

FRONTLINE

BRINGING THE TRUTH HOME



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Our sincere thanks to Kevin Bauder for coordinating this issue of *FrontLine* magazine.

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Getting Ready to Vote

For the moment, Christians inhabit two kingdoms. We are citizens of a heavenly kingdom, accountable to its king, and subject to its laws and ethos. We are also citizens of various earthly regimes, subject to their laws and living under their cultures. In some of those regimes—the republics and representative democracies—we are at least partly and indirectly responsible for the governance of our countries.

At minimum, we are given the opportunity to vote on our nations' leaders. We are responsible before God to use that vote wisely. We may cast it or abstain from casting it. We may choose this candidate or that. We may vote for this policy or another. But whatever we do, we shall render account to God. Duty demands that we choose well.

Sometimes our choices are complicated. We must decide which issues matter most and which candidates best represent them. Sometimes we gain a bit on one issue but lose a bit on another. We must choose between imperfect candidates, and we may find all of them repugnant. How, then, should we choose?

This issue of *FrontLine* will try to help you think through some of the questions. David de Bruyn (who is a South African pastor) opens by addressing the question of whether pastors should address political issues. Michael Riley asks whether it is ever permissible to opt for the lesser of two evils when making political choices. These articles are meant to address the larger question of how Christians should participate in the political order.

A second series of articles addresses specific issues that Christians should be concerned about. Preston Mayes develops a biblical perspective on immigration, including the responsibilities of both immigrants and their host nations. Ryan Martin critiques the welfare state and related socialist and collectivist political philosophies. Brett Williams responds to those who wish to expand the pro-life position to include a variety of “progressive” programs. Last, Kevin Bauder responds to a recent abortion of a Down Syndrome baby by remembering what it was like to grow up with developmentally disabled children.

The authors and editors of *FrontLine* do not intend to tell you whom to vote for. What we want to do is to help you vote intelligently. We want to provide biblical and theological categories that will

help you choose wisely when you go to the polls.
May God grant you wisdom as you vote—or abstain
from voting—in the governance of the earthly
regime that you inhabit.

Kevin T. Bauder, Associate Editor

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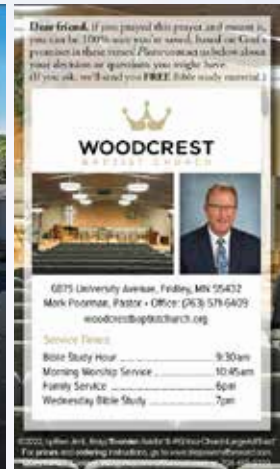
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David de Bruyn

Should Pastors Be Political?

When elections loom, some Christian pulpits change their topic and tone to political punditry. Other preachers become conspicuously muted on politics, as if nothing were happening. Pastors are told by some that “building the kingdom” requires guiding their parishioners to vote for the right parties and people. Others tell them that faithfulness requires a kind of political agnosticism in which the pastor acts the part of a neutral observer.

Should pastors use the pulpit either to promote or disparage political candidates? Should pastors address the perennial topics of election season, such

as immigration, wars, relationships with other nations (particularly Israel), abortion, healthcare, gun rights, and criminal law enforcement? A host of economic questions are also on the table: taxation, social welfare, tariffs, government spending, affirmative action, and several others.

In one sense, the question is moot. The pastor who says nothing on these things is still saying something, if only with his deliberate silence. This silence only invites (and tacitly endorses) other, less biblical voices who do speak about these matters. Those voices get heard because they answer the questions that people ask in the vacuum left by pastoral silence. Political commentary by the pulpit is unavoidable.

The question is not whether pastors will address political issues, but how. To answer this question, we should begin by distinguishing *political theology* from *partisan politics*. Partisan politics from the pulpit is preaching allegiance to a particular party, especially by endorsing particular candidates. Political theology is teaching a biblical perspective on government, responsible citizenry, civil law, and the ethical and moral matters involved in choosing a candidate.

Some Christians call on pastors to act as the Old Testament prophets did and denounce kings (or parties, congressmen, and presidents) to their face—or at least to the congregation. Yet the New Testament does

not seem to support this approach, either by example, principle, or precept. It is true that John the Baptist openly criticized Herod's incest, and Jesus called him a deceptive fox. But it is also true that the apostles had nothing to say about Caesar, Herod, Roman rule, or the Sanhedrin of Israel.

At that time, corruption and intrigue were the order of the day. Emperors like Nero were literal madmen. The apostles were not shy to publicly name individuals who acted wickedly. They called out people like Alexander the coppersmith and Diotrophes. But they never found it necessary to name and denounce the evil rulers of their day.

The world of the New Testament was not a democracy. Consequently, some argue that the apostles had no reason for political punditry, since electing candidates was not available to their readers. But that argument also works in the opposite direction. Political change was sometimes brought about by religious and political revolutionaries. If the apostles had wanted to sponsor a political movement, they would surely have engaged in vigorous and vocal denunciation of evil rulers. They would have strengthened the resolve of those about to protest, take up arms, or mount a resistance. Their silence is instructive.

Instead, we find the epistles offering all kinds of instruction for how life was to be lived in the Roman world. They tell Christians to pay taxes; to submit to local, regional, and imperial rulers; to abandon pagan temple worship and its practices; to care for destitute widows; and to be honest and upright in all dealings. They instruct slaves to respond to masters with diligent, conscientious service. They tell masters to treat slaves with fairness and consideration. They exhort the wealthy not to withhold just wages. These are the sorts of things they command and teach.

The pattern of the New Testament is to instruct Christians how to obey Christ in their contexts. Sometimes the apostles offer direct precepts (commandments). Sometimes they lay down more generalized principles. Christians are thereby taught to *principlize*: to take timeless biblical truth and apply it to particular, contemporary problems.

This approach has two benefits. First, Christians have been able to apply the apostles' instructions for two thousand years under varying political arrangements. A too-specific political reference would have made applications much more difficult. Second, biblical principles have shaped the Christian conscience instead of creating political foot soldiers. Indeed, principlization has sometimes resulted in Christians

who find themselves on different sides of political controversies with all believing they were being true to Scripture and obedient to the Lord.

Had the vote been available to first-century Christians, I am convinced that the apostles would not have written differently. By explaining the Christian approach to civil, societal, and ethical questions, the apostles supplied their readers with the biblical wisdom to know what side of an issue they should adopt. The only missing information for a voting population would have been to discover which candidate was closest to the biblical position.

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That is exactly the situation we find ourselves in today. We need biblical truth on the morality of abortion, the death penalty, a free-market approach versus a planned economy, marriage, education, a government's responsibilities to its citizens, self-defense, and many other topics. This is the responsibility of the Christian pulpit: to speak where God has spoken, and not to "go beyond what is written." Having explained what he believes to be the wisest and most biblical approach to these matters, the pastor's role in preparing his people for an obedient response to the elections is fulfilled. The responsibility now passes to his people to do their homework and to research which candidates promise to take the most biblical position on the issue.

While he may choose to do some "crash-course" political theology in the weeks before the election, the pastor serves his people better by having taught on these matters over the course of months and years. A course on biblical economics, a sermon series on civic responsibility, an adult Sunday School module on marriage and the family, a seminar on the church, the state and the kingdom, or a discipleship course on Christian ethics will disciple Christian people in political theology. A pastor will also do well to point

to books, podcasts, or other men's sermons on all these topics.

The matters up for debate during an election are usually complex, and our culture has a declining attention span. This tempts people to decide matters based upon clever (or snarky) rhetoric, entertaining debates, or pithy clips and memes, rather than through careful, reasoned argumentation. Pastors resist this decline of civil maturity by consistent and thorough teaching. Well-taught Christians are not tossed to and fro by the world's media, nor are they clueless as to whom they should vote for, come election season.

Finally, setting aside the candidates and the issues, should a pastor encourage his people to vote at all? Political cynicism is rife, and with it, political apathy. Some take the glaring flaws of the parties and their politicians to be reason enough to abstain from voting altogether. How should a pastor respond?

I believe a pastor needs to impress upon his people that participation in a democracy may not be required by law, but it should be felt as a civic duty. A government of the people, by the people, and for the people necessarily means that the people are charged to govern themselves. They govern in a republic by electing representatives. Refusing to vote because of sheer apathy or laziness is a neglect of responsibility,

like absconding from parental duties out of frustration that “my children don’t listen to me anyway.”

A conscientious citizen may wrestle with the question of whether he can vote pragmatically or on pure principle alone. He may ponder whether he can vote for the lesser evil or only for what he deems good. He may sometimes reach the conclusion that he cannot vote for any candidate on the ballot. If so, he can fulfil his democratic role and demonstrate his conscientious objection to the current parties and candidates by writing in the name of some other candidate. In some countries he may spoil his ballot deliberately. Here a pastor helps his people to distinguish between conscientious objections and mere cynicism. One leads to principled abstention, the other to lazy absenteeism.

Were an election to include a high number of spoiled ballots, it could conceivably bring about responsive change in the political parties. Mere absenteeism suggests a lazy and uninterested electorate, the kind of prey that attracts the worst sort of politicians. As a pastor would preach against laziness at work, apathy at home, and sloppiness at church, so he should rebuke the same attitudes in the civil sphere.

A pastor can no more avoid “being political” in the pulpit, than he can avoid “being controversial” if he preaches the whole counsel of God. Scripture is some-

times offensive (Gal. 5:11) and runs counter to this world's values (1 John 2:15). Since Scripture addresses “everything we need for life and godliness” (2 Pet. 1:3) and leads to Christians being “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17), its faithful exposition will end up teaching much political theology.

Since Christ's church is not an organ of any political state, Christ's spokesmen should never stoop to using its pulpit to promote political parties. But a pastor wishes to “present every man perfect in Christ” (Col. 1:28). This ‘perfection’ refers to maturity, one which extends to all of life, including the political and the civil realm. Christians bear political and civil responsibilities that form part of the second greatest commandment, to love our neighbor. A pastor must teach his people to be faithful, conscientious citizens of this world, even as they make their pilgrimage to the next.

David de Bruyn, ThD, is pastor of New Covenant Baptist Church in Johannesburg, South Africa. He is the author of *The Conservative Church: Preserving and Transmitting Biblical Christianity*.





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A photograph of three men standing behind a long wooden podium in a formal setting, likely a legislative chamber. The man on the left is looking towards the center, the man in the middle is looking forward with a serious expression, and the man on the right is looking towards the center. Each man has a microphone in front of him. Two small lamps are placed on the podium between the men. In the background, a large American flag is draped across the room, and wooden columns are visible.

Michael P. Riley

Can We Vote for the Lesser Evil?

We often make 100 percent decisions on 60 percent evidence. You either marry her—or you don't. You either take the job transfer to another city—or you don't. In any decision of consequence, it is rare that all the positives point to one choice and all the negatives the other. For this reason, we must cultivate the Christian virtue of wisdom.

Voting is just this kind of binary choice. Here, I do not use the expression “binary choice” as it is often intended. Some people who use this phrase mean that you must vote for either the Republican or the Democrat. They often insinuate the paradoxical accusation that not voting (or voting for a third-party candidate) is functionally to vote for the opposition. But when I say that voting is a binary choice, I mean that either you will vote for this candidate—or you won’t. You cannot cast or withhold a partial vote. Even novel election formats, like ranked choice voting, do not allow you to partially vote for a candidate.

How are we to vote, then, when no one meets the criteria of our ideal candidate? The problem is not hypothetical. In the recent history of America, Christians have prioritized voting for candidates who were people of good character and who endorsed strong stands against legally legitimizing moral evils. The list of moral evils has been a long one, and the chief points have been abortion and gay marriage. At this present moment, however, virtually no elected officials of national prominence argue against gay marriage. Some “conservatives” accept it outright. Most others have made tacit peace with it, at least as a matter of public policy.

Since the overturning of Roe, the national Republican Party has moderated its pro-life position. Between 2016 to 2024, it removed language from its platform that had supported a national recognition of the personhood of the unborn baby. Now the Republican Party explicitly opposes only “Late Term Abortion,” and endorses “policies that advance . . . IVF.”¹ (in vitro fertilization is a morally troubling practice that often results in the production of human lives that are later destroyed).

These issues were once considered inviolable red lines. What now? Philosopher Hannah Arendt articulates our challenge:

In their moral justification, the argument of the lesser evil has played a prominent role. If you are confronted with two evils, thus the argument runs, it is your duty to opt for the lesser one, whereas it is irresponsible to refuse to choose altogether. . . . Politically, the weakness of the argument has always been that those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil.²

Is it ever permissible for us to choose the lesser evil? Is Arendt’s framing of the question biblically correct? At first glance, her claim seems inescapable: anyone who chooses an evil chooses an evil. But I contend that this is not quite right, and while we

might be troubled by Arendt's dilemma, our discomfort is rooted in a kind of self-examination that is not grounded in biblical morality.

UNBIBLICAL INTROSPECTION

As we grow in faith and knowledge, we see God's holiness with greater clarity. We also become more aware of our own remaining sinfulness. This is good, but it comes with danger. There is a kind of inward looking that, untethered from biblical truth, can become paralyzing.

William Beveridge, a 17th-century Anglican, expresses this kind of introspection in his *Private Thoughts on Religion*:

Nay, I do not only betray the inbred venom of my heart, by poisoning my common actions, but even my most religious performances also, with sin. I cannot pray, but I sin; nay, I cannot hear or preach a sermon, but I sin; I cannot give an alms or receive the sacrament, but I sin; nay, I cannot so much as confess my sins, but my very confessions are still aggravations of them; my repentance needs to be repented of, my tears want washing, and the very washing of my tears need still to be washed over again with the blood of my Redeemer. Thus . . . , methinks I cannot but look upon my whole

life, from the time of my conception to this very moment, to be but as one continued act of sin.³

These words are weighty, thoughtful—and in my judgment, profoundly out of step with the New Testament language describing the Christian life. Instead, we read that Christians “do those things that are pleasing in his sight” (1 John 3:22); that we should be “perfect in every good work to do his will, [God] working in [us] that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ” (Heb. 13:21); that God works in us “both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13), and that we have been “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph. 2:9).

As a Christian, you are “a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). You, “beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). Believers are truly being sanctified. Although we continue to fight sin and will not see perfection in this life, it is wrong for a believer to think of himself as totally depraved and his actions as relentlessly sinful.

Whenever we are wrestling with a complicated theological issue, we should mark out the ditches. It is good for us to think deeply and carefully. But if we find that some conclusion that logically follows

from our premises runs counter to clear revelation, we must reevaluate our premises. If our reflection on our moral duties makes us conclude that believers do nothing but sin, we have taken a wrong turn.

PARTICIPATION IN ANOTHER'S SINS

I do not believe that Scripture ever directly addresses our duties when electing political leaders. To apply Scripture to this question, we must work from analogy and principle.

Consider the elevation of a man to the office of elder. If my choices help advance a man to a position in which he does evil, I bear some measure of responsibility for the evil he commits. Two passages state this clearly. In 1 Timothy, Paul commissions Timothy to deal with major problems in Ephesus. Those problems arise from corrupt men in the leadership of the church. 1 Timothy 5:17–25 deals with the need to remove some current elders while also ordaining other qualified men to that office. In both cases, Paul commands Timothy to maintain diligence and good order. He is not to be hasty and prejudicial either in removing men from or installing them into the pastorate. Paul writes, “Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins” (v. 22). The context strongly suggests that ordaining an unqualified man implicates those doing the ordaining; they

partake in his sins. Paul goes on to explain why diligence matters: “Some men’s sins are clearly evident, preceding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later” (v. 24, NKJV). Reckless haste in ordination increases the likelihood that you will “be partaker of other men’s sins.”

Similarly, John warns, “If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds” (2 John 10–11). Although interpretations of these verses vary, I believe John speaks of a teacher being welcomed into a house for a meeting of the church and being recognized as a brother. To do this is to gain a share in that false teacher’s sin.

Probably our voting in elections might offer an analogous if diluted moral responsibility. My vote in a national election is only fractionally responsible for whoever assumes office. But even if fractional, it is more than nothing. We are right to view voting seriously as a moral matter.

But as a counterpoint example, we have very clear instruction: “Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs,

fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor” (Rom. 13:7, NKJV; see also Matt. 22:21, Luke 20:25). John the Baptist did not instruct tax collectors to find a new career, but to be honest in the collecting of taxes for the empire (Luke 3:12–13).

Taxation is relevant here, because the Roman use of revenue was not wholly righteous. A Christian with a sensitive conscience might easily convince himself that paying his taxes implicates him in the evil purposes his taxes support. If this were so, then the commands of Paul and John the Baptist were wrong. But they were not wrong, and that indicates that we must have taken a wrong turn in our moral reasoning.

