Diving into good reading

Books of the Year in history, current events, science, and accessible theology
I consider myself a Christian and all. But seriously. I just want a good grade in Bio 109 and taking a stand for a Creator won’t help. What difference will it really make if I just go along with the crowd?

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FEATURES

32 Books of the Year–sort of
As we transition to more timely reporting, here are 12 pages on top books published from April through December, 2016

History and ideology: Upsetting conventional wisdom
Understanding America: Cultural carnage in the land of the free
Understanding the world: As our vision expands, so does our appreciation
Science, math, and worldviews: Darwinism heads toward senility
Topping the Top 50: Christian leaders offer better reading options than last year’s Christian bestsellers
Reaching back: Three novels from the past offer insights into the political battles of today

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Areas freed from the Islamic State’s grip display the depth of the terror group’s war crimes. As Iraqi forces continue that fight, American aid groups are staking out front-line positions, too

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Grant Funk has lived the traumatic childhood he now sees every day among young people in Alaska

ON THE COVER: Photo illustration by Krieg Barrie; books photo by Jeff Wales

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Give the gift of clarity: wng.org/clarity
Survey says: “More Books!”

A few responses to our recent member survey surprised me a little. One in particular—that 13 percent of our members read more than 30 books per year—surprised me a lot.

How can that be right? You’re making me feel like an underachiever.

About half of our members read between 11 and 20 books every year. Another 30 percent read at least six, which is about one book every other month. Now that’s my kind of reading schedule, the kind that a mere mortal with a job and kids might be able to keep up with.

Suffice it to say, WORLD members are a book-reading bunch. You’ve told us that our annual Books of the Year issue is your favorite issue. Almost 80 percent of you say you take reading suggestions from this issue. We’re happy to help.

Ever since you told us how much reading you do, we’ve added an extra page or two of book reviews in every issue. That’s a change you may have noticed already.

Here are some changes you haven’t had the chance to notice yet: To our annual Books of the Year issue we are adding another book-themed issue at the beginning of summer—a time of year when most of us try to squeeze in an extra book or two. Also, we’re introducing a Children’s Books of the Year issue, which will generally coincide with Children’s Book Week. Look for both of those issues later on.

Meantime, we’ll just keep putting good reading in front of you.

Kevin Martin
kevin@wng.org
When I first came to Union I was very evangelistic, but I didn’t have a proper understanding of the role of the church in evangelism and discipleship. Through the instruction and mentoring from professors here, my thinking began to change quite dramatically. I saw that the church was actually the proper beginning for evangelism and discipleship.

TIMOTHY O’DAY, ’10
Timothy and Haley (’11) are Biblical Studies–Languages graduates and church planters in Lehi, Utah
‘System for sinners’
THE INSIGHT OF DEMOCRATIC CAPITALIST
MICHAEL NOVAK

“Socialism is a system for saints. Democratic capitalism works because it’s a system for sinners.”

Over 50 years as a journalist, I’ve scribbled lots of forgettable quotes in my reporter’s notebook. But these 15 words were nothing if they weren’t both electric and memorable. They just kept leaping off the page.

All this was at the core of a 1983 interview I had with Michael Novak, who died Feb. 17 at his home in Washington at the age of 83.

I was nervous. Novak was a noted scholar and an intellectual. I’d better get things right—not just the words and the quotes, but especially the ideas and the concepts. I was young, and had just become the interim editor of The Presbyterian Journal, a magazine founded 40 years earlier by L. Nelson Bell, father-in-law to Billy Graham. The Journal was pretty good at covering “in-house” issues. But when I learned that Novak, a Roman Catholic, would be speaking at a nearby Southern Baptist college, I thought, “Here’s a chance to be part of a broader conversation.” I asked for credentials at a press conference to precede Novak’s lecture—and turned out to be the only reporter there.

These were big ideas, I thought. I strained to listen to Novak’s soft voice and scrawled as fast as I could. No, these were huge ideas.

Sometimes that evening, Novak sounded like an evangelical. He quoted liberally from John Calvin and Martin Luther. But then, he regularly went so much further. Again and again, he relied on Scripture itself to make his point. The evening had been funded by a handful of Baptist laymen who were eager to promote the cause of free enterprise. But ever so patiently, Novak kept explaining how “pure free enterprise” never takes adequate account of man’s sinful nature. He even dared to use the term “original sin” without suggesting it was an outdated concept.

