

CT

CHRISTIANITY TODAY

OCTOBER 2020



**HOW BIBLE
MEMORIZATION
REALLY WORKS** P. 56

**SAVING
PLAYER
ONE** P. 15

**HOW THE BLACK CHURCH IS
STILL SHAPING THE HOMETOWN
OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**

Atlanta's Dream



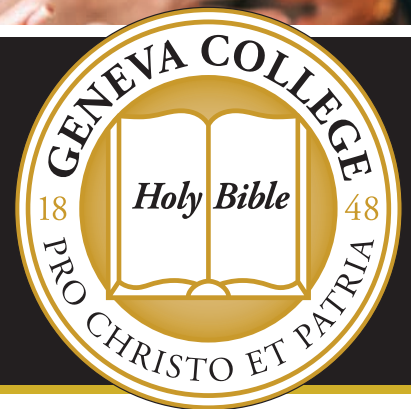
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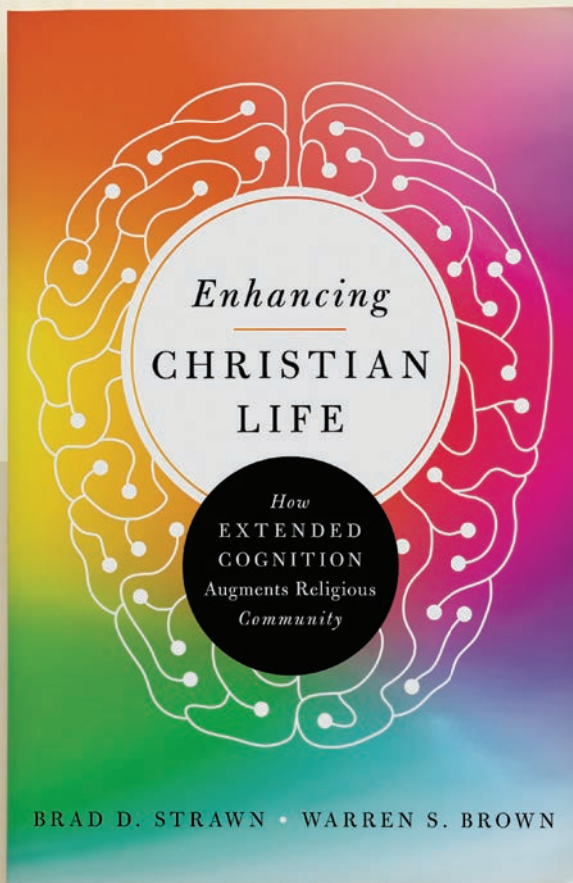
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JOHN GOLDINGAY,
Fuller Theological Seminary

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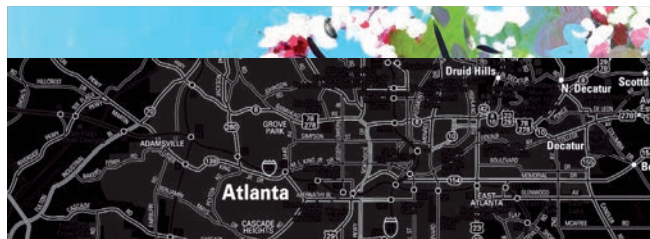
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With His generous gifts
For all you do.

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For each journey,
And a heart of hope,
Free from worry.

May you trust in Him
To guide your way,
And grow in wisdom
Each passing day.

May the Lord keep
And protect you,
In His light of love
All your life through.

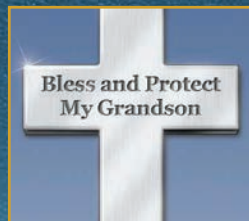
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EDITOR'S NOTE



A LIVING LEGACY

You can't lament a past you don't remember.

KATE SHELLNUTT *Senior News Editor*

They say you can't love what you don't know, and lately, many of us are realizing just how much we don't know. This year, my church in Augusta, Georgia, began exploring the racial history of our city, the location of one of the first and largest civil rights riots in the South. The details of the 1970 riot resemble current events: a teen beaten to death in police custody, the black community responding with peaceful demands then rebellion, police using deadly force to suppress the uprising. But the parallels to the present aren't striking if, like so many young people in our city, you had no idea it took place.

No wonder we feel so stuck in this racial justice fight. You can't lament a past you don't remember. You can't change problems you don't recognize. You can't empathize with voices you ignore. Part of our call to love and serve our neighbors is to understand the lingering scars and burdens they bear.

Learning how my community downplayed the significance of its racial past made me all the more curious about the extensive civil rights legacy in the Georgia capital, the subject of this month's cover package (p. 38). Across the generations, Atlanta—with the black church as its heartbeat—has worked to honor its hard-won progress as well as to lament the cost of the ongoing fight for justice.

That practice has helped carry on a long legacy and inspire today's leaders in Atlanta—the preachers and politicians, entrepreneurs and activists, who are working to see the principles of God's kingdom shape every sphere of life. They live out a gospel promise that God would not just bring individual people to salvation but would restructure all of society to be just, peaceful, and flourishing in his name.

This is indeed the great hope of our faith. "At its core, Christianity is about systemic change. God so loved the whole world that he sent his son to save it. Existing outside the system he created, God intervenes with the greatest energy of all to redeem it," writes CT editor in chief Daniel Harrell in his editorial (p. 25).

As a Christian and a journalist, I believe the stories we tell—the brokenness and faithfulness of those who came before—influence our actions today. Charles Oatman, the 16-year-old whose death sparked a landmark riot in my town 50 years ago, was never a hashtag, and his name doesn't appear in our history books. The most unsettling part of learning about this chapter of our past was discovering how much had been buried and forgotten. Throughout Scripture, we see forgetfulness correspond with a lack of faith or disregard for God's work in the world. It is a holy task, then, for us to remember rightly. **CT**

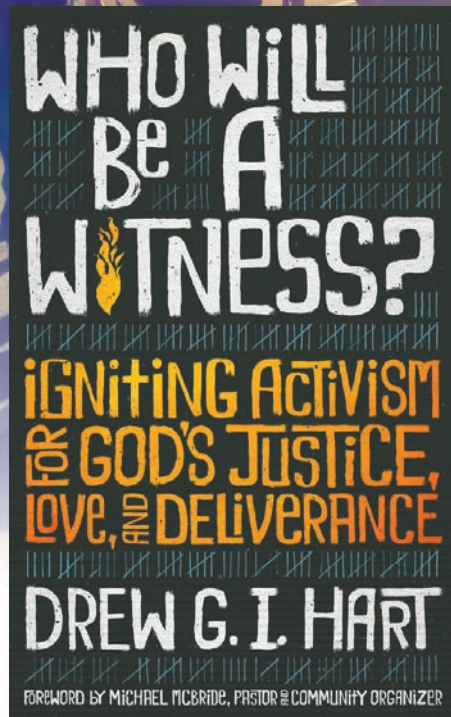


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NEW BOOKS from HERALD PRESS

on Social Justice and Racism



Who Will Be a Witness?

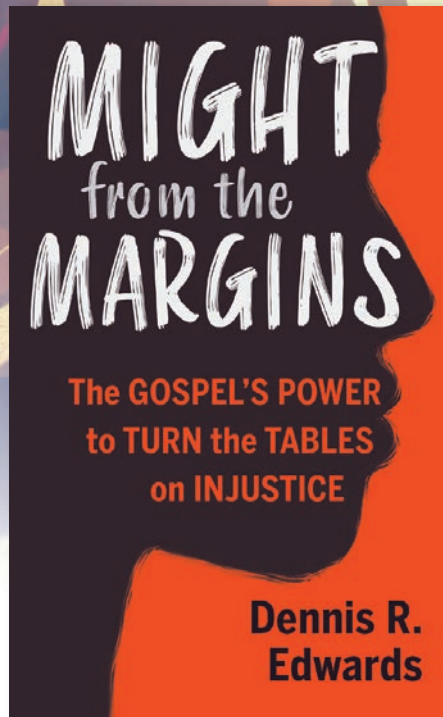
Igniting Activism for God's Justice, Love, and Deliverance

Drew G. I. Hart

9781513806587. \$18.99 USD.

Ebook. 9781513806600. \$9.99 USD.

Churches are awakening to social and political injustices, often carried out in the name of Christianity. But once awakened, how will we respond? Hart offers a vision for communities of faith to organize for deliverance and justice in their neighborhoods, states, and nation as an essential part of living out the call of Jesus.



Might from the Margins

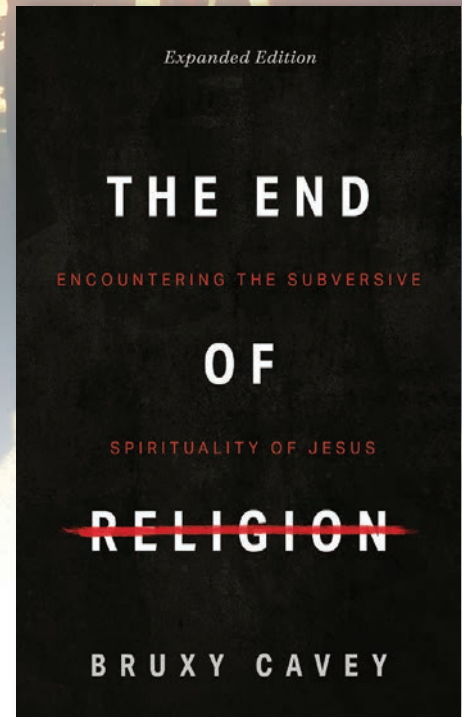
The Gospel's Power to Turn the Tables on Injustice

Dennis R. Edwards

9781513806013. \$16.99 USD.

Ebook. 9781513806037. \$9.99 USD.

The power of the gospel is often most visible among those who have been the least respected, including racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, women, and people who have been displaced from their homeland. Yet in many faith communities, these are the same people whose leadership gifts are least likely to be recognized.



The End of Religion

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Ofall the reader responses to former editor in chief Mark Galli's editorial on President Donald Trump last year, the most encouraging of those disagreed graciously. "We feel differently," they said. "But we have benefited from CT for decades. We can handle the occasional disagreement."

Little did we know, in the waning days of December, what challenges the new year would bring. A contagion swept the planet and forced entire cities to a standstill. Then a series of events ripped open the wounds of our racial history and provoked months of civil unrest. Which is to say nothing of a string of historic natural disasters.

But what has made all these things more painful is the rift in our social fabric. Suffering is lighter when borne together, in a sense of neighborly love and common cause. Yet we cannot suffer together when we blame one another for the suffering. Everything from the fundamental science of the pandemic and the practice of wearing masks to the persistence of racial inequality and the need for law enforcement has become battlegrounds of partisan animosity.

The evolution of media has shaped those battlegrounds. The typical media consumer today has thousands of sources at her fingertips for news and opinion. In the democratized digital marketplace, anyone with a social media account can build a platform.

The positives in these developments are undeniable. Powerful stories that earlier might never have seen the light of day now can spread instantly to everyone. Important voices that might never have made it past the old media gatekeepers can now shape the world. The same digital networks that carry conspiracy theories and pornography also carry praise songs and sermons and Bible translations, expose dictators, educate pastors, and reach the lost in some of the most remote and repressive places on the planet.

Yet the negatives are significant, and they go beyond conspiracy theories and pornography. The competition for audience share is fierce, and the tides of human attention flow all too naturally toward that which offers instant and uncomplicated gratification. Content that is immediate, hyperbolic, and hyper-partisan carries the day. Thoughtful interpreters of culture are replaced by conspiracy-mongers, scorn merchants, and torchers of straw men. This impoverishes social discourse and leaves many isolated in separate media spheres that fail to challenge or broaden horizons.

Unfortunately, at precisely the moment we need media to model balance, nuance, and charitable disagreement, even some

CONTINUED ON FOLLOWING PAGE



MINDING THE GAP

We won't solve our problems by retreating to the extremes.

TIMOTHY DALRYMPLE *President and CEO*

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 9

of the most venerable media institutions plunge in the opposite direction. Editors with the temerity to publish dissenting viewpoints are voted off the island, and the institutions that once employed them become smaller and more extreme. It's easier to bear the torch for the tribe than it is to build a fire and invite the tribes together.

As a consequence, Americans today occupy dramatically different informational worlds. If you draw your news from one set of sources, then America is under threat from hordes of ignorant and hateful conservatives. If you draw your news from another set, then America is dissolving into chaos at the hands of Marxists, global elites, and the despisers of Christianity. We cannot come together on solutions if we cannot agree on the nature of the problems in the first place.

The solution is not to return to a pre-internet era, when a narrow set of people—who were often unfriendly toward Christian concerns—tell the stories of the world. The solution is to renew our commitment as a people to gracious and loving public engagement. CT will remain a magazine that affirms the essential convictions of the evangelical Christian faith but also stretches our thinking and challenges our complacency. We do not agree with every piece we publish. Listening and conversing well are dying arts, but they are essential to a life marked by the grace of Jesus Christ.

We can handle the occasional disagreement. In this season of division and rancor, we pray that Christians, followers of a Savior who engaged the faithful and the unfaithful, the insiders and the ostracized, the rabbis and the heretics, can model what it means to listen with love and disagree with grace. **CT**



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REPLY ALL

RESPONSES TO OUR JULY/AUGUST ISSUE

Can the Church Save Marriage? p. 34

I deeply appreciate the sociological insights that Mark Regnerus brings, but I take issue with the assumption that a decline in marriage—and corresponding rise in singleness—is cause for alarm. Our faith celebrates the life-giving sacrifice of a single man. Jesus' life was witnessed by a lineup of remarkable single women and men, one of whom went on to write much of the New Testament. That same Scripture bears the mark of a radical shift in biblical and ancient thinking: that bloodlines and marital status no longer primarily determine one's family, inheritance, or maturity level, but discipleship does (Mark 3:35; John 3:3–6). The Bible also suggests that the truest of all weddings—between Christ and his church—is anticipated best by celibates (Matt. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:26–35). To be fair, a rise in singleness does not necessarily indicate a rise in committed celibacy. The church may not be able to save marriage, but it can raise disciples who—married or not—bear sacrificial witness to their bridegroom who does save.

AMY J. ERICKSON Kingsbury, TX



The issue is that we as a church still do not push a close and personal relationship with Jesus and that he is the one who completes us. In all the churches I have been to, they have amazing divorce recovery, but hardly any churches support healthy marriage. Let's work on healthy marriages and help identify what means before a couple struggles. We need to stop treating marriage as something that completes people and look at it as a partnership for life.

DEB BROWN ROBISON

Better for Worse p. 42

The restoration of a model of marriage onto a more biblical foundation

is superb news, but I strongly disagree with this article's portrayal of singleness. As the author is the director of the National Marriage Project, it is not a surprise that Wilcox has such a high opinion of marriage; but if one is to bring up the topic of singleness, one must do so in a balanced way. To say "research shows that married adults tend to be significantly happier than single adults" without further discussion is confusing and misleading. I am only one of many who has suffered at the hands of this culture that is so prevalent in the church.

SAMUEL JH



Good report, also in German [translated on CT's website]. I know some converts, so I know how hard it is for an Iranian convert to explain to officials what faith means to them.

@DIETERROBIG

Faith Seeking Asylum p.25

COMMENTS? QUESTIONS? Our editors would love to hear from you at cteditor@christianitytoday.com

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Hope Beyond a Vaccine p. 29

We are so addicted to the illusion of control that it hurts to have that illusion broken and ripped away from us. In the end, our Lord knows our times. And he will lead us, even through the valley of the shadow of death. He will be faithful to us his people. Of course, many of us hope that we find a medical solution that ends this pandemic. But we are going to have to follow and trust in the meantime and do all the good we can do while we wait for better news.

IAN MACLAREN

What Is a Christian Nationalist? p. 64

While I cannot count myself as a huge CT fan, I found Matthew Lee Anderson's reviews of three books about Christian nationalism to be very insightful, balanced, and fair. This kind of journalism has sadly been fading from view in recent years. I appreciate the work that he put into this piece.

MARK EPPS Ballwin, MO



Getting 'Born Again' Backwards p. 76

In the same way that Jesus called for the rich man to give up his lifestyle, I think Jesus engaged Nicodemus at the core of his very lifestyle. Today, in the US, how do we acknowledge and face the cultural dilemma that “being born again” and “being saved” have become an often-quoted formula, a prescription that calls people to conform to the religion of Christianity rather than go from religion to an encounter with the living Christ? Many of us who have been “born again” grew up in the religion of being born again, and our experience may be more like an emotional or religious ritual than an experience that is a profound

encounter with the living God, who calls us to allow him to transform our life.

CECIL CAMPBELL Indianapolis, IN

Do we have anything to do with our salvation? Matthew Barrett says not, relying on the birth analogy in John 3:3–8. Yet he neglects what immediately follows, John 3:14–16. Jesus there references Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. What is the significance of that? It was, of course, God who healed the snake bites, but only upon the snake-bitten person “looking up” to the snake on the pole. Even so, it is “whoever believes” who gets eternal life. Interpreting Scripture in light of Scripture, it is God who initiates, but we must respond before salvation inures.

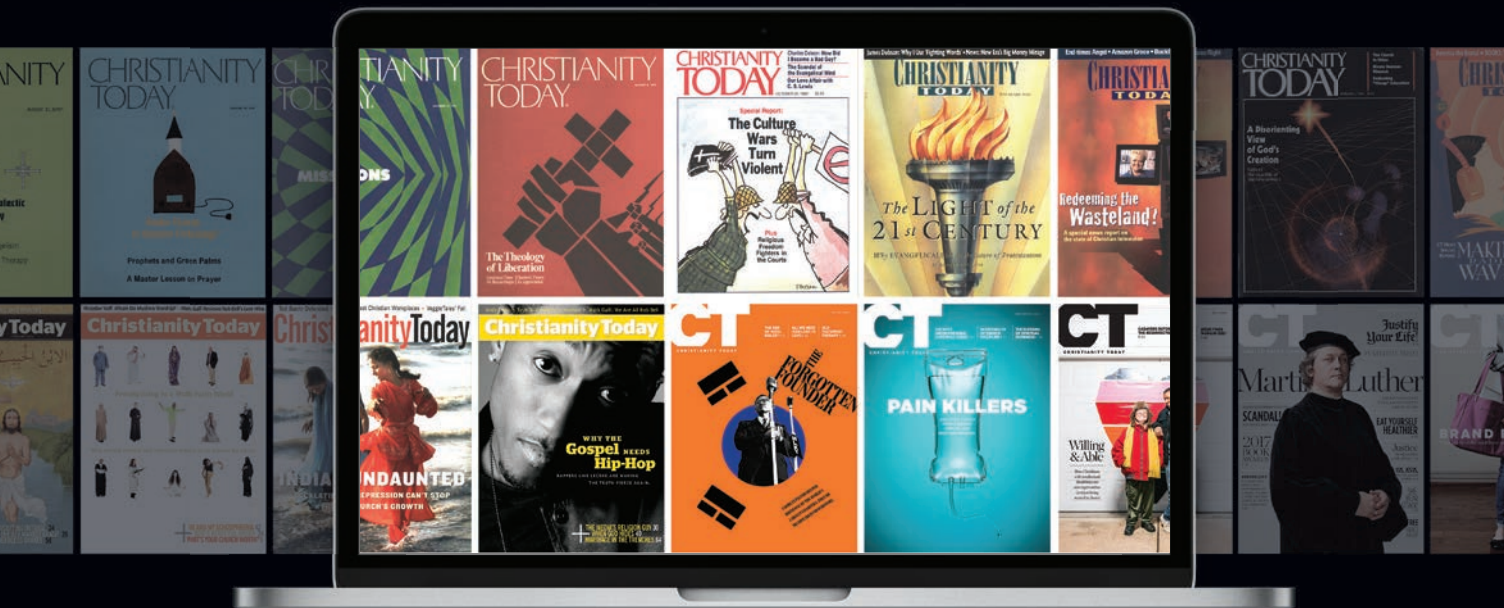
THOMAS F. HARKINS JR.

Fort Worth, TX

CORRECTION: On page 65 of our July/August issue, “What Is a Christian Nationalist?” credited the creation of the series *The Handmaid's Tale* to the wrong streaming service. It is produced by Hulu.

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NEWS



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PLAYING FOR SOULS



Esports opens new opportunities for evangelism, even during a pandemic.

BY DAVID ROACH

ILLUSTRATION BY DOROTHY LEUNG



Until the COVID-19 pandemic, Roman Khripunov didn't realize the missionary potential of video games.

Khripunov ran soccer academies for refugees and immigrants in Houston, using the sport as a platform to share Christ with children. When the coronavirus paused in-person outreach, the ministry came up with an alternative: Soccer coaches would begin playing video games on the livestreaming platform Twitch and invite players to watch and ask spiritual questions. On Twitch, participants talk with each other as they play or type back and forth in a chat box.

It was a hit. Teenage soccer players reluctant to spend 15 minutes discussing spiritual matters in person were willing to engage for three to four hours over video games online. Eventually, the ministry opened its Twitch channel to the public and began to establish a presence on other gaming platforms as well, with coaches talking with people online. Among the success stories, a man from the Netherlands professed faith in Christ while gaming, then brought five friends to hear the gospel too.

"The people that we're starting to observe on these [gaming] platforms are actually seeking a lot of spiritual things," Khripunov said. "They're very hungry for the gospel."

Khripunov isn't the only one who has realized esports can be used for ministry. From Houston and Brazil to South Africa and China, esports has emerged as an extension of Christian sports ministry.

Esports—video game competitions—has more than doubled its viewership

in the past decade to an estimated 454 million people worldwide last year. The most popular esports championships rival the Super Bowl in viewership. When South Korea hosted the world championship finals for the battle game *League of Legends* two years ago, the event drew almost 100 million people online.

Professional esports players—many of them teenagers—sign with teams, compete in brick-and-mortar arenas packed with fans, and at times take home multimillion-dollar prizes. Teams have starters, substitutes, and leagues, just like traditional sports.

But gaming includes a wide span of casual players too. A third of the world's population plays video games, including more adult women than teenage boys, according to data compiled by the online ministry training resource Multiplication School.

When the coronavirus caused lockdowns around the world last spring, some traditional sports leagues like NASCAR and the NBA turned to esports to hold their fans' attention, putting their stars into video game tournaments.

other negative effects. While playing video games has been linked to improvements in cognitive skills, 9 percent of gamers show signs of addiction, according to Multiplication School, and video game abuse has been linked to anxiety and depression.

Canadian Stefano DiSalvo, the most prominent professional esports player to share his Christian testimony openly, has experienced the dark side of esports. He played video games eight hours per day as a teenager to escape from the pain of a broken home. Then he found a relationship with Jesus at age 15 before launching his pro career. He sought to be salt and light in the industry and was known by his screen name, Verbo—Italian for "word," signifying the Word of God. DiSalvo left esports at 19.

"THE PEOPLE THAT WE'RE STARTING TO OBSERVE ON THESE [GAMING] PLATFORMS ARE ACTUALLY SEEKING A LOT OF SPIRITUAL THINGS. THEY'RE VERY HUNGRY FOR THE GOSPEL." ROMAN KHRIPUNOV

Some Christian sports ministries saw an opportunity too. A group of about 35 of them got together on Zoom to strategize.

"It's a connection point," said André Dickson of Brazil, who trains soccer coaches to disciple youth players. "We think about esports as a place where people are."

Assemblies of God pastor Matt Souza shepherds GodSquad Church, an online-only congregation for gamers that attracts about 100 people for worship each Saturday night. Tate Springs Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, hosted an online Easter egg hunt this year using the video game *Minecraft*.

Some Christians have moral qualms about video games and have shied away from esports. Many video games are of real-world sports, like *FIFA* and *NBA 2K*, but many others include sexualized and violent content, such as *Overwatch* and *Valorant*. There are also concerns about

Many teenage gamers are "escaping from their own reality and kind of taking out that anger, taking out that depression on other people online," DiSalvo said. "It creates this toxic environment at times."

That may be a reason to avoid esports. Or it may be a reason to find lost souls there. Christians must "wake up" to "the reality of gaming in church," said Bumble Ho, pastor of Redemption Point Church, a Vietnamese congregation in Fountain Valley, California. The church hosted a tournament this year with about 10 other area churches.