Return to the question of ordination. Given Paul’s warning, why should we ordain anybody at all? Which minister of the gospel has not failed in some way? If every pastor will do something wrong, we could easily argue that participating in the ordination of any man would implicate us in sin, and therefore we should refrain altogether. But that cannot be the correct conclusion. Paul is commanding responsible, careful, non-hasty ordination.

At the very least, we can say from Scripture that there are times in which we bear responsibility for the evil committed by others, when our decisions enable

that evil. But this principle is not unlimited. Without these limits, we would be paralyzed by introspection, because everything we do might help someone sin. But Scripture says that we should pay our taxes and we should ordain people to ministry. By extension, we can indeed cast a ballot—prudently, thoughtfully, wisely—without taking to ourselves the guilt of every choice that politician goes on to make.

CONCLUSION

There still are opportunities to vote in which our Christian duty is clear. One candidate will be overwhelmingly more in favor of righteousness than another, or one side of a referendum will reflect biblical wisdom and the other a rejection of it. In such cases, we ought to vote, and we ought to vote with confidence.

But some elections test our consciences and our wisdom. Such difficulties do not justify voting for candidates who enthusiastically endorse wickedness. Responsible, prudent voting might mean casting a ballot for the candidate who, all things considered, will permit us to “lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty” (1 Tim. 2:2). Others might be voting in electorally uncompetitive districts, giving them freedom to refrain from voting (or to vote for a protest

candidate) as a signal to the parties that their direction must change.

No candidate is flawless. A Christian should be a responsible steward of his vote. Having done proper diligence, he should not believe that voting for an imperfect candidate is endorsing evil.

Michael P. Riley, PhD, pastors Calvary Baptist Church in Wakefield, Michigan. He is also an adjunct professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis.



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- ¹ “The 2024 Republican Platform,” <https://prod-static.gop.com/media/RNC2024-Platform.pdf>.
- ² Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (Schocken, 2003), 35–36.
- ³ William Beveridge, *Private Thoughts Upon Religion, Digested into Twelve Articles, with Practical Resolutions Form’d Thereupon* (London: R. Smith, 1709), 57–58, capitalization and punctuation modernized.





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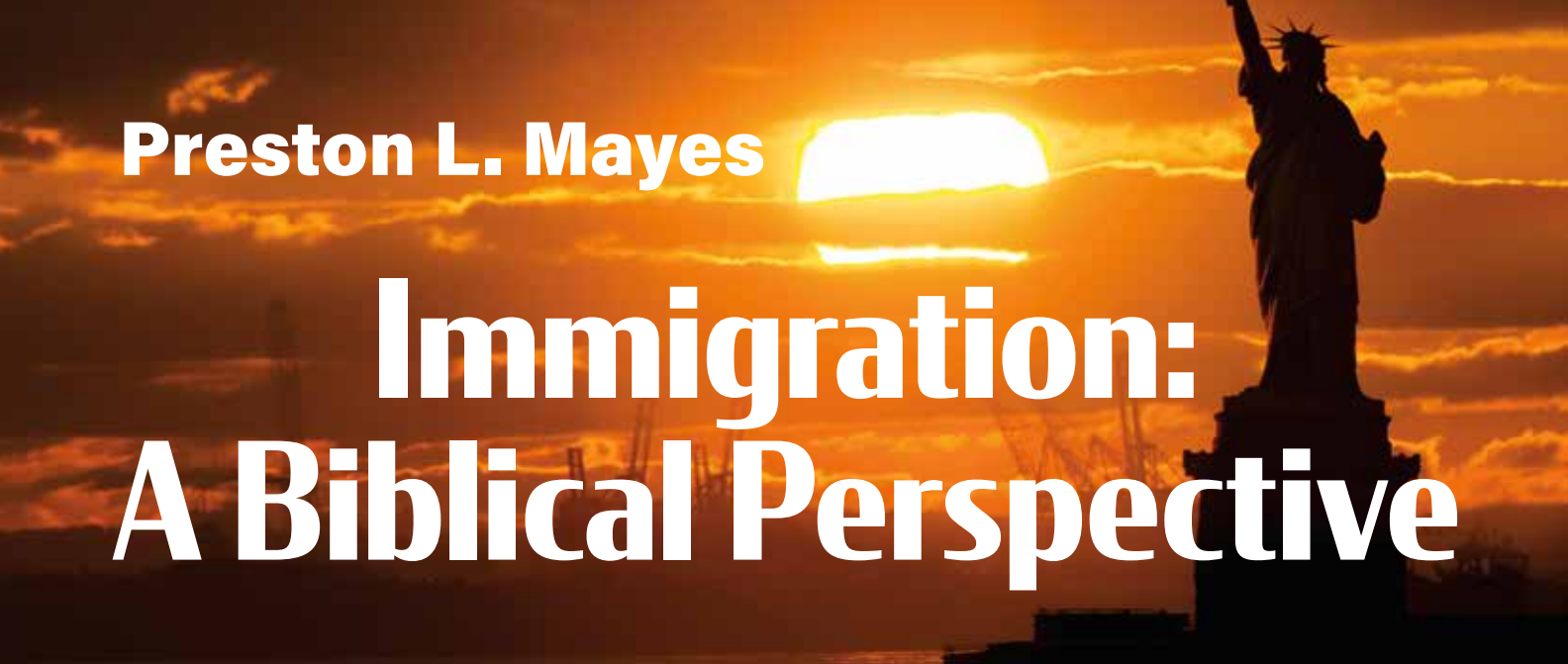


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Preston L. Mayes

Immigration: A Biblical Perspective

Immigration has been national news for years. From George Bush's failed Comprehensive Immigration Reform in 2007 to the Mexican border wall construction to the ICE mass enforcements of 2026, the issue provokes controversy. Amid the confusion, Christians wonder what they should think. How do we reconcile the command to love one's neighbor as oneself with the command to submit to government? How do we balance the need for compassion for the poor with the need to control the border and maintain law and order?

IMMIGRATION IN THE BIBLE

The Old Testament addresses the issue of immigration extensively. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's family all lived as immigrants. Immigration also featured prominently in the Mosaic law. For example, the Passover laws (the first laws given to Israel) allowed

resident aliens to participate, provided that the males were circumcised. The Mosaic law also laid responsibilities on both the immigrant and the host nation.

We must use care in applying these laws. Israel was governed under covenant by the Lord as a theocratic nation. Applying Israel's laws to our situation will require some adjustment. Nonetheless, when the Lord established a government for Israel, He did include laws about immigration. What He said can help shape our thinking.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE IMMIGRANT

God expects both immigrants and citizens to obey the laws of the land (Rom. 13:1). For one thing, immigrants must obtain legal authorization to live in the country. Old Testament Joseph provides a good example. Pharaoh invited Joseph's family to come to Egypt as honored guests. Nonetheless, Joseph refused to presume upon Pharaoh's generosity. He had his brothers make a formal request to settle as resident aliens.

Furthermore, Joseph sought the local population's goodwill. He instructed his brothers to say they were shepherds from their youth, making them unlikely to pose a political threat. He also told them to ask for the land of Goshen. This request avoided offending the Egyptians and kept his family from arousing

the suspicions of local populations.¹ The request was granted, and Joseph's brothers even became government officials in charge of Pharaoh's flocks.² Here is a pattern of immigrants putting the local population at ease and supporting the host country's interests.

When God formed the nation of Israel during the exodus, His second piece of legislation defined how foreigners could be included in the nation. The men had to be circumcised (Exod. 12:43–48). Once they gained permission to reside in Israel, immigrants were required to obey the law. Resident aliens attended the national reading of the law both at the end of Moses' life and every seven years thereafter (Deut. 31:9–13). They were held just as accountable as Israelites if they violated it and were under the “eye for an eye” standard of justice (Lev. 24:19–22).

Equal laws also applied to religious crimes. For example, the son of an Egyptian man and Israelite woman was executed for blasphemy (Lev. 24:10–14). Phineas was praised for executing two people guilty of idol worship. The incident occurred when an Israelite brought a Midianite woman into the congregation (Num. 25:6–13). The law did not envision deportation, which would have been an unequal punishment.

Biblically, immigrants were required to respect property laws. Even Abraham purchased a burial site

for Sarah (Gen. 23), and later Jacob bought land in Shechem to pitch his tent (Gen. 33:18–20). By contrast, Israelites were prohibited from permanently selling their fields (Lev. 25:23–28), so immigrants in Israel could not purchase land. It was unthinkable that any family should lose their land for any reason other than God's discipline (Lev. 25:23–34). Legal immigrants could, however, enjoy wealth (Lev. 25:47).

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE HOST NATION

A nation has a biblical responsibility to control its borders and may limit immigration. It can also grant different status to those it permits to enter (Gen. 15:18–21; Deut. 2:19; 32:8). The law of Moses includes several immigrant classes. Least integrated into society were foreigners (Hebrew *nekar* or *zar*). These might be traders, merchants, or other travelers on the roads connecting Mesopotamia and Egypt. Some immigrants were temporary workers or hired hands (Hebrew *sakir* and *toshab*). Resident aliens (Hebrew *ger*) were the most fully integrated into Israel. They received all the benefits of residents in the nation except for owning their own land or participating in local government. They could even join the Passover celebration, provided their males were circumcised.

Ruth's acceptance into Israel as part of Naomi's house illustrates how one might move from being a foreigner to being a recognized member of the community. Because of Ruth's willingness to enter Israel with Naomi, she was welcomed in Boaz's fields to glean. She was permitted to marry Boaz due to her commitment to follow the Lord.

Modern nations also recognize multiple categories of foreigners that may enjoy different privileges. For example, a foreign manager might enter the United States on a short-term visit to a factory, requiring a temporary work visa. Another may be given a permanent posting and become a resident alien with a "green card."³ Some might even choose to become naturalized citizens.

In legal matters, the law warns Israelite judges against abusing their authority against resident aliens (Exod. 23:9). A stern warning occurs in Deuteronomy 27:19, "Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow" (NKJV). Sadly, Israel did not treat these groups ethically. The nation went into captivity partly because they "they have oppressed the stranger . . . [and] mistreated the fatherless and the widow" (Ezek. 22:7, NKJV).

Ruth 4 illustrates how justice might fail for a widow, a fatherless child, or a resident alien. The wid-

owed Naomi and the foreigner Ruth were about to lose the family land through a legal process. When Boaz stepped in to represent Naomi's legal interests, he risked his own interests. His actions ensured that a "good old boys" network of local men would not overlook an injustice that might have seemed completely legal and even commendable. But it would have led to Naomi wrongfully losing her land.

A circumcised resident alien could eat the Passover and fully participate in Israel's religion (Exod. 12:43–45). Those less committed to Israel's worship could enter the land for various reasons, but none could worship another god. Economically, resident aliens were to be treated just like Israelites, except for land ownership. Resident aliens and hired workers were to be paid promptly and at the same wages as Israelite workers (Deut. 24:14–15). Resident aliens could glean in the fields when they needed food (Deut. 24:21). They could eat food from the triennial tithe (Deut. 26:12).

Foreigners who were temporarily present in Israel were also allowed to glean. Also, they could be charged interest on loans while Israelites could not. The difference is significant since most borrowing resulted from poor harvests.

Under the law, immigrants had to be treated well simply because they were people. Israel was to model the Lord's love for immigrants by also loving them (Deut. 10:19–20). Host nations should recognize and appreciate immigrants' contributions to society. Abraham was considered “a mighty prince” in the land, Joseph was elevated to prime minister of Egypt, and Uriah the Hittite was memorialized as one of David's best soldiers (2 Sam. 23). We also should appreciate the contributions of immigrants.

APPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

The United States is a secular state. We cannot simply adopt the Mosaic code as law. The attempt would result in chaos. For example, we cannot require immigrants to become Christians. We should also be wary of adopting specific systems meant to operate in Israel on a local tribal level. The United States is a vastly more populated country, and most people do not live in small towns. Nonetheless, this survey of Israel's laws suggests several broad principles.

First, immigrants must obey all laws, beginning with entering the country lawfully. Immigrants should also be sensitive to local cultures and laws. They should support the host government by submitting themselves to it. As with Abraham, Joseph, and Uriah,

immigrants should work to further the interests of the host nation (just as any Christian citizen should).

Americans should recognize that many immigrants do exactly this. I regularly walk by a new housing development near my neighborhood. I see work crews composed largely of Hispanic workers. I never see anyone loafing or goofing around. They work long hours, often in the hot sun or bitter cold. Frankly, I admire their strong work ethic.

As a host nation, the United States can and should control its borders to protect both its citizens and the integrity of its government. But it should also develop a streamlined process to avoid the years-long red tape currently required to obtain permission to enter the country legally. The federal government could do this if it would follow the US Constitution, eliminate many of the agencies, programs, and subsidies that overstep its jurisdiction and overwhelm its budget, and focus more resources on the limited but definite role the founders envisioned for it.

Second, the host nation should treat all people according to the same standards. Criminal laws must apply equally to all people. Resident aliens should receive the same wages and benefits as citizens. The practice of ignoring the immigration issue so businesses can underpay illegals is sinfully motivated

and displeases the Lord. Whatever social benefits are given to citizens should be extended to resident aliens as well. These government programs have created numerous problems, and the wisdom of continuing them is highly questionable. Nonetheless, as long as the programs exist, legal resident aliens should have the same access as citizens.

Host nations are not required to offer people a pathway to naturalized citizenship. The United States does, and it has good reasons for its policy. Naturalization will limit the tendency of those with power (the electorate) to take advantage of those without it. Even so, unlimited naturalization creates problems that might be avoided by a more limited policy.

Preston L. Mayes, PhD, is professor of Old Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis. In 2021 he delivered the MacDonald Lectures on “The Widow, Orphan, and Immigration in Deuteronomy.”



¹ See John Goldingay, *Genesis*, BCOTP (Baker, 2020), 67–68, and Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, NAC 1B (Broadman and Holman, 2005), 845.

² Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis* (Zondervan, 2001), 586.

³ See Preston Mayes, “The Widow, Orphan, and Immigrant in Deuteronomy: What Can Moses Teach Christians about the Modern Social Justice Movement?,” 2021 Central Seminary MacDonald Lectures, 11 February 2020. Videos and transcripts of the sessions are available online at <https://central-seminary.edu/about-central/macdonald-lecture-series/>. See also James Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis* (Crossway, 2009).

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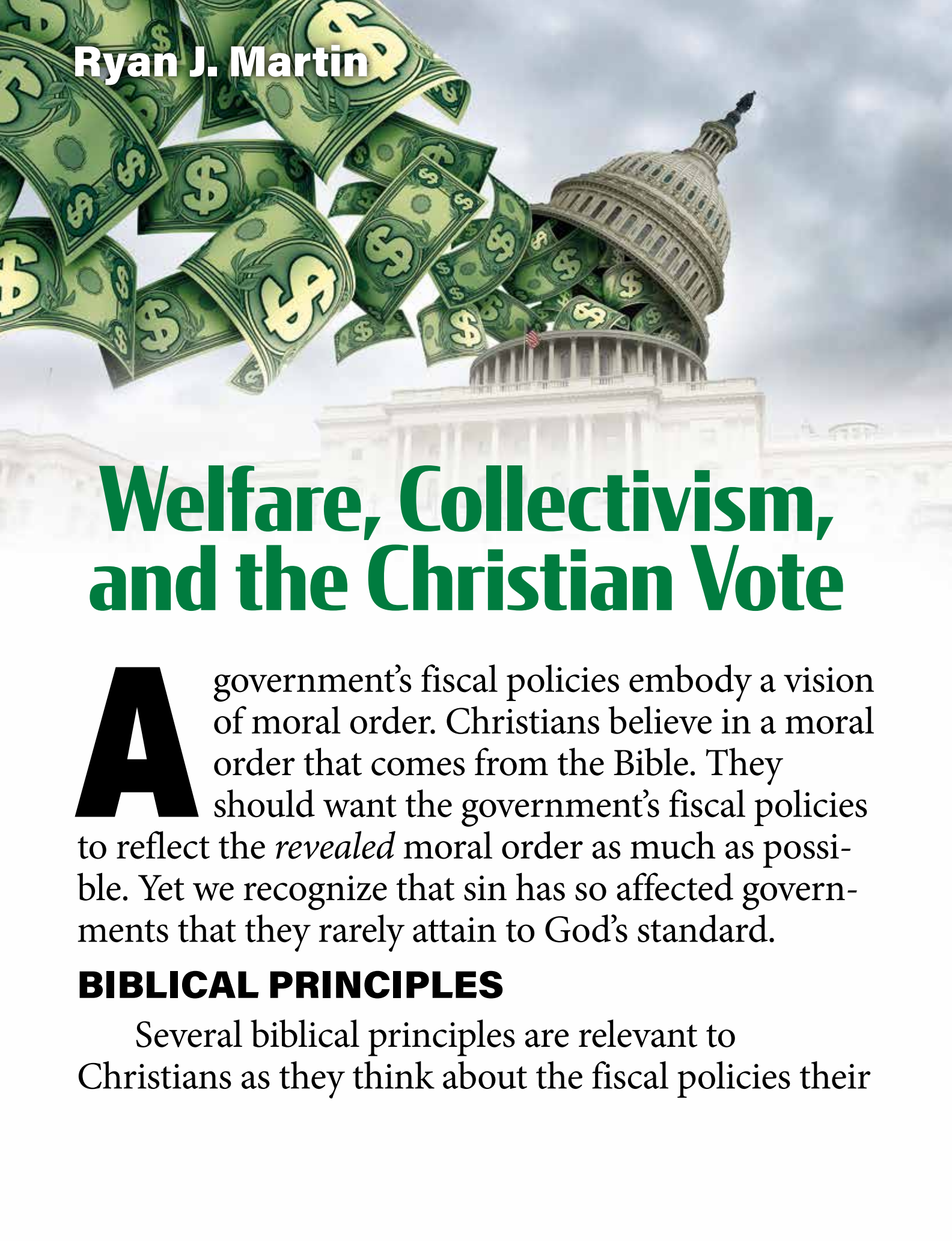
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Ryan J. Martin

Welfare, Collectivism, and the Christian Vote

A government's fiscal policies embody a vision of moral order. Christians believe in a moral order that comes from the Bible. They should want the government's fiscal policies to reflect the *revealed* moral order as much as possible. Yet we recognize that sin has so affected governments that they rarely attain to God's standard.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

Several biblical principles are relevant to Christians as they think about the fiscal policies their

government leaders should uphold. Four of them are particularly important.