Both that evening and through the years since, Novak has always preferred the term “democratic capitalism,” arguing repeatedly that a purely capitalistic system, with no restraints, is almost certain—because of the sinfulness of humans—to produce unacceptably ugly results.

At the same time, Novak was known as an optimist who was much more interested in how the wealth of the world is first created than in painful discussions about how that wealth should be fairly distributed. He referred often to the works of Adam Smith centuries ago. “What distinguishes Smith from contemporary inquirers,” said Novak in his lecture that evening, “is not so much that he favored one system over another as it is that he went after solutions instead of analyzing problems. It’s not hard to find dozens of people who study the causes of poverty. Big deal! So what? When they find the causes of poverty, who wants it?” Instead, Novak said, we ought to imitate Smith, who studied the causes of wealth. “That is the only real way to help the poor,” Novak insisted.

Then, unforgettably for this young reporter, Novak explained how he wanted to take a cue from Adam Smith, calling on Christians to offer “a theology of creativity rather than a theology of liberation.” He suggested that way too many church leaders have bought into the idea that there is a set amount of wealth in the world that cannot be increased and must therefore be fairly distributed. “The really unusual insight of Adam Smith is in effect a theological insight—that the world is not a finished system. If it were finished, then the urgent need would be for a distributive system. But God made the world differently, with the potential for constantly creating new wealth.”

For me, it was a staggering and magnificent concept. I drove home, but couldn’t rest until I wrote the longest piece I’d ever composed. It was also, in fact, the easiest interview I’d ever assembled. “It makes such good sense,” I kept thinking to myself.

Two weeks later, I got a brief but gracious note from Michael Novak. “Thank you,” he wrote, “for representing my thoughts so accurately and fairly. Sometimes I’m pretty complex and explaining me can be hard.” So now, I’ve got a string of 20 more words I can deeply treasure. ©
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Water passage

African migrants aboard the Golfo Azzurro gaze out over the sea on their way to Italy on Feb. 25, two days after being rescued off the coast of Libya by Proactiva Open Arms, a Spanish nonprofit. The aid group on a single day picked up 332 migrants floating in rubber boats north of Libya.

So far this year more than 16,000 migrants and refugees have entered Europe by sea, with over 400 deaths.
Susan and I have had three dogs during our 40 years of marriage. The third at the very ripe old age of 17 died in December, so just before Christmas we bought from the Austin Humane Society our fourth, Greeley. With bits of blueberry biscuit we’re training him not to bark or pull toward dogs or deer as we listen to The World and Everything in It during our morning 2-mile walks.

One day during the last weekend of February we forgot to carry a biscuit. Greeley displayed his good manners several times and looked up, expecting fine dining. He showed surprise when reward did not follow virtue. We sensed the plaintive question forming in his head: “Where’s my BISCUIT?”

During his first month on the job, Trump press secretary Sean Spicer upset traditions. The Associated Press representative didn’t get to ask the first question. The New York Times didn’t get kid glove handling. Reporters from outside Washington could ask questions via use of “Skype seats.” Friday, Feb. 24, brought the cruellest blow: Spicer scheduled an informal briefing known as a “gaggle” and invited the White House press pool—representative reporters who share their notes with all media colleagues—plus several more. He did not include a Times reporter and some other liberal illuminati. They cried out, “Where’s my BISCUIT?”

This year may be hard sledding for academia: President Trump prefers generals to professors and tends to lump brainiacs with maniacs. On Saturday, Feb. 25, NPR reported the unkindest cut of all: “Cuts for publicly funded colleges and universities” seem on the way. NPR quoted the new Republican governor of Missouri, Eric Greitens, saying what we’re also likely to hear from Trump: “Universities, college professors, administrators are going to get less money than the politicians had promised them in the past.” I can already hear my former University of Texas colleagues crying out, “Where’s my BISCUIT?”