John Merritt, who coaches esports for Oklahoma Wesleyan

University, knows the spiritual needs of players firsthand. He got into video games as a teenager struggling with depression, sometimes playing up to 18 hours a day. He attempted suicide before finally finding new life in Christ. Now he's part of the Unashamed Network, a community of Christians that seeks to reach fellow gamers for Christ.

At one point, he reached 20,000 viewers with his evangelistic gaming stream. Recently, a gaming friend messaged Merritt to say, "I met with a pastor today to be saved. I credit . . . you as part of my journey to this."

Another area of growth in Christian esports is at Christian colleges and universities. At least 11 evangelical schools have added esports programs, which is part of a larger trend. In all US colleges and universities, there are nearly 200 new esports programs, with a combined \$15 million available in annual scholarships, according to Promise Road Institute, a ministry to teen gamers.

Greenville University coach B. J. Fink said his school's esports program draws students who wouldn't otherwise be interested in a Christian education. That creates unique ministry opportunities.

"We have a large group of students from China, for example, that, now knowing about esports programs here, are much more involved on campus, and we use our recruiting network to reach new students in China itself," Fink said. "They may be closed off as a country, but they play video games and have the ability to communicate that way."

DiSalvo, the Christian esports professional who now owns a gaming company, thought God would stop him from playing video games. But gradually he realized the Lord was calling him deeper into the gaming world as a missionary and a Christian witness. He hopes other believers will experience similar divine calls.

Some Christians "view gaming as from the Enemy," he said, while "people from the gaming community think Jesus is an outdated figure." There's a need for believers who can engage people where they are online. **CT**

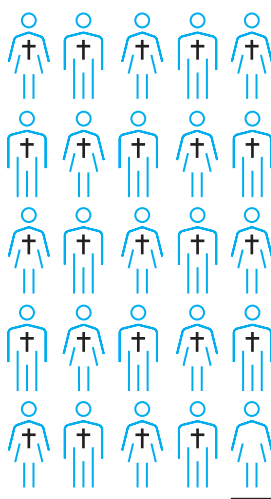
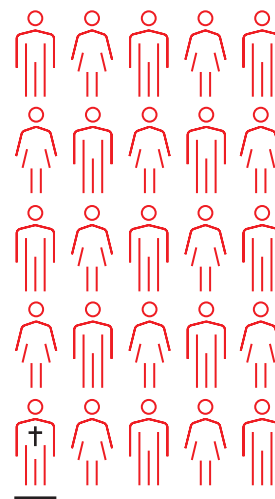
DAVID ROACH is a contributing writer for CT and is based in Nashville.

Political Identities, Born Again

A lot of political commentary focuses on how different groups of people will vote. Will 80 percent of white evangelicals support Donald Trump? Will gay and lesbian voters turn out for Joe Biden? How will swing-state Latinos cast their ballots? New political science research shows, however, that a small but significant number of Americans don't vote based on their religion, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Instead, they switch their personal identities to better match their political preferences. Partisanship, New York University professor Patrick J. Egan argues, is so powerful it even reshapes people's sense of themselves.

PROBABILITY, OVER
FOUR YEARS, THAT A
CONSERVATIVE REPUBLICAN
WILL START IDENTIFYING
AS "BORN AGAIN":

1 out of 25



PROBABILITY, OVER
FOUR YEARS, THAT A
CHRISTIAN LIBERAL DEMOCRAT
WILL STOP IDENTIFYING
AS "BORN AGAIN":

1 out of 25

GREENLAND**City votes to keep missionary's statue**

The citizens of Nuuk, Greenland, voted to keep a bronze statue of 18th-century Lutheran missionary Hans Egede. The "Apostle to Greenland" is seen by some as a symbol of colonialism. Greenland, with a population that is nearly 90 percent Inuit, remains part of the Kingdom of Denmark. Egede's 1721 mission was jointly funded by a for-profit corporation, the Danish king, and Protestant missionaries. The referendum came amid anti-racist protests and growing pressure in the US and Europe to remove landmarks honoring controversial historic figures. Nuuk voted to keep its statue, 921-600.

Billy Graham statue to take honored place at US Capitol

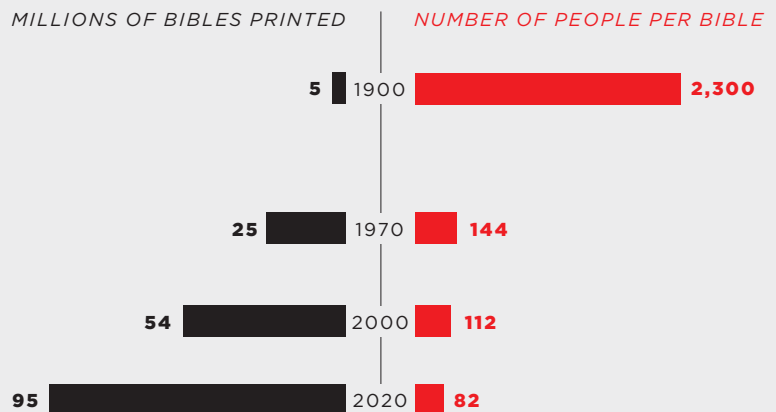
The North Carolina Legislature has approved installation of a statue of the late Billy Graham at the US Capitol. The Capitol has two statues from each state, most celebrating political or military leaders. "America's preacher" Graham will join a few religious figures, however, including Catholic Father Damien (Hawaii), Pueblo leader Po'pay (New Mexico), and Mormon Brigham Young (Utah). The evangelist will replace former Governor Charles Aycock, who supported the violent overthrow of Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1898 because some of the elected city officials were African American. It is considered the only coup d'état in US history.

RUSSIA**New restrictions on religion proposed**

The Russian parliament is considering a law that would ban foreigners from participating in religious activity. The proposed law is framed as a protection of religious liberty, but limited to Russians. It would also prevent Russians from studying theology abroad. Proponents of the bill say it is necessary to curtail the influence of foreign extremists, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baptists. If it passes this fall, the law would be the latest in a series of restrictions backed by Vladimir Putin since he became president for the second time in 2012. In July, Russia amended its constitution to allow Putin to stay in office until 2036.

THE BOOK FOR ME

There are a lot of new Bibles in the world, according to a 2020 report from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Rates of Scripture production have even outpaced global population growth. In 1900, Christians were printing one new Bible per 2,300 people. Today, it's one per 82 people.

NEW BIBLE PRODUCTION GLOBALLY

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY

PHILIPPINES**Christians support TV company**

Evangelicals threw their support behind ABS-CBN, the largest television company in the Philippines and the oldest in Southeast Asia, as President Rodrigo Duterte considered whether to allow the company to renew its license. The Philippine Council of Evangelical Churches called for prayer that the president and lawmakers in his party would "decide virtuously for the good of our country." Duterte has feuded with ABS-CBN since the 2016 election, when it aired footage showing the candidate joking about raping an Australian missionary. Legislators have investigated ABS-CBN 12 times.

FIJI**Prison officials point to Methodist failures**

The Fiji Corrections Service is asking the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma to consider

why so many Methodists are in prison. Nearly 30 percent of the prisoners in the country's 15 correctional facilities are Methodists, which is also the largest religious group in the republic. Chaplain Josefa Tikonatabua, an ordained Methodist, said the church needs to confront its failures and look at how Methodists raise their children. The denomination has previously promoted prison outreach and launched a rehabilitation program with the state.

ISRAEL**West Bank baptismal removal sparks dispute**

Israeli and Palestinian authorities are accusing each other of stealing an ancient Christian baptismal font. The stone font was carved by Christians in the 500s and is similar to a baptismal discovered during restoration of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Israeli officials removed it from the West Bank under the cover of darkness, alleging the font was stolen from an archaeological site in 2000. Palestinians say Israel is attempting to erase historic evidence of Palestinian presence through the theft of heritage sites. Israeli plans to annex more of the West Bank in July were delayed, possibly because of COVID-19.

EGYPT**Property fight divides Protestants**

The Protestant Churches of Egypt (PCE) claimed victory after a top Egyptian court ruled that Anglicans “cannot be separated from the evangelical community” and the PCE has rightful administrative control over all evangelical church property. A 2016 law created a uniform national process for licensing churches but only recognized three “Egyptian denominations”: Coptic Orthodox, Catholics, and the PCE. Anglicans, who have been in Egypt for 181 years, say they should be independent and accuse the PCE of using the law to steal property.

ZIMBABWE**COVID-19 prompts return to Wesleyan tradition**

United Methodists in Zimbabwe have revived small groups, a practice promoted by founder John Wesley for Christian discipleship, as a way to worship within the limits set by coronavirus restrictions. Churches were allowed to reopen in June, but with no more than 50 people at any one gathering. Traditionally, Wesleyan “classes” and “bands” had 7 to 12 people who would gather and ask each other, “How is it with your soul?” Pastor Gift Kudakwashe Machinga said the church believes it can encourage spiritual growth and adhere to strict health guidelines at the same time.

UGANDA**Missionary settles suits with bereaved mothers**

A US missionary agreed to pay about \$10,000 each to the mothers of two children who died in her care, according to an out-of-court settlement reached in July. Renee Bach, who has no medical training, has been accused of passing herself off as a doctor at the health center she founded in Uganda at age 20. Bach says she was trying to help in a “non-ideal situation.” The center treated 940 children over five years; 105 of them died. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, 125,000 Ugandan children die of malnutrition-related illnesses each year.

Youth Group Gets Counseling

New awareness of mental health sends ministers in search of resources.

Jarrod Hegwood was confident he knew how to counsel the students in his youth group. Then he got counseling and realized he had no idea.

“I learned that what I did was not counseling,” Hegwood said. “What I used to do as a student minister was called fixing people’s problems—telling them how to act and behave—and not helping them to understand themselves and grow personally.”

Hegwood learned a lot about himself while taking a seminary course on counseling and seeing a therapist. But his biggest revelation was about the importance of mental health professionals. He realized that as a youth minister, he wasn’t equipped to address the mental health challenges his students faced.

Across the country, youth pastors like Hegwood, who now runs a counseling center in Walker, Louisiana, in addition to continuing part time as a youth pastor, are starting to take mental health seriously and look for resources to help young Christians. This is due partly to a decline in stigma around mental health issues and partly to a concerning rise in anxiety, depression, and suicide in Generation Z (people born after 1997).

Anxiety disorders in adolescents increased 20 percent from 2007 to 2012. Today, 1 in 3 teens will experience an anxiety disorder, according to the National Institutes of Health. The percentage of teens who experienced at least one major depressive episode increased rapidly at about this same time, and now 1 out of about every 5 girls reports experiencing symptoms. The suicide rate for young people ages 15 to 19 increased by 76 percent from 2007 to 2017 and nearly tripled for adolescents ages 10 to 14. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents, after accidents, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Evangelical youth ministries are responding. They are getting creative and partnering with mental health professionals to get Gen Z the help and the resources that it needs.

Focus on the Family started discussing the need for more and better mental health resources after a tragedy hit close to home. Twenty-nine

“JESUS HAS EMOTIONS— EVEN THE ONES THAT WE WOULD VIEW AS UNPLEASANT. . . . IT’S NOT JUST A LACK OF FAITH TO HAVE THOSE FEELINGS.”

ROBERT VORE

students died by suicide in a two-year period in El Paso County, Colorado, where Focus is located. *Newsweek* called the surge “an outbreak, a plague spreading through school hallways.”

Focus organized a team to develop resources on suicide. It discovered that most high schools and universities and some churches had suicide response protocols, but holistic suicide prevention programs for teens were scarce. Focus decided to produce its own materials and started interviewing people about teen suicide: youth pastors, parents (including those whose children died by suicide), teenagers, people affected by another’s suicide, and people who had attempted suicide.

Joannie DeBrito, director of parenting and youth at Focus and a licensed mental health professional, said that when her team asked interviewees about the causes of suicide, social media was “the No. 1 answer that everyone gave with no hesitation.” Experts think a number of biological, psychological, and cultural factors likely contribute to the dramatic increase in suicide and mental health issues, but they continue to debate social media’s impact.

At minimum, DeBrito said, there is a strong correlation to consider: Around the time that deaths by suicide began rising rapidly in 2007, the iPhone was introduced, people started using social media apps, and Facebook lowered its minimum age requirement to 13.

Hegwood agrees with the connection. He sees young people continually pulled to their phones and then emotionally battered by the experience of trying to connect with people in any meaningful way on social media. Sometimes students are encouraged “not to care what others think,” he said, but the adolescent brain is wired for community and rewards teens for the approval and acceptance of their peers. Once Hegwood understood this fact, it changed the way he did ministry.

“I really became aware of how important community is,” Hegwood said. “I feel like it’s almost as important as sound doctrine, because if I have a ton of sound doctrine but I don’t have a place where kids can connect, their brains are wired to go connect somewhere else.”

Seeking approval and acceptance from a healthy community can be positive, which is why Hegwood cultivates community among his students—off their phones. Focus’s suicide prevention resource, *Alive to Thrive*, which was released in 2018, suggests parents put clear boundaries on technology use, but also says suicide prevention should start with encouraging healthy social relationships and protecting children from abuse.

Today, an effective youth minister has to know when to refer someone to counseling, said Steve Johnson, vice president of Focus on the Family.

“The issues that kids are dealing with today are so complicated,” he said, “it often takes somebody with clinical expertise to help. . . . As an effective youth minister, one of your goals should be to

84%

**OF PROTESTANT PASTORS
AGREE CHURCHES HAVE
A RESPONSIBILITY TO
PROVIDE RESOURCES AND
SUPPORT TO INDIVIDUALS
WITH MENTAL ILLNESS.**

have the discernment to know where to point a kid who’s dealing with issues that you can’t deal with.”

Hegwood didn’t always view counselors as partners in ministry. Before he became a counselor, he thought he had failed when he learned one of his students was in counseling.

“I felt like I didn’t meet that student’s needs somehow,” Hegwood said. “To be honest, I wasn’t equipped to meet that kid’s needs at the time. I wasn’t able to speak to him about what he was going through or where he was at.”

He began approaching mental illness like any other medical diagnosis among his students—a broken leg or cancer—that requires additional treatment. He thinks youth pastors are able to minister to their students holistically when they start to view mental illness this way.

“It’s okay to recognize our limitations,” Hegwood said. “If we don’t recognize our limitations, we’re not ministering to the people that God puts in our path as best we can.”

A LifeWay Research study shows that only 2 percent of Protestant pastors discourage people from going to counseling. Eighty-four percent agree churches should provide support to individuals with mental illness.

Kelsey Vincent, pastor to youth and families at First Baptist Church in Decatur, Georgia, embraces that responsibility. She connected her church with Robert Vore, a Christian counselor in Atlanta who works with youth and provides training for churches on mental health issues.

Vincent invited Vore to a church event called “Lunch and Learn.” Vore spoke to students and parents about some signs that teens might be struggling with mental health and ways they can help one another. Later, when several students in the church had mental health crises, Vincent called Vore, and he guided her to ask the right questions.

“This happens anywhere I give a talk at a youth group or college ministry or anything like that,” Vore said. “I end up hearing from staff pretty soon after that they are having conversations they’ve never had.”

Those conversations may mean Gen Z Christians get directed to mental health professionals when they need them. But increased awareness of mental health concerns also opens new possibilities for ministry. Hegwood realized this when he was getting counseling himself for the first time.

“I had been doing student ministry for a decade at that point,” Hegwood

said. “What I was personally going through—going to see a Christian counselor—was more like discipleship than anything I’d ever been through in my church life. And I grew up in church.”

Hegwood said he knew, for example, that 2 Corinthians 10:5 says to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” But he didn’t have a good way to do that until his counselor taught him how to become aware of his thoughts and feelings, so that he could challenge them at times.

Vore says learning to deal with emotions is a big first step toward mental health. People have a tendency to categorize unpleasant emotions such as sadness, fear, or anger as “bad” or “wrong.” It’s important to help students understand that God created them with emotions, according to Vore, and that they can challenge thoughts that aren’t true while still validating the legitimacy of their feelings.

“They are a healthy part of our being,” Vore said. “You can look throughout Scripture, and God has emotions. Jesus has emotions—even the ones that we would view as unpleasant. . . . It’s not just a lack of faith to have those feelings.”

Both Hegwood and Vincent have used the Disney-Pixar movie *Inside Out* to illustrate this point for their students. The movie is mostly set inside 11-year-old Riley’s brain, where her emotions jostle for control. Joy, usually the dominant emotion, is always trying to keep Riley happy. She has to learn that Sadness has a place in Riley’s life, too.

Vincent led a youth retreat connecting *Inside Out* with the Psalms. She showed her students how many emotions were in the Psalms as a way of demonstrating how God created human emotions—and can handle them.

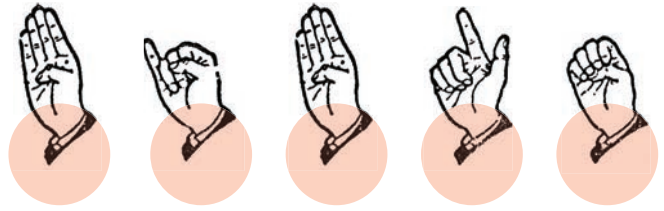
“If there’s anything I feel like my kids could repeat and teach back to somebody else after having been with me for two years, it’s that we have permission to be honest with God about how we’re feeling,” Vincent said. “We don’t need to be ashamed of that. We don’t have to fake being happy to anybody, especially God.”

Hegwood does not want his students to pretend with him, either. He’s learned to ask them hard questions through the process.

“The way it changed my mindset about youth ministry was the focus on the community,” he said. “But the way it changed my mindset on discipleship was the focus on the individual.”

He knows now that discipling his students is about more than fixing their problems. It’s about becoming acquainted with their hearts and minds and, when necessary, getting them the help they need to be mentally healthy. **CT**

LANIE ANDERSON is a writer and seminary student in Oxford, Mississippi.



Unto Them a Sign

The American Sign Language Bible is complete after nearly 40 years.

When Renca Dunn talks about having the Bible in her own language for the first time, she emphasizes the adjectives. In English, she has no problem understanding the people, places, and things of Scripture. But in her own language, the nouns vibrate with life and emotion.

“The clapping trees. The singing birds. The dancing meadows,” Dunn says. “The persistent Esther. The revengeful Saul. The weeping Magdalene. Most of all, our loving Jesus.”

With the translation of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel in the fall of 2020, Dunn and 3.5 million other deaf people finally have the complete Bible in American Sign Language (ASL). It’s been a long time coming. The translation has been in the works since 1981, when Duane King, a minister in the Independent Christian Church, realized that English was not the heart language of deaf people in America. ASL was.

King, who is a hearing person, started learning to sign after meeting a Christian couple in 1970 who didn’t come to church much because they couldn’t understand what was going on. He and his wife, Peggy, were moved to meet this need and started a church and a mission for the deaf near one of the nation’s leading deaf schools in Council Bluffs, Iowa. Then, after years of church meetings, small groups, and Bible classes, the Kings became convinced it wasn’t enough to sign the English Bible; the Bible needed to be translated into ASL.

“Most hearing people don’t understand how difficult it is to learn to read what you cannot hear,” Duane King said in 2019. “Deaf people rely so much on their eyesight that they want everything to be tangible—they want to be able to see everything. This sometimes makes it harder to grasp intangibles like salvation through faith.”

The evangelical commitment to sharing the gospel with everyone is a commitment to accessibility. It took a long time for Christians to think about what that might mean for deaf people, though.

The first Braille Bible for the blind was finished in 1919, more than 100 years before the first complete Bible for the deaf. Braille is not a distinct language, but an alternative alphabet that can be read by touch. ASL, on the other hand, is not spoken English turned into hand signs but is a full language developed by deaf people, with a distinct vocabulary and grammar.

When the Deaf Missions Bible project started, deaf translators took the Greek New Testament, translated it into ASL, and recorded that onto VHS tapes. The tapes could be sent out in the mail. Nearly 40 years later, when deaf translators took the major prophets of the Hebrew Bible and translated them into ASL, they made the videos available for free online, through social media, and on a smartphone app.

The translation was led by deaf people trained in the biblical languages, reviewed by one committee for accuracy and by another committee for clarity, and then recorded in a small TV studio. It cost \$195 to translate a single verse. The last four years of work cost more than \$4 million.

“It is a very comprehensive and very intensive process,” said Chad Entinger, who took over leadership of Deaf Missions when King retired in 2017. “Typically when we think ‘Bible,’ we think of a printed book. For us deaf people, the ASL Version is in video format because sign language is a visual language.”

The ASL Version is not the only modern effort to make Scripture available to the deaf. The Jehovah’s Witnesses finished translating their New World Translation into ASL earlier this year. The Witnesses—who do not believe in the Trinity and teach that Jesus is a distinct creation and not God incarnate—had their first sign language congregation in 1989 and started translating the religious magazine *The Watchtower* in 2002 and the Bible in 2005. The Bible project was completed when the Witnesses translated Job in March.

“We realized that ASL was the language of their hearts,” said spokesman Robert Hendricks. “ASL was the language and is the language that would bring them closer to their God Jehovah and get them to understand what he requires of them.”

There is also a complete New Testament in a written version of ASL called SignWriting, produced by ASL Gospel founder Nancy Romero. SignWriting is “almost hieroglyphic,” according to Anthony Schmidt, senior curator at the Museum of the Bible, who acquired an eight-volume copy of the SignWriting Bible for the museum. It includes arrows, circles, and lines that represent signing motions and facial expressions.

SignWriting was originally developed to notate dance moves. It was adapted for the deaf by Romero

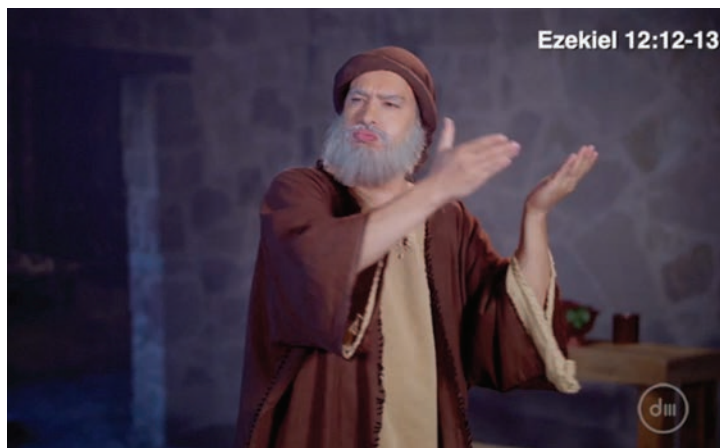
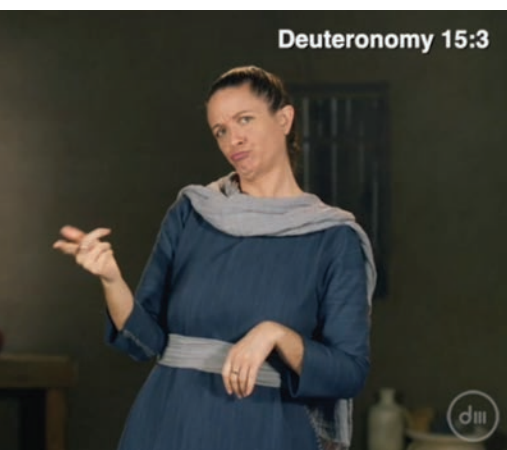
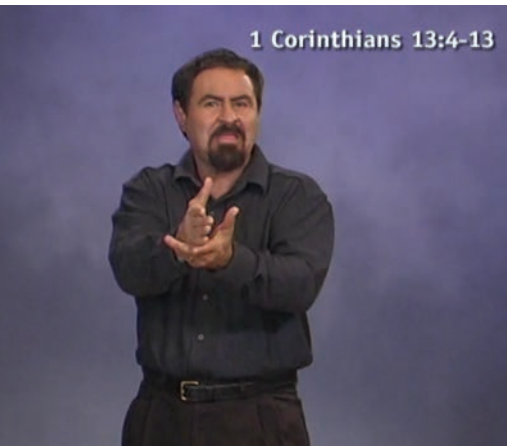


PHOTO SCREENSHOTS USED WITH PERMISSION FROM DEAF MISSIONS



THE EVANGELICAL COMMITMENT TO SHARING THE GOSPEL WITH EVERYONE IS A COMMITMENT TO ACCESSIBILITY. IT TOOK A LONG TIME FOR CHRISTIANS TO THINK ABOUT WHAT THAT MIGHT MEAN FOR DEAF PEOPLE.

starting in the 1980s. The New Testament took her 10 years to complete. Though it's not widely used, according to Schmidt, it is an important artifact for the museum.