First is the evil of theft. In the eighth commandment God declared to His covenant nation, “Thou shalt not steal” (Exod. 20:15). The New Testament reinforces this precept numerous times (Luke 18:20; Rom. 13:9; Eph. 4:28).

Second is the value of human labor. The Bible commends human work. In the fourth commandment, God decreed work: “Six days shalt thou labour” (Exod. 20:9; cf. 2 Thess. 3:8, 10). Christians know that work and industry are also valuable for human dignity.

Third is the nature of the present age. The Bible presents the present age as one that is under a curse (Rom. 8:20) and the dominion of Satan (Eph. 2:1–3). The age of blessedness belongs to Christ’s coming kingdom reign. This distinction is clarifying, for it keeps Christians from false or idolatrous beliefs in the possibility of any present utopia. During the present age, Christians have no confidence that fallen human governments can provide an ultimate remedy to societies’ brokenness.

Fourth is the responsibility of taxation. God’s Word says that human governments have a legitimate right to tax their citizens. Believers must pay those taxes, especially as due recompense to govern-

ment-employed “ministers” for their God-given work (Rom. 13:6).

BIBLICAL POLICIES

These great moral realities are some of the most important principles guiding Christians as they prepare to vote. These truths are especially relevant when some people, especially on the Left, expect governments to institute various forms of collectivism and welfare. God’s revealed moral order should lead American believers to support candidates who support the following kinds of policies.

The right to private property. The eighth commandment says, “Thou shalt not steal.” People steal when they take something for their own that belongs to a neighbor. God’s people have recognized several implications arising from this simple axiom. The most important is that this divine precept protects private property. Private property here refers not merely to land holdings, but anything that belongs to another, whether acquired by labor, industry, investment, gift, or inheritance. By forbidding theft, God assumes the right to private property. What a person obtains through his time and labor or by gift belongs to him and should not be taken away.

This policy overturns all radical governmental attempts to enact various forms of statist collectivism, including socialism and communism. The most ardent socialists in America still object if you try to steal their iPhone, their car, or even their place in line at the DMV. This is why Richard Weaver called private property “the last metaphysical right.” Though the secularized West has denied nearly all transcendent truth, most of us still balk when someone takes what belongs to us.

Societies need the eighth commandment. A disregard for private property rights leads to depraved cultures and societies, filled with distrust and violence. For these reasons, Christians should support candidates that uphold the right to private property.

The rejection of envy. The eighth commandment not only assumes the right to private property, but also the sovereignty of God (see Exod. 20:17). God’s sovereignty is also the reason that the Bible prohibits envy (Rom. 1:29; Gal. 5:21, 26; 1 Pet. 2:1). To envy is to oppose the good that another person gains. Envy destroys societies (Titus 3:3).

God has ordained some people to possess greater material goods than others. He blesses one field over another. He enriches one man’s work over another’s. God even blesses one Christian ministry over another

(1 Cor. 3:5–9). God wants mature men to work hard for gain and yet to rest contentedly under His sovereign hand. He grants the “food and raiment” that all people need (1 Tim. 6:8).

Politicians sometimes suggest that a vote for them will result in greater financial prosperity for the voter. It goes without saying that Christians should object to such crass appeals to avarice. Yet politicians often go further. They use the envy of their constituents to satisfy their own lust for power.

Politicians exploit envy when they demonize the rich and promise the “have nots” goods for which they have not worked. They buy votes with envy by falsely claiming that material goods and services are rights, something that people should be given merely by virtue of their humanity rather than gained by labor. Often, these politicians vilify people whose hard work or innovation have honestly gained them wealth.

Though Scripture warns against the “love of money” (1 Tim. 6:10), it does not present wealth as evil in itself. In the Old Testament, wealth represents Jehovah’s covenant blessing (Deut. 28:1–14). God calls the rich to trust Him, to share, and to invest in eternal riches (1 Tim. 6:17–19). Some early Christians “had all things common,” but they still possessed their own

homes (Acts 2:44; cf. Acts 5:4; 1 Tim. 3:2, 5; Titus 2:5; Phlm. 22).

Nothing in the Bible criticizes wealth *per se*. Wealth should not be criminalized or criticized. When the government shames the legitimate accumulation of wealth, it discourages industry and innovation.¹

Resistance to redistribution. Collectivist economic policies often suggest that governments can and should ensure equal outcomes for its citizens. That vision of society is far too utopian. It fails to account for native inequalities and for the groaning of the present age. Again, the eighth commandment assumes that some people will own goods that others do not. Jesus said, “Ye have the poor always with you” (Matt. 26:11). The Bible foretells that there will even be inequality amidst the blessed unity of the age to come (Luke 19:17, 19). When the Apostle Paul said that a person who does not work should not eat, he denied that even necessities are human rights (2 Thess. 3:10; cf. 1 Tim. 5:11). Modern wealth redistribution looks very different from God’s commandment that Israelites should let the needy glean the edges of their fields.

Equal-outcome policies happen when the government takes by force what belongs to those who have more and redistributes it to those who have less.

This kind of redistribution is government-sanctioned theft. Wealth accumulates when people decide to use their own time, knowledge, and resources to advance themselves. Government-forced wealth redistribution uses the sword to steal not only subjects' wealth, but their very lives.

For the sake of justice, Christians should desire equality of opportunity, but they resist any notion that a centralized government should guarantee equal outcomes. For Americans, some redistribution of wealth is likely to remain a part of governmental function for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, believers should frown on politicians who plan government programs to provide goods and services that should be the fruit of labor.²

Redirecting charitable responsibility. A government's fiscal policies should encourage its citizens to do honest labor. These policies should eliminate barriers to flourishing through work. They should also cultivate the virtue of charity among its citizens.

God ordained human labor in part so that we might see Him provide for our needs through our own work (1 Cor. 3:8). The Apostle Paul embodied a life of personal responsibility before God, and he called on others to follow his example (1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:7; Acts 20:34). God makes people responsi-

ble to earn their living and to prepare for times when they cannot provide for themselves. Having said that, when we face crises, we should humbly receive help from those closest to us (Phil. 4:16).

In fact, Christ intends a believer's earnings from work to be redirected, as necessary, toward other Christians in need (Eph. 4:28). God designed subsidiary relationships such as families and churches to help those who are unable to provide for themselves when catastrophes occur (1 Tim. 5:8, 16). When someone—even a government—supplants our responsibility to fill that role, both our personal stewardship of wealth and our virtue are eroded.

Families and churches are closer to their loved ones who have needs. Therefore, they are better able to help the vulnerable and to hold them accountable. When large and distant governments take over this responsibility, they often do more harm than good.

When governments take over charity, they also neuter their citizens' sense of moral responsibility for the needy around them. Instead of being personally concerned about the vulnerable, many citizens simply console themselves that the government will take care of the problem. By discouraging charity in this way,

governments block citizens from experiencing the joy that comes from helping others (2 Cor. 9:7).

Large and distant governments should not supplant these more local, subsidiary relationships. Wise Christians will support candidates who are prepared to begin moving the government away from seeing itself as “safety net.” They will support policies that encourage more personal responsibility and local charity. We truly do not want the government to take away from us and our churches the joy of charity.

CONCLUSION

Government fiscal policy is a huge and complicated topic. Much more could be said concerning fair taxation, sound monetary policy, the importance of prudence and thrift in using taxed revenue, and just relationships between employers and employees. The Bible also speaks abundantly to issues of corruption, bribery, graft, and even inordinate salaries for public officials. We have not addressed all of these issues. But we have argued that Christians should vote for candidates who would enact and enforce legislation to protect private property, to affirm the importance of work, to undergird personal responsibility, and to reject the politics of envy.

Ryan J. Martin, PhD, is the pastor of Columbiaville Baptist Church in Columbiaville, Michigan. He is the author of *Understanding Affections in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* and a contributing editor to the *Jonathan Edwards Study Bible*.



¹ See Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics* (Crossway, 2018), 958–1012.

² See Mark D. Liederbach and Evan Lenow, *Ethics as Worship: The Pursuit of Moral Discipleship* (P&R, 2021), 373–76.



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Brett Williams

What's Included in Pro-Life?

Prior to seminary, I worked for a large pro-life, non-profit organization. Part of my job entailed interacting with the public, especially those who were vehemently pro-abortion. Through many conversations and phone calls, I learned that one of the most common arguments, beyond some of the vitriol, was the claim of “moral equivalence.” Many people would begin a conversation with the phrase, “If you’re really pro-life, then you must also be for . . .” Invariably, what followed was some left-leaning social idea. I remember one woman yelling at me, “You Christians are so concerned with babies in the womb but couldn’t care less about what happens to people after they’re born!” For these people, the abortion debate was the same as every other social debate, be it illegal immigration, welfare, or whatever.

This argument is not new, even among religious people. In 1984, the Roman Catholic Cardinal

Joseph Bernardin articulated what has been called the “seamless garment doctrine.” This doctrine borrows a metaphor from Jesus’ garment on the cross (see John 19). To strengthen their case, earlier Catholic pacifists wanted to link their anti-war stance to other, more accepted doctrines in what they called a “consistent life ethic.” They used the metaphor of Jesus’ robe to illustrate the point that one issue cannot be separated from another. Because human life is a divine gift and sacred, it must be valued at every level and in every way. A consistent social ethic, therefore, must be seamless.

For Bernardin, this “seamless garment” ethic not only included a clear stance on abortion and euthanasia but also on other social evils. These included issues such as war, poverty, opposition to immigration, nuclear proliferation, and especially capital punishment. Christians have always held that the divine right to life presumes human dignity. Bernardin took this emphasis in a new direction, arguing that human dignity necessarily entails many progressive social policies. If Christians value life, then they must value every policy that enhances life, no matter the cost. Abortion is woven together with concerns like the plight of the poor, so-called social justice, and free subsidized healthcare. In his view, to reject any of

these agendas is to rend Christ's ethical tunic. Remove one strand, and it falls apart.

For Bernardin and his followers, opposing abortion is morally equivalent to opposing poverty or closed borders (among other issues). This kind of equivalence is critical to their argument. These modern "moral equivalentists" develop their argument in two major directions.

The first is the idea that protecting life in the womb necessitates a consistent stance against all forms of violence. According to this view, pro-lifers must also be pacifists, support strict gun control policies, and oppose capital punishment. This argument, however, rests on several logical and theological errors. Not all forms of violence are inherently wrong. Whether in a just war or in self-defense, violence can, at times, be good and necessary. In a fallen world, violence is often essential for the propagation of peace, and God frequently uses it to restore order. Scripture is replete with examples, from Abraham rescuing Lot in Genesis 14 to Jael killing Sisera, the commander of the Canaanite army, in Judges 4 and 5. God sometimes uses and allows violence, not because it is necessarily good in itself, but because it can bring about good despite sin. A soldier killing to defend his country is doing something entirely different from a mother or a so-called surgeon killing a child in the

womb. One aims at the peace of justice, while the other is often driven by convenience, greed, or even malice. Murder is never equivalent to justice.

Guns are a favorite target of moral equivalen-
tists. They argue that if someone is pro-life, then they must oppose any implement whose purpose is taking life. However, as shown, the use of violence to defend life is not murder. It is, in fact, the opposite, and every form of jurisprudence has recognized it as such. To defend life implies possessing the means of that defense. Weapons, whether arrows or Armalites, were invented to equalize the means. A person's size and strength, whether physical or political, should not be the only deciding factor in that person's ability to defend himself. To remove a person's means of adequate defense seriously degrades his ability to defend himself and limits his freedom. The fathers of our country recognized that an armed and educated populace defangs tyrants, terrorists, and thieves.

The purpose of owning a weapon is to defend life and to defend the liberty that comes from life. The purpose of pro-life advocates is also to defend life. Abortion is not about equalizing opportunities for justice; it is about the strong preying on the weak. Abortion is not about the freedom of the mother. It is about the tyranny and slavery of convenience.

Perhaps the most common thread in the “seamless garment” argument is capital punishment. Moral equivalentists argue that if God is the author of life, then only God can take life. For anyone else to do so, even in a controlled, state-authorized way, is to play God. They contend that taking a life can never be justified. Even if self-defense or national defense could sometimes be justified as necessary evils, the death penalty is an act of violence that is never necessary. They believe that God alone can enact death as a penalty. If we must allow the beginning of natural life in the womb, then we must always allow its natural ending.

While this argument initially seems pious, it suffers from bad logic and poor theology. Granted, God is indeed the author and designer of life, and He alone chooses its ending. Nevertheless, Scripture reminds us that God also chooses the means by which life is taken.

After the flood, in the Noahic covenant, God demanded an accounting from men for the lives of other men (Gen 9). Because humanity is made in the image of God, human blood and life are so valuable that unauthorized killing must be addressed. God further demands that justice be done: “by man shall his blood be shed.” God has authorized human governments both to defend life and to take it. Paul clearly articulates this point in Romans 13. He explains that

rightly formed governments are God's servants, enacting a measure of His justice and vengeance on earth. Capital punishment is not anti-life or "playing God." Rather, it is God's controlled means of demonstrating the immense value of life. To truly value life is to value the God-ordained consequences of unnecessarily destroying it.

The second major argument of the moral equivalentists concerns human prosperity. They argue that if we are truly pro-life, then we must support policies that promote human flourishing. I wholeheartedly agree with this assertion: the right to life and the desire to flourish are indeed connected. The issue arises when these proposed "human flourishing" policies include measures such as illegal immigration, an expansive welfare state, or free healthcare. Typically, those who equate abortion with these progressive social issues frame them within economic theories like socialism, communism, or anarchism. If these theories led to greater human flourishing, then their argument might be compelling. But the truth is just the opposite. History repeatedly demonstrates that when these schemes are implemented, equality of outcome is often mistaken for equality of opportunity, freedom is defined as arbitrary fairness, and justice devolves into forced vengeance.

Because life is from God and infinitely valuable, people should seek the good, true, and beautiful for their neighbors through love. Our Lord reminds us that this is one of the two pillars of the law (Matt. 22:34–40). Many progressive ideas deny neighbors this love. Abortion dehumanizes and degrades society, but so does unfettered immigration. Abortion destroys mothers and families, but so does an extreme welfare system. Abortion denies prosperity, but so does so-called social justice.

Being pro-life should fundamentally mean advocating for human flourishing. Many progressive policies, particularly recent ones, actively impede human flourishing. Mass migration and illegal immigration often have more to do with human trafficking than with human empowerment. Free, taxpayer-subsidized healthcare rarely results in medical advancements and equitable access; instead, it often leads to unequal redistribution, prioritizes budget bottom lines over individual care, and allows bureaucratic hypocrisy to supplant the Hippocratic Oath.

Social issues are complex and demand nuance. Those who uphold the sanctity of life must also carefully consider what that life means within the context of human society. Flourishing often stems from adhering to the principles of Scripture, which

include the fundamental ideas of individual responsibility, rights, property, sovereignty, love, and neighborliness. While social theories are related to one's view of the right to life, the right to life is more foundational, not morally equivalent. Certain social rights are derived rights, coming from the right to life. The right to life itself is a direct right from God. Therefore, whatever one's views on social theories may be, they are not morally equivalent to rescuing the unborn from abortion.

While we all ought to strive to have a “consistent life ethic,” we must also acknowledge that God's gift of life takes precedence over social theories from capital gains to capital punishment. Pro-life proponents must be careful not to confuse an innocent baby's right to take its first breath with later, derivative rights on the body politic.