Illustrous actress Meryl Streep in January attacked Donald Trump, saying “when the powerful use their position to bully others, we all lose.” At the Oscars on Sunday, Feb. 26, many of filmdom’s elect artfully tried to bully the president and viewers. Inside Hollywood’s Dolby Theatre where tight security prevailed, award presenter and actor Gael García Bernal said he is “against any form of wall that wants to separate us.”

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Many Christians, of course, have for years criticized mediacrats and entertainer-savants. Thirty years ago I wrote a book with the then-controversial title, Prodigal Press: The Anti-Christian Bias.
of the American News Media. Between then and now most leading journalists, instead of doing their job as watchdogs, have been lap dogs during liberal administrations and attack dogs during conservative ones. Meanwhile, many leading professors have become propagandists. Many movie stars have seen themselves as philosopher-kings rather than court jesters.

The sense of entitlement is so strong that National Press Club President Jeffrey Ballou said Spicer’s Feb. 24 gaggle selectivity “harks back to the darkest chapters of U.S. history.” Darkest, really? Akin to whipping slaves and fighting a Civil War in which 600,000 died? But who will say that our media emperors have no clothes, especially when they look so good on the pre-Oscar red carpet?

In the late 1990s, while occasionally offering solicited advice to then-Gov. George W. Bush, I took a few minutes to tell him about University of Texas lunacy a mile from his home. Bush sighed and said, “I know, I know, but I can’t take on UT and win.” Given the sad demise of one governor a generation before who had tried and lost, Bush was right. Besides, he truly wanted to be a uniter, not a divider.

Now, look at consummate divider Donald J. Trump. He’s fighting a multifront war against major media, universities, entertainment industries, the legal establishment, Washington careerists, and others. Admirable, maybe. Audacious, certainly. Rolling Stone correspondent Matt Taibbi bashes Donald Trump in his crude new book, Insane Clown President, but notes that every previous candidate concluded: “If you want power in this country, you must accept the primacy of the press. It’s like paying the cover at the door of the world’s most exclusive club.” Now, an astounding change: “Trump wouldn’t pay the tab.”

So Trump, after his impressive speech to Congress on Feb. 28, entered March in a thoroughly modern version of the biggest story of 1813-1814: Could Napoleon defeat the combined armies of Russia, Prussia, Austria, Great Britain, Spain, and Sweden? @molasky@wng.org @MarvinOlasky

$12.58 trillion
U.S. household debt in the fourth quarter of last year—just short of the record level reached during the 2008 financial crisis.
Announced

Tim Keller said on Feb. 26 that he would step down as senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in July. Three pastors will succeed Keller, 66, as the 5,000-member, multisite megachurch splits into three separate congregations. Keller, who became the first pastor of the Manhattan church in 1989, reportedly plans to remain active by teaching and working with Redeemer’s church planting network.

Died

Doug Coe, a religious leader with influence in political circles, died on Feb. 21 at the age of 88. Coe led the Fellowship Foundation, a faith-based group that sponsors the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., and many state capitals. It was Coe who made the prayer breakfast an institution, with the presence of every sitting president since Dwight D. Eisenhower and guest speakers that included Mother Teresa and Irish rock singer Bono. Many in political life saw him as a mentor, someone who would provide spiritual guidance and keep their secrets. He had connections with leaders from across the world, and he even sponsored some private diplomacy, using his friendships to bring together quarrelling parties. Coe became part of the Fellowship after meeting founder Abraham Vereide and took over the running of the organization in 1969.

Died

Alan Colmes, Sean Hannity’s liberal partner on Fox News, died on Feb. 23 at age 66. Colmes, a former radio host and stand-up comedian, joined Fox News in 1996 to act as Hannity’s sparring partner on the talk show Hannity & Colmes.

Many liberals thought Hannity overpowered the quiet Colmes, but Colmes said he was content and felt lucky to be on the show, which ran until 2009. Colmes said most people who watched the show probably didn’t realize that he and his conservative foil were best friends.

Removed

Two days after the California state Senate honored the late leftist activist Tom Hayden, GOP state Sen. Janet Nguyen took to the Senate floor to offer the view of someone whose family had fled Vietnam on a small wooden boat to avoid execution by the Hayden-supported communist government. Democratic leaders of the state Senate, however, wouldn’t allow Nguyen to finish her Feb. 23 speech and forcibly removed her from the Senate floor. At the next weekend’s state GOP convention, many Republicans wore “I stand with Janet” stickers.