"It represents this broad effort to reach all people," he explained. "It shows the passion that a lot of Christians have for translation and the calling they feel to provide access to the Bible."

The ASL Version of the Bible—produced by Deaf Missions with support from the Deaf Bible Society, DOOR International, Deaf Harbor, the American Bible Society, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Seed Company, and Pioneer Bible Translators—is the first sign language Bible to be translated from the original languages. Erle Deira, a project manager at the American Bible Society, said it is also the first to be accepted as authoritative by Protestants worldwide and will be used to assist in translating the Bible into other sign languages, including Nigerian, Japanese, and Mexican.

"We are very grateful that we have sufficient Biblical scholars who understand Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew who are part of the deaf community," Deira said. "It was important that deaf people who are trained to be translators, those are the people who call the shots. Those are the people who decide how to best express an idea from Hebrew. They have ownership."

Fifty-three translators have worked on the project since 1981. Renca Dunn became one of them. For her and many others, that work meant seeing the Bible come alive and experiencing a deeper, more intense relationship with God.

"When I see the Bible in sign language, I finally feel that God does get me," Dunn said. "He understands me. He wants me to understand him. He loves me. He wants me to love him. He speaks in my language."

CT

DANIEL SILLIMAN is news editor for *Christianity Today*.
Additional reporting by Taylor Bundren.

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VIEWS



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THINGS FALL APART **>**

Why we need the one in whom
all things hold together.

BY DANIEL HARRELL

ILLUSTRATION BY DOROTHY LEUNG



Aristotle didn't quite say, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." But it is true—for good and for ill. First Corinthians 12:20–27 looks at churches and bodies as systems that possess properties their parts cannot possess on their own. You can't be a community or a family by yourself. The same holds true with our political systems: A democratic government requires individual citizens working together as one nation for any common good to have a chance.

No matter how good or how strong, every system eventually succumbs to entropy. Increasing disorder is inherent in every system, including the very universe itself. As the physicist Stephen Hawking reminded us, everything we do increases disorder in the universe. This world is inevitably running down. Our bodies age and die, churches decrease, governments collapse, economies recess, families fall apart.

True, some things get better over time. But to overcome the entropy, systemic improvement must exceed the ever-increasing disorder. This is an enormous challenge, as the ever-penetrating repercussions of systemic racism in America demonstrate. Centuries of structural and institutional policies discriminated against black citizens, sanctioning inadequate education and substandard health care and creating economic disparity that restricted access to fair wages and decent housing.

Because entropy always increases, driving systems toward chaos, you might think the best strategy for opposing racism or any other systemic sin would be to let it be and watch it die. But that very chaos is the problem. To let it be is to let it wreak its havoc.

To achieve systemic change, an exceeding amount of energy from outside the system must be applied. An unhealthy body needs therapeutic injections; a bad family system needs outside intervention; a bad political system needs "outsider" candidates. Systemic racism requires changes in the laws and policies that perpetuate discrimination—a difficulty when the people who make the laws are mostly those who prosper from the prejudice.

Unfortunately, any human energy we tap only comes from within the systems we inhabit, meaning real change presents an enormous challenge. We go to counseling as families, but once the energy of intervention stops, family systems typically revert to old habits. We go to the polls every election season voting for change, but elected officials adapt to the political status quo. Black Americans unjustly suffer and protests erupt, but in time, societal behavior gravitates back toward the cultural mean.

Jesus, and trust that true change will follow. Inasmuch as structures and systems are composed of component parts, changing an individual person for good can have significant effects. But good people still make for bad systems. The whole remains greater than the sum of its parts. For systemic change to happen, the entire system must be addressed.

God so loved the world that he sent his Son to save it, but not always just one person at a time. Scripture speaks of whole tribes and nations and peoples and languages coming to Christ (Rev. 7:9). In Christ there is "one body and one Spirit . . . one hope [to which] you were called, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4–6). As one body of Christ, we possess power beyond what any one of us could ever exert on our own.

But to fully tap into that spiritual power requires sacrificial love. Jesus calls us to lay down our lives—our agen-

UNFORTUNATELY, ANY HUMAN ENERGY WE TAP FOR CHANGE ONLY COMES FROM WITHIN THE SYSTEMS THAT NEED CHANGING.

At its core, Christianity is about systemic change. God so loved the whole world that he sent his Son to save it. Existing outside the system he created, God intervenes with the greatest energy of all to redeem it. As Martin Luther King Jr., drawing on his own faith, famously put it, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

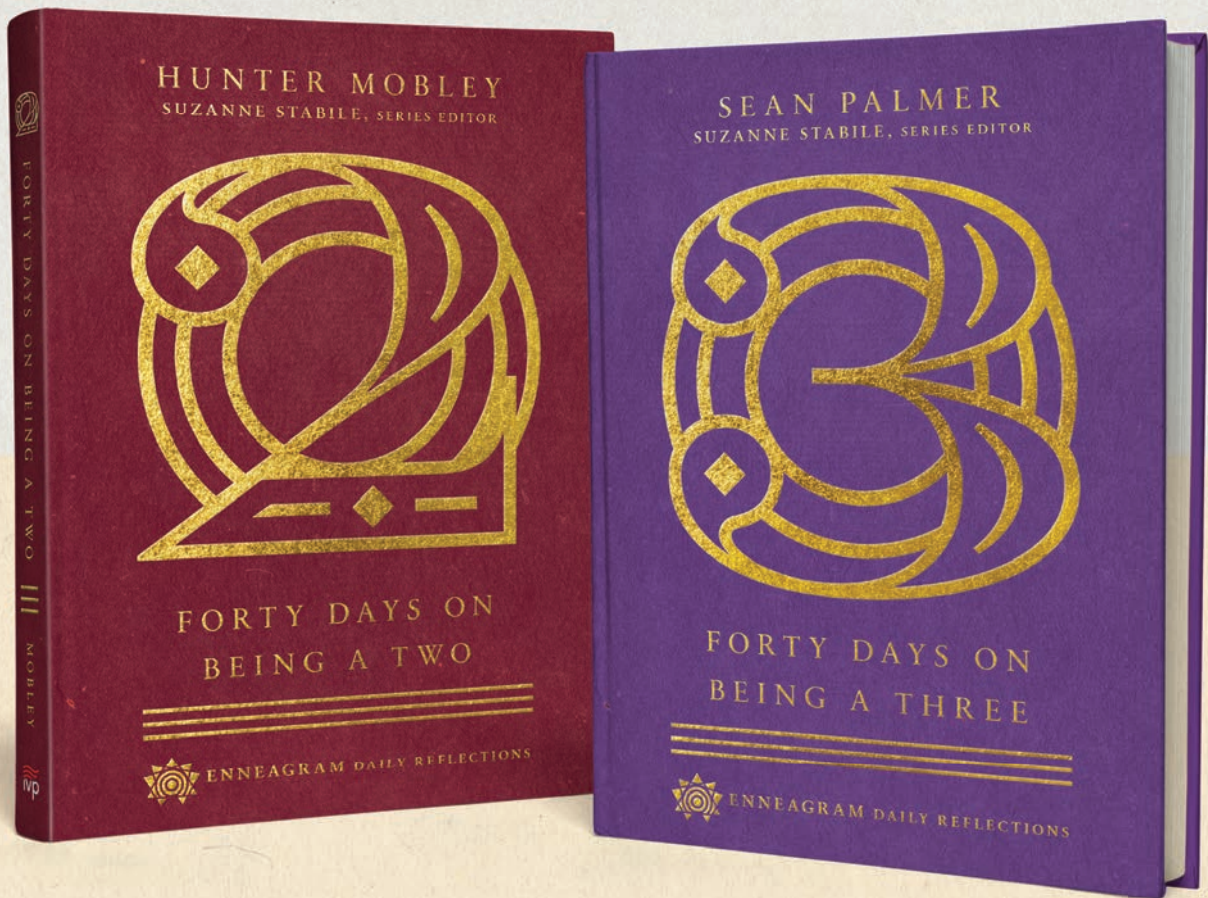
But an appeal to love can sound so clichéd. For many Christians, love tends to get relegated to personal relationships and forgiveness of individual sins. Win individual hearts and minds to

das, preferences, and priorities—to take up a cross and follow (Mark 8:34). As Jesus' disciples, we make plain his passion to do right by the least and the lost, the disenfranchised and discriminated—along with their persecutors. As one global, massive manifestation of Jesus on earth, we are capable of changing the world. As the Southern preacher Vance Havner once put it: "Snowflakes are frail, but if enough of them get together, they can stop traffic." So in the Spirit of Jesus, let it snow. **CT**

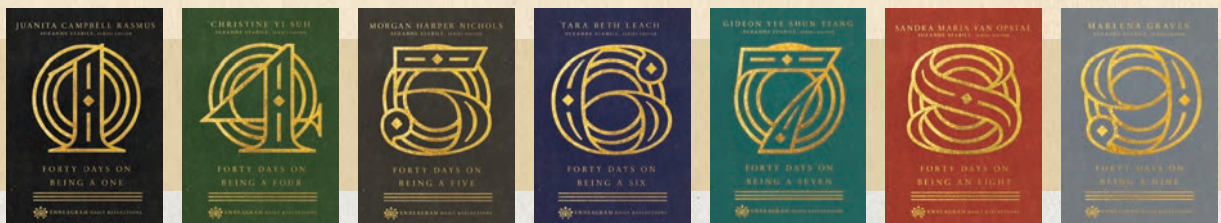
DANIEL HARRELL is editor in chief of *Christianity Today*.

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Your Devotional Is Not a Bible

Inspiration and comfort do not offer us the full weight and scope of God's Word.

What do Bible teachers do for fun on a Friday night? They check the Amazon lists to see which Bible translation holds the top spot.

The last time I looked, it was the New International Version (NIV). The NIV has been the best-selling translation in the US for decades, but on Amazon's rankings, the translation sat at No. 5, beat out by two children's Bibles, an audio Bible, and at No. 1, a popular devotional guide that somehow made its way into the Bible category.

The devotional far outshone the Bibles on the list, boasting 5,800 five-star reviews in 18 months. Seeing it in the top spot was a reminder of how many Christians rely on daily devotions as a formative practice and how big a business devotional books have become.

But how are these resources forming us? Does a devotional yield devotion in the biblical sense?

Again, I scanned through the descriptions for other popular devotionals on Amazon. Among the 10 bestsellers, one offered 365 days of "inspiring, unexpected, humble teaching on grace and love that will prepare you for the day ahead." Another provided "an inspiring Bible verse to reflect and meditate on throughout your week." Still another promised that readers would "be inspired to activate living your life on mission." The takeaway was clear: Daily devotion involves being inspired.

But another defining element also emerged consistently in the descriptions. One book was "designed to help alleviate your worries as you learn to live in the peace of the Almighty God." Others promised "words of encouragement,

comfort, and reassurance of God's unending love," the ability to tackle life "with the wisdom and comfort of the Bible." Another takeaway: Daily devotion involves being comforted.

According to the bestseller list, to be devoted is to be inspired and comforted. But according to the Bible, it's something much more.

The Bible uses the term "devoted" to mean consecrated, or set apart for special service. As a museum devotes a wing to displaying a particular art form, so God devotes us to display his image. Yet we sometimes mistakenly equate devotion with emotion. Devotion is not mere feeling, but action: It serves and it obeys. Jesus made this connection when he taught that "No one can serve two masters . . . you will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matt. 6:24).

Compare those bestseller descriptions from Amazon to Paul's words: "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17, CSB).

While best-selling devotional books offer formation through inspirational words of comfort, true Christian devotion—the formative practice of being set apart to serve—is founded on inspired words that correct.

**DEVOTION IS NOT
MERE FEELING,
BUT ACTION.**

Are the words of devotional books profitable? Some, but not all. Emotion is certainly an expression of devotion but is not its sum total. Biblical words of comfort are profitable, but so are words of correction. Both are words of life. If devotional reading is our primary vehicle for formation, we run the risk of malformation and—worse still—of forming God himself into an idol, one who comforts without correcting, seeks relationship but not repentance, dotes but does not discipline, and is our companion but not our commander.

It is one thing for Amazon to confuse a devotional book with a Bible. But let it not be said of Christians that we have done the same.

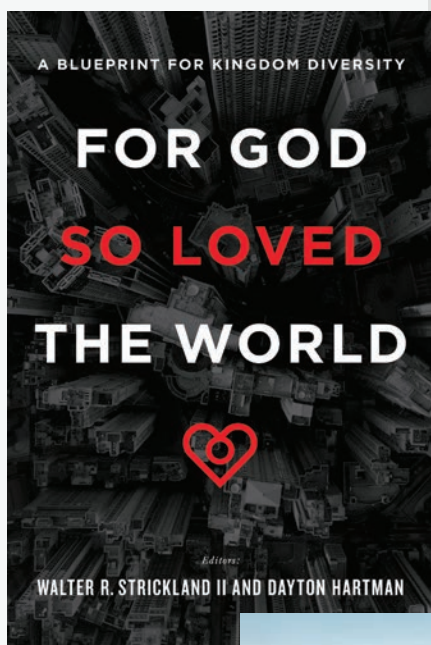
The inspirational words of humans are a paltry substitute for the inspired words of God. Devotional writing, when done with excellence, may supplement our time in the Scriptures, but it must not subordinate or supplant it.

Peter captured the preciousness of divine speech in his pleading question to Jesus: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Christian, to whom shall you go for words of life? For formative words, daily applied, to devote you to sacred service and submission? Amazon is happy to provide you with authors. But forget not the author of all things. Like the flowers on a devotional's dust jacket, human words fade. But the Word of the Lord—ever profitable for both comfort and correction—endures forever. **CT**

JEN WILKIN is a wife, mom, and Bible teacher. She is the author of *In His Image* and *None Like Him*.

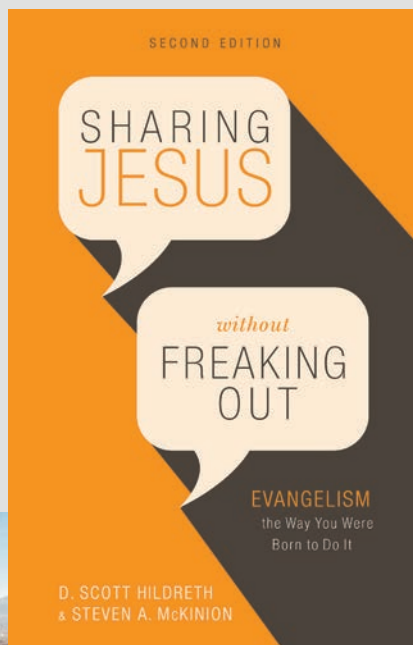
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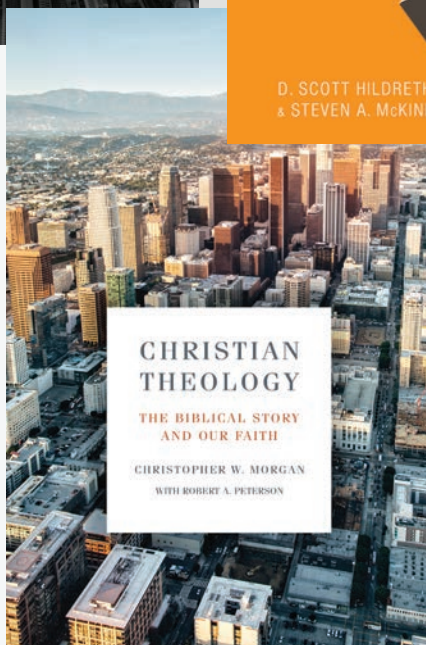
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God Himself Gives the Gift

Humans have a penchant for sacrifice, but it's the Lord who makes it possible.

Over the years, one thing that has fascinated me about the gospel is the way it takes our familiar human longings and instincts and transforms their common, sinful manifestations in liberative ways. Take the almost universal human impulse to sacrifice, for instance.

Jewish philosopher Moshe Halbertal notes in *On Sacrifice* that sacrifice is the “most primary and basic form of all ritual.” In Greco-Roman religion, the principle *do ut des* (I give that you might give) governed sacrificial ritual: You gave gifts to the gods to put them in your debt so they might bless you—or to appease their wrath on the chance you angered them. In ancient times, sacrifice was the anxious, human end of the bargain.

We may think we're too modern, enlightened and humane to practice the sacrifices that marked the worship of our ancestors, but a quick scan of our contemporary culture says otherwise. We too have rituals of sacrifice. We put on sacred vestments and sacrifice sweat (and blood, even) at the gym so the gods will bless us with sex appeal (Aphrodite) or spare us from sickness (Apollos). We sacrifice time (and our families) at work so Mammon will shower us with possessions and recession-proof 401(k)s. We sacrifice our neighbors' reputations in ritualized social media posts to PHEME, goddess of fame and rumor, that we might protect our own in exchange.

When it comes to Scripture, then, we shouldn't be surprised to find sacrifices. But we should slow down and notice that sacrifice works a bit differently there.

Halbertal says that in Scripture, sacrifice in its most basic form is still a gift to God. It is either offered to bring about

communion and intimacy or to atone for a breach and restore that communion, putting away God's wrath. But take a closer look at the most important sacrificial text in the Old Testament, from the book of Leviticus, which explains why Israelites weren't allowed to eat blood in their meat: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (17:11, ESV). The author of Hebrews picks this up in the New Testament to explain that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (9:22, ESV).

On the surface, this seems familiar: The lifeblood of the sacrifice is to be offered up as a gift, making atonement. Functionally, the gift is a substitute for the life of the sinner—who owes it to God for his sin—ransoming him from death.

But the familiarity of the mechanics of atonement makes it easy to skip the most remarkable line in the verse: “*I have given it for you* on the altar to make atonement for your souls.” Reading this should stop us, should prompt a mental record-scratch moment.

Note that God doesn't say to reserve some blood to *give to him* on the altar. No, God has *given it for us* on the altar. He himself is the one who provides the

means of sacrifice we need to make atonement for our souls before him!

Lest we think that's a one-off, we see the same principle at work throughout Scripture. We see it dramatically displayed in the story of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah. Right before Abraham brings the knife down on Isaac, the angel of the Lord appears and stops him. Abraham looks up, and “in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns” (Gen 22:13). God provides the sacrifice! That is why on that day Abraham called the place “The Lord Will Provide” (v. 14).

We see the very same movement, taken to its glorious, shocking conclusion, in the gospel. The miracle is that we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. *God presented* Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood” (Rom. 3:24–25, emphasis added).

Herein we find the uniqueness of the gospel. We see a God unlike the gods—ancient or modern—that we are so often tempted to appease. He is the one who offers the sacrifice. We don't give so that he will give to us in return. He gives first. Even more, in Christ, the God-man, he gives himself. His is the blood that ransoms our souls and purifies our uneasy consciences “from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14, ESV). He liberates us to offer our whole lives as living sacrifices—motivated by God's mercy, not our anxious fears. **CT**

WE DON'T GIVE SO THAT GOD WILL GIVE TO US IN RETURN. HE GIVES FIRST.

DEREK RISHMAWY is the Reformed University Fellowship campus minister at the University of California, Irvine and a doctoral candidate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

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N C E

HOW CHRISTIANS ARE TRANSFORMING THE WORLD OF WEALTH MANAGEMENT.

by JESSICA FRALIN

IN A QUIET OFFICE in San Antonio, Texas, a gong rings out. Staff members flood from their offices to clap and cheer, congratulating a client on his daughter's graduation from college.

At PAX Financial Group, this mid-afternoon ceremony isn't unusual. Companies define success in many ways, but PAX is dedicated to measuring hope. Because PAX, a financial planning firm, serves people, not investment portfolios, they praise what is praiseworthy in their clients' lives, and each milestone is documented in the company's system and observed by the ringing of the gong.

Today, the gong sounded for a father seeing a child graduate from college. Tomorrow, it could ring out to celebrate a business owner retiring well 50 years after launching. Last week, it marked one client paying off her mortgage and another client's decision to donate six figures to worthy causes.

In an industry laser-focused on the end goal of wealth accumulation, PAX is dedicated to celebrating every step of the stewardship journey. They recognize that more than leaving a legacy, clients are desperate to live one, finding ways to rejoice in today as well as prepare for tomorrow.

Like PAX, many financial institutions across the nation are turning notions of greed and gain upside down. Gospel-centered leaders of

wealth-management companies are changing the financial climate and the public's perception of it as they focus on building their clients' lives, not just their profit margins.

LIVING A LEGACY

"Inheritance is what you leave to someone, but legacy is what you leave in someone," says Darryl Lyons, co-founder and CEO of PAX. "Living a legacy is much more rewarding, and much more fun, than just accumulating money to leave behind."

A commitment to generosity is revolutionizing the financial planning industry. According to cofounder Joseph Schuetze, inspiring generosity rather than simply pushing toward endless wealth accumulation allows companies to ensure that each client's legacy when they're gone—and their life now—will be richer. Schuetze credits C12, an organization that compels and equips Christian CEOs and business leaders to achieve excellence with eternal impact, as being a consistent driver behind these choices. He says, "C12 isn't afraid to offer tough accountability and push you to live with high integrity."

"It's antithetical to this industry to convince clients to give more money away," Schuetze explains. "We're actually cutting into our own fees. But we



**DARRYL LYONS +
JOSEPH SHUETZE**
CO-FOUNDERS, PAX
FINANCIAL GROUP

PHOTOS BY ABIGAIL WROTEN / C12 GROUP





“ DOING THINGS
TOGETHER AND
BEING FOR ONE ANOTHER
IS THE ULTIMATE WAY TO
BRING ABOUT CHANGE.”

TRAVIS PENFIELD CEO, 49 FINANCIAL

are staking our claim to the ideals of the kingdom of God, not the ideals of the world of finance.” PAX goes beyond simply encouraging clients to give to charitable organizations by prompting them to actively engage with those organizations. As a result, clients see their generosity making a difference in the community. They get to live their legacies.

MENTORSHIP AND BEYOND

“Doing things together and being for one another is the ultimate way to bring about change,” says Travis Penfield, CEO of 49 Financial. He’s certainly seen this to be true in his own life. After a stint in consulting, Penfield was ready to pursue a job that allowed for less travel and more time at home and in his community. Financial advising seemed like the perfect fit—until he noticed that the job retention rates, especially for employees in his age bracket, were shockingly low.

Enter Jeff Davidson, cofounder and co-CEO of Camp Gladiator. Previously, Davidson led in AXA Austin, a provider of financial services for consumers and businesses, and in 2012 he approached Penfield with an irresistible offer. “I’ll mentor you as a financial planner for the next two years, teach you everything I know,” Davidson suggested. “Then I’ll hand over the reins to you when I step out of the industry.” Penfield took him up on it, and soon he and Davidson shattered previous company records as they proved the value of coupling the dynamism and energy of a new hire with the trustworthiness and expertise of a seasoned investor. Penfield expanded on this innovative financial planning partnership as he founded a new firm, 49 Financial.

The mission of 49 Financial is based squarely on the principle laid out in Ecclesiastes 4:9: “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor.” In an industry that is often known for a fend-for-yourself mentality, Penfield saw mentorship as the perfect way to counter that culture. His new company’s policy of rising together lifts new advisors through the ranks while giving industry veterans a chance to pass on their expertise. An abundance mindset coupled with a discipleship model is radical, simple, and making waves.

A financial industry molded around mentorship may be a novel concept, but it works. Retention rates and job satisfaction have substantially increased at 49 Financial. But mentorship involves more than sharing trade secrets and hitting performance benchmarks. The 49 Financial model strives to care for the whole person, a philosophy Penfield gleaned from his C12 peer advisory group. Experienced team members teach younger hires how to separate identity from success, celebrate wins and bounce back from losses, and couple values with results. This system creates a culture of high integrity and low burnout, setting advisors up for a long, healthy future in the industry.

“When people think of financial advisors, they think of greed and ego,” Penfield says. “Gratitude is one of our main values for that reason. A grateful heart is the antidote to greed and ego.” It shows: 49 Financial is seeing growth in both their returns and their relationships, adding more than 100 team members in a single year. When advisors are able to make choices based on their values and not their bottom line, they



“ INVESTING IS LIKE PRAYING WITH YOUR DOLLARS. YOU WANT THE COMPANIES YOU INVEST IN TO THRIVE. THE PROBLEM IS THAT YOU MAY BE INVESTING IN BUSINESS PRACTICES THAT ARE COUNTER TO YOUR BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW, AND YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW IT.”