Brett Williams, PhD, is provost of Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis, where he also teaches systematic theology.



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Kevin T. Bauder

Despise Not One of These Little Ones



The Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v Wade* was one of the worst blots on America's moral legacy. It opened the door to the state-sanctioned killing of sixty million or more unborn Americans. Christians have understood these abortions to be the murder of innocents. Consequently, they have made pro-life opposition to abortion a major plank in their political agenda ever since.

Abortion advocates used to tell us that they were simply pro-choice. They claimed that they did not favor abortion, but they did favor a woman's right to choose. That mask has now been ripped off. Rather than arguing that abortion is a necessary evil, pro-abortionists are now trying to present it as a positive good. One example is a YouTube celebrity who,

with his wife, decided to abort an unborn baby who genetic testing identified as having Down Syndrome. These tests for Down Syndrome are notoriously unreliable. Still, the YouTuber posted a lengthy apologetic to X explaining how hard it was to make the decision to abort, but how abortion was best for the child. Much of the post explained what terrible lives the victims of Down Syndrome lead.

This post brought back memories from my childhood. During my growing-up years, my parents' home was host to a constant stream of foster children. Over the years, I had more than twenty foster brothers and sisters. Some stayed for only a few weeks, while others remained in our home for years. All of them arrived damaged. Many of them were developmentally disabled. In those days, we called it "mentally retarded."

Their disabilities resulted from several conditions, one of which was then called "Mongolism." This term is now considered obsolete and offensive. Today, the condition is called *Down Syndrome* or *Trisomy 21*. But during the 1950s and 1960s, *Mongoloid* was the term that everybody used, and it lodged itself in my consciousness when thinking of my foster brothers and sisters.

There was hardly ever a time when we didn't have at least one developmentally disabled child in our

home. My nearest sibling (a year younger) and I grew up with them. They became our earliest playmates. The first I can remember were Ricky, Jimmy, Larry, and Mike. These four overlapped in their stays, and I think that Ricky was probably with us the longest. We learned early on that we had to adapt our play to his level of interaction. Others were less able to interact with us. We accepted their limitations as a fact of life.

Their behavior could create misunderstandings in our childish minds. For example, Mike really wanted to feed himself, but he couldn't handle a spoon or fork. For that matter, he couldn't find his mouth with the food that he scooped up in his fingers. It went everywhere. For a while, I thought this was terribly unfair: Mike was allowed to fling his meal around the room while I was not. Eventually my parents impressed upon me the lesson that food is not a toy. Even so, Mike seemed to have a good time with it.

John and Gail were a bit older. They were brother and sister, and they had already formed a close bond before they ever reached us. They had been separated from their other siblings when they were sent to us, and I don't think they ever really trusted us. We tried to include and befriend them, but they consistently kept us out of their bubble. This was disappointing, and to a child it felt like rejection. But we understood

how the circumstances that brought them to us created this barrier.

Claude and Claudia were twins. I'm not sure whether their slowness resulted from actual mental deficiency or simply from neglect and social backwardness. I was in second grade when they came to live with us. They were a couple of years older than me, but a year behind me in school, and struggling there.

Claude wanted to be called Buck. We honored his request. Buck told us that his father was a G-man. He turned out to be a garbage collector in Detroit. I'm not sure how long Buck and Claudia were with us, but it must have been at least a couple of years. And Buck was a true brother. I learned to ride my bike with him. I learned to shoot a BB gun with him. We spent hours together trying to chop down a tree with a dull hatchet. We did boy stuff together.

My father always gave foster children the opportunity to name their most-disliked food, with the promise that they would never have to eat it. Buck was emphatic: "Hash!" Imagine our surprise when the rest of us were eating corned beef hash, and Buck dug right in. The mystery was solved at Thanksgiving when a dish of turkey dressing was set on the table. Buck pointed to it and said, "That's the hash I don't like."

It always hurt when a social worker arrived to take our foster brothers and sisters away. With Buck and Claudia, it hurt more than usual. They were only with us for two or three years, but they were the long years of childhood.

Our greatest challenge was Andy. He was a newborn who was brought to us directly from the hospital. His mother had rejected him because of his “severe Mongolism.” He was a Down Syndrome baby, and his condition was the worst we saw. Andy didn’t cry when he had a need. He couldn’t suck on a bottle. We had to buy special nipples that went way down his throat, where his swallowing reflex would take over. He had to be watched constantly. We had to anticipate when he needed to be changed or when he needed anything else. Andy was completely helpless.

To this day I’m not sure why the state thought that a foster home would be good for Andy. Perhaps they did not have an institutional bed open. But I do know that in our home, Andy was loved and cared for. And I know that he gave us more than we could ever give him.

They all did. I learned much from growing up with developmentally disabled children. Their influence still marks my life, my mind, and my heart. I

miss them today. I find myself wondering whatever happened to them.

What did they teach me?

First, that disability is nothing to be afraid of. Disabled people are just people. Yes, they have special needs, but their needs do not alter who they are. We have no reason to shy away from them. We must not be embarrassed by their presence. While making allowances for what they can't do, we should treat them in as normal and natural a way as possible.

Second, I learned that developmentally disabled people are, as a class, some of the happiest people on earth. Of course, nobody lives constantly in bliss, and they have their moments of sadness and anger. But the boys and girls who came to us were less disposed than most to greed, jealousy, and envy. It took little to satisfy them, and they were easily delighted. Though we need to respect the limitations of developmentally disabled people and to help them with whatever they can't do, there is no reason to pity them.

Third, these experiences taught me that every human being is precious. Every person has enormous value, and that value doesn't depend upon what they can do or how well they can think. Later in life, I would learn that humans have value because they are created in the image of God. I didn't understand that

at the time. But I saw the investment that my mother and father made in these children. I felt affection and friendship for them. They became my brothers and sisters.

Fourth, I have learned that God uses people who are useless to others. My brother Andy could never do a thing for us. But in caring for him we learned important lessons about patience, tenderness, watchfulness, and the blessing of giving oneself. We learned a bit of what it means to bear another's burden and to put another's interests ahead of our own. We learned that it is possible to love a person who cannot love you back.

I can articulate a theological case against abortion. I can point to specific, biblical evidence that implies the fully human personhood of the fetus in the womb (e.g., Ps. 51:5). I can advance Scriptures that emphasize the sanctity of human life (e.g., Gen. 9:5–6). Christians must consider abortion to be, not simply the moral equivalent of murder, but the actual murder of human beings. I believe that these arguments are both compelling and important.

Even little children are God's image-bearers. The littlest ones are still in the womb. We must remember that in heaven their angels do behold the face of the Father (Matt. 18:10). We have a moral duty to protect

them. That duty extends to dismantling the laws that allow them to be aborted on demand.

For me, though, the theological case is buttressed by lived experience with these who are least of the least. When I hear of someone aborting a child because of Down Syndrome or some other developmental disability, I don't see arguments. I think of names. I see faces. I think of Ricky, Jimmy, Larry, and Mike. I see Buck and Claudia. I see John and Gail. I see Andy. I know how valuable these people are. And I yearn for babies like them to have a chance at life.

The "abortion issue" has not gone away. Christians must weigh a variety of moral issues when voting. When we do, we must put abortion at the top of that list. Protecting human life is fundamental not only to our Christianity but even to our humanity. That hasn't changed.

Kevin T. Bauder is research professor of theology at Central Seminary in Plymouth, Minnesota. He also pastors Bible Baptist Church in East Bethel, Minnesota.



Honoring the Faithful Ministry of Dr. Michael Harding

First Baptist Church of Troy, Michigan, gathered on March 15, 2026, to celebrate a remarkable milestone: **41 years of faithful pastoral ministry** by Dr. Michael Harding. The service brought together the FBCT congregation, extended family, and former staff members who traveled from across the country to honor a man whose influence has shaped generations.

Pastor Harding's ministry has been marked by a rare blend of doctrinal depth and practical, heart-level application. His preaching consistently reflected a passion for practical Bible training with a solid doctrinal foundation, a commitment that has strengthened churches, families, and young leaders for decades.

Before becoming senior pastor, Harding served faithfully as a youth pastor in Oak Forest, Illinois. His leadership extended far beyond his own pulpit, influencing Christian education, missions, and pastoral fellowship through service on the Executive

Committee of the board of directors of Bob Jones University, as well as the boards of Gospel Fellowship Association Missions, the Michigan Association of Christian Schools, and Foundations Baptist Fellowship International.

In the spirit of 2 Timothy 2, Pastor Harding has modeled what it means to entrust truth to faithful men who will teach others also. His steady example of integrity, courage, and pastoral wisdom continues to inspire those within the FBFI and beyond.

Dr. Harding's legacy is not merely measured in years, but in lives shaped, leaders trained, and a testimony that calls all of us to perseverance in gospel ministry.





Bruce McAllister, Mike Harding, Sam Dawson

Pastor Mark Minnick Honored at Jubilee Celebration

On April 12, 2026, Mount Calvary Baptist Church gathered for a Jubilee Celebration to praise the Lord for His kindness in giving the church Dr. Mark Minnick, who has devotedly ministered the Word for fifty years, including forty-six at Mount Calvary. Friends and family joined the church for a full day of thanksgiving, fellowship, and reflection on God's work through the enduring ministry of Pastor Minnick and his wife, Linda.

The morning service included a message from Dr. Bruce McAllister from 1 Peter 4:10–11, urging

believers to develop their gifts for the glory of God. Afterward, lunch on the grounds provided a joyful time of fellowship as members served in practical ways—setting up tables, chairs, and tents; preparing food; welcoming the large crowd across the church campus; and sharing a variety of hand-made pound cakes.

A special evening service highlighted Pastor Minnick's personal walk with God, love for the flock, appreciation for church history, vision for the future, and steady ministry of the Word. The service included a prayer of thanksgiving, Scripture reading, a humorous video capturing children's perspectives, testimonies from friends and church members, and gift presentations—a book of written tributes, a commissioned painting by church member Emma Leedy, and financial provision from the congregation for future devotional trips to church history sites. Pastor Minnick concluded the evening with a gracious response.

The celebration was joyful yet tender, as the church honored Pastor Minnick only weeks after his February 2026 announcement that he would retire at the end of August. He plans to remain in Greenville and continue attending Mount Calvary Baptist Church. Though the church feels the

weight of this transition, it rejoices in God's provision of Pastor Eric Newton as its next undershepherd. With gratitude for the past and confidence in the Lord's care for the future, Mount Calvary gives thanks for Pastor Minnick's faithful and fruitful half-century of ministry.



SOUND WORDS

HOLD FAST THE FORM OF SOUND WORDS

2 TIMOTHY 1:13

FIRST PARTAKER

“The husbandman that laboureth must be first partaker of the fruits” (2 Tim. 2:6)

Not the Nadir of Our Life's Work, but Its Crown

These words are a slight rearrangement of a proposal made by a man named J. Graham Miller. He and his wife, Flora, went out from New Zealand as missionaries to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) during the Second World War. After serving faithfully and with remarkable spiritual success, Miller returned to pastor in New Zealand and then later in Australia. Finally, the couple retired to a small cottage in northeast Victoria, Australia. The autobiographical account of their lives is published under the evocative title, *A Day's March Nearer Home*.

I read this book twelve years ago and felt that I gained some insight concerning several things that I'd wondered about for a while. One of them was retirement. *Retirement*

should be, Miller challenged fellow missionaries and pastors, *the crown of our life's work, not its nadir*.

By the time this comes to print my own retirement from fifty years of continuous pastoring will have commenced. On the last Sunday of May 1976, Linda and I were married in a remote stone building on her father's cattle ranch in far west Texas. Exactly one week later I was installed without ceremony as the pastor of a very small independent Baptist church just east of Charlotte, North Carolina. I knew little of how to pastor, and scarcely anything more about what or how to preach. But the few families that made up the congregation listened as if I were an oracle. We had four happy years together until the call came to join an older man, Mr. Jesse Boyd, at the church where I've been now for forty-six years; the first nine as his associate and then these last thirty-seven as the senior pastor.

How gracious the Lord has been to me and to my wife to allow us to raise our three daughters in just one church, to see each of them coming to Christ under its ministry and then memorable years later processioning down its aisle to marry fine Christian husbands. How patient and forgiving the people have been with me, very much like the Lord Himself.

This past April the church family honored my wife and me with a ministerial Jubilee Sunday. In the morning, Dr. Bruce McAllister preached a never-to-be-forgotten challenge from 1 Peter 4:10–11. All throughout the auditorium hearts were stirred to renewed service for Christ.

Our daughters sang, the choir and congregational numbers were glorious, and the focus was kept where it should have been—on the goodness and greatness of the Lord. In the evening the church showered us with overwhelming kindnesses: a short movie, a PowerPoint presentation, testimonies, tears, laughter, and gifts so generous and given with such affection that Linda and I were staggered to near speechlessness and reduced to tears. It was an undeserved but joyfully edifying once-in-a-lifetime day. There are no expressions adequate for conveying the depths of our feelings about those services.

I've hesitated to say anything further about this. But I've reconsidered because of conversations the last few years with pastors and missionaries about my age. The talk tends to drift pretty naturally into the questions of when to make this momentous alteration and what to do afterward. To me, it's been one of the three or four most important personal issues I've ever had to decide. It seems scarcely possible that now at last I've closed the door forever on the life for which God made me: to pastor a beloved congregation of responsive, growing people. Perhaps there are some readers approaching this same inevitable threshold who might welcome a perspective from one who has just recently stepped over it into a new kind of life.

TIMING

Several years ago, a friend who was then in only his late sixties stepped away from a church he'd pastored for over thirty years. He told me that he'd done so because of

two considerations. He needed to do it, he said, *before he wanted to . . . and especially before his church wanted him to!* Some tongue-in-cheek there, for sure, but certainly a little wisdom as well.

Like my friend, I underscored two considerations when I announced my intentions. They were somewhat but not entirely different from his: *First*, I explained, *because I know myself, and second, because I know our church.*

I know (or at least suppose that I do) that my energy, stamina, memory, resiliency, and ability to recover from the exertions of a Lord's Day and lead energetically for yet another week are no longer adequate (actually, they scarcely ever were). I told the church that though Linda doesn't seem particularly fond of my putting it this way, the simplest explanation is that, in the words of Zacharias, *I am an old man, and my wife well stricken in years!*

I'm challenged and even rebuked by the sacrificial examples of some of our missionaries who are soldiering on well beyond my own age. But I shared with our church in a little preparatory "family talk" a few years ago that I didn't feel that in my own case it would be wise to continue on until I "died in the saddle." It certainly didn't seem best for the church. In that respect, I've wondered if it isn't something of a parallel to an athlete who feels that his head and heart are still as much in the game as they ever were, but whose diminished powers simply can't keep up any longer with the pace of what's going on out on the field. And when I've thought about the best stewardship of what

I hope will yet be many years, it has seemed to me that rather than fading down to a last pastoral gasp, it might be better and more blessed to open up an entirely new chapter in which I can do more with less.

So *retirement* isn't quite the right word. Over a lunch last spring a missionary said laughingly that he likes to call his own a *refirement*. I smiled and went away wondering whether to think of mine as being something like that.

Regardless, I have little inclination toward more entertainment, hobbies, or even leisure. I want to continue working for the Lord through whatever means my capabilities and strength allow. Our new senior pastor, Dr. Eric Newton, and the elders have graciously asked both my wife and me to continue on for a while with several of the discipleship ministries closest to our hearts. We're humbled but thrilled to be able to remain, to contribute in meaningful ways, and most of all, just to try to be good church members who are easy to pastor. We're looking forward to joining the "seniors" for their monthly Saturday gatherings. They serve up potluck luncheons I've been eyeing for a long time.

RETROSPECT

In my files are the transcripts of two messages given by a respected Welsh pastor who was nearing the milestone of having pastored the same church for forty-five years. Appreciative friends requested that he speak at one of their pastors' conferences on the subject "In Retrospect." He opened his first point with this statement: *Everyone comes*

to the close of his ministry with a sense of regret . . . the gap between what you should have been and what you believe you were.

He explained eight of his own regrets. Some of his are not mine. Some of mine are not his. But the one with which he concludes is certainly my greatest: *I am sorry that my love for Jesus Christ is cool and shallow.* Surely the failures I most bemoan have been deficiencies in this respect.

Archibald Alexander, the founding professor of Princeton Seminary, has long been a kind of shining light to me. He addressed what I find myself so grieved to feel that I so often lacked.