Vandalized

Vandals either late on Feb. 19 or early on Feb. 20 toppled more than 170 gravestones in one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Missouri. Investigators were reportedly reviewing surveillance camera footage for clues to the identity of the vandals. The Chased Shel Emeth Cemetery in University City, Mo., near St. Louis opened in 1893. Police in Philadelphia reported on Feb. 26 that vandals had toppled more than 100 headstones at the Jewish Mount Carmel Cemetery in that city.
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‘It’s not going to get any better; it’s getting worse.’

Aetna CEO MARK BERTOLINI, on Obamacare’s death spiral, predicting more insurers will soon exit government-run marketplaces.

‘Our law punishes people for what they do, not who they are.’

U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice JOHN ROBERTS, in a Feb. 22 decision throwing out a death sentence against a black man based on expert testimony that African-Americans were more prone to violence.

‘Don’t think it’s going to be at the bar.... Maybe some grilling in the backyard with a beer or two.’

IAN GRILLOT on spending time with his new “best friend” Alok Madasani. Grillot intervened on Feb. 22 when a man at a bar in Olathe, Kan., shot Madasani and another Indian man, the assailant telling them to “get out of my country.” Grillot was shot in the chest but is recovering along with Madasani. The other man, Srinivas Kuchibhotla, died.

‘I was bullied at school for being gay. I now feel I’m being bullied at Synod for being same-sex attracted and faithful to the teaching of Jesus on marriage.’

Pastor and writer SAM ALLBERRY at the Church of England General Synod in London, England, on opposition to him and his views against same-sex marriage.

‘A lot of Jews in Sweden are scared. Parents are scared to drop off their kids at the Jewish preschool. People of all ages are scared of going to synagogue.’

JOHANNA SCHREIBER, a Jewish journalist in Stockholm, on the rise in hate crimes and death threats against Jews in Sweden. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention reported a 38 percent increase in reported anti-Semitic incidents in 2014.
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BY SO MANY REPORTERS...

I WONDER WHAT THAT'S LIKE!

THAT MAY EXPLAIN
WHY THERE'S SO LITTLE
OF IT LEFT FOR THEM TO
GOVERN WITH...

OIL SPILL
ALREADY?

PROTESTER TRASH.

WASHINGTON INTELLIGENCE LEAKS

NORTH DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE

ARMY CORPS' CLEANUP CREW...
Road test
Who’s a good driver? Everyone is, if you ask them. That’s the finding of an American Automobile Association survey published in February that found 83 percent of American drivers consider themselves somewhat or much more careful compared with other drivers they encounter. Very young drivers were among the most confident, with only 0.2 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds regarding themselves as less careful than the average driver. More specific questions, though, revealed one-third of drivers had texted while driving in the previous month and half admitted they speed 15 mph above the speed limit.

Predatory service
The mayor of London has a choice—cats or rats. London Assembly Member Tom Copley called on Mayor Sadiq Khan to end the pestilence of mice at London’s City Hall by getting a cat, “preferably rehoming one from Battersea Dogs and Cats Home.” In a Feb. 18 interview with The Telegraph, Copley complained that mice recently tumbled down from ceiling panels and fell into a crowd of visiting school children. If Khan acquires a cat for City Hall, the feline will join an auspicious group of government cats that keep buildings like Number 10 Downing Street, the Foreign Office, and the Treasury free of vermin.

Snow falls
Adrian Solano of Venezuela managed entry into the qualifying round of the Nordic World Ski Championships in Lahti, Finland, which began Feb. 22, only to gain the Twitter label “world’s worst skier.” After nearly falling at the starting gate, Solano wobbled through his start, took a tumble around one of the first curves, and repeatedly fell before running out of time only about a third of the way through the course. The problem: Solano had trained for the event but never on actual snow in his tropical South American home country. He had instead trained using skis with wheels on them. Solano remained upbeat after the race: “Maybe I have fallen many times, but what really counts is that I will always continue to rise.”