CASSANDRA LAYMON PRESIDENT, BEACON WEALTH CONSULTANTS

can then shift the thinking of their clients, spurring them on to acts of gratitude and generosity in their own lives.

INVESTING ETHICALLY

Many Christians want to integrate their spiritual and financial lives, but don't know where to start. What practical choices can we make with our finances today that will make a difference tomorrow?

Beacon Wealth Consultants believes biblically responsible investing is the answer. The company has spent the past two decades researching how to build clients' portfolios in alignment with their faith. Beacon Wealth Consultants seeks to protect investors from unknowingly supporting unprincipled companies by implementing a rigorous internal screening process. They're not only on the lookout for unethical or problematic business practices but also for companies who are actively improving the world around them, finding new avenues for flourishing, and creating a safer, better tomorrow. Clients can rest assured that companies Beacon Wealth Consultants recommends have been thoroughly vetted.

As for concerns that screening based on ethics rather than profitability will counteract competitive returns, Kayleigh Kulp with U.S. News and World Report confirms that there is no negative financial impact in choosing ethically screened investing. "Over the last five years, a composite of the returns from all of the equity mutual funds within the Christian Investment Forum ... outperformed the industry average by 77 basis points annually," she wrote.

In addition, Cassandra Laymon, President of Beacon Wealth Consultants, believes that the positive gospel impact

helps every penny invested go further. Clients practice a deeper form of generosity consistent with biblical principles when their investments are in companies who give to their communities.

An entire industry is being revolutionized by faith-driven, results-minded owners and CEOs who allow the gospel to shape everything from profit margins to employee practices as they run their business as a ministry. "The most exciting thing I see is the heart change among advisors and investors alike and the positive impact biblically responsible investing is beginning to have on publicly traded companies as a result," says Rick Laymon in an online interview with Beacon Wealth Consultants. Living legacies, mentoring the new generation, investing biblically—these CEOs are part of a movement transforming the marketplace with the gospel, with the satisfaction of their employees and clients speaking for itself.

JESSICA FRALIN is an author and freelance writer living in Nashville, Tennessee. Her first book, *#Stolen*, addresses the world of social media and the ways it has shaped our identities in recent years. You can connect with her on social media at @jessicafralin.

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LIVING & EFFECTIVE

The intersection of the Bible and grief can be difficult to approach, but the Bible is not silent on our struggles.

Join an extended conversation with Todd Billings (p. 62) and others (Costi Hinn, Diane Langberg, etc.) on how the Bible speaks to our grief and suffering in the *Living and Effective* podcast, season two.

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Dream

CHRISTIANS ACROSS THE COUNTRY HAVE TAKEN UP CALLS FOR RACIAL JUSTICE WITH NEW MOMENTUM. BUT THE MOVEMENT TRENDS FAMILIAR TERRITORY IN ATLANTA, THE URBAN CENTER HOME TO THE HIGHEST CONCENTRATION OF BLACK CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA. BLACK LEADERS THERE HAVE MOBILIZED THROUGH THE CHURCH FOR GENERATIONS. IN FOUR PARTS, CT EXPLORES HOW THEIR FIGHT CONTINUES.

Painting by Charly Palmer Photo by Travis Grissom



A Civil Rights Legacy

INSPIRED AND BURDENED BY THEIR HISTORY, GENERATIONS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAITHFUL TAKE UP THE WORK OF BECOMING A BELOVED COMMUNITY.

By **Cameron Friend** Photographs by Ben Rollins

FROM MY APARTMENT in Midtown Atlanta, I could hear the helicopters above the protesters after the murder of Rayshard Brooks in June. By then, demonstrators had been in the streets for weeks, incensed by the recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.

In cities across the country, crowds were marching for black lives and praying for racial justice. Yet this national movement took on a different magnitude in Atlanta, a city shaped by the faith, activism, and political prowess of its African American forebears.

Much of the same could be said about black hubs like Detroit, Houston, Harlem, and Washington, DC. But there is a unique echo for justice in Atlanta, where leaders have walked the same streets and stood in the same pulpits as civil rights heroes who came before them. The Southern capital—a dreamed-of “black mecca” and the major metropolitan area with the highest concentration of black Christians in the US—has this history in its bedrock.

As Coretta Scott King, the civil rights leader and wife of Martin Luther King Jr., said, “Struggle is a never-ending process. Freedom is never really won; you earn it and win it in every generation.”

I think of the black men and women of my generation—recently called the Trayvon Generation by poet Elizabeth Alexander. We were raised to be aware of the ever-present threat to black lives because it was right in front of our faces, in headlines and on our Instagram feeds. Amid a very public conversation about racism and equity in America, we can see signs of progress. But as long as we find ourselves continually angry and mourning over another black death, we are far from being able to call these small iterations of progress freedom.

In Atlanta, it feels like we are living in between the current racial justice movement still unfolding and the civil rights movement that began in 1954. I simultaneously feel the urgency in the fight for my humanity now and the desire to acknowledge all of the contributions of the civil rights heroes of old.

Both are part of the spirit of the city today. To understand Atlanta, you must look to the deep history of black suffering and the indomitable will and gospel hope of its African American community.



BERNICE A. KING

Almost always, when you hear a prominent story of black success and progress in Atlanta, it connects somehow to the legacy of the black church. The beloved Atlanta businessman Herman J. Russell, whose construction empire built landmarks like Turner Field and the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, cited his pastor as the greatest influence on his career.

“For most African Americans, church was the only place we could be somebody. It was there we did not have to prove our worth or our humanity. It was in church that we could act dignified without being chastised or threatened with harm for ‘acting uppity,’” wrote Russell, a friend of Martin Luther King Jr. who helped fund civil rights efforts and aided in the election of Atlanta’s first black mayor, Maynard Jackson, in 1973. “Church was the place all black folks, young and old, felt safe, loved, and affirmed.”

The black church has been a literal rallying point in Atlanta for more than 150 years. The fires of black justice and economic freedom were especially stoked in Atlanta during the washerwomen’s strike in July of 1881, when a handful of black laundresses met in a church in Summerhill, one of the city’s oldest black neighborhoods, to organize for fairer wages and treatment. Black preachers helped spread the domestic workers’ message, and soon more than 3,000 women went on strike. When a police captain was asked what the women did at their meetings, he said, “Make speeches and pray.”

Church basements housed the earliest classes for what have since become the city’s prestigious historically black colleges and universities: Clark Atlanta University, Morehouse College, and Spelman College. They started as ministry training programs and grew with the assistance of Protestant missionary societies that supported abolition and black education.

The legacy of faith and education in Atlanta provided one of the few groundswells for African American prosperity, even though seemingly every iteration of black progress was met with an increased amount of white violence. But even formerly enslaved men—such as

Alonzo Herndon, the city’s first black millionaire—steadily developed economic capital and cultural credibility in the early part of the 20th century.

Auburn Avenue developed into a center for black business and community building. Its oldest church, Big Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, was known as “Sweet Auburn’s City Hall.” The growing Ebenezer Baptist Church also made its home on the street, its preachers encouraging congregants to become homeowners and “get a piece of the turf” in the bustling district. Martin Luther King Jr. saw his grandfather and father lead Ebenezer, and he co-pastored the church during the final years of his life.

Black Christians have long looked to God as a divine Deliverer, Redeemer, Healer, and Judge in the face of the absurd reality of racism. Martin Luther King Jr. built on those biblical teachings around deliverance by fusing them with the political promises of democracy, freedom, and equality—embracing the prophetic black church tradition alongside American civil religion.

At times unseen and at times marching front and center, the black church has been at the core of each iteration of America’s struggle for freedom,



LEE JENKINS

convicting America of its failure to hold to its foundational ideals. The American conscience was steeped in white supremacy and a form of capitalism that disregarded the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of the nation's nonwhite citizens.

For Martin Luther King Jr., injustices against the economically disenfranchised and black people did not just violate the principles of the kingdom of God; they put America on a road to self-destruction. And so he rallied supporters, fellow black believers in particular, to boycott against segregation, register to vote, and proclaim a different vision for the country, a beloved community of justice and peace. His prophetic faith demanded social change, but also nonviolence.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s life is one reminder that the story of Atlanta is built upon the mountains of resilience and deep conviction. His death reminds us that the movement has come at the great cost of many lives and the emotional well-being of image-bearers seeking justice. That's not specific to the city. America has long been a nation unwilling to receive its spiritual resuscitation without first being marred by tragedy and black death.

Though overcome with grief from her husband's assassination and frustrated with the daunting fight that lay ahead for the movement he had begun, Coretta Scott King did not let her husband's legacy die with him in 1968. She considered it her call from God to take the charge, even at a time when black women were not widely celebrated as leaders.

"She had a spiritual strength that gave her the ability to do what she did without hesitation," said Bernice A. King, the CEO of The King Center, the organization founded by her mother and the place where I work today.

"Her confidence in her calling was undergirded by her prayer life," she told me. "I recall a time in 1990 when I saw my mother seemingly wrestling with God. I walked into her room and heard her saying, 'Whenever I pray, I am on the right path. Whenever I don't, I get off.' This served as a confirmation for me that everything my mother did was formed in prayer."

On a national level, Coretta Scott King worked with legislators to establish the holiday in his honor. In Atlanta, she worked to preserve historic Auburn Avenue and founded the Historic District Development Corporation, which helps to provide affordable housing in the Old Fourth Ward community to this day. Her King Center houses millions of civil rights-era documents and draws in a million visitors a year. Coretta Scott King's efforts are forever tied to the spiritual, social, and political fight for freedom in the city of Atlanta.

And the work continues. Bernice A. King echoes her mother's words, saying now, "The freedom struggle connects us from generation to generation. There are things that we can extract from our elders. . . . There's a strength and courage and tenacity in the younger generation that is so important to the movement for freedom."

Through The King Center, kids as young as toddlers and teens participate in long-term training to develop philosophies around anti-racism and non-violence. They too are caught between the very contemporary realities of the world, with smartphones in their pockets and increasingly diverse classrooms around them, and the still-relevant strategies in the fight for freedom.

For them, the place of the church in the racial justice movement may have shifted, according to my pastor, Lee Jenkins. The church still has the prophetic voice to lead on issues of righteousness and justice, he said, but it needs to speak up.

The Atlanta native—a former manager of Kirk Franklin who built a successful career as an investment adviser—sees the movement extending across all areas of life.

"In 2020, engagement looks different. We need activism from the street to the boardroom," said Jenkins, who leads Eagles Nest Church in Alpharetta,

There is a unique echo for justice in Atlanta, where decades of leaders have walked the same streets and stood in the same pulpits as civil rights heroes who came before them.

Georgia. "The church needs to be leading the charge. It is just as important to build street prophets as boardroom prophets. That is how we are aiming to train people."

In 2020, as black blood has been poured out yet again onto the streets of America, we are at a crossroads. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., where do we go from here? Are our city and our country still on the journey away from the vestiges of white supremacy and toward the more hopeful claim of the beloved community?

The aim of this article—and the articles that follow it—is not merely to capture a historical backdrop of the legacy of faith and activism in Atlanta but to beckon everyone, everywhere, to participate in the story.

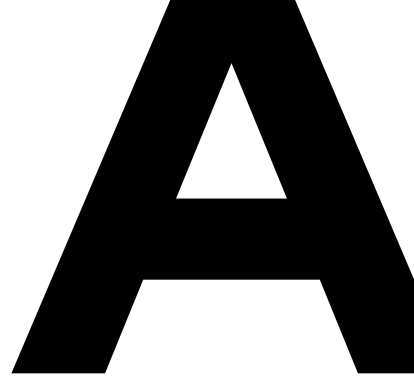
Countless people have sacrificed to make Atlanta what it is today. Just as we are required to be "doers" of the Word in the Book of James, the door has been flung open for all of us to join together in the work of the same God, the same Spirit, the same Word that inspired the civil rights leaders of past and present to see, hear, and act.

The task of dismantling racism and other forms of injustice is mighty, and it requires all of us to be actively engaged with the mission of justice. But the good news is that the kingdom of God is not a faraway existence available to us only upon death. Rather, it is here, active and present in our midst. **CT**

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RAPHAEL WARNOCK



Political Calling

THE BIBLICAL CALL FOR FREEDOM FOR THE OPPRESSED
LED ATLANTA CHRISTIANS TO SOCIAL ACTION.

By Kathryn Freeman Photographs by Ben Rollins

AS PASTOR OF Atlanta’s historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, Raphael Warnock said he never felt the pressure to fill the shoes of his famous predecessor, Martin Luther King Jr. But he does “stand on his shoulders.”

Warnock is the fifth and youngest inhabitant of the pulpit of the 134-year-old church, both a National Historic Site and an active Progressive Baptist congregation. Ebenezer Baptist famously was co-pastored by King and his father, Martin Luther King Sr., or “Daddy King,” from 1960 until the civil rights leader’s assassination in 1968.

Though “times are different than they were then, there are many of the same challenges,” Warnock told *Christianity Today* in the midst of another wave of activism around policing, voting rights, housing, and health care for black Americans. “But we have to rise to [the next] one while finding inspiration in what they’ve done.”

After 15 years at Ebenezer Baptist, Warnock’s present challenge is running for US Senate in Georgia. The issues he hopes to address in office are many of the same ones that troubled an Ebenezer college student named Lonnie King Jr. in 1960. With fellow black student activists, Lonnie King decried racial discrimination in “An Appeal for Human Rights,” which ran in local papers as well as *The New York Times* and was a catalyst toward desegregation in Atlanta.

The contemporary civil rights movement is more diffuse and its leadership less religious than in the days of the marches led by ministers and Christian students in the 1960s. But today’s black church leaders are still building on the political legacies of their forerunners, and Atlanta showcases many of the historic parallels.

“This moment is foremost a moral crisis, but it is also political one,” Warnock said. “The nation could use a moral voice, and the Senate could certainly use a pastor.”

At Ebenezer, he led an interfaith coalition to offer free record expungement to people whose arrest records hurt their employment and housing prospects. As a senator, Warnock plans to prioritize bipartisan efforts to end mass incarceration. Campaigning for November’s special election, the Democratic candidate is the latest in a long line of black faith leaders

and pastors in the state whose faith led them into politics. (Warnock served as pastor to another famous preaching politician, the late US Rep. John Lewis.)

“Atlanta’s long and courageous struggle for social justice has always and continues to this day to include faith and activism because of a tightly knitted web of relationships between black institutions,” said Walter Earl Fluker, professor at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology.

Political candidates and community organizers cite a sense of mission—their desire for the peace, justice, and neighborly love that define God’s kingdom—as they march and mobilize against the systems that threaten their communities. In the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Rayshard Brooks, devout African Americans are responding not just in prayer and lament but also in the streets and the voting booths. They believe the God who values all people as made in his image, who champions the vulnerable, would have them speak up and act.

In Atlanta, that political conviction against racial injustice dates back to at least 1868, when African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Bishop Henry McNeal Turner was elected to the Georgia legislature as a Republican.

“Because God saw fit to make some red, and some white, and some black, and some brown, are we to sit here in judgment upon what God has seen fit to do?” he challenged lawmakers. “As well might one play with the thunderbolts of heaven as with that creature that bears God’s image.”

The former Civil War chaplain was one of 33 black legislators expelled from the statehouse by white politicians, and hope for full citizenship rights for black people in this country dwindled.

In the absence of political power, black Christians historically turned to the church. “In lieu of not being able to engage in traditional politics, black people used their faith to organize and force society to hold to its ideals of democracy and freedom,” said Candler student Darin Sims, a fellow with the Georgia Justice Project.

Black washerwomen relied on the church as they rallied to strike for better

wages in 1881. Black women working at the Scripto factory did the same more than a half century later. Many were members at Ebenezer and had the backing of Martin Luther King Sr. when they unionized in the 1940s. And they had the backing of Martin Luther King Jr. when Mary Gurley, a prominent member of the church, led another Scripto strike in 1964.

According to University of Texas political scientist Eric McDaniel, black pastors and churches across the country are politically engaged “on a variety of issues, like fair housing and anti-discrimination laws, because their members are calling upon them” to help. The church also serves as a place for voter outreach, registration, and education. Today’s black Protestants are three times more likely than their white counterparts to hear about political candidates at church, a Pew Research Center survey shows.

Historically, black pastors were middle class and well educated, so they were in a position to advocate for their community’s needs. Fluker noted that churches like Friendship Baptist, as well as Wheat Street Baptist, Ebenezer Baptist, and Big Bethel AME—all located on Auburn Avenue, the center of black life in Atlanta for generations—helped build the civic and social capital from which black Atlantans today still benefit.

The leaders of these historic churches were involved in landmark interracial cooperation efforts after a 1906 riot. But young student activists criticized the old guard, including Martin Luther King Sr., for accepting incremental changes. In the 1960s, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan “the city too busy to hate” in contrast to more brutish government responses in Memphis and Birmingham, though many white business leaders—more pragmatic than progressive—did not actually welcome integration.

Atlanta “has long celebrated itself as a city too busy to hate, but we must labor to make sure that it is not also a city too busy to love,” Warnock told CT. “We in the church work to make sure Georgians have access to jobs and address the inequities we see in Atlanta and across the country.”

Bobbi Simpson, a former candidate for the Georgia House of Representatives and political consultant, said she got into politics to “provide hope for the poor and call for repentance where governmental or ecclesial leadership has failed to live out biblical commands.”

“Luke 4:18–19 and Amos 2:6–7 speak of God’s love of the poor,” Simpson said. “The poor have been criminalized for far too long, and the church has been complicit either by apathy or by silence.”

Attorney Justin Giboney sees the black church’s theology, particularly its focus on the Exodus narrative and the Great Commandment, as playing a crucial role in spurring political activism in his city. He leads the And Campaign, an Atlanta-based movement calling on Christians to stand for human dignity and justice in public policy. In many ways, the And Campaign reflects traditional black Protestant politics like those of Henry McNeal Turner—a commitment to both justice and morality.

The And Campaign’s positions span from assisting families to addressing poverty and reforming the prison system, and Giboney advises Christians to see political parties as tools, not as identities. Still, he believes all kinds of civic organizations can work toward gospel ends. “If there is something in

Today’s black Protestants are three times more likely than their white counterparts to hear about political candidates at church.



my sphere of influence and my neighbor is hurting, and there is something I can do about it and I do not, that is unfaithful,” he said.

Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged Christians to not only “play a Good Samaritan along life’s roadside” but “to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed.” Atlanta leaders told CT they see that philosophy reflected not only in King Jr. and Coretta Scott King’s legacy, but in a whole generation of civil rights leaders like Juanita Abernathy, Julian Bond, Maynard Jackson, John Lewis, C. T. Vivian, Joseph Lowery, and Ella Baker.

Area pastors make that kind of community and societal transformation a core part of their ministry, with politics being one major way to improve their Jericho roads. Sammie Dow, senior pastor of Pleasant Grove Missionary Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia, organized a letter-writing campaign, trained members to offer public comments to local legislative bodies, and mobilized members for protests while encouraging them to be active voters.

“Activism is the responsibility of anyone, especially black people who profess to be followers of and in relationship with Jesus Christ,” said Dow, a former national director of the NAACP Youth and College division.

Black clergy in Atlanta are ramping up efforts to make sure their members vote and to protect the hard-won rights that leaders like Lewis fought for. The Skinner Leadership Institute and the National African American Clergy Network are sponsoring “Turnout Sunday” in several states, including Georgia, rallying church leaders to pray and share election information.

“We must use our position and influence to teach, motivate, empower, and challenge our members to care about the lives of others, to advocate

for justice and equity, to be actively involved in the community and helping to shape its direction through our vote,” said Cynthia Hale, senior pastor of Ray of Hope Christian Church in Decatur, Georgia. Her church sent out cards with information about voting.

In his book *Across That Bridge*, Lewis wrote, “The power of faith is transformative. It can be utilized in your own personal life to change your individual condition, and it can be used as a lifeline of spiritual strength to change a nation.”

Serving the God of the Exodus and the Son whose anointing set the captives free, black Christians are working to change their neighborhoods, their cities, their states, and the nation—one vote, one protest, one march, one community meeting at a time. **CT**

KATHRYN FREEMAN is an attorney and former director of public policy for the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.



DHATI LEWIS

A

Ministry of Reconciliation

IN CONTINUED PURSUIT OF RACIAL JUSTICE,
ATLANTA'S CHURCH LEADERS PREACH AND
PARTNER ACROSS LONG-STANDING DIVIDES.

By **Jacqueline J. Holness** Photographs by Ben Rollins

DHATI LEWIS SET out to start a church that could be a blueprint for urban discipleship, a church “in the city, for the city, that looks like the city.” But first, he needed a city.

A decade ago, he left the college town of Denton, Texas, for Atlanta, an urban hub four times larger. With him came 25 longtime ministry partners, including rappers Lecrae and Sho Baraka and pastor John Onwuchekwa. Together they planted Blueprint Church in the Old Fourth Ward, a story chronicled in a recent documentary, *Becoming Blueprint*, released in honor of the church’s 10th anniversary.

Lewis’s approach to ministry grew out of the tension he felt between the white evangelical culture that fueled his faith in Denton and the familiar black culture of his upbringing. In Atlanta, though he was a black pastor leading a diverse congregation in a majority-black city, the work of urban church planting was complicated.

For one, the area around his church continued to gentrify. “In this neighborhood, what scares me is the fact that you have Section 8 housing on one end and like a million-dollar home on the other end,” he said in the documentary.

Lewis, vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Send Network, advises fellow church planters that the urban mission field is no longer the “inner city” stereotype but is instead defined by density and both racial and economic diversity.

Urban churches straddle dividing lines, and the context challenges pastors to ask whether they are after superficial unity or are willing to do the difficult work of addressing their own assumptions, shallow theology, and cultural hang-ups to engage in reconciliation.

“Diversity is such a buzzword these days, and as pastors, we all seem to want it. It seems most Christians also want to be part of a diverse church,” Lewis wrote in his 2019 book, *Advocates: The Narrow Path to Racial Reconciliation*. “But I’ve found that once you are in one, you discover how much it challenges some of your most deeply embedded theological convictions.”

The biblical roots of reconciliation are preached from the pulpits and panels at Blueprint, drawing from the multicultural growth of the early church in the New Testament, and these teachings influence the way its members engage in ministry in their own neighborhoods. The pressures Lewis faces as a pastor in Atlanta are some of the same ones fellow black leaders in other parts of the city have confronted over the decades.

Bishop Garland Hunt—co-founder of the OneRace Movement and senior pastor of The Father’s House, a church in the northern suburbs—realized that before he could lead a church working toward unity, God had to change his own heart.

The urban mission field is no longer the “inner city” stereotype but is instead defined by density and both racial and economic diversity.



GARLAND HUNT

Born in the civil rights era, Hunt grew up in the black community in Atlanta. He belonged to a black Baptist church and attended all-black schools. He remembers watching Martin Luther King Jr.'s funeral procession winding through thronged streets of his hometown.

"I was about 10 years old, but I was really impacted by what Dr. King was doing and the impact of the movement in the black community fighting against racial injustice and for our civil rights," he said.

Hunt moved from the city known as the civil rights capital of the nation to the nation's actual capital for college and law school. "Even though I was accepted at other schools, I chose to go to Howard University because it was black and it was in Washington, DC," he said. "So I was choosing a path promoting my cultural identity, and I carried what I experienced in Atlanta with me."

King's example inspired Hunt's activism. He marched on the National Mall for King's birthday to become a national holiday. And he gravitated to new black voices, introducing Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan when he spoke on campus. But Hunt was still a churchgoer, and the Christian principles he was raised with convicted him.

"I realized that the road I was on wasn't the right road, and I knew that the Lord was not pleased with me," he said. His blackness was still the prism through which he practiced his faith, to

the point that he mistrusted white people and "really did not want to hear any biblical truth from anybody white," he said.

In law school, he began to see that the "church of Jesus Christ is not black nor white."

After being baptized in the Holy Spirit during a campus ministry event, "God started dealing with all my racial hatred and prejudices, and I began to open up to true healing. I had to forgive. I had to release." He took years to process what that meant for his approach to racial issues and political issues, going on to build a career in law and ministry.

Hunt, who was involved as a leader in the criminal justice system in Georgia and served as president of the ministry Prison Fellowship, drew from King's legacy and his own convictions on race as he joined with a half dozen pastors to develop the OneRace Movement.