The love of Christ ought so to predominate, so to possess his [the minister's] mind, and to bear him along, that every interfering, or opposing principle, should be neutralized or extinguished. This should suggest all his plans, guide all his operations, give energy to all his efforts, and afford him comfort under all his trials. Constrained by the love of Christ, he should cheerfully forego all the comforts of ease, affluence, and worldly honour, to serve his Master in places far remote; or far removed from public observation. This holy affection should impel him to undertake the most arduous duties, and encounter the most formidable dangers; this should enkindle the ardour of his eloquence, and supply the pathos of his most tender addresses. This is the hallowed fire which should be kept bright and burning continually. All other warmth is no better than "strange fire." . . . Other motives may lead a man to great diligence in

*preparing for his labours in the pulpit . . . other motives also may stimulate a minister to great public exertion, and give him all the appearance of fervent zeal and devotedness to God, in the eyes of men; but if supreme love to Christ be wanting, he is, after all, nothing; or, at best, a mere “sounding brass or tinkling cymbal.”**

I can easily reflect and regret myself into much sadness over this, as well as the many lesser, though still significant, sins and failures. But a dear brother, who was a kind, loyal assistant to me for over thirty years pointed me in the right direction one gloomy afternoon. Decimated by years of battling two different strains of cancer, and just shortly before his homegoing he was giving voice to these very kinds of things. Suddenly, nearly rising up out of his chair, he exclaimed, *But Pastor! That’s what the Cross is for!* How very, very true. How unspeakably comforting.

The other day I was walking in a cemetery near our home. Occasionally underlying tree roots bulge the paving. Here and there its edges are crowded by small curbs. I almost overlooked one of these, and immediately found myself thanking the Lord that by His watchcare I’d stepped over instead of stumbling into it. My mind went to reminiscing on how many times and in how many different kinds of circumstances, conversations, and unexpected turns God has done this kind of thing for me—alerting me or restraining my tongue, or warning me just in time *through many dangers, toils, and snares*. And just as faithfully, He has sometimes allowed me to trip up, to mis-

Speak, or for a short season to have my own way. The relatively light touches of needed chastisements that followed have been good for me.

PROSPECT: THIS NEW CHAPTER

There are so many really elderly people in our church that I find myself taking long life for granted. But the average life expectancy for males here in the US is just under 76 years. I'm less than three away from that. And I read somewhere recently that the average American struggles with some form of significant disease or other bodily trouble for nearly twelve years before dying. So, I want to do as Moses counseled in asking the Lord to grant me wisdom to number my days soberly (Ps. 90:12).

It means that I want to devote more time and attention to trying to be a better, more attentive son, husband, father, and grandfather. It also means that I want to give even more time to serious study. Friends would ask David Martyn Lloyd-Jones what he was going to do now that he'd retired from Westminster Chapel. He would reply, *Now I can finally read!*

When I became the senior pastor here, the church provided a generous book allowance. I've gratefully used it all these years to build, title by select title, an unusually distinctive library. Hundreds of its volumes are notable older works of preaching, theology, biography, and church history not only long out of print, but in many cases virtually unobtainable even through worldwide search engines. To a friend, Samuel Davies wrote of his daily delight that

the venerable Dead are waiting in my library. I'm thankful to be able to say the same. Some of the best and most devoted minds of all the ages are on my shelves, and I feel a sacred calling to reading, researching, and consulting among them. I want to know more of what they had learned of the One Who is the same unto all generations. I trust that it will eventuate in some treasures both old and new (Matt. 13:52) that I will want to write about, whether anyone else ever cares to read my reflections or not. I hope that they might (smile). But regardless, I want to put some things into a satisfying, finished, permanent form. And, of course, I want to continue preaching and teaching insofar as the Lord directs.

But my thinking about what ought to be primary when one is finally freed from vocational preoccupation has been influenced significantly by the book I mentioned earlier, *A Day's March Nearer Home*. When Graham Miller proposed that *retirement should be the crown of our life's work*, he wasn't referring to a more splendid kind of Christian service. He was talking about finally being able to break out into the full, uninhibited flourishing of a tremendously fruitful, daily devotional life. In a chapter about their routines in retirement, Miller gives twelve inspiring pages to glorying in what he and Flora were able to do individually with their Bibles and in intercessory prayer and family worship. It's obvious that he enjoyed telling about the Bibles that they used, and explaining the methods they employed, the time they spent, and the kinds of

notes that they carefully copied into diaries. *We have both written notes on the entire Bible several times over, he testified.*

There can be no doubt that this practice and this method lay the foundation for every day of our lives. All that follows tends to be controlled by the hidden disciplines of God's Word. Retirement has been governed by Scripture and we are amazed, as each new year comes along, by what has been attempted and achieved.

Miller talks of the susceptibility in retirement to feeling *oppressed as we see disorder in society in ever-burgeoning proportions, confusion in the visible church, compromise in adherence to the faith, division among like-minded brethren.* He warns, *In such disillusionment it is easy to become isolated on our wave-swept rock, like wet cormorants, overcome by weariness and want of work.* His exhortation is that *it is time to take up the vocation of intercessory prayer.*

All that has gone before, first in the preparation for ministry, and then in the exercise of that ministry, is but the preparation to the third and final earthly ministry of prayer. Many of God's saints have made this discovery, and, as a by-product, it has exorcised the demons of despondency and loneliness.

At last we have time to pray! How often in the busyness of church ministries we have excused ourselves! These burdens are now gone, our peace and quietness are assured, our memories are richer, our friends and

prayer-partners have grown more numerous, our sense of priorities is more Scriptural, our self-centeredness is yielding to the heavenly view of the vocation of the intercessor. It may well appear, in the unveiling of the life everlasting, that this last phase of our ministerial vocation is incomparably the richest, the least tainted with self, the most productive, the most enduring. We have learned to work with gold, silver, and precious stones. But it has taken so long to learn.

Three or four years ago, about the time that I reached 70 and anticipated that change was near, I took serious stock of my life and began to move myself intentionally toward a richer devotional life. I began to rise earlier (easier to do now that I was experiencing the insomnia common to seniors) and to sit longer over my Bible and devotional literature and prayer. Anyone who does this understands my testifying that it is unspeakably more soul-satisfying than having much fine gold in a retirement account. It is sweeter even than the joys of preaching and teaching.

Stacked right now next to the upholstered chair in which I spend several hours early every morning are more than a dozen titles. All of these I've read before, but never more enjoyably. Among them are *The Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, Augustine's *Confessions*, James Morgan's priceless work on the 51st Psalm (*The Penitent*), O. Hallesby's *Prayer*, John Owen's incomparable *Communion with God*, and Andrew Murray's *Humility*. These I find so rich and soul-feeding that I can scarcely put them down. I ask myself why I didn't see all these wonderful things when I

read these blessed books years ago. Is it true that there are things so simple that even a child can read them, but that only the old can actually *see*?

I have a deep desire to know for certain that in my own daily practice I've joined my mind entirely with that of the post-ascension Apostles in their view of the place of prayer. They all were of *one mind* about it (Acts 1:14). They evidently thought all the same things about its vital importance and practice. I want to join all my mind with theirs about these things. It gives me a sense of warm security, and what the Hebrew scriptures call *shalom*, on the days when I can do so from my heart. On days when I cannot seem to, I tend to be more anxious and pressured; to feel, in some vague sense, actually somewhat distant from God. I've come to dread that, and I think that it is a good thing that I do and that it is an even better thing to be devoting more time to ensuring that it seldom happens.

A number of years ago I developed a catechism for our church and named it "Treeology Theology" (for Psalm 1:2–3 kind of people). When it came to deciding on a question and answer about our relationship to the Bible, I found the *Westminster Shorter Catechism's* wording to be most helpful. It asks, *How is God's Word to be read and heard?*

God's Word is to be read and heard with preparation, prayer, and diligence. It is to be received with faith and love. It is to be laid up in our hearts and practiced in our lives.

I've found that progression to be easy to remember: *read and heard with . . . received with . . . laid up in . . . practiced*. Each of our catechism's questions and answers is printed on a handy, attractive card for aiding memorization. I keep this particular card in the Bible from which I read in the morning and try to do what it says. Before I read, I look over the chapters to survey their content. Then I appeal to the Lord to give me an earnest desire to read that particular content. This is especially helpful if (to my shame!) the chapters don't seem appealing, or when the content is such that I actually fear reading without an unusually humbled and reverent spirit. The accounts of Christ's crucifixion almost always give me pause about this.

My delight and satisfaction in daily devotional reading of Scripture has never been greater. Little things scarcely taken note of for much of my life now minister insights that I could hardly say are new, but which are surprisingly fresh. They're what one of the old Scottish ministers said of times of revival—they were *sunblinks of light and warmth*.

Nearly all my Christian life I've been trying to find better ways of capturing and retaining these *sunblinks*, because if I cannot recall them they cannot bring me over and over again the light and warmth that I crave. How can I *meditate* until they shine again unless I can *remember*?

There's a little leather wallet that I started using last year, and which I've come to love. It came with fifty small cards that are lined in blue on one side. When I come across a portion of Scripture that I wish I could embed in

my heart, I write it on the front side of one of these cards. I reserve the backside for the very best spiritual comments on that passage that I can find in commentaries or devotional writers. It's probably just a personal kind of quirk, but it heightens my enjoyment to use various colors of ink and to write as carefully and handsomely as I'm able. Without giving overmuch attention to these things, I nevertheless try to magnify the wonderful words of each of these scripture treasures by the little personal touches that make each card a "jewel," even in its appearance. Once I've filled the backside with all the comments that it can hold, I cover the entire card, front and back, with clear contact paper so that the cards won't fray, or a coffee spill or rain won't smear the ink.

My longing, the thing which I covet every day, is to experience on earth a little foretaste of what Christ does in heaven. *Full of joy with thy countenance* is the way that He expressed it (Acts 2:28). I hunger for the *felt* sense of God. I used to wonder if this was a sign of spiritual immaturity. But I concluded that there's nothing in Scripture to discourage this hunger. *O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is; to see thy power and thy glory . . .* (Ps. 63:1–2a).

Surely, more of this thirst and more of this longing is the chief way to make one's final years the crown of all. We retirees must ask ourselves regularly, *What is the chief end of man?* "What is the chief end of my retirement?"

Answer? *To glorify God and to enjoy Him* [both now and] *forever.*

Mark Minnick pastored Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina.

* From his lecture “The Pastoral Office,” quoted by James M. Garretson in *Princeton and the Work of the Christian Ministry* (Banner of Truth, 2012), 1:256.

BRING...THE BOOKS

“... when thou comest, bring with thee . . . the books.” (2 Tim. 4:13)

Three Books on Prayer

I was converted at the age of 20, some 51 years ago. Somewhere in my early years of Christian growth, I was encouraged to read a book about prayer each year and set out to follow that advice. Though I have failed to read 51 books on prayer, three have most impacted how I pray.

D. A. Carson's *Praying with Paul: A Call to Spiritual Reformation* comprises a theology of prayer. “The one thing we most urgently need . . . is a deeper knowledge of God. We need to know God better.” And we pray better when we know God better. This was the largest lesson of the book for me.

Carson's excellent discussion of the sovereignty and personhood of God conditions our whole approach to God in prayer. His explanation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility is masterful. His summary statements are profound: “Sometimes it is more important to worship such a God than to understand him. . . . We shall discover that the biblical emphasis on God's sovereignty and on God's personhood, if they function in our lives properly, will serve both as powerful incentives to prayer and as direction for the way in which we approach God.”

Carson applies his theological explanation to Paul's prayer in Ephesians under three headings. First, Paul praises God for His sovereign grace that converted them, and for the rich evidence of that conversion. Second, Paul prays for believers to know God better—a rare prayer request at the average midweek prayer meeting. Third, he prays for Christians to know that all Christ's sovereign power is for us. Carson asks, "When was the last time you prayed for such things?" I pray for such things now because of Carson's book. Carson closes the book with his own prayer for us in his "Afterthought."

The second book I recommend is **D. Edmond Hiebert's *Working with God Through Prayer***. The lesson of this work for me was attaching applicable Scriptures to my petitions to help me pray according to God's will. Hiebert says, "Prayer unites puny man to Almighty God in miraculous partnership. . . . This is the basic message of this volume." And puny man *has* unity with God when he prays according to His Word. Hiebert's exposition of passages describing praying men gave me a desire to pray like them.

The most thorough exposition of a praying man is his description of Daniel. Hiebert explains, "Prayer in accordance with the will of God is sure of an answer. Such prayer is the believer's ratification of God's will; it brings him into active cooperation with God in the furthering of God's will." My prayer in the last few years has combined Matthew 9:38 and 1 John 5:14–15. God has and will yet answer this prayer.

The earliest book that impacted my praying the most of these three was **W. Graham Scroggie's *Method in Prayer: An Exposition and Exhortation***. My praying at the time focused on myself and my family. Scroggie's book organizes approaching God into five kinds of prayer: adoration, confession, petition (for oneself), intercession, and thanksgiving. This order gave a clear structure to my daily devotions. I began to use Scripture for the five parts of my praying.

Because my requests (especially petition and intercession) changed quite radically over a year, I began to renew my prayer lists in January each year. My early prayer lists were one page long but are now seven pages long as I add Scripture to speak before God.

The idea of praying with worshipful and loving adoration of God changed my praying completely. I began with very general adoration of God which has morphed over the years into a more detailed gratitude for who God is and what He is like. In 2009 I moved my family to Edmonton to begin Foundation Baptist College. Now I was not only worshipping God daily but also teaching classes in systematic theology, which included teaching God's attributes. I have genuine joy in thanking God for who He is.

Before reading Scroggie, my confession of sin was erratic. His wisdom helped me: "If this discipline [prayer] begins at worship, at the contemplation and adoration of God, it will inevitably turn to confession of sin." He was

right. I have found that most biblical confessions spring from a guilty conscience. They help us, then, to live our lives in all good conscience before God. I have often consulted the confessions of Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9, and Daniel 9.

It has always seemed appropriate to conclude my praying with thanksgiving. But never before had I borrowed such scriptural gratitude as Psalm 145:1, 105:3–4, and Isaiah 12:1, 4. There is so much language throughout Scripture to borrow! Scroggie quotes Lancelot Andrewes: “What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me? For all things in which He hath spared and borne with me? Holy, holy, holy, Thou art worthy”

I have approached each new book on prayer with confidence that I was a glowing example of biblical praying. But I have found that the best books on prayer leave me wishing I could pray more like the authors. These books have reproved and corrected me.

Bud Talbert has been a missionary for over forty years with GFA serving in Alberta, Canada.

STRAIGHT CUTS

“Rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)

The Making and Keeping of Vows

Questions concerning the taking of vows can be vexing. Charles Bridges provides balanced counsel (slightly edited here) in his handling of Psalm 119:106 (*I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep thy righteous judgments.*).

The blessing of the guidance of the Lord’s word naturally strengthens our resolution to walk in its path. And as if a simple resolution would prove too weak, the Psalmist strengthens it with an oath.

Some timid Christians, under a sense of their weakness, would shrink from this solemn engagement. And some, perhaps, may have burdened their consciences with unadvised or self-dependent obligations. However, when it is a free-will offering, it is a delightful service, well-pleasing to God. Such was it in the days of Asa, when *all Judah rejoiced at the oath: for they had sworn with all their heart, and sought him with their whole desire; and he was found of them* (2 Chron. 15:12–15).

Vows under the law were both binding and acceptable. Nor are they less so—in *their spirit at least*—under

the perfect law of liberty. But a wise Christian will not entangle his conscience (1) by *multiplied vows* as if they were—like prayer—a component part of our daily religion, (2) nor *by perpetual obligation*—whether of restraint or of extraordinary exercises, (3) nor *by connecting them with trifles*—thus weakening the deep solemnity of the purpose. Christian simplicity must be their principle. And our engagements to God must be grounded on his engagements to us. His faithfulness—not ours—must be our confidence. There is no innate power in these obligations. Except they be made in self-renouncing dedication, they will only issue in despondency and deeper captivity in sin.

But the inconsiderateness of the unwary is no legitimate argument against their importance. If Jephthah was entangled in a rash and heedless vow, David manifestly enjoyed the perfect freedom of the service of his God, when binding his soul with a bond equally fixed, but more advised, in its obligation (Ps. 116:12–14). Does not a humbling sense of forgetfulness suggest sometimes the need for a more solemn engagement? And may we not thus secure our duty without being ensnared by it?

We need *the blood of sprinkling* to pardon our innumerable failures, and the Spirit of grace to strengthen us for a more devoted obligation every day. Yet in dependence upon the work and Spirit of Christ these holy transactions have often brought to us a peace and joy that led us to look back upon such times as seasons of

avored enjoyment. If, therefore, we sin in a perpetual backsliding from these engagements, it is still our privilege without presumption to believe, that *we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins* (1 John 2:1–2). And as for necessary grace, there is One who hath said, *My grace is sufficient for thee* (2 Cor. 12:9), and that One has given no less a proof of his interest in us than by dying for us. May we not therefore trust that he will *perfect that which concerneth us* (Ps. 138:8) and that he will *work all our works in us* (Isa. 26:12)—*to will and to do of his good pleasure* (Phil. 2:13)?