Stepping out
Kick up your heels, Henryetta. The small Oklahoma town (population 5,765) deep in the heart of the Bible Belt has finally lifted a 40-year-old ban on public dancing within 500 feet of a church. The issue came before the City Council after town residents scolded Joni Insabella for planning a Valentine’s Day dance at her business (see Quick Takes, March 4, 2017). “We weren’t having alcohol or anything. We just wanted it to be fun for the community,” said Insabella, who ended up canceling the event. When news spread, the town’s mayor claimed to have never heard of the seldom-enforced ban. Neither had the City Council, which on Feb. 21 voted unanimously to repeal the ban.
College English

Goodbye style manuals, hello social justice grammar. The director of the Writing Center at the University of Washington issued a statement in February calling prescriptive grammar rules racist and promising to encourage students to see grammar as a “set of choices with various consequences.” Asao Inoue attributed the statement to the ongoing work of the Writing Center’s staff, noting that racism can be found “in the systems, structures, rules, languages, expectations, and guidelines that make up our classes.”

Trash collection

A long-suffering Maryland mother has gained a modicum of revenge on her college-student son. When 18-year-old Connor Cox opened a parcel from his mother at Westminster College in Pennsylvania, he expected cookies. What he got instead in the care package was the garbage he left strewn across his room after a recent trip home. Confused, Cox called his mother, Terri: “[I said,] ‘Did you send me the wrong package? Why did you send me this?’” His mother told him she was just forwarding his trash. The college student said the prank gave him a good laugh.

Cattle call

Police in Suffield, Conn., posted a warning to local residents on their Facebook page on Feb. 19: Don’t open doors to unfamiliar cows. Earlier that morning, officers with the police department spotted a pair of black-and-white bovines standing at the front door of a local house. Authorities say the cows escaped from a nearby pen due to a faulty fence. Officers were able to round up the cows in short order.

Deer crossing?

Drivers during certain seasons are wise to watch out for deer, but how many airplane pilots would think to do so? An American Eagle CRJ-700 jet reportedly hit a deer while attempting to take off from the Charlotte Douglas International Airport on Feb. 15. Nobody was harmed among the 44 passengers and four crew members, but the collision caused a fuel leak that shut down the runway and prompted an emergency evacuation of the plane.
Very high stakes

DON’T FORGET THAT POLITICAL OPPONENTS ARE IMAGE-BEARERS OF A HOLY GOD

Anyone who sails the high seas of political dialogue on the internet encounters a lot of this kind of thing: “Dear White, Christian Trump Supporter—We Need to Talk.” That’s the title of a much-shared article on The Huffington Post, written by a female social-sciences professor at a West Coast university. But the combined condescension and anguish of the piece are echoing from every progressive corner: What’s wrong with you Christian conservatives?

The piece takes an oddly passive-aggressive tone. Its author was raised in a blue-collar, churchgoing Southern family, studied hard, racked up degrees, and landed a university professorship. Along the way she exchanged her conservative roots for a progressive worldview (a not-uncommon path for academics, after all). Now, “I feel you’re holding it against me now that I no longer share your views.” She knows that White, Christian Trump Supporters—let’s just call them WCTSs—regard her as an ivory-tower elite, but like her fellow academics she braved the hail of rigorous standards and peer review. Therefore, “we really do know a lot about what we’re talking about.” She resents being told to get over the election because her team lost: “politics is not a sport.” She’ll get over her disappointment that the Falcons lost the Super Bowl, but the NFL is not “life and death. This election, however, is exactly that.”

The aggressive side betrays itself with certain assumptions: that WCTSs “think people are not Christians if they aren’t Christian in the same way as you”; that they “cling to overturning Roe v. Wade as the only way to end abortions”; that it’s “more important to you to win than to do good.” None of which is new or original, and I feel hackles rising.

But wait. Am I making my own assumptions? I assume that politics has become her de facto religion. I assume she’s a tenured academic with a cushy job. I assume she’s never tried to run a business or meet a payroll, that she regards herself as enlightened, and that she’s as white as I am (not an assumption, judging by her photograph). At least some of this is likely true. But what else?