The racial reconciliation ministry held its first major public event in 2018 at Atlanta's Stone Mountain, the largest Confederate monument in the country and a place King referenced in his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Nearly 20,000 people and over 300 churches and ministries participated, encouraged to sign OneRace's "Atlanta Covenant" pledging to "stand against racism" in any form.

Pastor Léonce Crump Jr. was one of the speakers at the event. He moved to Atlanta from Tennessee more than a decade earlier to start a church downtown. Hoping the city's history would buoy his efforts, Crump scheduled the launch of Renovation Church to correspond with Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday weekend.

Crump sought to plant a church that "reflected the full breadth of God's creative genius," and he has seen that prayer bear fruit: The 1,200-person congregation now represents 30 ethnicities. But growth hasn't come without tension. "I've been told, 'You're not preaching the gospel when you're speaking out about police brutality.' Or, 'That's a political issue, not a gospel issue,' or 'I feel like you talk about race too much,'" said Crump, who has a criminal justice degree. "I had one white couple leave, and they called me racist."

Crump wore a shirt that read "Unapologetically Black" as he spoke at a rally in Atlanta's Liberty Plaza in June, joining fellow black Christians speaking out in the weeks following George Floyd's death. He does not intend to stop addressing race, citing John 6:66. "Jesus lost many disciples when he told the truth," he said. "People labeled Dr. King a Marxist and a communist when he was a just a Bible-believing radical Christian."

Atlanta's Latasha Morrison knows what it is like to work through conflict over racial issues on a congregational level. Her Be the Bridge ministry trains Christians to do the humbling work of learning from marginalized voices, developing empathy, and pushing for justice—all undergirded by a belief in the power of God's reconciling work.

"The church has to talk through differences and talk through issues, and there will be pushback," said Morrison, who cautions that people in multiethnic churches are not necessarily reconciled to one another. "People love the word *reconciliation*, but when it comes to the work, that's hard for people. You may lose people along the way."



LÉONCE CRUMP JR.



LATASHA MORRISON

Morrison began Be the Bridge in 2015 in Austin, Texas, where she was on staff at a white church. She was unable to find black friends, and her white friends didn't share the same pop culture references common in black culture and didn't immediately connect over broader concerns around racism in society and the church.

"It was just a burden in my heart to see the church, particularly, so racially segregated," said Morrison. "Rather than complain about it, I started looking at the problem and thinking about why we are so segregated and what can we do to change it." She started with a group of a dozen people, and Be the Bridge has spread to include more than 1,000 groups across five countries.

She has since returned to Atlanta, where she joined leaders like Crump and Hunt in promoting racial justice and racial healing at local events in June. As those conversations around race took off over the summer, Morrison's book *Be the Bridge: Pursuing God's Heart for Racial Reconciliation* became a *New York Times* bestseller.

The Juneteenth march organized by OneRace followed days of rioting and destruction in downtown Atlanta. "The night when Atlanta started to burn, it hurt me so bad," Hunt said. "The violence was overshadowing what was being protested."

Instead, at the OneRace march, more than 13,000 people representing 500 churches marched from Centennial Olympic Park to the state Capitol—evidence that a growing number of Christians in Atlanta see racial reconciliation as an essential part of their faith and church life and are willing to act.

And yet, even pastors who have long felt called to this work and who lead multiethnic congregations themselves testify that the process is challenging.

King's hope was that "with this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together . . . to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."

Decades later, Atlanta pastors are still working toward this dream, taking hope in the fact that, as Blueprint's Lewis writes in a new racial reconciliation curriculum, "the gospel message has never ignored racial issues," and as Be the Bridge attests, God's reconciling work "has the power to remove the enmity, alienation, prejudice, and self-interest."

Leaders sense the Spirit at work in their city and beyond.

"I think we're one generation away from a significant shift because I do think there has been a shift societally. It's just not moving fast enough for the boomers, Gen Xers, and older millennials, the ones who are still caught up in that wicked mentality of racism and supremacy, to be swept away yet," Crump said.

"My children and their children, if the Lord tarries, will have a very different world." **CT**

JACQUELINE J. HOLNESS is an Atlanta-based journalist and author. She blogs at AftertheAltarCall.com.



New Economic Narrative

IN THE CAPITAL OF THE NEW SOUTH,
FAITHFUL BLACK ENTREPRENEURS SEE BUSINESS
AS A WAY TO BLESS THEIR COMMUNITIES.

By **Terasha Burrell** Photographs by Ben Rollins

WHEN JOHN ONWUCHEKWA moved to Atlanta over a decade ago, he came as a church planter. But his call was much broader than that. By starting churches in broken-down neighborhoods, he set out to bring a sense of community and economic opportunity “to the people that look like me.”

“When you start with the church as your cornerstone, you set the direction and the boundaries for everything else to fall into place,” said Onwuchekwa, who leads Cornerstone Church in the Historic West End.

The pastor’s latest venture, launched this year, was not another church, but a coffee business. He and five business partners from Southwest Atlanta founded Portrait Coffee. The roastery and forthcoming café is committed to “pouring a new narrative” for black coffee by recovering the African origins of the product and bringing jobs and development to its neighborhood.

The West End was one of Atlanta’s earliest suburbs, its gingerbread-trimmed residences home to top businessmen and politicians. But as in many cities, white flight in the ’60s and ’70s shifted the demographics, making way for an infusion of African American culture and business: churches and funeral homes, schools and shops. One of those Victorian homes with the fancy trim, said to be one of the oldest in the neighborhood, was bought by a prominent black doctor and became a museum for African American art. Over the years, neighborhood blight became the target of urban renewal and revitalization efforts. In the early 2000s, the West End was hit hard by the housing crisis and recession.

Amid a recent wave of businesses opening in the area, Onwuchekwa and his co-founders talk about creating a different “portrait” for its black residents. When people who look like you respond to the changes and challenges in your neighborhood by creating opportunities for families like yours, that’s a portrait of gospel love.

They’re part of the latest generation of black leaders in Atlanta whose faith motivates them to change hearts and change their neighborhoods—including



JOHN ONWUCHERWA

Atlanta is simultaneously full of success and full of disparity. It's the tale of two Atlantas.

the economic landscape. To these leaders, communities struck by financial downturn and generational poverty don't just need to hear that the Lord "secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy" (Ps. 140:12), or "God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19, ESV). They need sustainable jobs, career paths, and stability.

Atlanta is simultaneously full of success and full of disparity. *Forbes* ranked it the No. 1 city for African Americans economically, and it has a higher proportion of black entrepreneurs than anywhere else in the country (20 percent of the area's black working population is self-employed). Black business owners and artists are drawn to the city in part because of its racial makeup and civil rights history; they know it's a place where black people can prosper.

Lecrae's Reach Records came to Atlanta a decade ago, when the rapper joined friends from Texas who were church-planting in the city. "I said, 'Wow, well, No. 1, I got saved in Atlanta, so it's got a special place in my heart, and No. 2, it's Atlanta,'" he recently recalled.

At the same time, wealth gaps persist between black and white workers at every income and education level, and they're growing wider due to



JOHN WOOD

gentrification. It's a tale of two Atlantas. According to the Atlanta Wealth Building Initiative, the city "leads the nation in income inequality and lack of economic mobility."

Lecrae has seen that side of his new hometown too. He partners with Love Beyond Walls founder Terence Lester to serve people experiencing homelessness and extreme poverty across the city.

This narrative is everywhere, including at the busy intersections where young black boys hustle to sell bottles of water and sports drinks. These "bottle boys" sit on coolers in the sweaty summer heat and dart through traffic to make a sale. But it's a dangerous enough venture that city officials recently condemned the practice and instead want to develop other outlets for youth entrepreneurship.

Churches have already led the way, enlisting business leaders in their congregations to mentor and train eager kids in their neighborhoods. The entrepreneurship ministry at Providence Missionary Baptist Church offers youth the chance to learn about different career fields, gain hands-on experience, and practice networking. Plus, the Southwest Atlanta congregation highlights successful business leaders among its members and offers resources such as career coaching, business coaching, financial literacy classes, and soft-skills training.

Today's leaders continue to recognize the moral implications of the wealth gaps and chronic poverty that persist in their city.



Programs like these are practical ways to fill the distance between where people are in life and where they feel God calling them to be. They reflect leaders' willingness to see economic justice and financial opportunity as relevant to the mission of the church.

Providence also happened to be the home church of the late civil rights activist C. T. Vivian and hosted his homegoing service when he died in July at age 95. Vivian famously joined fellow minister Martin Luther King Jr. in what he saw as a movement to "remove the black struggle from the economic realm and place it in a moral and spiritual context." Today's leaders continue to recognize the moral implications of the wealth gaps and chronic poverty that persist in their city.

In the Old Fourth Ward, the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood famous for being King's birthplace, LaToya Tucciarone runs a retail shop in Ponce City Market, a former Sears, Roebuck, & Co. building that was adapted into an upscale mixed-use development.

Her SustainAble Home Goods carries products that nod to the African artifacts her parents displayed in her childhood home. The fair-trade business is "born out of a deeply held belief that all men and women are made in the image of God and have inherent worth and value, skills and talents," and its high-end location allows her to challenge shoppers to consider the broader impact of their spending.

She's also an example of a black businesswoman shaking up the approach in what can be a realm shaped by white savior complexes or expectations of catering to a white market. That was also a factor for Portrait Coffee, whose owners want to expand high-end, quality coffee beyond the stereotypically white, hipster shops and into diverse neighborhoods.

As Portrait awaits the opening of its own West End location, its beans are sold at Chrome Yellow Trading Co. in the Old Fourth Ward and Westview Corner Grocery, about a half-mile from Onwuchekwa's church. In the first few months in business, Portrait—which launched with the help of a \$35,000 Kickstarter campaign—had enough demand that its online store was selling out.

The first couple years of any new business can be hard, particularly for black founders, who generally have less access to startup capital. Kelly Burton knows the struggle firsthand after her apparel company folded three years ago. She heard from so many fellow business leaders in Atlanta—particularly fellow black women—who faced similar challenges in making their creative ideas profitable that she created a network so they could learn from one another: Founders of Color.

Entrepreneurs, especially ones who chase after a dream alone or with little support, find a special kind of fulfillment in doing what feels like the work they were meant to do for themselves, their industries, and their communities.

"If you are attempting to solve problems related to economic empowerment in black neighborhoods of Atlanta," Burton said, "you need to come to the people that are putting in the work and uniquely know the challenges that will be faced because they've paved the way and are far more invested in the people first and then profit."

Opening a business is an act of creation, a way we reflect the God who made Earth out of the void and who placed us there to cultivate it. With the mind and heart of Christ, enterprising believers recognize opportunities, take initiative, and do the tending work to help their projects grow.

For John Wood, that cultivation was making poetry and clothing that

promote Atlanta culture and reflect the love of God. Atlanta's his hometown, and with the influx of business opportunities and new residents, it can feel like "no one is from Atlanta anymore." Wood worries about investors who come in without regard for history or community. Instead, he says, they should approach Atlanta "as a garden that needs watering, knowing that where you plant seeds, you will eventually see growth."

Like Onwuchekwa at Portrait, Wood wants to tell a different kind of story about the city he has always called home. He felt God call him to be a voice for the lost and broken, to speak healing into hurting communities by pointing to God's Word.

His brand, Stained Glass Apparel, displays slogans designed to start conversations about Scripture ("Rooted," "In Christ," "Jesus Saves"). But his BLK FRVR line, along with his latest poetry, reflect his heart for the African American community in Atlanta. "If race is part of our eternal destiny, I can't wait to be black forever" is printed on a pastel tie-dye shirt. His poetry asks, "... and just who is responsible for all this black on black hope?"

This summer, BLK FRVR was among dozens of businesses in Atlanta participating in expos and pop-up shops encouraging spending among black-owned ventures, one strategy to help build wealth among African Americans and promote economic development. They see themselves positioned to change the local landscape.

"If we as Christians are really about the advancement of the kingdom of God, we need to figure out practically what that looks without the inequality that plagues black communities," Burton said.

Across industries, from roasting coffee to printing sweatshirts, black Christians hope for the kind of prosperity for their communities that the city has long represented—not because they believe Atlanta has overcome its disparities, but because they want to work to make it so.

CT

TERASHA BURRELL is the author of *Broken Pieces Speak* and the co-blog director for Black Christian Influencers.

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NEUROSCIENCE SUGGESTS
THAT MEMORIZING
SCRIPTURE IS NOT ABOUT
HEAD KNOWLEDGE.

BY K. J. RAMSEY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CORNELIA LI



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DESPERATE FOR encouragement but couldn't even open my Bible. As my tears fell, the words I could not read welled up inside instead.

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. . . ." (Ps. 139:13–14). Unbidden, my soul remembered its truest story, the story that my present suffering was threatening to smash and scatter into the wind.

A month after I turned 20, my body suddenly became a place of pain rather than possibility. In a matter of days, I could no longer walk because of severe joint pain and inflammation. I sat on my dorm bed, and for a few minutes I tried to uncoil my swollen hands to turn the pages of my Bible, to no avail.

In that suffering, the Word hidden in my heart started countering my fear. I was confused and craving comfort, but God's story was alive inside of me, welcoming me into the wonder that I am loved at my weakest.

God's Word became a living part of my memory long before I most needed it. Many summers during my childhood, my Presbyterian church memorized an entire chapter of Scripture together, including the psalm that bubbled up in me that afternoon in college. Our pastor printed verses on colored paper and

posted them on every wall and bathroom stall. Each Sunday evening we would gather in the warmth of the setting sun, sitting in lawn chairs in quiet Michigan backyards, where word by word we repeated passages of Scripture together. It was before our eyes, on our lips, in our hearts, and in our midst.

Scripture memory was also a central part of my education at my conservative Baptist school. But instead of shared joy, there were stars on charts. At church, I learned God's Word as a story while standing next to 70-year-olds with beaming smiles. But at school, I learned to satisfy teachers, afraid of their frowns. I barely remember the hundreds of verses "memorized" for our weekly quizzes. But the words we said under the summer sun are welded into who I am.

We can better understand the difference between what we remember and what we forget by learning the way God designed our brains and bodies to form lasting memories.

Most of us misunderstand the basic way memory works. In a large-scale 2011 study, researchers found that 63 percent of Americans believe human memory is like a video camera—as though our minds accurately record everything we see and hear so we can review and reflect on it later.

In reality, memory is a complex function of how the brain processes each moment, situation, and relationship and how it directs our response. Memory is shaping the story we live every moment of every day, but most of us are unaware of its steering. Our minds are etched by relationships, and our past relational experiences subconsciously guide how we experience God, ourselves, and others now. Our past shapes our present and our future.

Jessie Cruickshank is a researcher, minister, and Harvard-trained expert in neuroscience and education. She explained that our long-term memory banks are composed of two kinds of memories. "Heart knowledge is that embodied, autobiographical memory," she told CT, "and head knowledge is

semantic.” These two parts of our memory are not easily linked, such that it is incredibly difficult to learn something in our semantic memory and then wire it to our hearts.

According to Cruickshank, who is now a consultant at the leadership support ministry 5Q, the way most Christians in the US approach Scripture, especially memorizing it, involves using semantic memory. But research has shown that semantic memory has an extremely high forgetting rate. In other words, we often try to memorize Scripture in a manner in which it will be easily lost. Autobiographical memory, however, has much more staying power.

We want the Word of Christ to dwell richly among us (Col. 3:16) so that the stories of God’s love and redemption become so thoroughly etched in our memory that they guide us more than sin or any feelings of abandonment or fear. The Word has to be experienced and embraced as living, active, and relational to become a lasting part of our autobiographical memory. We must approach Scripture with our whole selves, whole stories, and whole bodies as a means by which we can encounter the author of all life, rather than as facts to retain or truth to know.

Cruickshank explained: “Only autobiographical memory can project into the future. Because it’s the memory of your past, it’s the memory of your future. It’s called prospecting. . . . Semantic memory cannot do that. So if you learn something as a data fact, you literally cannot—biologically cannot—apply it to your life. This has profound implications for discipleship. If you memorize—which is semantic memory—‘God is good,’ you literally cannot apply that to your life.”

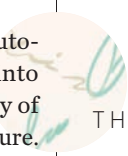
Memorizing Scripture in ways that do not fully get stored in our autobiographical memory might mean we will know the truth but be incapable of living it. But when the Word, story, and presence of God become part of our autobiographical memory, we can’t help but apply them to our lives because they’ve been encoded into our story. Instead of needing to find a verse to discern right from wrong, we can so thoroughly encounter the person of God in

his Word that walking in his way of wisdom becomes the habit of our hearts.

But we’re much more used to looking up information than dwelling with it and meditating on it. We live with nearly constant access to search engines, and research is showing that when we interact with the internet as an assistive memory partner, we do not remember as much information.

Researchers call this dynamic cognitive offloading. Perhaps without realizing it, we’re also offloading Scripture’s place in our hearts by searching for words or phrases on Bible Gateway instead of taking the time to search the Bible for ourselves. As psychologists Daniel M. Wegner and Adrian F. Ward wrote in *Scientific American* in 2013, our tendency toward cognitive offloading may “undermine the impulse to ensure that some important, just learned facts get inscribed into our biological memory banks.”

They also noted that the relational richness of our shared knowledge is diminishing, even as our access to knowledge has never been more expansive. Researchers in France and the



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UK have shown that “digital natives,” those who have grown up with internet-connected technologies, tend to gravitate toward shallow information processing. According to Ward, our tendency to reach for Google to tell us what’s true may be impairing how we encode new memories, keeping us from developing metamemory—our knowledge of learning processes and

our capacity to be aware of and regulate how we form memories.

Our habits of disconnection and distraction with a wealth of devices at our fingertips keep us from being shaped to feel the wealth and wonder of the story of God as our own. Both our tendency toward cognitive offloading and our general bias toward treating Scripture like a collection of facts rather than encountering the person of God keep us stuck in a mode of shallow information processing, where the Word and presence of God cannot become rooted in our autobiographical memory.

Rafael Rodriguez, a professor of New Testament at Johnson University in Knoxville, Tennessee, shared in an interview how the early church’s oral culture interacted with the Word of God. Though the earliest Christians had much lower rates of literacy, they were driven to turn to the words not simply to remember facts but to encounter Jesus. “The texts are important,” Rodriguez said, “because we believe God speaks through them to us and to our world and to our community.”

Rodriguez encourages his students to learn to listen to Scripture much the way a first-century Christian would. He tells them, “Read this out loud so that the muscles of your chest and throat and mouth have to form these words, so that your ears register them, so that your eyes see them on the page. You want to engage your whole body. Write out the Word, not just type out the Word. When you’re writing with a pen and paper, it interiorizes the Word in a way that’s much more real. Being a scribe of the Word is important for us as individual Christians and as the community of the church.”

Cruickshank agrees. She says that when we engage the Bible first and foremost as a relationship with the living God, it activates the parts of our brain needed to encode the story of Scripture into our autobiographical memory. Further, as we engage the Word with our whole bodies—writing, speaking, listening, drawing, and imagining—and connect it reflectively to our stories, we are able to absorb it in a way that connects multiple systems of our brains.



Some people in ministry witness these theories at work. Every Sunday, pastor Jon Brown stands before the congregation of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, and recites the sermon's passage of Scripture from memory. In an interview with CT, Brown shared that he calls his approach "interiorization" instead of memorization. He described his process of sermon preparation as indwelling the story of Scripture so thoroughly that it becomes his story, so that when he shares it with his congregation, they can also experience the story as their own.

Brown preaches from texts set by the Narrative Lectionary, a four-year cycle of readings crafted by two professors at Luther Seminary aimed at helping Christians experience the Word as a larger, living story. During the week, Brown sets aside time to commit the text to memory. Like Rodriguez, he seeks to absorb a biblical passage with his whole body, employing hand motions, drawing, speaking the words aloud, writing out the passage, and using mnemonic devices. By the middle of the week, Brown says he has so internalized it that he cannot help but see its patterns and themes come alive in conversation. Rather than being something he can just recite, the Word animates his thoughts and actions. It becomes part of his autobiographical memory and sense of self. And he's been doing this for 17 years.

Gary Cantwell, chief communications officer for the Navigators, shared similar experiences of being holistically formed by Scripture. Like Brown and Rodriguez, Cantwell has used embodied practices to absorb the Word over the past year while working through the Navigators' Topical Memory System—drawing pictures and even recording himself reading verses to listen to later. He described noticing a shift from outside to in: "I have it [the Word] in my heart." He said Bible memory was more of a duty or expectation in the early days of the Navigators, but leaders today are encouraged to pass on verses "from disciple to disciple" in a conversational way.

Yet there's still potential for ministries that stress Bible memory to unwittingly shape Christians to turn to Scripture to accumulate facts rather than become part of God's story. When our focus is on head knowledge, our encounters with the Word can become void of eagerness to be shaped by its author.

What helps us move from being mere observers of Scripture to participants in God's story? Cruickshank says it's suffering. When we suffer and experience the cognitive dissonance of realizing some things we thought were true are not, our brains release a hormone called brain-derived neurotrophic factor. Research done by the University of Arizona has shown that learning is optimized when we fail 15 percent of the time. When we come

up against the limits of our knowledge of God and life, when we realize we are not in control and sometimes are wrong—a place that suffering brings us to again and again—God has wired us so that our bodies release the very hormone we need to form new neural connections. And as we learn to pause there, to reflect rather than anxiously seek answers or quick relief, our brains stay in the state needed for the presence and Word of God to become rooted in our autobiographical memory.

Living as an at-risk person during the COVID-19 era, I'm again finding that suffering can recall the Word within me. Right before the pandemic started, I looked forward to speaking opportunities all over the country. Now, my doctors anticipate I may not be medically safe to fly or even go to church until there is a vaccine. In a corner of my small apartment, I speak aloud the words of Psalm 18: "He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me" (v. 19, ESV). Day by day, I mouth the words from behind my mask as I slowly make a loop around our neighborhood park. In my smallness, engaging all my senses, I start to see a spaciousness within me and feel a growing hope that I will again live farther than the confines of my apartment and park. It's in the contrast between where I am, where I'd like to be, and what David expressed as true that I find my story in this season becoming bigger than what I can see.

In Jesus, we are offered the relationship that will change our stories by renewing our minds (Rom. 12:1–2), down to the very firing of our neural networks. Because Christ came, because he suffered, because he lives in us now by his Spirit, he is always meeting us in our smallness and sorrow. As we move from merely memorizing Scripture to encountering God with all our senses and emotions—especially when we are most anxious, confused, and in need of comfort—Christ's story becomes our own. That is a broad place. **CT**

IN JESUS, WE ARE OFFERED THE RELATIONSHIP THAT WILL CHANGE OUR STORIES BY RENEWING OUR MINDS, DOWN TO THE VERY FIRING OF OUR NEURAL NETWORKS.

K. J. RAMSEY is a licensed professional counselor and writer who lives in Colorado. Sections of this article are taken from her first book, *This Too Shall Last: Finding Grace When Suffering Lingers*.

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GOOD NEWS



Our mortality offers



surprising encouragement.

TOMORROW WE DIE

By J. Todd Billings



USED TO ASSUME that God owed me a long life—to pursue a vocation and family with full strength, to live long enough to become a grandparent. Then, at 39, I was diagnosed with incurable cancer. The expected storyline of my life was interrupted. Now, as a cancer patient, my expectations have changed. The cancer is likely to cut decades from my life; I experience daily pain and fatigue that drain my strength. While my former expectations of God may seem reasonable, I’ve come to see how I had unwittingly embraced a form of the prosperity gospel. I believed that God owed me a long life.

This assumption is widespread. Among those in the United States who believe in God, 56 percent think that “God will grant good health and relief from sickness to believers who have enough faith,” according to a recent Pew study. In other parts of the world, the percentage of Christians who hold this view is even higher.

In some ways, this belief fits with Old Testament teachings about reaping what we sow. “Trouble pursues the sinner, but the righteous are rewarded with good things,” Proverbs 13:21 says. The prosperity gospel takes nuggets of wisdom like this and combines them with the healing ministry of Jesus in a way that explains illness in a clear axiom: Since God loves us, he doesn’t want us to be sick. So if we don’t have good health, it must be a consequence of personal sin, or at least a lack of faith on our part. One way or another, the ill person is to blame. While many evangelicals would reject this “strong” form of the prosperity gospel, many

of us accept a softer version, a corollary: If I’m seeking to obey God and live in faith, I should expect a long life of earthly flourishing and relative comfort.