Perhaps, however, *a messenger of Satan* may buffet us. “Thou hast broken thy bond; now it will be worse with thee than before.” But did not Jesus die for sins of infirmity, and even of presumption? Does every infirmity or backsliding dissolve our covenant with God? Was our faithfulness the basis of this covenant? Rather, does not *the blood of this covenant* make constant provision for our foreseen unfaithfulness? And does not our gracious God overrule even our backsliding to establish a more simple reliance upon himself, and a more circumspect and tender walk before him?

But let us take a case of conscience. A Christian has been drawn away from a set season of extraordinary devotion by some unforeseen present duty, or some unlooked-for opportunity of actively glorifying God. Has he then broken his obligation? Certainly not. It was,

or ought to have been, formed with an implied subserviency to paramount duty. It cannot therefore be impaired by any such providential interference.

Yet let it not be a light matter to remove a free-will offering from the altar. Let godly care be exercised to discover the subtle indulgence of the flesh in the service of God. Let double diligence redeem the lost privilege of more immediate and solemn self-dedication. In guarding against legal bondage, let us not mistake the liberty of the flesh for the liberty of the Gospel. Let us be simple, and ready for self-denying service. The Lord our God will not fail to vouchsafe some token for good.

Come then, my fellow Christian. Let each of us renew our surrender, “O Lord, truly I am Thy servant; I offer myself to Thee.” *Thou hast loosed my bonds* (Ps. 116:16). “Oh! bind me to Thyself with fresh bonds of love, that may never be loosed. Glad am I, that I am anything—though the meanest of all; that I have anything—poor and vile as it is—capable of being employed in Thy service. I yield myself to Thee with my full bent of heart and will, entirely and forever; asking only that I may be *a vessel meet for the Master’s use*” (2 Tim. 2:21).

Mark Minnick pastored Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina.



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WINDOWS

“To every preacher of righteousness as well as to Noah, wisdom gives the command, ‘A window shalt thou make in the ark.’” Charles Spurgeon

The Individual and Corporate Call of Missions (Acts 13)

Sometimes it is easy to get confused and have that confusion misdirect our actions. In the mid-1960s, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover was reading a typed copy of a letter he had just dictated to his secretary. He didn't like the way she had formatted the letter, so he wrote on the bottom, “watch the borders,” and asked her to retype it. The secretary did as she was instructed and sent it off to all the top agents. For the next two weeks FBI agents were put on special alert along the Mexican and Canadian borders. She had typed “watch the borders” across the bottom of each letter. Confusion misdirected action.

Such confusion exists on the part of some modern Christian leaders who have denied or minimized the existence of an individual call from God to full-time ministry service. Gary Friesen's *Decision Making and the Will of God*, published in 1979, argued that the Holy Spirit does not give direct guidance through His working in the heart

of the believer about what he calls “nonmoral” decisions. By nonmoral decisions, Friesen meant anything that is not specifically addressed in Scripture such as which person to marry, where to live, where to go to school, which job to take, and whether to enter the ministry of the Word or become a cross-cultural missionary. He advocated simple human logic for these decisions.

Despite this confusion, men of God and local churches throughout history have magnified the importance of such a call to ministry. W. H. Griffith Thomas observed, “This is the Divine Call, and it is the foundation of all else.” Martin Lloyd-Jones stated powerfully, “Nothing but this overwhelming sense of being called and of compulsion should ever lead anyone to preach.” The great preacher and New Testament scholar John Broadus once said, “The preacher should be a person with a call from God. Ministers are called as professionals, but they should never be persons with just a ‘profession.’” In his classic work *Lectures to My Students*, C. H. Spurgeon said, “It is a fearful calamity to a man [or a woman in the case of missions] to miss his calling.” The powerful British preacher G. Campbell Morgan stated, “The only men who can really enter this ministry are those whom the Lord chooses, calls, and equips, by the bestowment of gifts according to the wisdom of His will.”

We need not be confused, because God has given us His Word to guide us in such matters. Acts 13 makes clear by exegesis and example that God called the first two full-

time vocational missionaries, Paul and Barnabas, and that He also called the church at Antioch to send them. While many transitional apostolic activities recorded in the book of Acts were temporary, the calling and sending of missionaries has been validated by the example of the church for the past 2,000 years. The same commission from Christ is for us today.

How do we theologically justify such a statement? In four instances in the New Testament, the Greek word translated “called” is used in a vocational sense: twice when Paul describes himself as called by God to be an apostle (Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:1), once when the Holy Spirit calls Paul and Barnabas to missionary service (Acts 13:2), and once when Paul and his fellow workers are called by God to take the gospel to Macedonia (Acts 16:9–10). While recognizing that the office of apostle does not exist today in the church and that God’s authoritative means of communicating to His people is through written revelation, care should be taken to note that the term is used in the sense of a vocational call to the ministry.

A. H. Strong gives the meaning of the word “call” in Acts 13 as “to call to oneself.” He states that “Christ and the Holy Spirit are said to call to themselves those . . . to whom they have decided to entrust a service having reference to the extension of the Gospel.” Is God interested in calling from our churches individuals and couples to the Gospel ministry? Absolutely! To help us understand how God

works in the matter of calling to His service, let's consider Acts 13.

THE INDIVIDUAL CALL

An individual call is inseparable from God's transforming grace. God calls people in whom He has done a work of grace. We know much about Saul of Tarsus and God's grace in his life, but let's briefly consider the record of Barnabas thus far in the book of Acts. We can consistently see the grace of God working in his life to bring him to the place of calling as a layman at Jerusalem, as a lay leader sent to Antioch by the church at Jerusalem, as a pastoral leader at Antioch, and then as a God-called vocational missionary.

An individual call involves God's sovereign choice. Because of His sovereignty and the uniqueness of each of our lives, God often uses diverse circumstances in His calling of a servant. That being said, biblically common principles will always be involved in a call, as found in Acts 13 and 16 where a vocational missionary call is referenced.

The time when God chose them—while they were serving and seeking (13:2a). Proverbs 3:6 promises, “In all thy ways know God, and He shall direct thy path” (free translation). How do I know the will of my wife? By knowing my wife. How do we know the will of God? By knowing God. A. W. Tozer said, “We are called to an everlasting preoccupation with God.”

The context in which God revealed His choice

(13:2b). Though we do not have a record in Acts 13 of how the Spirit of God spoke to Barnabas and Saul, we do have in Acts 16:4–10 a record of five components in the life of Paul and his ministry team when God issued the Macedonian call. The first of these components is dedicated obedience (16:4–5). The second is providential circumstances (16:6–9). The Holy Spirit brought providential circumstances into their lives to direct their path—both hindrances and a holy vision. Providence comes from the prefix “pro” (“before”) and the root “video” (“to see”). God sees before and directs our path, opening and closing doors of opportunity, and that opening and closing often is intertwined with His call. G. Campbell Morgan states that we miss the point in Acts 16 if we fail to see how God uses everyday circumstances to direct the paths of His people. The third component is patient prayer (16:8-9). In my studies of Paul and his ministry, I have found that when he was unsure of direction, he was especially at such times given to prayer. It is certainly not stated in this text, but it is my assumption that a prayer meeting at Troas set the context for the Macedonian call. Fourth is godly counsel (16:10). Though Paul experienced the Macedonian vision, Luke uses the words “we” and “us” in verse 10 to indicate collective, prayerful consideration of counsel. In a football game, when it’s fourth and one, the quarterback goes over and confers with the coaches concerning what should be done—punt or go for it. Why? The coaches have more

experience, they have greater resources of knowledge, and they are spectators rather than participants, thus being able to be more objective. Fifth is divine assurance (16:10). “Assuredly gathering” in verse 10 is one word meaning to knit together, to put together in one’s mind. Paul and the ministry team took all the working of the Holy Spirit, the circumstances, the vision, their knowledge of God and His Word, their mutual sense of His leading—and they put it all together. Out of that they had assurance concerning the call and guidance of God. We must do the same.

Consider the fact that it is a fearful and awful thing to fight the calling of God. Dr. Robert Bruce, called the greatest preacher of Scotland by Alexander Whyte, was educated to become a lawyer, but against the wish of both parents, the Lord had set him apart for the Edinburgh pulpit. Listen to what he said: “I would rather walk through a mile of burning brimstone every night than spend over again those midnight hours when I fought against the call of God.”

THE CORPORATE CALL

The corporate call demands a listening church.

Antioch heard the voice of the Holy Spirit when He spoke. What kind of church hears God? One that listens. Antioch was not only a Spirit-filled local church (13:1), but also a serving church (13:2). The verb translated “ministered” was commonly used in the both the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament to describe the work of priests and Levites in the temple (cf. Luke 1:23; Heb. 8:6; 9:21). In later

ecclesiastical language it was connected with the observance of the Lord's Supper and referred to the pattern of worship. In practical terms, it summarized all Spirit-controlled work being done by these prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch and included all that Luke wrote about in the second chapter of his record when the disciples "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Lastly, Antioch was a seeking church (13:2). This word "fasted" indicates that as they submitted to the Holy Spirit there was a willingness among the leadership and membership of the church to forego food, sleep, and social interaction in order to give time to prayer and waiting upon the Lord.

The corporate call involves co-laboring with the Holy Spirit. In the US military a commissioned officer is a member of the armed forces who holds a position of authority. Commissioned officers derive authority directly from a sovereign power and, as such, hold a commission charging them with the duties and responsibilities of their specific office or position. Such is the concept of a commissioning—training is completed, a commissioning service is held, and the officer assumes his rank and responsibility. In commissioning, the church is personally and perpetually involved with the missionary in three ways, each indicated in Acts 13:3: (1) personally identifying with them, (2) prayerfully interceding for them, and (3) practically enabling them. The word "sent" is also translated

“released.” It was the Holy Spirit who sent forth Barnabas and Saul (13:4), but the church released them. Scholars tell us that the word “released” implies that the church freed the two missionaries of all obligations in relation to their duties in the church and of the heavy financial burdens of their missionary journey. Only such practical identification could have enabled Barnabas and Saul to attempt an unchartered itinerary to the pagan cities of their day with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his book *The Christian Ministry*, Charles Bridges observes that the public setting apart of a God-called servant is “a commission received from and recognized by the Church, according to the sacred and primitive order; not indeed qualifying the minister, but accrediting him, whom God had internally and suitably qualified.”

The corporate call involves accountability. As time went on, the missionaries were expected to report back to the church for accountability all that the Holy Spirit was accomplishing in the matters of evangelism, discipleship, and church planting, and the church held them accountable in three primary areas: (1) proclaiming the Word (13:5), (2) standing against error (13:8–10), and (3) being willing to suffer (13:50–51).

It has been said that no one can live and preach in the power of the Holy Spirit without creating either a revival or a riot. When considering emergency evacuation of a missionary, there is to be biblical balance—Paul was low-

ered over the wall of Damascus in a basket, but he stood and was stoned at Derbe and Lystra.

May the Lord give us individuals and churches who biblically respond to the individual and corporate call of God.

Bud Steadman is Missions Mentor with Baptist World Mission.

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2026

September 15, 2026

New York City Regional Fellowship

Bethel Baptist Fellowship
2304 Voorhies Ave.
Brooklyn, NY 11235
Coordinator: Matt Recker

September 18, 2026

New Mexico Regional Fellowship

Manzano Baptist Church
12411 Linn Ave. NE
Albuquerque, NM 87123
Coordinator: Dan Mauldin

October 5-7, 2026

FBFI Annual Fellowship

Faith Baptist Church
500 W Lee Rd.
Taylors, SC 29687
Coordinator: Caleb Phelps

October 24, 2026

New England Regional Fellowship

Heritage Baptist Church
186 Dover Point Rd.
Dover, NH 03820
Coordinator: Taigen Joos

October 26-27, 2026

Central Regional Fellowship

Harvest Hills Baptist Church
9713 N County Line Rd.
Yukon, OK 73099
Host pastor: Jason Shirk
Coordinator: Marcus Heffernan

2027

February 2, 2027

Rocky Mountain Regional Fellowship

Westside Baptist Church
6260 W 4th St.
Greeley, CO 80634
Coordinator: Dan Unruh

March 8-9, 2027

Northwest Regional Fellowship

Highland Hills Community Church
901 S. Pearl St.
Tacoma, WA 98465
Host pastor: Matt Poole
Coordinator: Greg Kaminski

March 15-16, 2027

California Regional Fellowship

First Baptist Church of Pinole
16550 San Pablo Ave.
San Pablo, CA 94806
Host pastor: Kris Solberg
Coordinator: Dan Pelletier

March 15-17, 2027

South Regional Fellowship

Good News Baptist Church
3252 Taylor Rd.
Chesapeake, VA 23321
Host pastor: Mike Ascher
Coordinator: Tony Facenda

May 17-18, 2027

Wyoming Regional Fellowship

Grace Baptist Church
Kemmerer, WY
Coordinator: Jay Sprecher



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BEST OF *PROCLAIM & DEFEND*

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25,512 sessions 33,820 views 24,695 users

FEATURED FROM OUR MOST POPULAR ARTICLES:

Are Kids Too Expensive?

Ben Hicks | June 11, 2026

My wife and I took our kids to Bob Evans not too long ago. It was either that or a burger joint, and the burger joint lost—not that I’m bitter. As we were waiting for a table, an elderly gentleman came up to us and commented on how well-behaved our children were. We made pleasant small talk for a minute or two until the hostess came to take us to our table. As we left I heard him say, “You used to see families like that all the time. Now you never see them. No wonder, with how expensive everything is.”

I’ve heard this trope a lot: “It’s just too expensive.” Is it? Is that really the reason that the American family seems to be a dying breed? Many people seem to think so. Well, let’s dig into the numbers a little.

<https://proclaimanddefend.org/2026/06/11/are-kids-too-expensive/>

The Sin of Provoking

John Van Gelderen | October 7, 2021

“Provoke not . . . to wrath” (Eph. 6:4).

Many books have been written on forgiveness. They are definitely needed. But for all of those, it seems there ought to be at least a few written on “provoke-ness”!

Bitterness is wrong, but so is provoking. Instead of focusing on someone’s negative reaction whenever our words or actions are met with an unpleasant response, we would do well to search our own hearts to see if the fault lies with our own unnecessary provocation.

<https://proclaimanddefend.org/2021/10/07/the-sin-of-provoking/>

Did the Bible Prophecy Last Week’s Middle East Peace Treaty?

Kevin Schaal | October 19, 2025

If it did, is Donald Trump the Antichrist?

At first, this title just looks like click bait, but it’s a question that has flashed across the minds of many dispensationalist Christians in the last week.

There are a few things we believe about biblical prophecy that do give us pause.

<https://proclaimanddefend.org/2025/10/19/did-the-bible-prophecy-last-weeks-middle-east-peace-treaty/>

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Regional Reports

ALASKA FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Charles England, Regional Coordinator

The Alaska FBFI regional meetings were rebirthed with a wonderful fellowship on May 18–20 at Maranatha Baptist Church in Anchorage! We had good solid and practical preaching with Dr. Bud Steadman as our keynote speaker. The theme was “We Live in *Great* Days.” Dr. Morrell, from Central Seminary, and several local pastors also brought some challenging messages. The Lord was in it. The fellowship was sweet and encouraging. Please pray for next year’s meeting to continue to be a blessing and encouragement for our sound pastors and brethren.



WYOMING FBFI REGIONAL FELLOWSHIP

Submitted by Jay Sprecher, Regional Coordinator

The Wyoming FBFI Fellowship met May 18–19 at First Baptist Church in Pinedale. The noise of construction on the church's new auditorium was music to our ears and provided a wonderful background. Northwest Baptist Missions supported and promoted the conference and was well represented.

Our theme was "Wilt Thou Not Revive Us Again?" The preachers were drawn from our own ranks, and we sought to enjoy the energy of the young and new as well as learn from the gray hairs of experience. Pastor Dan Patrick of Friendship Baptist Church (Thayne, Wyoming) and Pastor Jeff Estes of Fellowship Baptist Church (Nampa, Idaho) opened the conference with "Early Will I Seek Thee" and "Doing the Work of the Ministry" respectively. On Tuesday Pastor Matt Murphree of Faith Baptist Church (Selina, Utah) and Pastor Brad Jenkins of Douglas Baptist Church (Douglas, Wyoming) preached on "God's Word: Proclaiming, Hearing and Believing" and "Loving Jesus Above All" respectively. Two added features were a forum on church planting and a special ladies' session led by Pam Sprecher.

The conference was well attended, and the fellowship was warm. We are abundantly grateful to Pastor Ted York and the kind and hospitable people of First Baptist Church for all the loving care they gave to us. Next year's fellowship will be May 17–18, 2027.



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TOGETHER

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Heart to Heart

Carolyn Coursen

Twelve Stones: A Life Led by the Hand of the Lord

There is a question worth pondering, especially later in life: where have you seen the goodness and mercy of God? This question makes you think back over the years and record the journey of God's leading.