Is she happily married or bitterly divorced? Is she a mother, by turns delighted and frustrated in that role? Has she ever been confronted with a scary medical diagnosis or a foreclosure? Has she ever been moved to tears by Bach’s B-Minor Mass or a Paul McCartney song?

What do Christians ‘just not get’—specifically about those who identify as LGBT? They are people trying to make sense of their lives. They love their kids and significant others, experience joy and tragedy, long for significance. “People are people,” and however difficult, spoiled, or ruined they appear, they are “image-bearers of a holy God.”

C.S. Lewis took this a bit further in his famous essay “The Weight of Glory”: “You have never talked to a mere mortal...but rather immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.” The stakes are actually not as high as the professor thinks. They are a good deal higher, and far more life-and-death than another election cycle.

Not to say that these immortal image-bearers who happen to be in opposition shouldn’t be debated, or blocked, or sometimes fought tooth and nail. But it matters how we go about it. When I read a piece like the professor’s, I automatically bristle: Who is she to tell White Christians what they think and how they feel?

I start constructing pithy statements and thought-provoking zingers that will have fans cheering from the sidelines. Maybe even put together a catchy meme that goes viral. But wait—before I write anything about her, I should pray for her.

And that’s what I did. ☯
The Timothy Track is now offering select residential M.Div students at Midwestern Seminary in-the-field ministry training in a local church context. In addition to their regular studies, students in The Timothy Track will spend their first two semesters participating in an internship with one of Midwestern’s partner churches. And along with gaining valuable ministry experience, all Timothy Track students will receive a 50% tuition scholarship.

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Most of the media focus on Logan, the latest movie featuring Hugh Jackman as X-Men member Wolverine, has been on how 20th Century Fox decided to pursue an R rating. It's an unusual choice for a superhero flick, where the PG-13 niche is still seen as most profitable. But it's growing more common.

Since 2016’s raunchy, irreverent Deadpool became the top-grossing R movie of all time, trends have been shifting: Popular, edgy Netflix dramas based on Marvel comic books like Jessica Jones and Luke Cage have further pushed a genre that once was aimed squarely at adolescent boys toward older (though, in the case of Deadpool, no less adolescent) viewers.

By and large, critics are also hailing Logan’s R rating as welcome progress for superhero movies.

While Logan is centered on a strong, classic story, the addition of R-rated material was still a mistake. And not just because I find moral fault with the content.

Screenwriter Scott Frank described to Recode Media his mindset working on Logan: “On this one, we’re never talking about being a superhero. ... [We’re telling] an adult story about growing old, about paying for your sins.”

Logan (played by Jackman for the ninth and reportedly last time) has a lot of sins he believes he should pay for. Over the course of the X-Men series, Wolverine has been used as a weapon of violence. But he’s also a man of conscience, and the two cannot live comfortably side by side. Thus, when we find him in the year 2029, he’s a down-on-his-luck hustler,
drowning his pain in alcohol and drugs. With the exception of Professor X (played again by Patrick Stewart), there’s not a life in the world he cares about enough to save, including his own. That is, until he stumbles across a young girl with looks and characteristics disquietingly similar to his own.

There’s no question that director James Mangold, who also helmed one of the 21st century’s best Western remakes, 3:10 to Yuma, intentionally draws on the dusty outlaw archetype. If Clint Eastwood had ever played a superhero, it would have been Logan. We recognize in him a hero from an older age—beat down, selfish, cynical—who ultimately finds renewed purpose through self-sacrifice.

With this time-honored setup and a gang leader as fantastically reprehensible as anyone John Wayne or Alan Ladd ever faced, Logan could have been one of the best superhero films ever made. It misses the mark by spending so much time indulging the freedom of its rating.

When you see Wolverine stab the first head with his metal claws, it’s shocking. By the time he gets to the fourth or fifth, the reaction is more like, “Oh yawn, Wolverine is stabbing heads again.” Again and again when the film could have used its already-long running time to delve further into its central relationships and emotional conflict, it instead gives us more blood spatter during increasingly boring action sequences.

