley Kubrick
- **Best meal you cook** Conversation

question & answer

How did you get this role?

I got an e-mail from Steve Taylor saying I was on his shortlist. I hadn’t read the book, but I was really excited when I read the script. I e-mailed Steve and said that I was 1,000 percent in. He responded that he loved my enthusiasm but it wasn’t an offer yet—he wanted to meet in person. We met for lunch a week later, and he told me I had the part.

What did you like about the script?

It was funny and moving at the same time, which is rare. And though it dealt with issues of faith, it wasn’t trying to force any beliefs on anyone. It just happened to be a story about a kid wrestling with his beliefs and his identity. That’s a story anyone can identify with.

How did you capture Don’s personality?

It wasn’t a literal interpretation of Don’s book or the actual person; I wanted to capture the spirit of both. I watched videos of Don and read all his books; I basically stalked him. Eventually, I got to know him and found those two to be consistent. The main qualities that struck me about Don are his pursuit of adventure and a razor-sharp sense of humor.

Did you “become” Don for the role?

That’s what makes acting sort of like magic. If people believe I am Don, then I’ve done a great job. As an actor, I strive to be no more than a vessel for the story. Here to serve you, the audience.

How would you describe the film?

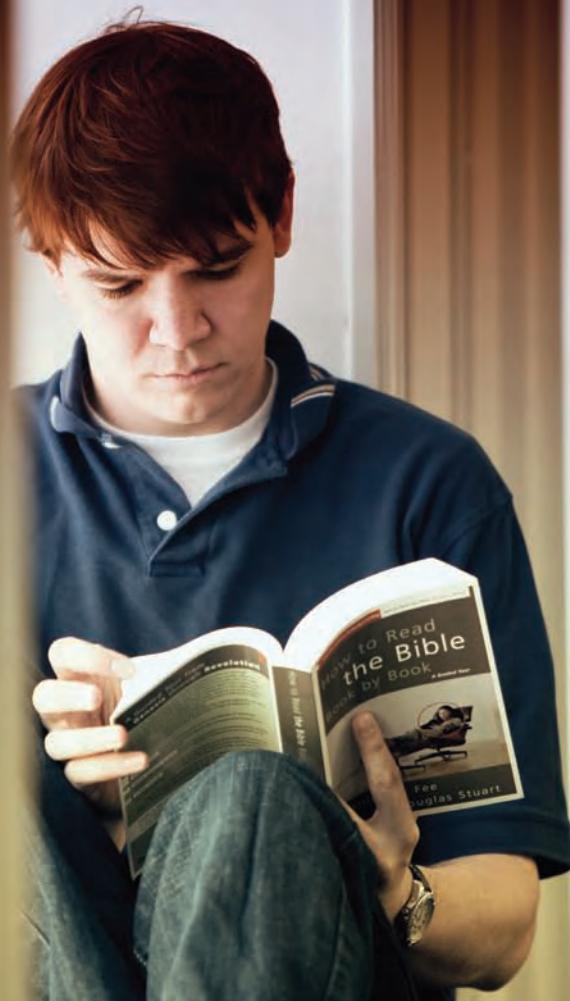
A Southern Baptist kid is set to go to seminary, but gets burned by the very church that raised him. He instead attends Reed College in an attempt to run as far away from his upbringing and God as he can. And it’s funny too.

More: BlueLikeJazzTheMovie.com

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FRESH TRANSLATION

1 In the beginning, God created everything: the heavens above and the earth below. *Here's what happened:* ²At first the earth lacked shape and was totally empty, and a dark fog draped over the deep while God's spirit-wind hovered over the surface of the empty waters. *Then there was the voice of God.*

God: ³Let there be light.

And light flashed into being. ⁴God saw that the light was beautiful and good, and He separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God named the light "day" and the darkness "night." Evening gave way to morning. That was day one.

God: ⁶Let there be a vast expanse in the middle of the waters. Let the waters above part from the waters below.

⁷So God parted the waters and formed this expanse, separating the waters above from

Italic type indicates content added to help contemporary readers bridge the history gap.

was beautiful and good. ¹³Evening gave way to morning. That was day three.

God: ¹⁴⁻¹⁵Lights, come out! Shine in the vast expanse of heavens' sky dividing day from night to mark the seasons, days, and years. Lights, warm the earth with your light.

It happened just as God said. ¹⁶God fashioned the two great lights, the brighter to mark the course of day, the dimmer to mark the course of night, and the stars.

¹⁷God cast warms the day from the new creation.

God: ²⁶Let us create earth.

IN-TEXT INSIGHTS

The crown of God's creation is a new creature, a creature that can sound the heartbeat of its Creator. That creature, made male and female, reflects God's own relational richness. The human family is to join God in the ongoing work of creation. The earth below and the sky above with all their inhabitants are too beautiful and too good to be left alone. They need the tender care and close attention that only God's favored creature can give.

In-text notes offer cultural, theological, or devotional insights.

SCREENPLAY FORMAT

God (calling to Adam): ⁹Where are you?

Adam: ¹⁰When I heard the sound of You coming in the garden, I was afraid because I am naked. So I hid from You.

God: ¹¹Who told you that you are naked? Have you eaten from the tree in the center of the garden, the very one I commanded you not to eat from?

Adam (pointing at the woman): ¹²It was she! The woman You gave me as a companion put the fruit in my hands, and I ate it.

¹For the rest of your life, You will fight for every crumb from the crusty clump of earth you from.

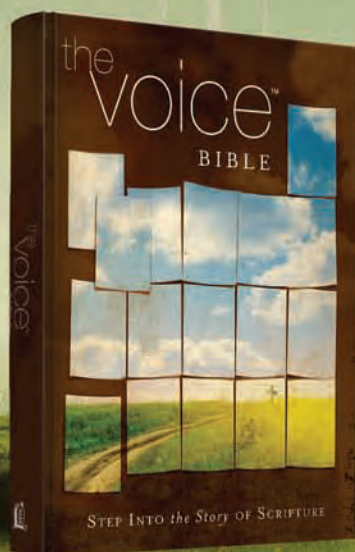
¹⁸As you labor, the ground will thorns and thistles, and you will eat the plants of the field.

¹⁹Your brow will sweat for your taste even a morsel of bread until you return.

To the very ground I made you. From dust you have come, And to dust you shall return.

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