Recently, a friend told me about her work as a counselor with middle school youth at a Christian summer camp. On a designated day, campers participated in an activity designed to help them develop empathy in some small ways for people living with physical disabilities. Some students were blindfolded, others had their ears covered, and others sat in a wheelchair for the day’s activities.

Partway through the day, one girl ripped off her blindfold and refused to put it back on. “If I became blind, God would heal me,” she said. She had faith in Jesus and was trying to obey God. Like a predictable transaction, she knew that if she did her part, she could count on God to give her a life she considered to be prosperous. If she became blind, God would fix that.

The problem with this approach is not the belief that God can heal and that God loves us. The issue is that the God of Scripture never promises the type of prosperity this camper so confidently expected. Certainly, when healing comes, including through the means of medical treatment, it is a good gift from God. When we feel like we are in a dark “pit,” like the psalmist (Ps. 30:1–3), we can and should lament and petition for deliverance, including in our pain and illness. We rightly ask God for healing, just as we ask the Father for our daily bread in the Lord’s Prayer. Yet healing, like our daily bread, is ephemeral, passing away. Whether we live only a few years or several decades, Ecclesiastes reminds us that, viewed through a wide-angle lens, “Everyone comes naked from their mother’s womb, and as everyone comes, so they depart” (5:15).

Every one of us will eventually be struck down by death, a wound that no medicine can heal. Though Proverbs is right to point us to the general wisdom of reaping what we sow, it’s not a divine law of how the universe always works. Job was “blameless and upright” yet suffered great calamity with the loss of his children, his servants, his wealth, and his health (Job 1:1, 13–19; 2:7–8). The apostle Paul served Christ

PHOTOS ON PREVIOUS SPREAD BY THEMACK / ISTOCK / GETTY
DOUBLELIBRA / MOMENT / GETTY

and the church sacrificially in faith yet was not granted deliverance from his “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7–10). When it comes to mortality and the losses that come with it, none of us will be exempt. Although we tend to push away such basic human realities in our daily life, I’ve discovered something surprising: For us as Christians, embracing daily reminders of our mortal limits can refresh our parched souls.

Good News Worth Dying For

Our lifetime is “fleeting,” our days like a “handbreadth” in relation to the eternal God, Psalm 39 reminds us. Until the Lord of creation comes again to make all things new, we join the psalmist in praying:

Lord, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
(vv. 4–5, NRSV)

This prayer contrasts with commonly shared cultural assumptions today. Our tendency to construct tales about ourselves on Facebook and Instagram, for example, is part of a larger cultural liturgy—a set of practices shaping our desires—that subtly leads many of us to assume that we are at the center of the universe and that our story, if not our actual number of years on earth, will never end. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed these assumptions as illusions. The fact that refrigerated trucks were required to gather the bodies of the dead in cities like New York and Detroit is jarring testimony that highly developed nations are not immune to unexpected death. Moreover, as protests about the killing of unarmed black people have disclosed, the assumption that “my storyline will never end” is a culturally privileged one. The black church and other marginalized communities are painfully aware of the fleeting nature of human life. “Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus,” the Negro spiritual intones. For “I ain’t got long to stay here.”

Our mortality was not so easy to avoid in earlier generations. Beyond the reality that life-threatening communicable disease was an ever-present threat, the culture of death in America was more communal. Funeral services served as consistent reminders of human mortality as whole congregations attended, including children. These services traditionally focused on how we are not our own but belong to Christ in life and in death. In contrast, it is more common now to have personal memorial services tailored

to the particular life story of the deceased, with only family and friends attending. We may care about someone else’s death, but only when it’s meaningful for our own story. Our own story counts the most. Death is something that happens to *other* people.

Psalm 39 cuts through such illusions, yet it is charged with hope. Though we are temporal creatures, we can still find true flourishing by investing our deepest loves in the one who is everlasting, the Lord. Peter Craigie, a particularly insightful commentator on the Psalms, notes how life’s value must be understood in light of its finitude. “Life is extremely short,” Craigie once wrote. “If its meaning is to be found, it must be found in the purpose of God, the giver of all life.” Indeed, recognizing the “transitory nature” of our lives is “a starting point in achieving the sanity of a pilgrim in an otherwise mad world.” Craigie penned these words in 1983, in the first of three planned volumes on the Psalms in a prestigious scholarly commentary series. Two years later he died in a car accident, leaving his commentary series incomplete. He was 47.

Craigie’s life was taken before he and his loved ones expected, before he could accomplish his good and worthy earthly goals. Yet in his transient life, he bore witness to the breathtaking horizon of eternity. He bore witness to how embracing our mortal limits goes hand in hand with offering our mortal bodies to the Lord of life. We’re not heroes of the world, and we can’t do much. But we can love generously, and we can bear witness to the one who is the origin and end of life itself—the everlasting Lord, the Alpha and the Omega, the crucified and risen Savior who has accomplished and will bring about what we could never do ourselves.

The Antidote to Death Denial

Our faith should not be used as a buffer to shield us from the sobering reality of our own mortality. Indeed, this death-denying attitude, so common in the “soft” prosperity gospel today, is unnecessary because of our hope in God for the resurrection of the dead. In the

*I HAD UNWITTINGLY
EMBRACED A FORM OF
THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL.
I BELIEVED THAT GOD
OWED ME A LONG LIFE.*

end, a faith unable to cope with our mortal helplessness is not worth having. The apostle Paul admits this openly: “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith,” he says in his famous chapter on Christ’s resurrection. “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:14, 19). Daily admitting our impotence before death can be a way of giving ourselves over to the risen Lord rather than depending upon our own attempts to manufacture a “prosperous” earthly life.

Strangely enough, admitting our powerlessness over death in this way can free us from slavery to the fear of death. Sociologists, in a school of thought inspired by Ernest Becker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, have documented how cultures tend to idolize political heroes or national fortunes as a way to deny their mortal limits. When we humans deny our mortality, we become defensive, trusting only our own political tribe or own racial or cultural groups. But living in resurrection hope displaces the need to idolize flawed leaders or whitewash sinful ideological causes. We can openly admit that we cannot defeat death. Instead, we live in trust that on the final day, “when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Cor. 15:54). That day has not yet come—we long for it in the coming age, when Christ’s kingdom comes in fullness. Our hope for it, and in God’s purposes rather than our own, makes a great deal of difference in how we live each day now.

In light of resurrection hope, Paul believed that though “outwardly we are wasting away,” our bodily decay will not have the final word (2 Cor. 4:16). Moreover, even our bodily afflictions are incorporated into the reality that holds us: our union with the crucified and risen Lord. “For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body” (v. 11). Whether or not we have sight or mobility, whether we live 5 or 40 or 90 years, our bodies belong to the Lord, and the process of outwardly wasting away can be a testimony to the

*IN THE END, A FAITH
UNABLE TO COPE
WITH OUR MORTAL
HELPLESSNESS IS NOT
WORTH HAVING.*

humble love of our Savior. Amazingly, the Spirit enfolds bodily failings into his work in the world. As we are witnesses to Christ, the very crumbling of our bodies makes it “clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (v. 7, NRSV). In this way, the anchor of our hope is not deliverance from the process of decay but union with the crucified and risen Christ. This union with Christ will fully blossom in the coming resurrection, sharing in “an eternal glory that far outweighs” our present troubles (v. 17).

The Gift of Mortality Reminders

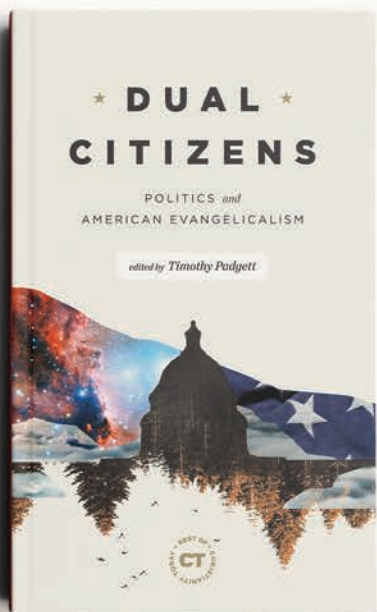
According to Martin Luther, even when our bodies feel vibrant and dying seems to belong to a far country, we should make death a frequent acquaintance. “We should familiarize ourselves with death during our lifetime,” he wrote in a 1518 sermon, “inviting death into our presence when it is still at a distance and not on the move.” Why does Luther advise this? His reason is not a morbid proclivity but rather the same reason the psalmist refers to life as merely “a few handbreadths” before God: Death punctures our hubris, our sense that the world is a drama in which we are the focal point. Reminders of our death can point to the God of life—the God who put flesh on dry bones—as our only hope, both now and in the age to come. As Luther reminds us, “since everyone must depart, we must turn our eyes to God, to whom the path of death leads and directs us.”

On hard days and easier days, amid joy and pain, I’ve come to embrace mortality reminders as strange but good gifts. They can ground me as a mortal before God. We live in hope that the frailty and decay of our bodies will not be the final measure of our lives. We live in hope that the central drama of the universe is not our own life story. Instead, living as small creatures, we can rejoice in the wonder and drama of God’s love in Christ.

Our present life will end when, like Job, we as creatures are stripped of family and fortune and worldly future. But even in light of this mortal end—indeed, especially in light of it—we can join the apostle Paul in being “convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39). **CT**

J. TODD BILLINGS is the Gordon H. Girod Research Professor of Reformed Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. This article includes material adapted from his latest book, *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live*.

THE BEST OF CHRISTIANITY TODAY



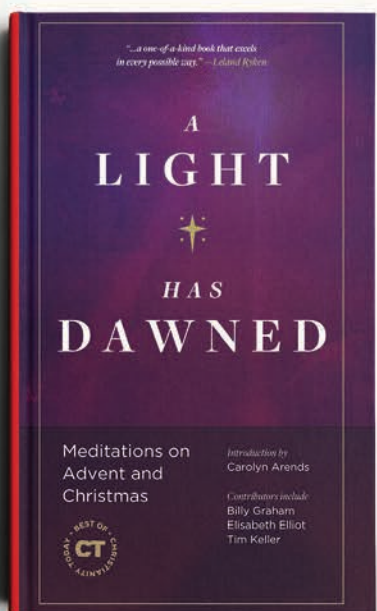
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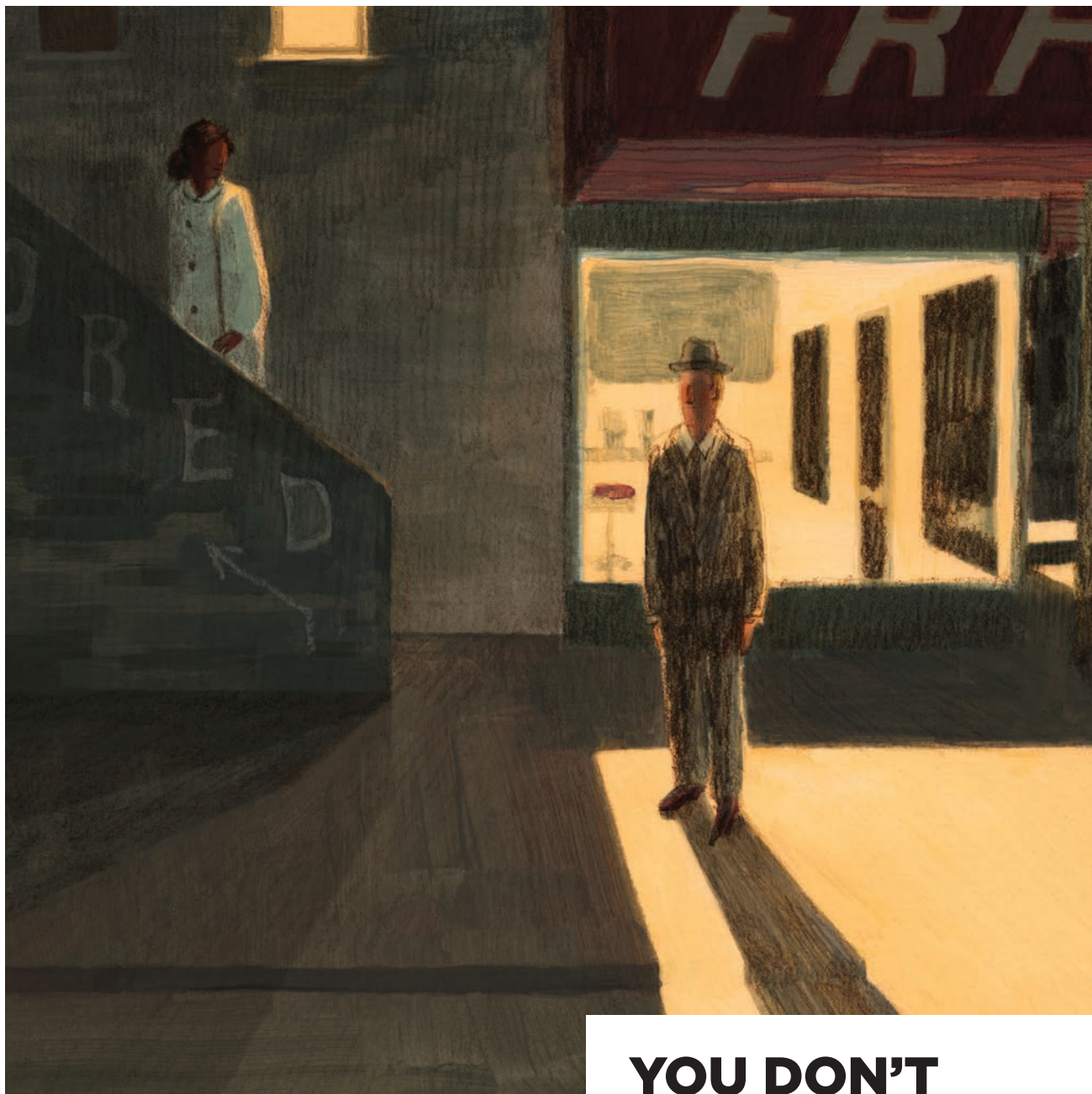
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YOU DON'T KNOW JACK



In Marilynne Robinson's latest novel, the wayward pastor's son has struck up an interracial romance. And he can't stop talking about Jesus.

BY TIMOTHY LARSEN

ILLUSTRATION BY DOROTHY LEUNG

J

John “Jack” Ames Boughton is a wayward preacher’s son who always seems to find himself close to Christians. He often feels the need to let them know he is actually an atheist. His Christian acquaintances, however, somehow don’t feel the need to take his confession at face value.

Perhaps Jack bears some blame for this ambiguity. He talks about his “atheist soul”—a soul he suspects has been predestined (he definitely believes in predestination) for perdition (he is definitely not a universalist). Yet he still seeks out Christian worship, pastoral counsel, and even a hoped-for blessing. He loves to play hymns on the piano. He is also a habitual thief, liar, drunkard, and—in his own unflinching self-assessment—a “confirmed, inveterate bum.” But perhaps that is just another way of saying that he starts from the same place we all do, as a son of the old Adam.

Jack ★★★★★ is the fourth in a series of novels by Marilynne Robinson. It follows *Gilead* (2004); *Home* (2008), which adds Jack’s perspective to the events of *Gilead*; and *Lila* (2014), all of which were lauded by critics and readers alike.

Robinson is widely considered among the greatest American novelists writing today. She has also emerged as one of America’s leading public intellectuals. Many of her addresses and essays have been collected in resonant volumes such as *The Death of Adam* (1998), *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (2012), *The Givenness of Things* (2015), and *What Are We Doing Here?* (2018). Barack Obama is such an admirer that while he was president, he did an interview with Robinson that appeared in *The New York Review of Books*.

What makes all this especially intriguing is that Robinson is also very open about her Christian faith. She is even an unapologetic champion of John Calvin. Moreover, her works are infused with Christian thought and theological meditations. She trusts her readers to know and care about the contents of the Bible, the doctrines of the church, and the distinctive views of the major denominations.

DETERMINED HARMLESSNESS

This latest novel is centered on the romantic relationship between Jack, a white man from Iowa, and Della, an African American high school teacher from Tennessee, which blossomed when they were both living in St. Louis. The precise year is not identified, but my historical detective work suggests 1954. In other words, the novel is set in a time and place in which interracial marriage was illegal and segregation was the norm.

In the previous novels, readers learned a lot about Jack through the eyes of characters he had disappointed, notably his father and sister, and his namesake, the Reverend John Ames. Jack’s chief offense was impregnating an impoverished, underage girl and then callously abandoning her and their child. He skips town and leaves his distraught family—not least his Presbyterian minister father—to figure out how to make some amends.

That episode revealed a gross weakness of character. Arguably more rattling still was the fact of Jack’s chronic malicious streak. He would steal things of no use to him just because they held sentimental value for their owners. He would destroy things he happened upon just because he could.

Poignantly, we learn in this novel that Jack is just as bewildered by his behavior as everyone else. He can’t explain his actions even to himself—and he grasps how frightening they

are. He felt these deeds as a “compulsion”—somehow, he knew he was going to do mischief. Robinson does not psychologize this, but there are moments when it seems like obsessive-compulsive disorder or something similar might be a factor. At one point in the story, Jack walks to a church building with the notion of touching it and thereby absorbing its solidity. When he arrives, someone he knows is standing there, unwittingly barring him from undertaking this private ritual. As he chats with the man, Jack can’t shake the inner turbulence of having the ritual interrupted.

Robinson’s real interest, however, is not psychological but theological. Jack knows himself to be a wretched man. The good he ought to do he does not do, and the evil he knows he shouldn’t do he ends up doing anyway. The reader is relieved that Jack is looking for a way out. When Della meets him, he is already pursuing a life of determined harmlessness. He has become a kind of utilitarian saint, following John

JACK’S BEHAVIOR TOWARD DELLA IS UTTERLY PURE, EVEN CHIVALROUS. YET BECAUSE THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS INTERRACIAL, EVERYONE AROUND THEM SEES IT AS SHAMEFUL AND DISCREDITABLE.

Stuart Mill's dictum of being free to do anything as long as it does not harm others.

Jack, however, is not a true saint. He is not doing anyone any good, and he is indulging in a lot of self-abuse. Moreover, as Scripture reminds us, it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). A central tension of the novel is Jack's moral dilemma: Should he embrace love and thus move beyond his self-contained, self-destructive life? Or is staying away from Della—thereby ensuring he does not cause her harm—truly the most good and Christian course?

One tragic aspect of the whole situation is the tragedy of America. In contrast to the callous relationship in *Gilead* that so marred his reputation, Jack's behavior toward Della is utterly pure, even chivalrous. Yet because their relationship is interracial, everyone around them sees it as shameful and discreditable. The one time in his life when Jack is behaving honorably, he is judged dishonorable; he is at last being respectable, but a racist, sinful, toxic society condemns his actions as disrespectful.

Della and Jack fantasize about re-creating society from scratch, writing the rules as they see fit. Revealingly, even for Jack, this is an imagined chance to escape the injustices of segregation but not the demands of Christian discipleship. They decide against abolishing the category of "sin" in their brave new world, reasoning that the potential to do harm will still exist. Endearingly, they even commit to remembering the Sabbath. Not only is it "pretty hard to forget," but as Jack reflects: "Closing the world down once a week to frustrate some percentage of bad impulses was Moses' best gift to humankind."

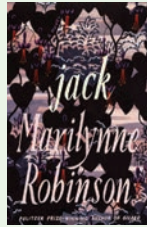
There can be no exit into nihilism. But, Jack muses, what if it were clearly, unequivocally revealed that life has no meaning? Della has her retort ready: "Meaninglessness would come as a terrible blow to most people. It would be full of significance for them. So it wouldn't be meaningless. That's where I always end up. Once you ask if there is meaning, the only answer is yes."

Moreover, the guarantor of meaning is Jesus Christ. As Della observes, "I just think there has to be a Jesus, to say 'beautiful' about things no one else would ever see." Jesus, therefore, is another prominent character in this narrative. Jack evokes his name incessantly, including in his internal monologues. Sometimes it can sound like an expletive, but on other occasions it is readily discernible as a prayer: "Dear Jesus, keep me harmless."

When city officials devise a development scheme that involves demolishing the black neighborhood, Jack fantasizes about rescuing the large portrait of Christ's ascension in the black Baptist church he

has been attending. He would take it back to his tiny, dingy, one-room lodging. He imagines Christ filling his dwelling place.

On the piano in her house, Della has pictures of her family and, among them, a portrait of Jesus. We eventually learn that Della's father—an African Methodist Episcopal bishop—has the same picture on his desk, as does Jack's father. Are they not then already blood relations—part of the same family? In Della's display, the picture of Jesus is the only one in color. Does he then offer a way to free us from our black-and-white binary?



Jack: A Novel
MARILYNNE
ROBINSON
Farrar, Straus
and Giroux

GRACE UPON GRACE

Unchristian, unjust, and socially constructed though it is, that binary is nevertheless brutally real. Jack and Della cannot sit next to each other on a bus when they travel "together"; they cautiously face away from each other when they sit talking on a park bench.

Early on, Jack compliments Della: "You're very sure of yourself. At ease in your own skin." To which she can only reply, "You actually said that." When she prods him to reform his life, Jack retorts, "You don't know what you're asking. Can the leopard change his spots?" Robinson counts on the reader to feel the haunting resonance of the unspoken first part of that biblical quotation: "Can an Ethiopian change his skin?" (Jer. 13:23).

Another way their relationship is "mixed" is that Della is a Methodist and—doubter and flagrant sinner though he is—Jack is very much a Presbyterian. When Della airs her doubts about predestination to reassure Jack that he isn't doomed, he remains unmoved: "Destiny," he replies, "has made you a Methodist." Jack can even give a defense of the Reformed faith that would make his father proud: "It's all pretty straightforward. Salvation by grace alone. It just begins earlier for us than for other people. In the deep womb of time, in fact. By His secret will and purpose."

And so we reach the doctrines of grace, for this is a book about grace, and Marilynne Robinson is a theologian of grace. Della's sister dismisses her interracial relationship as a "disgrace," but the reader, thank God, doesn't believe it. It's not too great a spoiler to reveal that the novel's last word is literally "grace." At his birth, Jack was christened "John," a name that means "the Lord is gracious" or "graced by the Lord." And the reader, like Jack's father, is allowed to hope that in Jack's beginning is his end. Grace upon grace. **CT**

TIMOTHY LARSEN is McManis Professor of Christian Thought at Wheaton College. He is the co-editor of *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson*.

Racial Reconciliation Needs to Hurt

Why tears of lament are an essential part of the path to unity.

INTERVIEW BY KATHRYN FREEMAN

In the wake of the high-profile killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others, many white evangelical churches have shown renewed interest in matters of racial reconciliation. Some have joined protest marches, hosted conversations with local black pastors, or participated in city-wide prayer vigils. But others, unsure how to respond, have taken the path of least resistance. In *Weep with Me: How Lament Opens a Door for Racial Reconciliation*, Mark Vroegop, lead pastor of College Park Church in Indianapolis, argues that recovering the biblical practice of lament can help the church speak where it is tempted toward silence. Kathryn Freeman, a writer and master of divinity student at Baylor University, spoke with Vroegop about his book.

How did it occur to you to bring together the topics of lament and racial justice?

Weep with Me was born out of my first book, *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy*. The more I explored lament as a biblical category and as a way for people to navigate their grief, the more I saw parallels and possible applications in the area of racial reconciliation. In my own experience pastoring a church, trying to help hurting people, and with grief in general, I've found that the language of lament is really helpful, since it has the capacity to move people toward one another rather than pushing them away. And this has important implications for how we discuss racism and racial injustice within the church.

Why do you think lament is such an important part of the journey toward racial reconciliation?

When the subject of racial reconciliation comes up, people often lack a common language for discussing it. We don't always understand what other people mean when they use certain words. Lament helps reset the conversation. We can say to each other, "Look, we are fellow Christians. You're in pain, and I'm in pain. Let's talk to God together about what's wrong in the world."

And the conversation can proceed from there. In the book, I list five key steps: We love, listen, lament, learn, and then leverage all that into positive momentum toward justice and reconciliation.

In my own church, we've seen this process bear fruit on something we call a Civil Rights Vision Trip. Two years in a row, 50 leaders at a time, we've taken a pilgrimage to places like Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma, and Memphis to absorb the history that happened there. In the hotels, we spent time lamenting together, studying lament in the Bible, and talking to God about what we've experienced. This didn't solve every problem or heal every division, but suddenly people were able to speak the same language.