That is exactly what I did when I was asked to share my testimony. Inspired by Psalm 23's image of goodness and mercy following us like sheepdogs all our days, and by the twelve stones stacked at the Jordan River in Joshua 4 as a memorial to what God had done, I identified my own milestones. Together they tell the story of a life spent desiring to love and serve the Lord and of His faithfulness all along the way.

THE GOSPEL AND GOD'S CALL

It began in Flint, Michigan, where my family had relocated from Arkansas in the early 1950s. I was ten years old when the gospel was presented to me during a week of special meetings. Each night the verses convicted: "All have sinned." "The wages of sin is death." "The gift of God is eternal life." The verse that finally broke my heart was John 3:18: "He that believeth not is condemned." I went forward and received Christ. The heavy conviction lifted. I began using my mother's flannelgraph, pretending I was the storyteller. Eventually I would teach children's church for forty-five years.

A great youth pastor came to our church. It was like adding fuel to the fire. The group exploded. Young people were challenged to carry their Bibles to school, be witnesses, and lead their friends to Christ. Out of that group many young people entered full-time ministry. I was one of them. My future husband was another.

I headed to Bible college, planning to become a nurse. During Spring Bible Conference, the Lord made it plain He wanted me in full-time Christian ministry. I changed my focus that day. My husband and I were married the following year, and, while he finished seminary, we served on weekends at

a church in Wisconsin. Decades later, God would bring us back there in retirement.

TRAINING GROUND

Our first call out of seminary surprised us both, landing us only thirty minutes from where we grew up. We were there twenty-two years, raising our three children. My husband served eight years as assistant pastor. When the senior pastor died, God led my husband to stay on permanently. We call those twenty-two years our training ground. God was shaping us for what came next.

DRASTIC CHANGES

A phone call came from Washington, a state neither of us had ever set foot in. I heard my husband say “Washington” and thought, “Oh my!” We began to see what the Lord was teaching us: If you are His servant, He has the right to put you wherever He wants you. God was spreading our family in all directions across the country. It was painful and uprooting, but it was also exactly where God wanted us. We gave it our all. God was with us and God blessed. We were there, as it turned out, twenty-two years.

In 2020 COVID brought frustrations. Those were eclipsed by overwhelming grief. On July 30, our eldest son went into Lake Michigan to rescue his children. The children survived. He did not. My husband and I

had already planned to be nearby that week. Instead of visiting, we went to a funeral. Our son's last text to me is still on my phone. I texted back that we would see him in a few days. We did, but never in the way we had imagined. Through our family's traumatic grief, Isaiah 43:2 comforted me: "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee." I pictured my son passing from those waters into the Lord's hands. God's mercy comforted me.

More losses followed: my father-in-law's stroke and my husband's massive heart attack with one hundred percent blockage. He was in Arizona near a hospital, received stents in time, and recovered completely. A godly couple filled in at our church for four months, met with us nearly every day, and became close friends. Then my father-in-law died. Then, on March 30, my own father also passed away. March 30 also happens to be my late son's birthday. They were rejoicing together in heaven.

A NEW SEASON

We left Washington on May 15, 2022, ending twenty-two years. A friend from church later showed us a photograph: A rainbow had appeared over the church sign the day we drove away. After arriving at my mother's home in Arkansas, we

came back from church that first Sunday to see a rainbow over the driveway. The Lord was reminding us that He is with us!

After a year and a half in Arkansas, we moved to Wisconsin. We are now in the season of retirement, finding opportunities to serve while living closer to family.

Looking back across those milestones, the moves and losses, the unexpected callings, the heart attacks and deaths and rainbows, I can say this with confidence: “There has not failed one word of all God’s good promise” (1 Kings 8:56).

When you are in the middle of life’s challenges, they do not always feel like “goodness and mercy.” Sometimes you wonder whether God is even there. But He is. His hand is always with His children, and not one word of His promise will ever fail.

Carolyn Coursen served alongside her husband, Richard, as he pastored in Michigan and Washington for forty-four years. They have three children and eleven grandchildren. Now retired, they keep busy serving as God brings many opportunities. They have truly seen God’s goodness and mercy faithfully displayed all through their lives.



At A Glance

Layton Talbert

Human Forgiveness (Part 2)

There is a lot of confusion about the topic of forgiveness. This two-part exploration of the topic does not purport to be the final or definitive word on this issue. It merely attempts to gather and reflect on some of the primary principles the New Testament (NT) provides about forgiveness.

The NT has a lot to say on the subject of forgiveness. The word shows up about 65 times in the NT. Let's start with where the Scripture is clearest and with what all believers should agree on. The previous column worked through three NT principles relating to forgiveness:

Principle 1: Whenever the offender genuinely confesses and asks for forgiveness, I am obligated to grant it fully and freely.

Caveat A: Serious forgiveness requires serious repentance.

Caveat B: Forgiveness dismisses the past, not the future.

Principle 2: I have neither the right nor the authority to pronounce forgiveness for sins committed against God or others.

Principle 3: Forbear and, if you can, overlook; make it your ambition to be hard to offend.

That brings us to the next principle.

PRINCIPLE 4: IF YOU CANNOT OVERLOOK, YOU MUST GRACIOUSLY CONFRONT.

Biblical forgiveness is responsive and reactive, but it has a proactive side as well. Forgiveness as a response does not mean that your sole obligation is to wait on the offender to repent. Jesus teaches that the offended party has an obligation to the offender: If your brother sins against you, *rebuke him* (Luke 17:3). When there is a legitimate offense, and especially if it becomes a habitual pattern that not only breaches a relationship but potentially damages the testimony of Christ, that needs to be addressed. And Jesus places a responsibility not only on the offender to repent, but also on the offended to confront. The full pattern is laid out in Matthew 18:15–17.

So, there are times to forbear but also times to confront. You'll have to determine the difference. That brings up what is perhaps the most frequently cited verse in the whole debate over forgiveness.

The most famous passage for insisting that forgiveness does not pre-require repentance is the *only* passage where no linkage between forgiveness and confession is either stated or implied: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). What are the implications of this passage? Does this require that I freely and frankly forgive everyone for anything they may do to me (or to those I love)? To *voice* that forgiveness to them? Even if they’re not sorry? Even if they continue to sin against me? These questions lead to the next NT principle concerning forgiveness.

PRINCIPLE 5: BE WILLING TO DISMISS PERSONAL OFFENSES COMMITTED OUT OF IGNORANCE.

I have tried to couch the principle in a way that highlights at least three important factors that affect how we apply this passage.

First, the nature of the offense is *personal*. That is, it does not involve a sin against someone else; it involves my response to a sin committed against me.

Second, *the offenders are ignorant* of the offense and/or its magnitude. Many limit this statement of ignorance (*they know not what they do*) to the Roman soldiers who were merely following orders; to them it was just one more execution of yet another criminal. Two

passages, however, may suggest that Jesus was thinking more broadly when He prayed that prayer. If ignorance is the issue, 1 Corinthians 2:8 extends that ignorance to the Jews themselves (see also Acts 3:17). Stephen, echoing Jesus' example, prays substantially the same prayer regarding his Jewish executioners (Acts 7:60).

Third, when Jesus and Stephen uttered this expression of forgiveness, they were *not addressing the offenders, but God*. That is, they were not verbalizing a formal expression of forgiveness to their offenders; they were expressing to God a personal, internal posture toward their offenders. (At the same time, we can't say this is the only biblical or spiritual response to personal injury; see, for example, 2 Timothy 4:14 or Revelation 6:9–11, though that's a topic for another column!)

It is inconsistent with the rest of the NT to elevate this passage to a level that trumps all other NT instruction. It is not as if this statement represents “the” teaching or example of Jesus on the matter of forgiveness; as we have seen, it is only one of many. The only application that is consistent with all the factors in the context (and with the teaching of the rest of the NT on this subject) is that we be willing to dismiss personal offenses that are committed in ignorance. The NT has another word for that—love. As in, *love is patient and gracious and is not touchy* (1 Cor. 13:4, 5, my translation).

But what if someone knows they've wronged you, yet doesn't ask your forgiveness? Surely that justifies holding a grudge! Doesn't their refusal to repent legitimize my bitterness? If I can't express forgiveness because they won't repent, isn't holding a grudge and harboring bitterness my only option?

PRINCIPLE 6: FORGIVENESS IS "DISMISSAL," AND THAT IS EXERCISED ON DIFFERENT LEVELS.

I'm admittedly wandering into territory here that is not explicitly charted in the NT, but I'm trying to get at a distinction that I think does have biblical warrant. The Greek word translated *forgive* in the NT literally means *to dismiss*. That can be done on different levels.

One level is dismissing an offense outwardly by *granting forgiveness in response to confession*. That's what this series has focused on. We might call that formal, theological, or relational forgiveness. But it is possible, on another purely internal level, to dismiss an offense inwardly by standing ready to forgive and, in the meantime, *refusing to dwell on the offense*. We might describe this as an informal, personal, internal kind of "forgiveness"—that is, "forgiveness" in the sense of dismissing it from your conscious consideration. *It is a choice to allow God, not the sins of others, to control your life and your spirit.*

This concept may also be described *directionally*. Rather than different “levels” of forgiveness (release), Wendell Miller (*Forgiveness: The Power and the Puzzles*) refers to “horizontal” and “vertical” forgiveness. Horizontal forgiveness is releasing or dismissing the offense based on the offender’s repentance (Luke 17:3). Vertical forgiveness is releasing the offense to God when the offender fails to repent (Mark 11:25). The context of Mark 11:25 is one of private prayer, and the command is simply to “forgive” (there is no direct object in the Greek text). Here the offended is not commanded to forgive a *person* (who apparently has not repented), but to release the offense to God. That prevents the bitterness that will be discussed in Principle 7.

Consider the OT example of Joseph (Gen. 37–50). Though the word *forgiveness* surfaces only at the tail end of the story (50:17)—in response to an earlier clear confession of sin—the Joseph narrative may be considered a classic illustration of personal “forgiveness” even prior to that confession. Joseph is grieved by the injustice of his betrayal by his own brothers. But he does not seethe. He does not sit in prison plotting his revenge. Believe it or not, what sustained him amid such sinful sibling betrayal was his *theology*. It is your personal theology—what you think about God at that moment—that drives your actions and

reactions, especially when you are wronged. Even in the face of such despicable human sin, he understood that the providence of God rules and overrules even such sinful actions (45:4–8, 50:19–21). This sets the stage for two final principles of forgiveness.

PRINCIPLE 7: EVEN THOUGH THE NT PRE-DOMINANTLY TEACHES THAT FORGIVENESS IS A RESPONSE TO CONFESSION, THAT DOES NOT GIVE THE OFFENDED THE RIGHT TO THINK AND FEEL AS THEY CHOOSE UNTIL THE OFFENDER REPENTS.

The Bible forbids harboring resentment and nursing grudges (Ps. 37:8; Col. 3:8). Bitterness is not a legitimate pastime until the offender owns up. The fact that a number of medical studies have demonstrated the negative health effects of bitterness and anger is interesting, but immaterial. The bottom line for the believer is that it is unbiblical.

Bitterness is a choice with personal as well as relational consequences. It is a choice to resist God's grace, to sour your relationships with others, and to poison those around you (Heb. 12:15). In the same breath, Paul commands both my tenderhearted forgiveness (just as God, in Christ, forgave me when I

confessed my sin to Him) *and* my renunciation of all bitterness, anger, and malice (Eph. 4:31–32). Put another way, what may never be suspended—with or without confession or forgiveness—is love. The same context insists that we *bear with one another in love* (4:1), *speak truth in love* (4:15), and *walk in love as Christ also loved us* (5:2).

How does one do that? It takes growth in grace and sanctification. Yet there is another ingredient for victory in this regard. The Joseph story illustrates it, but I'll spell it out in a way that may help us help others—others like “Anna,” that summer camper in my daughter's cabin that prompted this whole discussion in the first place.

PRINCIPLE 8: IT IS NOT SCRIPTURAL TO INSIST THAT ANOTHER PERSON FORGIVE SOMEONE WHO HAS SINNED AGAINST THEM (AND HAS NOT REPENTED); BUT IT IS SCRIPTURAL TO HELP THEM FOCUS THEIR ATTENTION ON GOD RATHER THAN ON THE OFFENDER AND THE OFFENSE.

I can't be someone else's conscience or presume to pontificate how someone else ought to feel. This is especially true when the offended party is a young person and the offense is deep, the betrayal of trust or

abuse of power severe. But I can encourage them in a legitimate alternative direction.

No one in the NT talks more about suffering and how to handle it than Peter. When we unjustly suffer because of the sinful persecution of others, who is our model? Jesus (1 Pet. 2:18–21). And no one knows more about suffering wrongfully because of the sins of others than Jesus—not by virtue of clinical omniscience, but by painful personal experience. If you want to compare your experience of suffering to someone else's, compare it to His.

But another prong of Peter's strategy is to focus our attention in the right place, to anchor our souls in a bigger reality and in the heart of a bigger Person. What did Jesus do when He faced sinful abuse? Christ, "when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (2:23). There's the secret. That's our model. "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God [i.e., not because of my own sin or foolishness, 4:15] commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (4:19).

You need not be paralyzed, or victimized, or embittered by the sins of others against you. Neither should you fall for some kind of fuzzy, feel-good, omni-for-

givenness that diminishes the seriousness of sin and minimizes the importance of repentance. You can move your injured soul in the right direction while you wait to forgive those who haven't asked for it, even if they never do. You do that by fixing your thoughts and attention not on the people who hurt you but on the God who heals and forgives and loves and leads you.

Repentance and forgiveness is a two-way street. I can see to it that my lane toward the offender is unclogged by my readiness to forgive and my refusal to harbor bitterness or to let sun after sun go down on my wrath. But for the relational road between two people to be unblocked, both have to be there.

These eight principles do not exhaust the topic of forgiveness in the NT. They are just some biblically informed guardrails to help navigate our way through a sinful world filled with sinful people, starting with ourselves.

Layton Talbert is professor of theology and biblical exposition at BJU Seminary in Greenville, South Carolina.



Jim Tillotson

Essential Elements in Building a Church (Part 2)

In the last issue, I wrote about several common elements I have observed in thriving churches. I mentioned prayer and an intentional focus on reaching lost people. In this article, I would like to consider three additional characteristics.

ELEMENT 3: FASTING

Fasting is not a topic that receives much attention today. However, I have noticed an interesting pattern among a group of churches here in Iowa that are regularly seeing adults come to Christ. In conversations with several of their pastors, I discovered that each of them practices fasting one day a week.

Of course, Matthew 6:16–18 warns against fasting for the wrong reasons. Fasting is not a formula that guarantees people will be saved. Nevertheless, throughout Scripture, fasting is frequently associated with humility before God, earnest prayer, and a dependence upon Him.

Fasting often grows out of a burden to see God work in a powerful way. It creates additional opportunities for prayer and serves as a reminder of our need for God's intervention. While fasting is not specifically commanded for New Testament believers, Scripture seems to assume that it will be a normal part of the Christian life. It is a natural expression of devotion, dependence, and spiritual hunger. The Bible consistently indicates that God honors humble hearts and responds to prayer.

ELEMENT 4: EFFECTIVE PREACHING

Another common denominator of thriving churches is effective preaching. Such preaching is Word-centered, Spirit-empowered, and clearly communicated.

First, effective preaching is **Word-centered**. The preacher must diligently study the Scriptures so that he accurately understands the meaning of the text. When he stands in the pulpit, the main points of the sermon should arise from the passage itself. People should not gather merely to hear a preacher's opinions; they should come to hear what God has said through His Word.

Second, effective preaching is **Spirit-empowered**. Only the Holy Spirit can accomplish the spiritual transformation that people need. Pastors cannot change hearts; that is the Spirit's

work. Therefore, they must pray earnestly over their sermons and maintain a right relationship with God so that they do not grieve the Holy Spirit and hinder His ministry.

Third, effective preaching is **clearly communicated**. There is a good book entitled *Saving Eutychus: How to Preach God's Word and Keep People Awake*, by Gary Miller and Phil Campbell. What took Paul hours to accomplish in Eutychus's case can happen within minutes in some sermons today.

Expository preaching is essential, but it should be more than a data dump. People can find information on their own. Effective sermons include compelling illustrations and practical applications. They are not only informative but also motivational and inspirational. They connect biblical truth to the everyday realities and struggles of life. Jesus Himself modeled this approach. His teaching was rich in truth, yet He frequently used parables and vivid illustrations to help His listeners understand and apply God's Word.

ELEMENT 5: STRONG LEADERSHIP WITH A GENUINE LOVE FOR PEOPLE

A fifth characteristic of thriving churches is strong leadership coupled with a sincere love for people. Dr. Les Ollila often said, "When buildings are

your focus, people get used. When people are your focus, buildings get used.”

