

Pleasing People, Pleasing God (Luke 4:28-30): Bible Commentary for New Baptist Covenant

N. T. Wright, the great New Testament scholar and Bishop of Durham, England, tells of a fellow bishop who said, “Why is it when St. Paul went into a town they had a riot, but when I go to a town they have me for tea?”

That is the question confronting the culturally accommodated American church. It is worth pondering in this context that the least churchied region of the United States in the early 19th century was the American South, now known as “the Bible Belt.”

Sometime around 1830, Southern preachers- tired of empty pews and empty coffers-began to downplay the “love thy neighbor as thyself” part of the gospel as it related to one’s enslaved neighbors. By ending the practical application of the gospel to African Americans, the way was clear for widespread acceptance of the message, “God loves you ... and other whites.”

In other words, the churches flourished as a direct result of downplaying the implications of the gospel for specific groups of people whom the majority did not want to include.

In his book *God’s Long Summer*, Charles Marsh, the director of the Project on Lived Theology at the University of Virginia and son of a Baptist minister, writes about those who supported, ignored or violently opposed the Civil Rights movement.

His research has shown him that those very few white ministers on the side of the angels preached just like their uninvolved colleagues. All of them talked about God’s love. The difference is that when a handful of ministers preached about loving your neighbor, they explicitly mentioned that this included one’s black neighbors.

Many of these men received death threats and lost their jobs, all for moving from talking about grace in the abstract to talking about it in a very specific way. It

takes courage to name names and to apply the general truths of the faith to specific circumstances.

Baptist preacher and New Testament scholar Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch* translation of the New Testament into the Southern vernacular has attained iconic status.

In 1942 he founded Koinonia Farms, an interracial Christian community in Americus, Ga. His and other families soon came under death threats. Their children were beaten up at school and the local business and farming community boycotted Koinonia Farms. (That is the reason they began their popular mail order business.) In spite of the threats, Jordan hewed to God's New Testament vision for a Christian community that transcends racial boundaries.

Most of us want to please people, not anger them. Consequently, we stop with good words about God's love and justice, without descending into the messy particularities of how that looks.

For example, if I love my Mexican neighbors as myself, how can I blithely benefit from their low-wage work without raising a finger to help them by striving for economic justice?

If God loves Iraqis and Palestinians as much as Americans and Israelis, how can I stomach a Holy Land tour—let alone American foreign policy—that neglects issues of justice for Palestinians?

How can I say God loves everyone and acquiesce in a ginned up “holy war” that pits the “Christian” West against the “Muslim terrorist” Middle East?

One can prattle all day in American pulpits about love for others, but what would happen if one dared advocate closing Guantanamo? Or ending support for “the war on drugs” as an excuse to support the murderous Columbian government and their death squads? Or scrapping all U.S. nuclear weapons because they are inherently immoral to use—even on North Koreans or Iranians?

If one names names, then one is viewed as politicizing the gospel. But this is not politicization. It is application of the truth of God's universal love to our own particular historical circumstance.

Jesus' courage is astounding. He refused to take back one word he had said, even

in the face of death. Contrast our Lord's bravery with that of the flagship educational institution of the Southern Baptist Convention, Southern Seminary.

It repented of one of the very few good deeds it ever did to oppose the racial terrorism abetted by Southern churches. The seminary invited Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to preach at a chapel service in 1961. Once word got out that he had spoken there, the South-wide firestorm of criticism led Southern Seminary to formally apologize for having ever invited Dr. King to speak, and to make clear that such a lapse in judgment would never happen again. And it never did.

The town that is forever associated with Jesus of Nazareth was the first to reject him. The worship services did not stop, and no one missed him on the next Sabbath, but this is the last time Jesus is known to have shown up there.

One fears that Nazareth may not be the only place where this is true.

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This column excerpted from a Bible commentary for "The Agenda: 8 Lessons from Luke 4," a free, online study to help prepare churches for next year's New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta. Belmont University's School of Religion partnered with the Baptist Center Ethics to write the commentaries. The commentary, lessons and other resources are available [here](#).