This experience gave our black brothers and sisters permission to vocalize their grief. When they see words of lament echoed in the Bible, it validates their struggle. It gave our white brothers and sisters a language of empathy. And it allowed us to talk to God together, which starts us down a path toward unity in the context of a subject that seems to automatically create division.

In your own experience, do you think the language of lament is somewhat less familiar to Christians in the majority culture?

Yes, no doubt. In fact, one reason I wrote this book stems from an interview I did about my first book. I was asked, "Why do you think the church doesn't understand lament?" And I realized I needed to reframe that question: "Why doesn't



Mark Vroegop is the lead pastor of College Park Church in Indianapolis.

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NEW & NOTEWORTHY

Compiled by Matt Reynolds

All That God Cares About

Common Grace and Divine Delight

RICHARD J. MOUW BRAZOS PRESS

Abraham Kuyper, the Dutch theologian and statesman, famously affirmed that Christ's rule extends over every square inch of his creation. In *All That God Cares About*, Richard Mouw celebrates Kuyper's understanding of common grace while cautioning against a "triumphalist tendency" that it sometimes encourages among believers who are fired up by his vision of cultural reclamation for kingdom purposes. As Mouw explains, "we need to discern the signs of God's renewing work in the present." However, "we do still need to be constantly reminded about Christ's call to us to share in his suffering. The ravages of the fall are all too obvious in our world."

Where Is God in all the Suffering?

AMY ORR-EWING

THE GOOD BOOK COMPANY

With each month COVID-19 lingers, it exacts an even heavier physical, psychological, and material toll. Writing in the thick of the pandemic, Oxford-trained apologist Amy Orr-Ewing takes a warm, personal approach to addressing the suffering that people experience and their doubts about God's protective care. "For me," she writes, "love is the starting place for untangling questions of pain and suffering, and especially the question, 'Where is God in all the suffering?' Love seems to be at the absolute core of why suffering feels like it does. Suffering feels so wrong to us because of our love for another person who is in distress."

For the Body

Recovering a Theology of Gender, Sexuality, and the Human Body

TIMOTHY C. TENNANT ZONDERVAN

The evangelical witness on matters of sex, gender, and public morality can suffer from a piecemeal focus. We mount distinct arguments against things like abortion, same-sex marriage, gender reassignment, pornography, or cohabitation, but we neglect knitting them together into a holistic theology of bodily life. Asbury Theological Seminary president Timothy C. Tennant sets out to correct this imbalance in *For the Body*. Too often, he writes, believers are rushing around "like firefighters desperately careening from one spot to another, trying to put out this fire or that fire," and "our focus on extinguishing individual fires has prevented us from examining the underlying cause."

the white church understand lament?" Because if you look at American church history, you'll find this tradition very much alive within the black church, with African American spirituals being one of the classic examples. This doesn't mean that every last white Christian neglects lament. But at least from my vantage point, when you look at the songs we're singing and the topics we're addressing in majority-white churches, then it's clear that lament isn't playing a major role.

Lament is something we don't really understand until the bottom falls out. It's interesting that, in the middle of the pandemic, even before racial justice issues started coming to the fore, there was growing interest in lament. All of the sudden, we had to wrestle with the idea of a hardship that everyone's facing. I don't think white evangelicals, as a group, are quite as familiar with this sense of communal, collective suffering as our black brothers and sisters, or Christians around the globe.

What would you say to someone who thinks of lament as an excuse for inaction on matters of racial justice?

Lament, by definition, is not meant to lead to inaction, even for those who are grieving. I define lament as prayer and pain that leads to trust. Lament is action oriented. It goes somewhere. It moves us from where we are to where we need to be.

Bringing this back to racial reconciliation: If all we do is lament, that's not sufficient. And in fact, I would argue that without action, we haven't engaged in genuine lament, because lament is designed to move us toward a renewal of trust. Imagine you have a friend who's grieving. You'll pray and lament, but afterward, you're probably going to reach over and offer a hug, right? At the very least, you'll do something that expresses solidarity or offer tangible ways to help. The same principle applies to racial reconciliation. As a pastor friend of mine, Isaac Adams, likes

to say, *We have to do more than pray, but we can't do less than pray.*

In my model, we're committed to one another because we're brothers and sisters in Christ. And so we need to practice James 1, being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry [v. 19]. We need to enter into one another's pain, weeping with those who weep. More than that, we need to *understand* that pain, to understand how we got here. And that's part of the challenge for white evangelicals: Too often, our lamenting runs behind our learning. This is one of those subjects you need to grieve over before you can really study it.



**Weep with Me:
How Lament
Opens a Door
for Racial
Reconciliation**
MARK VROEGOP
Crossway

What do you most hope the church will take away from your book?

Mainly, the importance of entering into the space of

someone else's pain, just the way I might, for instance, when my wife is hurting or struggling with something. Maybe I think I have a good solution. And that can be part of our conversation. But it should only come up after I've sat with her, wept with her, and understood her pain. My hope, then, is that this book could be a conversation changer for our white brothers and sisters. Our first step is to say: "I love you as a brother and sister in Christ. I want to listen and lament with you, so that I can learn, and together we can leverage that for meaningful change."

For black brothers and sisters, I hope the book provides some level of validation and provides a biblical language for both their pain and their protest. Overall, I want to see the church reclaim its witness to the gospel by taking the lead in pursuing racial reconciliation rather than chasing after it from behind. In the book, I make it clear that gospel unity creates racial harmony, which means that racial harmony is part of God's plan. When racial harmony isn't present, that says something bad about the church. We should work to change that, because our witness is undermined when the church isn't reconciled. **CT**

Prophet, Priest, and Philosopher King

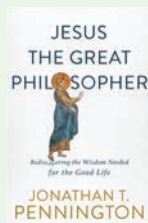
Jesus isn't just our Messiah. He's also the world's greatest thinker.

BY PAUL M. GOULD

Let me begin with a brief lament. As a Christian philosopher who teaches future ministry leaders and speaks to lay leaders and pastors, I frequently defend the need for philosophy. Allowing for some slight exaggeration, a typical student comment goes like this: "Why do I need to learn logic? Will I ever perform a logical proof in a Bible study?" Whenever I speak, teach, or preach at a church, I find a similar suspicion. Philosophers are viewed as a kind of novelty act: "Look what we found! A philosopher! Let him babble a bit to see if any koans drop out of his mouth." All too often, the church assumes that Christianity and philosophy mix as well as oil and water.

In every generation, certain books profoundly influence individuals or entire cultures, serving as catalysts for new ideas, enlarged possibilities, and fresh perspectives on ancient truths. The Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant, for example, claimed that reading David Hume awakened him from a dogmatic slumber. I hope that Jonathan T. Pennington's *Jesus the Great Philosopher* ★★★★★ plays a similar role in the contemporary church, reminding us to value the brilliance of Jesus the Philosopher King. Pennington, who teaches New Testament at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, makes three arguments: that the Bible addresses the

big philosophical questions, that Christianity is a philosophy, and that Jesus is a philosopher. Each of these claims seeks to recover a key truth lost by the contemporary church.



Jesus the Great Philosopher: Rediscovering the Wisdom Needed for the Good Life
JONATHAN T. PENNINGTON
Brazos Press

Modern secular philosophy is anemic and disconnected from everyday life; it was not always so. The ancient Greeks and Romans had a rich conception of philosophy. For the ancients, philosophy was a way of life: the love and pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful for the flourishing of individuals and the broader public. Philosophers sculpted society. They mapped and explored what Pennington calls the "land of the Good." This map of reality directs us to four main compass points for

exploring life's big questions: metaphysics (the study of the nature and structure of reality), epistemology (the study of knowledge, truth, and belief), ethics (the study of right and wrong, goodness and evil), and politics (the study of the nature and structure of human society).

Now for Pennington's startling claim: We find the same four compass points in the Bible. God's Word makes claims about the nature and structure of reality, including the fundamental distinction between Creator and creature (metaphysics). It offers a nuanced view of

knowledge as both factual and experiential (epistemology). And it has much to say about how we ought to live both individually (ethics) and as a society (politics). Thus, if we pay attention to the questions the Bible seeks to answer, we'll discover how the world works and how we ought to live in it. We'll develop into good philosophers, learning to ask the big questions and finding answers that help us align our lives with the true story of the world.

The Bible answers the big philosophical questions, according to Pennington, because Christianity is a philosophy. It is not *merely* a philosophy, of course, but it is also not less than a philosophy.

FOR THE ANCIENTS, PHILOSOPHY WAS A WAY OF LIFE: THE LOVE AND PURSUIT OF THE GOOD, THE TRUE, AND THE BEAUTIFUL FOR THE FLOURISHING OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE BROADER PUBLIC.

Christianity offers us a “whole-life philosophy” that unites head and heart—and humans to each other and God—for the sake of meaningful happiness. After establishing this, Pennington’s book then takes an unexpected turn for those familiar with contemporary philosophy, or even with contemporary Christian philosophy, as it tackles topics that are regularly ignored or glossed over. More specifically, Pennington spends two chapters apiece on emotions and relationships. Plato and Aristotle discussed both topics extensively—as did Jesus and the biblical writers. Pennington argues that matters of emotion and social situation figure prominently in Jesus’ conception of the good life, which means they should figure prominently in ours as well.

The book’s title makes an iconoclastic claim: Not only is Jesus a philosopher; he’s a *great* philosopher. Christians today are prepared to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, but not necessarily as a philosopher. And yet, as Dallas Willard writes in *The Divine Conspiracy*, Jesus possesses intellectual virtue to speak on all matters of reality. This makes Jesus a philosopher. While this might sound odd to modern ears, early followers thought of him this way. For support, Pennington points to a third-century painting found in a house church in Dura-Europos (modern-day Syria) depicting Jesus with a philosopher’s haircut, robe, and posture. A guru worth following, Jesus speaks authoritatively about what is good, true, and beautiful.

Pennington links some of the problems endemic to modern Christianity—fragmentation, biblical illiteracy, anti-intellectualism, a limited witness, and more—to the church’s failure to appreciate the philosophical nature of Christianity and of Christ himself. His book sets forth a challenge for modern Christians: to return to a more ancient—and biblical—conception of Jesus as the true Philosopher King. **CT**

PAUL M. GOULD is an associate professor of philosophy of religion at Palm Beach Atlantic University. He is the author of *Cultural Apologetics: Renewing the Christian Voice, Conscience, and Imagination in a Disenchanted World* (Zondervan Academic).

The Breathing Church

An excerpt from *The Sacred Overlap*.

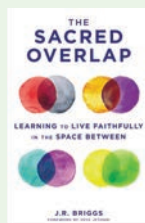
My sons’ elementary school is just a block from our house; it appears to inhale students every morning, hold its breath for several hours, and then cough them back out in the afternoon. On spring mornings, when the windows in my office on the third floor of our house are open, I can hear the bustling as kids chat and squeal with their friends. When I look out the window, I can see the minivans lined up in the carpool lane, waiting to be waved forward by students on safety patrol.

When the weather is nice, I often take a walk around the block at midday, to clear my mind or pray. When I pass the school, all is quiet outside the building; there’s not a sound or person in sight. And then, at 3:40 every afternoon, kids begin trickling out a few at a time. This builds to a crescendo, as the building spews out one large, chaotic rush of students with noise, laughter, excitement, and relief. Some kids rush to hug their parents or jump in their parents’ cars, while others sprint to throw the football on the playground. Similar scenes of inhaling and exhaling probably play out at most schools around the world.

I often think of church as a pulsating heart, which expands and constricts to push blood through the veins and arteries of the body. Or, better yet, a living, breathing entity that inhales her people, holds

her breath, and then exhales them out, scattering them as missionaries disguised in various vocations, roles, and responsibilities throughout the world. Of the 40 miracles found in the book of Acts, all but one of them occurred *outside* the walls of a religious building.

This idea of a breathing church is quite theological, actually. The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach*. (To say it properly you have to say the end of the word—the *ch*—as if you are clearing your throat.) *Ruach* means “spirit, breath, or wind.” In Greek, the word is *pneuma* (said with a silent *p*), which means “spirit, mind, or breath.” It’s where we get our word *pneumonia*, the condition where you have trouble breathing. To be a faithful church, we take our cues from this holy wind-breath. We read in the Gospels that the first apostles were told by Jesus himself they could not begin his ministry until—and only until—they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49). Don’t do anything until the Spirit comes. Stay put. Maybe we should take note, too. In the Book of Acts we see that the Spirit is the chief player in the mission of Jesus’ church, the director of this entire venture which points the world toward Jesus.



**The Sacred Overlap:
Learning to Live
Faithfully in the
Space Between**
J. R. BRIGGS
Zondervan

As members of Jesus' church, we are both blessed *and also* sent. We are called to gather in Jesus' name *and also* scatter in it. If all we do is gather, singing our songs and saying our prayers and listening politely to sermons without any intent to live all of it outside the church, it would be like taking a deep breath and never exhaling. It's exhausting, unhealthy, and eventually we'd turn blue and die. If all we do is scatter, busying ourselves with service projects, community events, and other meaningful endeavors, it would be like we're exhaling and exhaling until there is nothing left in the tank. Eventually, we'd turn blue and die. Gathering for worship is vital because it's where we center around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and respond to his great love for us. But 90 minutes spent in worship every Sunday only equates on average to a mere 1.3 percent of our waking hours in a given week. If we believe this space will be sufficient to mold us into fully formed, fully matured Christlikeness, who are we kidding? We need to gather together in worship, but we also need to learn to engage with God and others in various forms of worship, formation, and mission during the other 98.7 percent of our time.

This approach of only inhaling (or only exhaling) is never the vision or intention of the church. If we have either one without the other, we cannot faithfully express God's purposes in and for the world. It's spiritual pneumonia. But when churches find the sweet spot in the midst of this healthy tension, they develop strategies for both gathering *and also* scattering in order to bless the world. Doing both means we value the activities of the church without neglecting those outside the church. Inhaling and exhaling with regularity and intention, we allow the Spirit to work in our communities of faith in naturally supernatural ways. Being present and committed to the local church is an important priority, but sometimes this also means you have to just skip the Wednesday service to hang out with your neighbors.

This is what pastors and authors Hugh Halter and Matt Smay describe in their book *AND: The Gathered and*

Scattered Church as the power of the *and*. The right things are centralized and also decentralized. Both people and resources find a blessed blending of maintenance *and also* mission, survival *and also* sending, tradition *and also* innovation. Fans are turned into followers, disciples are made into apprentices,

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and consumers become missionaries. It reminds me of Jesus' words in Matthew 13, where the owner of a house brings out of his storeroom new treasures *as well as old* (v. 52). The kingdom is not always *either/or*; it's often *both/and*.

Jesus' intent is to create little pockets of heaven where people can be in God's presence, but he does it out here in the world, in the middle of sin and death. I'm certainly not saying this is easy. Admittedly, many Christians find church to be the most difficult aspect of being a Christian. As a pastor, I have found this tension to be tough work, like walking

a tightrope; sometimes it feels like I'm about to throw up.

The church stands as an alternative and prophetic space, a colony of heaven in a country of death. We don't have to be seminary trained or overly religious to participate in this. As Eugene Peterson wrote, church is "a congregation of embarrassingly ordinary people in and through whom God chooses to be present to the world." We long for things to be made right and to be put back together in the *shalom* of God, yet we live in the midst of a world at war with itself.

When we started our church over a decade ago, I asked our core team why we existed, why we would go to the trouble of setting up chairs and singing songs and listening to sermons. I wasn't against these activities; I believed they were important. But if we didn't clarify *why* we were doing these things, we could also fall into the trap that perpetuates the unhealthy mentality that we're just in this for ourselves. Without focused and intentional conversation and communal discernment, we could run the risk of becoming a church that inhaled and held its breath for dear life.

During the weeks those conversations took place, trying to clarify exactly why we would gather each week as a community of Jesus followers, we eventually landed on the phrase *formation for mission*. We realized that we gathered to be formed in order to be sent. We realized that, in our own way, we were articulating the blessed-and-sent posture. The purpose of our singing and prayers and Communion and storytelling and sermons was to form us in order to allow the Spirit to exhale us into our various contexts, not as just somebodies but as God's deeply loved children sent to represent Christ well in the world by living the *with God* life.

Inhaling *and also* exhaling, blessed *and also* sent, studying God's Word *and also* following God's Spirit. It's messy and costly and time intensive. But it's worth it.

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ONLINE

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EDUCATION

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ASK MIDWESTERN

with **MATTHEW BARRETT**

*Associate Professor of Christian Theology;
Founder and Executive Editor of Credo Magazine*



Q Why should I care about theology?

God made us for one purpose: to know him and enjoy him forever. That is the point of theology. Theology opens our eyes to what all of Scripture teaches us about who this triune God is and how he has acted both as our Creator and Redeemer, especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we might apply his Word to every area of our life, both in

the church and in the world, in order to know him in a saving way and bring glory and honor to his name.

Matthew Barrett is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at MBTS and executive editor of *Credo Magazine*, as well as the host of the Credo podcast. He is the author of *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God*.

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WHAT IT MEANS

COLLEGES AND SEMINARIES

TO BE A CHRISTIAN

FACE THE AFTERMATH OF COVID-19.

COLLEGE IN THE

BY KEVIN SINGER AND KASSIDY HALL

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Within weeks of the first COVID-19 cases appearing on American shores in the spring of 2020, open houses and graduation ceremonies were canceled, non-essential personnel were furloughed, international students were stranded, and those studying abroad were forced to rush home before borders closed. As states rapidly increased restrictions on gatherings, college leaders were forced to make difficult financial and safety decisions, often with limited information and little clarity about what the future might hold.

These leaders rose to meet the moment. In a matter of days, hundreds of classes were moved online as were on-campus resources, programs, and even student jobs.

Christian colleges and seminaries were battered just like other institutions of higher learning, but they have faced additional challenges all their own. For example, most Christian colleges' average enrollment is in the low thousands, and their small size has made them particularly vulnerable to the economic impact of the virus. As President Beck Taylor of Whitworth University in Spokane, Washington, notes, unforeseen shifts in enrollment can be devastating for small, private colleges, as they

tend to have smaller endowments to draw from during emergencies and are, as a result, heavily dependent on tuition.

The cancellation of open houses and campus tours took a toll on fall semester enrollment, as small colleges tend to rely on these in-person experiences to showcase the benefits of a close-knit campus community. "The backbone of a small college, secular or sacred, is having students come on campus and visit and explore," says Alexander Jun, professor of higher education at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California. "Small Christian colleges were already on shoestring budgets. I feel like some of these smaller Christian colleges are not unlike some of the small mom and pop restaurants in my local community—one or two natural disasters away from shutting their doors."

The clear faith-based mission of Christian colleges and seminaries, however, and their focus on mentorship and community, has helped set them apart in a crowded higher education market. Leveraging that mission and that focus has been crucial in schools' continued success. In the midst of all the pandemic's challenges, leaders have recognized a great opportunity: a chance to make good on their schools' Christian mission and identity. If there were ever a time to flex their Christian distinctives, that time is now.

For Caieligh Treash, a senior at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, it was her college's distinctly Christian identity and sense of community that made her decide to return to campus. "While many things will change at Gordon, I'm grateful that the most important things will stay the same: the people, the mission, and the commitment to following Christ through all circumstances. It is for this reason that I am filled with hope," she explains.

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“SMALL CHRISTIAN COLLEGES WERE ALREADY ON SHOESTRING BUDGETS. I FEEL LIKE SOME OF THESE SMALLER CHRISTIAN COLLEGES ARE NOT UNLIKE SOME OF THE SMALL MOM AND POP RESTAURANTS IN MY LOCAL COMMUNITY—ONE OR TWO NATURAL DISASTERS AWAY FROM SHUTTING THEIR DOORS.”

ALEXANDER JUN, AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY



SERVING STUDENT NEEDS

Moving operations online is certainly the most visible step colleges have taken in the COVID era, but it was only one piece of the puzzle for Christian higher education institutions. They also carefully considered how to best care for a new slate of student needs that emerged as a result of the pandemic, a responsibility they take seriously.

Soon after Baylor University in Waco, Texas, made the decision to shift to online course instruction, for example, they created a comprehensive program—the Bear Care Program—that offered assistance to thousands of domestic and international undergraduate students. More than 300 staff members from across the university volunteered as Bear Care coaches, reaching out to students weekly to see if they needed any help adjusting to the stress of online education, being away from their peers, and trying to adapt to a college experience disrupted by COVID-19. They also helped students connect to Baylor resources providing academic, emotional, financial, physical, and spiritual support.

“The development of the Bear Care program was quite an accomplishment,” says Mark Bryant, director of international student and scholar services at Baylor. “Baylor’s leadership in supporting and advocating for this program as well as the staff who volunteered to add duties during an already

stressful time period are evidence of the Baylor community’s commitment to students and their success, and a testament to the university’s caring Christian community.”

Colleges and seminaries have also been proactive in helping to provide housing options on campus to students who have nowhere else to go. “I think that every single one of our campuses found a way to care for vulnerable students, whether they were international students who couldn’t go home, foster care students, or just students who didn’t have a good place to go,” explains Shirley Hoogstra, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), which provides support and resources to over 175 partner institutions.

When we talked to Whitworth’s Beck Taylor in March 2020, the university had 39 students still living in its residence halls. The student tenants did have to remain socially distanced in accordance with state protocols, but Taylor didn’t want them to get lonely—so he threw them a party. “I’m doing a Zoom reception with those students so that we can at least try to find some community, to chat, laugh, play games, and do some silly things together. The ways that we’re attending to those students’ needs is, I think, particularly evident of the Christ-centered mission of Whitworth,” he said.

LEADERSHIP IN A PANDEMIC

Partying digitally with students living in the residence halls was part of Taylor’s efforts to maintain what he calls “pastoral presence” among Whitworth students and staff during a difficult season. Throughout the pandemic, Taylor hoped to be as visible and accessible as possible. “I have found myself communicating through any channel I possibly can, whether through social media or recorded videos that I send out to students and employees,” Taylor said. “Today I’m hosting a town hall for all

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ATTEMPT SOMETHING BIG



“So often we think love has to be this grand thing, and sometimes it is a grand thing, but sometimes it’s as simple as just listening to another person and hearing their story.”

*-Adam Weber
Asbury Seminary Graduate 2007*

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employees via Zoom. I've found that my voice and my presence, and specifically my pastoral presence in this space, is very important right now."

Students have noticed. Eric Anderson, a senior and resident hall advisor at Whitworth, has been impressed by the commitment he sees from the college administration to put student needs first. "It's easy for students, even at a small Christian school, to think of the institution as basically uncaring, focused solely on self-preservation and public image," he says. "And that could very well be true of other schools, but I can say with confidence that our leadership sacrificed time with their family, lost sleep thinking about how to best care for students, and prayed hard to discern the will of the Lord for our community."

Phil Ryken, president of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, emphasized the importance of taking the pandemic and its repercussions as seriously as possible. "Part of what helps people have that hope and encouragement is when they realize you're seeing the problem as seriously as it can possibly be seen," he says. "If you don't do that, then people get alarmed because they don't see the appropriate level of response."

To demonstrate this, Ryken and his team consistently strive to have answers to difficult or complex questions before those questions are even posed. "One thing that I've been saying is the thought that crosses your mind today is a question that somebody is going to ask you tomorrow. And that somebody is going to really be demanding an answer the day after that. So rather than thinking, *Oh, we can't worry about that right now*, we need to think about that right away and start developing a view on that," Ryken says.

CELEBRATING COMMUNITY

One of the pressing questions that President Ryken has weighed in on is whether Wheaton will continue to offer robust online course options after the COVID-19 crisis has passed. "This season does not convince us that there's an online future for Wheaton college undergraduate education," he says.

Like many other Christian colleges and seminaries, Wheaton prides itself on the experience students have on campus, growing academically and spiritually alongside peers and mentors. "We're a unique institution. We have a particular calling to raise up leaders for the church and society. This requires a certain investment of resources, and a certain kind of life-on-life discipleship," Ryken explains. "It doesn't matter how well online education goes for us this semester, we believe we are anti-gnostic. We believe in embodied, human communities."