Most people can discern whether they are genuinely loved or simply being utilized to accomplish an agenda. Effective leaders care deeply about people while remaining committed to biblical truth. Their primary concern is what God thinks, not merely what others think. They do not lead by surveys; they lead by biblical conviction.

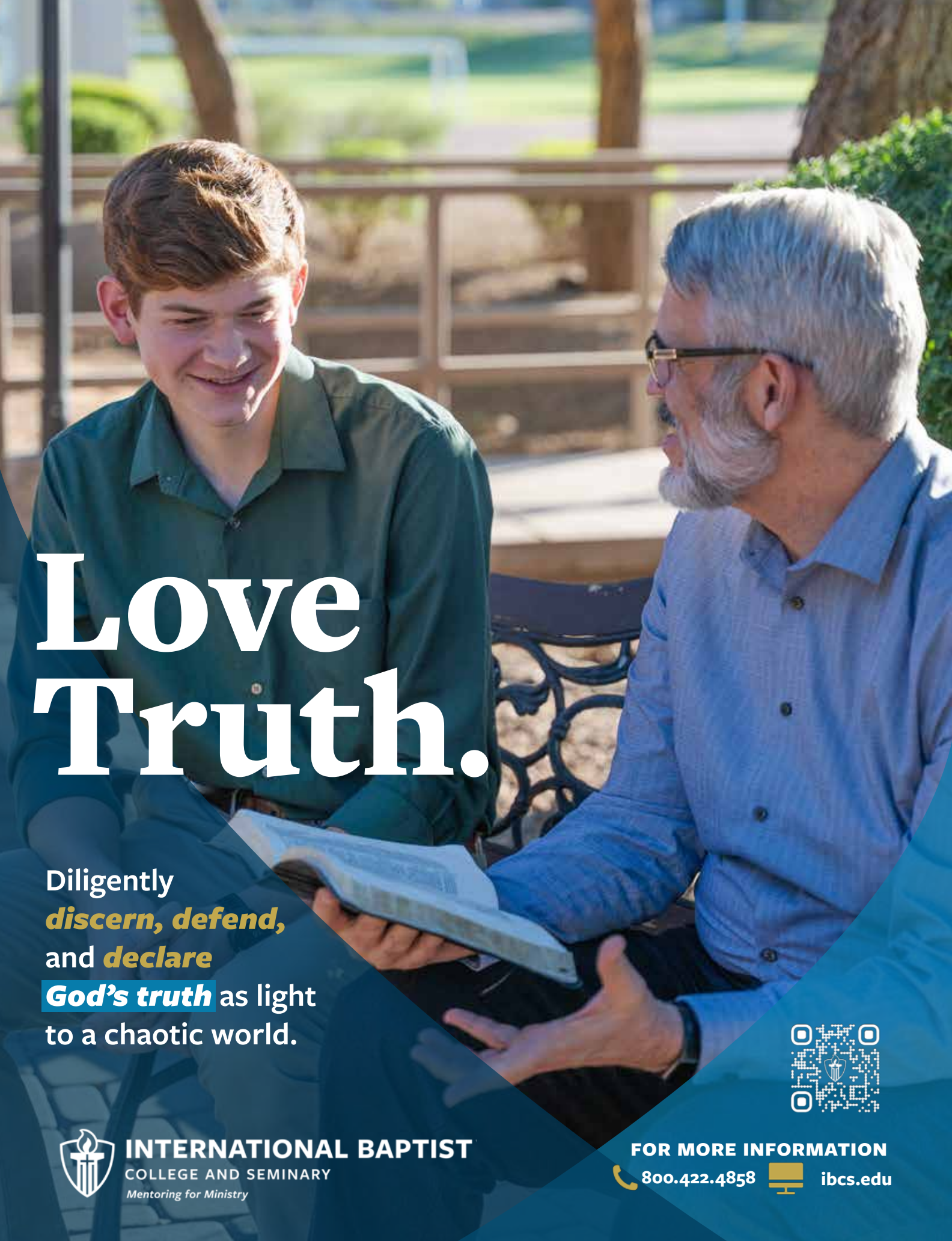
Such leaders exemplify servant leadership. They speak the truth in love and follow the exhortation of 1 Peter 5:2–3:

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock.

These five elements consistently appear in ministries that are doing an exceptional job of taking the Word to the world.

Jim Tillotson has served as the president of Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, since June 2015.





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Stewardship Matters

Corey A. Pfaffe

Carrying the Load: Understanding Your Church's Financial Reports

Fifty-eight pounds. That's the optimal load a US Marine carries into battle. Forty-three pounds is for protection: a flak jacket, Kevlar helmet, and uniform.¹ It's quite a burden. Just as soldiers carry essential equipment into battle, God's people carry financial responsibilities that require accountability.

Before Ezra departed Babylon with the authorization of King Artaxerxes, a treasure trove was entrusted to his supervision (Ezra 8:24). Some 63,000 pounds of gold and silver were delivered to 1,672 men for the 900-mile journey home to Jerusalem. Each man was accountable for about 38 pounds of treasure—a significant responsibility carried for the benefit of the entire nation.

Ezra's account is one of many biblical examples that emphasize financial accountability (e.g., Paul's

delivery of the Jerusalem offering in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4 and Hezekiah’s stewardship of temple resources in 2 Chronicles 31:12–16).

Your local church establishes practices that promote accountability and protect both its resources and those entrusted with managing them. Your role may be limited to reviewing the church’s financial reports, but it is important to have a basic understanding of the financial activities and position reported to the congregation.

FINANCIAL REPORT NUMBER 1: STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES

To fulfill your stewardship responsibility as a member, you should understand the financial “ins” and “outs” of your church. Churches use a variety of titles for this report (e.g., Statement of Activities, Profit and Loss Statement, Income and Expense Report), but all serve the same purpose: reporting money received, money spent, and the resulting increase or decrease in resources available for future ministry.

Sources of funds for the church budget. As depicted in the accompanying example, contributions to the church’s general budget are listed first on the Statement of Activities. Other receipts deposited

into the church's bank account may include designated gifts. These are omitted here because they are not available to support the church's general budget. Instead, they were given for specific purposes outside the approved budget.

You will also see the annual budget forecast for giving. On a year-to-date report, expect to find the percentage of annual giving received thus far. By mid-year, approximately 50 percent or more of the annual giving goal should have been received.

Uses of funds for the church budget.

Expenditures are reported next. The church budget authorizes expenditures according to categories listed in a chart of accounts.

For most churches, compensation is the largest expense category and is often reported in subcategories such as salaries and wages, payroll taxes, employee benefits, and expense reimbursements. Program expenses may follow (e.g., children's ministry, evangelism, missions). Administration expenses (e.g., office operations) and occupancy expenses (e.g., utilities and facility costs) are also included.

Net increase or decrease in funds. The report concludes with the net result. Either income exceeded expenses, or expenses exceeded income.

A church's Statement of Activities strengthens accountability by providing a transparent comparison of actual income and expenses against the budget approved by the congregation. Such transparency protects both the ministry and those entrusted with managing its resources.

FINANCIAL REPORT NUMBER 2: STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

Funds available beyond the church's current obligations provide a financial cushion against unexpected pressures. Providing members with an understanding of these ministry reserves promotes transparency and accountability in financial matters.

Modified cash basis. In its most basic form, a Statement of Financial Position reports the congregation's available cash and investments, its current liabilities, and the remaining resources available for ministry purposes. Accountants often refer to this approach as the modified cash basis.

This basic report excludes land, buildings, and equipment acquired for long-term ministry use, since those assets are not intended to be sold to meet current operating expenses. You will also find disclosed in a separate footnote the remaining balance of any

mortgage loan, since mortgage payments require the ongoing use of cash resources.

Designated funds. Cash and investments that exceed current liabilities represent fund balances available for ministry purposes. However, a portion of these balances may consist of designated funds that were solicited and received for specific purposes and have not yet been spent.

Only the general fund balance is available for the congregation to authorize when planned or unplanned expenditures exceed current-year tithes and offerings.

Your Church Statement of Activities— Six Months Ended June 30			
	Actual	Budget	% of Annual Budget
Tithes and Offerings	\$110	\$200	55%
Expenditures			
Compensation	72	140	51%
Other	35	55	64%
	<u>107</u>	<u>195</u>	<u>55%</u>
Net Increase (Decrease)	\$ 3	\$ 5	

When Ezra's caravan reached Jerusalem, each man publicly demonstrated that he had faithfully carried out his responsibility (Ezra 8:33–34). Accountability helped ensure that what had been

entrusted was faithfully delivered.

In the same way, regular and transparent financial reporting to a church's leaders and members

promotes accountability, protects the ministry, and helps God's people remain focused on their mission of eternal impact.

Corey Pfaffe
serves as the CEO
of MinistryCPA,



a certified public accounting firm based in Watertown, Wisconsin. The firm works with ministry clients in virtually every US state and every continent. He and his wife Laurie have served in various lay capacities as members of Calvary Baptist Church of Watertown for more than thirty-five years.

**Your Church
Statement of Financial Position
(Modified Cash Basis)—
June 30**

Cash and Investments		<u>\$100</u>
Current Liabilities		\$ 5
Fund Balances		
General	\$75	
Designated	<u>20</u>	<u>95</u>
		<u>\$100</u>

Note: Our church mortgage balance remaining—
\$120 at 5% interest

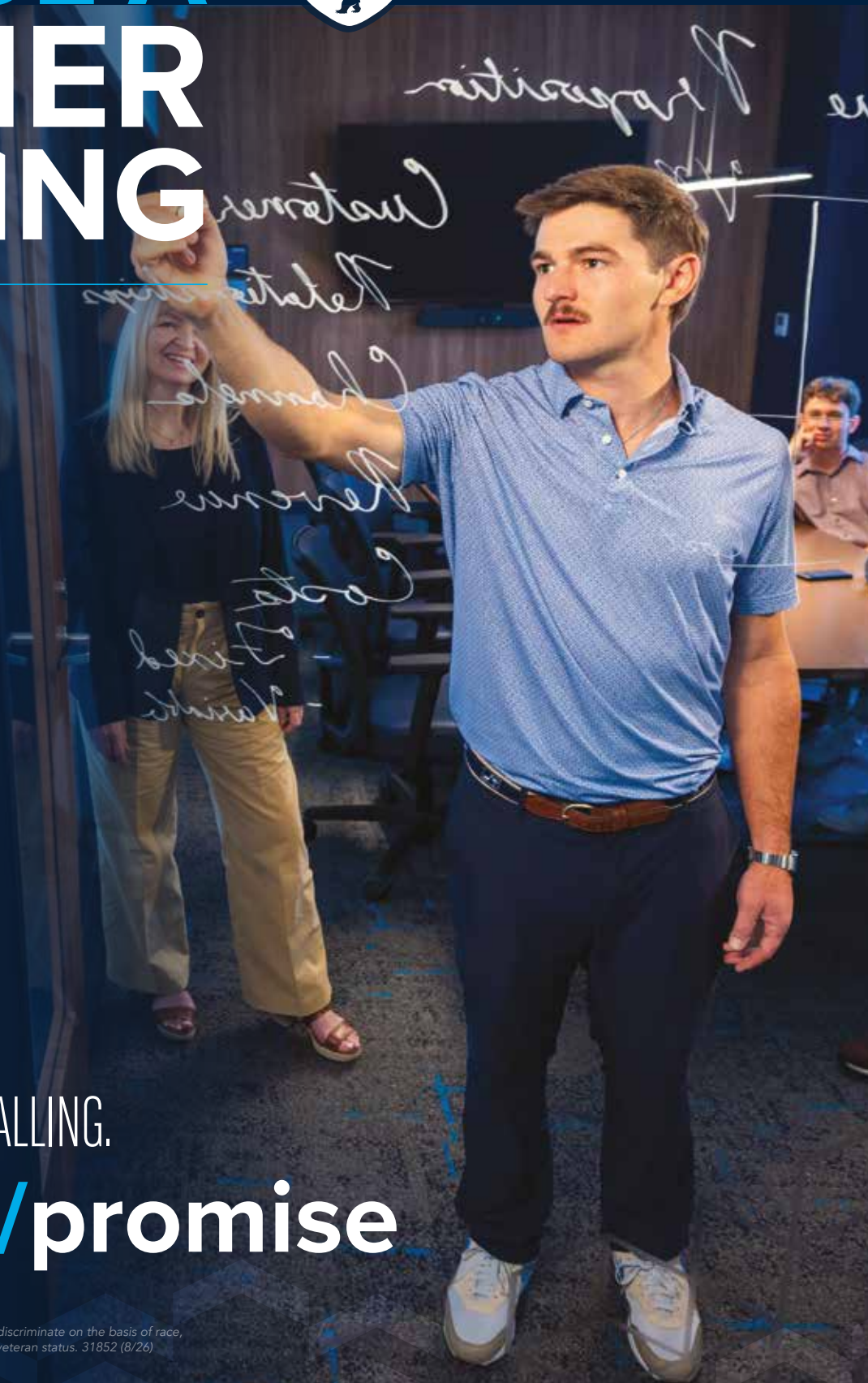
¹ C. Thompson, “Paying for weight in blood: An analysis of weight and protection level of a combat load during tactical operations” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2019).



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Chaplain's Report

CH ADAM YATES ORDAINED

Following examination by the ordination council and in recognition of God's call to gospel ministry, Landmark Baptist Church, under the leadership of Pastor John Flanders, ordained **Adam Yates** on



May 17, 2026. The ordination council consisted of CH (COL) Joe Willis (Ret.), Pastor Cody Adkins, and Pastor Louis Canaday. Adam currently serves as assistant pastor at Landmark Baptist Church in Clio, Michigan, and is a Chaplain Candidate in the US Army Reserve. He looks forward to serving as an Army Chaplain while continuing to faithfully proclaim the gospel wherever the Lord leads.

PASTORAL TRANSITION FOR CHAPLAINS

Special testimonies and prayer for Littleton Baptist Church, Littleton, Colorado, was the focus at a local Olive Garden Restaurant in July. Hosted by the Mountain States Baptist Fellowship, pastors



from the Denver area and several others who joined online came together to honor outgoing **Pastor Mike Sproul** (Ch, Brigadier General, ANG,

retired) and newly voted-in **Pastor Caleb Schaff** (Ch, Captain, AFR). Transitions are going well for each of our FBFI Chaplains, pictured here with Western Regional Chaplain Recruiter, Larry Robbins.

WELCOME NEW FBFI CHAPLAINS

Foundations Baptist Fellowship International welcomes three new families to our chaplaincy family. **Michael and Melissa Johnson** were interviewed on May 12, 2026. Michael is the senior pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Hanover, Indiana, where he has served since 2005. Michael and Melissa have served in the ministry together for over forty years and now desire to work together in the local hospital system just like Joe and Kyla Jackson in Lansing, Michigan (FBFI chaplains since 2024). It is of note that Melissa is Joe Jackson's



aunt. Michael and Melissa have been married since 1981 and have two adult children.



David and Bethany Siers reside in Tucson, Arizona, where David is the senior ministries pastor at Tucson Baptist Church under Pastor Brent Armstrong. David desires to become an Air National Guard Chaplain in the Tucson area. He will actu-

ally be working with Chaplain Nathan Mestler, another one of our FBFI Chaplains. David and Bethany have one daughter (Elizabeth) and three sons (Titus, Boaz, Judah). The Sierses were interviewed on May 27, 2026.

Our third couple coming to us is **Thiago and Naomi Rocha**. Thiago is currently a student at International Baptist College and Seminary (IBCS) with an expected graduation date of 2027. Thiago's area of interest as a chaplain is the Army Reserves. The Rochas currently attend Tri-City Baptist Church in Chandler, Arizona, with Pastor Ken Endean. Thiago was inter-



viewed and accepted into the FBFI Chaplaincy on July 8, 2026.

CHAPLAIN NOTEWORTHY PROMOTIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

Alan Ashley: Attained All-American status in Masters Track and Field (High Jump, age 55-59 bracket), winning gold at the Ohio Senior Olympics (June 13)

Michael Bonit: Completed MDiv at Phoenix Seminary

Gerred Dylan: Graduated with MDiv, May 2026

Seth Hamilton: Knight of the Order of St. Michael, Patron Saint of Aviation; recognized as Fort Drum AUSA Family of the Year

Malachi Kauffman: Graduated with MDiv, May 2026

Daniel Llorente: Received Unit Citation

Drew Paul: Received Joint Meritorious Unit Award from time at JSOC (2nd Award)

Paul Phelps: Graduated with DMin in Chaplaincy

Jonathan and Lisa Shafer: Received Servant's Heart Award (Calvary Christian School)

John Shay: Received Army Commendation Medal (ARCOM)

Christopher Wagner: Awarded Joint Service Achievement Medal



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