In Ryken's view, online course delivery simply cannot offer the same benefits as the residential campus experience. "There is a quality of discussion, an opportunity for mentorship, community life, and spiritual formation that takes place in a residential community that is irreplaceable. It can only be attenuated even through the best of digital delivery."

**"THERE'S STILL A HUNGER FOR
BEING TOGETHER INCARNATIONALLY,
YOU KNOW—ACTUALLY SENSORIALY
TOGETHER, PEOPLE TO PEOPLE."**

**RONALD MATTHEWS,
EASTERN UNIVERSITY, PENNSYLVANIA**



President Ryken is not alone. A major thread in our conversations with students and staff is that the pandemic experience has only magnified their zeal and gratitude for the on-campus community experience at their schools.

When Isaac Liskowski, a senior at Moody Bible Institute, found out that campus would be reopening this fall, he was thrilled. "Living on campus at Moody has completely changed my life, and the Christian community there is like none I have ever experienced before."

"The absence of face-to-face community was felt immediately, and it was something I realized I had been taking for granted," said Daniel Bennett, professor of political science at John Brown University. "I realized how much I value meeting with students before and after class, discussing readings and issues beyond class in my office, and cultivating relationships with people who are in that stage of life where they're learning their gifts and discovering their callings. I'm at John Brown University primarily to invest in students. Online learning limits those experiences dramatically."

Eastern University in St. Davids, Pennsylvania, where Ronald Matthews serves as president, has built a reputation for its award-winning online programs. They consistently rank among the best in the state. The university has wholly embraced

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THAT MIGHT BE.
MAYBE IN FACT,
IT'S SOMETHING NEW.”**

**BECK TAYLOR,
WHITWORTH UNIVERSITY**



the challenges and benefits that come with digital delivery, including the challenge of translating Eastern's close-knit community online. All the same, despite relative success and positive student feedback, Matthews does not feel that online education will ever be able to replicate or replace the faith-based campus experience. “So many students have talked about our weekly chapel services and how much they miss our community,” he says. “There’s still a hunger for being together incarnationally, you know—actually sensorially together, people to people.”

LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

While continuing to serve the needs of the campus community, college and seminary leaders are also striving to remain attentive to the needs of their local and regional communities. Hoogstra reports that numerous CCCU-partner health and nursing programs donated their protective gear to local hospitals, health providers, and emergency personnel. Azusa Pacific introduced an innovative partnership with Pasadena City College to address California's nursing shortage. At Baylor University, over 100 parents of Chinese international students pooled together enough money to send thousands of masks to campus for Baylor staff to distribute to the local community. The Experiential Learning Commons at Baylor Libraries also used their 3D printers to make surgical mask tension-relief bands for the health care professionals at the Family Health Center in Waco.

“I feel like this is an absolutely critical opportunity for Christian higher education, and Christians in particular, to rise up and demonstrate what it means to love our neighbors,” notes Azusa Pacific's Jun. “I feel like the Lord's giving us this opportunity to respond in a way that Christians and Christian higher ed ought to, a way that can bring glory to God.”

According to Jun, the act of loving one's neighbor in the COVID era must include Christian colleges publicly denouncing the racist assumptions being made about Asian Americans and

their relationship to the coronavirus. “Attributing the spread of a disease to foreigners is nothing new,” Jun says, referring to the Spanish flu and Japanese encephalitis. “Asian students, including international students from China, may think twice about certain institutions if they do not make a stand on this. They might be wondering, *How could you be so bold about your faith and not say anything about this?*”

THE L WORD: LAYOFFS

At Calvin University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the Service Learning Center led by Jeffrey Bouman and Andrew Haggerty is eager to continue finding innovative ways to serve the community, but the short-term future of their department and its services is unclear. The vast majority of the center's work is conducted in-person at partner organizations and schools, and their popular service-learning trips have been canceled along with all university-sponsored travel.

Haggerty admits he cannot yet predict, semester by semester, what the center will be doing. “The work of our office is not designed for a socially distant or online reality. But we are committed to supporting the personal and professional development of our students, helping our community partners fulfill their goals, and providing meaningful service-learning opportunities for Calvin students. We just don't know what that will look like yet.” The Service Learning Center has been conducting “Zutoring” (Zoom tutoring) sessions with local K–12 students who they used to meet at a local library for homework help and mentorship, and they hope it will be possible to find other new ways to provide the help and support the Grand Rapids community has come to rely on.

Haggerty and the student staff at Calvin's Service Learning Center are not alone. Numerous college programs and departments exist to serve in ways that may not be possible in the near future—programs for study abroad, programs

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that recruit and support international students, event services, athletics, food services, and domestic and international missions—and if enrollment remains low, the students and staff working in these departments will continue to be particularly vulnerable.

Because most Christian colleges are small and heavily tuition dependent, should COVID-19 result in a continued drop in enrollment, it is almost certain that the trend of layoffs will continue. This keeps college administrators and their staff pinned in an excruciating position, as the full effects of COVID-19 on enrollment may not be felt for some time.

President Taylor offered hope to his faculty and staff: “What I can reassure employees of is that we are preparing for any contingency. We are putting employees first—we want to care for our employees.” Even so, he anticipates having to make difficult decisions in the future. “Like almost any school within the CCCU, we are tuition driven,” Taylor continues. “If students don’t show up and pay tuition, we’re going to be in trouble financially.”

FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY

“The potential economic impact of what’s happening with the coronavirus threatens the very existence of our Christ-centered colleges and universities,” President Ryken of Wheaton College remarked. “Already across Christ-centered higher education, we have had lots of institutions that were below sustainable economic thresholds.”

“Just going online has a cost,” Shirley Hoogstra told *USA Today*. “If you are a residential college, you have to figure out what would be a fair repayment to students who are no longer living on campus.”

Seminaries that are heavily reliant on financial support from churches are also in a difficult spot, as many small churches are now themselves financially struggling. Bruce Ashford, provost of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, anticipated difficult days ahead for Southern Baptist seminaries. “COVID-19 is going to do untold damage to our small churches, and 90 percent of Southern Baptist churches are small churches. Many aren’t going to make it. And they’re not going to be able to give to the pot that then pays Southeastern.”

Many colleges applied for and received relief from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, signed into law in late March. The law allocated around \$14 billion in funds for higher education, distributed incrementally to colleges based on student enrollment. Small colleges could receive millions if they demonstrated significant unmet needs as a result of COVID-related expenses, so long as 50 percent of their benefits went toward emergency student grants. Wheaton College received \$2 million, Whitworth University received nearly \$3 million, and Azusa Pacific University received over \$5 million from the CARES act. Though these allocations may not mean much at a large university, for these small colleges they proved to be a life raft, allowing them to remain open.

Hoogstra predicts that access to financial aid will be key

in recruiting and retaining students in the years to come. “If we can get students enough support financially,” she insists, “they will want to return to college.”

HOPE BUILT ON NOTHING LESS

Though the post-COVID landscape remains uncertain for Christian colleges and seminaries, campus leaders are looking to what is certain to create and sustain peace in these unprecedented times: the unwavering faithfulness of God.

“This is the era that God has given us. This is the calamity that he’s put in our hands,” Ashford says. “In John’s version of the Great Commission, Jesus told his disciples that when you go out into the world, you’re going to face opposition. He was saying to his disciples, ‘Just embrace the moment. Embrace the task that I’ve given you whatever comes your way, and minister in the face of it.’”

“As a Christian, I place my hope in the Lord and in the sovereignty of God. That doesn’t mean that I like what’s happening. That doesn’t mean I’m not frustrated and angry at times. I have a lot of questions, but that’s the human part of me,” said President Taylor of Whitworth University. As he grappled with shutting down the campus, he heard a timely sermon that prompted a change in his mindset. “I’m trying to maintain a posture of expectation. Maybe we shouldn’t be praying for restoration, but rather we should be praying for healing,” he says. “Maybe the old normal isn’t what we want, as comforting, reassuring, and familiar as that might be. Maybe in fact, it’s something new.”

Ready or not, Christian colleges and seminaries have taken their first steps this fall on a journey that will test their strength. “We talk about organizations being spiritually, mentally, and physically strong—and individuals within that—but we didn’t have to test that [before],” Hoogstra explains. Leaders met the immediate challenge and rose to the occasion with impressive speed, but new financial pressures and more difficult decisions are sure to come. In those moments, leaders will have to consider again what it means to be a Christian college. ■

KEVIN SINGER is a freelance journalist and PhD student in higher education at North Carolina State University, where he is a Research Associate for the Interfaith Diversity Experiences and Attitudes Longitudinal Survey (IDEALS), as well as Co-Founder and Director of Neighborly Faith. **KASSIDY HALL** is a senior and international studies major at Taylor University in Upland, Indiana, and Marketing Coordinator for Neighborly Faith.



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Who Was Artaxerxes?

In one of the most famous battles of ancient history, Xerxes defeated the Spartans in 480 BC. This Xerxes was likely the husband of the Persia who was the husband of the biblical Esther. Xerxes had another wife named Amestris. Queen Amestris was probably the same as Vashti in the book of Esther, since the word "Vashti" can mean "the best" or "the beloved."¹ The third son of Xerxes and Amestris was named Artaxerxes I Longimanus.

Artaxerxes I Longimanus was the king of Persia from 465 to 424 BC. Artaxerxes means "kingdom of righteousness" or "kingdom of justice" and Longimanus means "long-hand" or "long-armed," as the Greek scholar Ptolemy said.² The Greek scholar Ptolemy said Artaxerxes's right hand was longer than his left. Ptolemy also claimed that Artaxerxes was "preeminent among the kings of Persia for gentleness and magnanimity."³ Artaxerxes's character contrasts with that of his parents—whose reputations for immorality and brutality long outlived them. Artaxerxes is important

to Bible students because of his connection to Ezra and Nehemiah. He permitted Ezra to leave Persia and visit Jerusalem in 458 BC, and he authorized his brother Nehemiah for a mission to Jerusalem in 445 BC.

THE RISE OF ARTAXERXES I

Artaxerxes may have shown kindness to Ezra and Nehemiah, but his reign began in intrigue and assassination. The historical sources relate that a powerful royal official named Artabanes had King Xerxes killed in his bedchamber and named Darius, the eldest son of Xerxes. After some months, the eighteen-year-old Artaxerxes killed Darius. Eventually Artaxerxes determined that Artabanes was behind the assassination plot and put him to death also. Artaxerxes would

later defeat another older brother, Hytaspes, in battle. Hytaspes was a satrap or governor in Bactria who rebelled against his brother's rule.⁴

THE REIGN OF ARTAXERXES I

With a young king on the throne and his army occupied or having been weakened with threats to the kingdom by Hytaspes, 465-460 BC seemed a propitious time for Egyptians to rebel against Persian rule. The Persians would suffer reversals at the beginning of the war; completely subduing Egyptian forces would take about ten years with Athens and its navy as an ally to the Egyptians in the rebellion. The accusations of the foes of the Jews, as described in Ezra 4:7-23, would have been of particular concern to the Persian

monarch given the fact that Persian forces would have to travel through Israel to quell the rebellion in Egypt. People against the Jews of being rebellious and evil; they further claimed that tax revenue would be lost if the Jews completed their rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and its walls. Artaxerxes then stopped

Eventually Artaxerxes allowed the Jews under Ezra to return to Israel with the king's blessing. Perhaps a king realized that any kindness he showed to Israel would result in a loyal buffer state between his forces and the rebellious Egyptians. Of course, the real reason the king ruled favorably on Ezra and his mission to Israel was because God's hand was on Ezra (Ezr 7:6).

The Persian general Megabyzus, who had ended the rebellion of Egypt, was satrap of Syria for a time but eventually rebelled against Artaxerxes. He was finally reconciled to the Persian monarch. Later, though, Artaxerxes sent Megabyzus into exile for shooting a lion before the king could do so while the two were on a hunting expedition. After some time in exile, he would again be restored to favor.⁵

By the time Artaxerxes granted Nehemiah the liberty to return to Israel in 445 BC, the Egyptian revolt and the subsequent rebellion of Megabyzus would have long been over. Moreover, the war between Persia and the Greek city-states apparently came to a halt or truce about 449 BC with the Peace of Callias.⁶

In about 425-424 BC, Artaxerxes died of natural causes—which was a rarity among Persian kings. The relative stability and peacefulness Artaxerxes exhibited in his reign are in accord with what the Scriptures say about him. If he was as generous to his subjects as he was to the Jews, then one should not be surprised that he had such little

opposition to the building of their temples.⁷ One should also not be surprised at Artaxerxes's generosity as he encouraged Ezra and Nehemiah with protection and financial support. Both biblical and extrabiblical sources indicate Persian kings were tolerant of other religions, "actively supported the temple-worship of the gods of their subjects, [and] contributed to the building of their temples."⁸



Alabaster vase that honors King Xerxes I, about 485 to 465 BC. Inscription says "Xerxes the Great King." The inscription is in Egyptian, Old Persian, Elamite, and Neo-Babylonian languages and written in hieroglyphics and cuneiform.

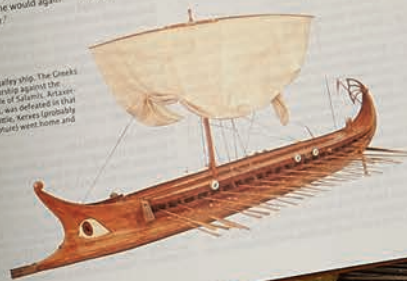
¹ Cf. H. W. Freeman, "Xerxes," in *ISBE*, vol. 4, (1988), 664. ² Artaxerxes—I, "His Writer," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. by Eugene H. Merrill, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 314-16. ³ Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2:10:1-2. ⁴ Ptolemy, *Geographia*, 2:10:1-2. ⁵ Ptolemy, *Geographia*, 2:10:1-2. ⁶ Cf. B. Gray and M. Gray, "The Peace of Callias," in *The Persian Empire*, ed. by B. Gray and M. Gray, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 167.



Silver bowl, fifth century BC. The cuneiform inscription refers to three Persian kings mentioned in the Bible: "Artaxerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of countries, son of Xerxes the king, son of Darius the king, the Achæmenian, in whose house the drinking cup was made."



From the palace at Susa, relief of a bodyguard of the Persian King Artaxerxes I.



Model of a trireme galley ship. The Greeks used this type of warship against the Persians. Xerxes, was defeated at the battle of Salamis. Xerxes probably (Alexander's father) went home and married Esther.

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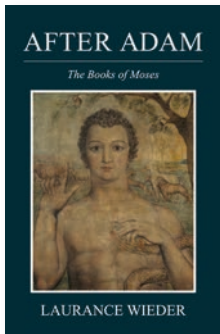
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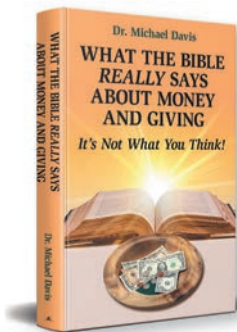
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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 96

and drugs, and—after I got my driver's license—go wherever I wanted. Before long, I had given myself over to a lifestyle of partying, fornication, and drug addiction. Things got so bad that I eventually found myself selling drugs. Perhaps saddest of all was the influence this had on my younger brother, Joe, who was only in middle school and who ended up venturing down similar paths.

I still recall arriving at home one night at around two in the morning as a high school senior. My mom was awake, crying to God and praying for Jesus to save me. Later on, I would discover that while I was running from God, he had been working on others close to me.

My best friend, George, who was something of a partner in crime, started going to a new church with his brother Mark. This church—Arabic Baptist Church, outside Boston—was not Coptic Orthodox, so naturally I was apprehensive about their sudden invitation to visit its youth group. But Mark was relentless. Every Friday night, without fail, he would pick up me and Joe in his cool, red Mitsubishi Eclipse for the hourlong drive to the church. Mark took me there for more than a year, at times against my will, until I was able to drive myself.

At Arabic Baptist, I found a very different breed of Christian. The people there sincerely loved God. They were kind and not hypocritical. They actually loved and welcomed me. *Wow*, I thought, *these Christians are having fun and enjoying their relationship with God. God seems so real to them.* Around the same time my brother and I got connected with the youth group, the woman who would become my mother-in-law was praying and reading the Bible with my mom over the phone. I began noticing a different, more peaceful environment at home.

By late 2008, my whole family was attending this church together, and my parents and brother were getting quite involved. My dad began hosting a Bible study in our house, and I saw God change him during a study of the Book of Hebrews. I was showing up to church meetings because I loved the people

there and felt loved in return. But I was showing up under the influence of drugs. Even though I really needed Jesus, I was still looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places.

In July 2009, during the summer between my freshman and sophomore years in college, my dad forced me to attend the church's annual Fourth of July conference. Dragging my feet, I went along, and I brought some drugs to help pass the time. I wasn't open to hearing from God. But I discovered that weekend that even the fiercest resistance or the coldest indifference is irrelevant once God decides to act in your life. At the conference, I heard the gospel with new ears. I heard that God loves me so much that he sent Jesus to die for my sins. And I understood that by trusting in Jesus, all of my sins would be forgiven, and that I would be accepted by God and made right with him.

SURRENDERING TO JESUS

I distinctly remember a feeling of internal struggle within my soul: How could God forgive all my sins? And how could he forgive me when I couldn't even forgive myself? At the time, I lacked the capacity to fathom God's lavish mercy and unmerited grace. And yet I couldn't escape feeling like God had cornered me with his love and I had no choice but to lay down my resistance and surrender. I realized that what Jesus had done was sufficient to cleanse me from my sin and make me new.

I was born again in that moment when I finally saw and treasured Jesus by faith. Oh, what a glorious day it was! That Fourth of July conference changed

my life forever. My joy was doubled, however, because my brother Joe, who is now a pastor at our church, was also saved that same weekend. We both had a one-night rehab with Jesus and were miraculously set free from addiction to drugs. In fact, when we returned to our car to leave the conference and realized we still had some weed left, we immediately tossed it out and said, *We can't go back.* Our parents were delighted with the two new sons they got back after that weekend. We were completely transformed.

Other radical and immediate changes took place as well. For example, I began to serve at church almost immediately with the worship team and with the youth group. That was how I met my wife, who was the youth group and worship leader at the time. Our worship team traveled to different conferences and retreats, and during those trips, a sense of calling grew in my heart and I began pondering a future in ministry.

Meanwhile, I was devouring the Scriptures, Christian books, podcasts, sermons, and anything else I could get my hands on. I attended church services and midweek prayer meetings on a regular basis. And I was blessed to have a few mentors in the church who disciplined me. All this encouraged my pursuit of ministry as a full-time vocation, a journey that brought me to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and eventually saw me ordained at Arabic Baptist Church, where my whole family had come to faith.

My life today is a testimony to God's goodness and grace. This past July, I celebrated another year of walking with and serving Jesus Christ at Arabic Baptist's annual One Name Boston conference. I have been celebrating my spiritual birthday every Independence Day for the past 11 years, and the symbolic overlap isn't lost on me. The very gathering where I once showed up under the influence, with the intention of keeping God at arm's length, is now a tangible reminder of his miraculous work in my life. Thank you, Jesus, for putting nothing to waste. **CT**

The middle-school years were rough for me: Imagine trying to make friends in the aftermath of 9/11 as a chubby Middle Eastern kid who spoke no English.

FADY GHOBRIAL is a Christian Union ministry fellow at Harvard University.

TESTIMONY



My Spiritual Independence Day

I arrived at the church's Fourth of July conference a drug addict. I left a believer.

By **Fady Ghobrial**

PHOTO BY TONY LUONG

I was born to religious, hard-working parents in 1990 in Cairo. At 40 days old, I was baptized by triple immersion like every good Coptic Orthodox Christian.

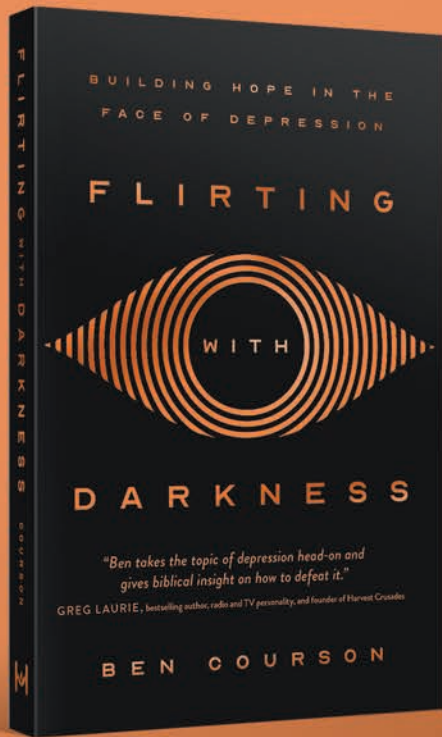
Growing up in this kind of religious atmosphere leaves its mark on your soul forever. I can still recall the routine—but much-dreaded—confession times with the priest. Those experiences were especially deflating. Even well into my teens, I remember finishing confession, being instructed to do some penance so that God would like me again—at least that's how it felt—and then inevitably returning to my same old sins. My attitude toward God was that he was mean, like my teachers from the Jesuit school I attended who would physically punish me (and other students) for falling short of their academic or behavioral standards.

In 2002, my family moved to America. The middle-school years were rough for me: Imagine trying to make friends in the aftermath of 9/11 as a chubby Middle Eastern kid who spoke no English. To add to my school woes, I was bullied at the one place no one ever should be: the church. Our family continued to attend Coptic Orthodox services, but my heart quickly soured on the church of my youth, which never appealed to me much to begin with. By the time I reached high school, I was so disillusioned with the faith that I swung from being a “good religious kid” to the opposite extreme.

A DIFFERENT BREED OF CHRISTIAN

High school afforded opportunities to hang out with new friends, experiment with dating

CONTINUED ON PRECEDING PAGE



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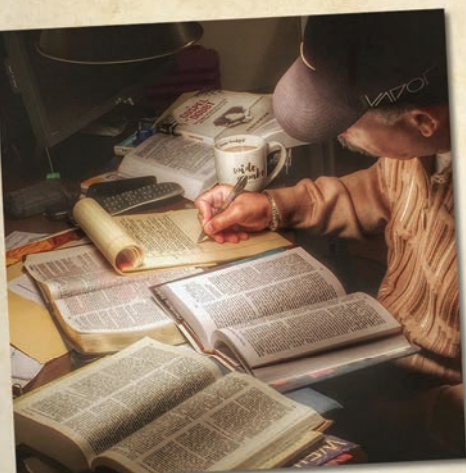
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- 30-32 - Jesus kept a low profile, unimpressive and focused on teaching his disciples about his death and resurrection but they had difficulty understanding
- 33-35 - Jesus ask them about this conversation on the road with or without. They kept desilencing because of shame because they were debating among who was the greatest. Jesus needs to explain the true nature of true greatness. Jesus says it is to be first. He does not condemn them for a desire they just need to know how to attain it. Christ's coming through service. This means you must have yielded to the power of his kingdom. Jesus
- 36-37 - Jesus illustrates his point by getting a little child in their midst and explains that greatest is achieved by receiving or honoring little ones in his name.
- 38-40 - The 12 were offended when they saw another servant successfully cast out demons in his name because they were not apart of the 12. They believed themselves to be the highest administration of God's power. The fact that he was doing it in Jesus name and they to honor him meant his motivation was right. Jesus says he will reward little things done for his followers. Jesus says one cannot work for him and against him at the same time.
- v. 41 - Jesus to lead them walking
- 42-43 - In contrast anyone who cause a child to stumble who believes in him (which means children can come to faith in Christ). One would be doubly consequence. A child required the strength of a donkey to move.
- 44-48 - There are a variety of things that can keep a person from Christ. Hard is what one handles, good places one goes, one's life, one's steps. One's motives must be clean to remove hindrance of faith from a unbelievers life. Removing people places and things can set in the way of salvation. It is better to believe in Jesus having lost something removed than you enjoy but keep those things and never believe in Jesus. It would be your judgement. It would be your judgement.
- v. 49 - Even heretics (everyone) will have to deal with the cast of truth and show in their lives they will have to deal with Jesus who OT teachers were opposed to but with fact. Believers must let their hearts with scripture in mind.
- 50 - Salt has a variety of uses. It is used in preserving, seasoning, and sustaining life. This believes needed to be useful in preserving, seasoning, and sustaining life. This believes needed to be useful in preserving, seasoning, and sustaining life. This believes needed to be useful in preserving, seasoning, and sustaining life.

Some of Tony's actual hand-written notes as he studied verse-by-verse through the Bible.



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