Logan does take worthwhile risks and breaks some good ground in superhero storytelling. To have a hero saving not the world but a single girl brings greater depth to the plot while reminding us that rescuing one being led away to death is every bit as noble as rescuing thousands. Likewise, Logan’s search for meaning is fulfilled only in the role of personal, protective father. These are timeless lessons that boys once learned from stories of the Old West. It would be nice if they could learn them now from the near future. Sadly, the enormous level of violence, language, and brief but totally gratuitous nudity won’t allow it.

Perhaps the most moving moment in the film comes during the credits, which roll as Johnny Cash sings his brilliant Judgment Day ballad, “The Man Comes Around.” If Logan’s closing symbol doesn’t convince you that Mangold intentionally links Wolverine’s redemptive story to that found in the Gospels, its closing song will.

**Finding Jesus**

CNN may not be a reliable source for theological insight, yet the network’s *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery* could make for interesting viewing. Academic voices from Duke University, Ashbury Theological Seminary, and the University of Notre Dame join with rabbis, bishops, authors, and journalists in the second season of this documentary series about Jesus. Re-enactments keep the action moving, although actors depict both Biblical and extra-Biblical events (such as those described by the Jewish historian Josephus) side by side, which is sometimes confusing.

The series doesn’t seem intended to prove or disprove the existence of Jesus or the major events of His life. But it does highlight academic skepticism of Biblical inerrancy. For example, one expert compares the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ trial before Pontius Pilate to “fictional courtroom dramas.” His reasoning: The Gospel writers downplayed the role of the Romans (especially Pilate) in their crucifixion accounts because of the political climate they lived in.

In another episode, experts suggest Lazarus, not the Apostle John, was “the disciple Jesus loved” present at the Last Supper and the only male disciple present at the foot of the cross. It’s an interesting (if speculative) theory since, after all, Lazarus above anyone would have known that death doesn’t mark the end of the story.

The best parts of *Finding Jesus* are the in-depth looks at recent archaeological discoveries, such as the possible discovery of the site of Herod’s palace. Other portions, focusing heavily on the authenticity of certain relics, may bore non-Orthodox audiences. Still, it’s exciting to hear the words “I am the resurrection and the life” on one of the biggest news outlets in the world.

—by LAURA FINCH
**The Shack**

*The Shack* is a same-title movie adaptation of William P. Young’s controversial and heretical best-selling novel. The film treads on very dangerous ground by personifying God in the image of man and putting words outside of Scripture into His mouth. *The Shack* is the first major motion picture that presents God in three visual, humanized persons: Father God or known here as Papa (Octavia Spencer) is portrayed as a huggable black woman who wears beads and jams to Neil Young; Jesus (Aviv Alush) is a super-chill, kind-eyed Jew who tinkers with wood in the shed and walks on water; the Holy Spirit or Sarayu (Sumire Matsubara) is a swan-necked, sparkly Asian woman who gardens and communicates in whispers. They have personalities, facial expressions, fashion styles—all portrayed according to the imagination of sinful human beings.

Like the book, the entire film unfolds into a long theological dialogue (mostly in gravelly or hushed tones) with little action. Mack Phillips (Sam Worthington) loses his bubbly 6-year-old daughter on a camping trip to a sick serial killer who vanishes with her body. As Mack heaves under paralyzing grief, gnawing guilt, and a breaking family, he finds a letter in his mailbox signed by “Papa”—a term of endearment his wife uses for God. Papa invites him to the shack where his daughter died, so Mack shows up with a pistol.

The first time Mack meets Papa, who swooshes him into a bosom-crushing hug, he gasps, “Do I know you?” Papa answers, “Not very well, but we’re working on that.” And that’s how Mack spends his whole weekend: building a new intimacy and trust with God. But it is, of course, a god who is far removed from the God of the Bible: When Mack pointedly questions Papa about his wrath, Papa responds blankly, “My what? You lost me there.”

The novel sold 10 million copies against all odds (such as a piffling $300 marketing budget), so there is a hunger for its contents, which grapple with this time-old question: “What kind of God allows terrible tragedies in the world?” The film addresses serious, hard questions about suffering, evil, shame, judgment, and forgiveness without airbrushing them—hardcore themes that earned it a PG-13 rating. Mack’s questions (“Where were you when I needed you?”) are real and relevant to even the most mature Christians. Certain parts, like the scene in which Sophia (personification of God’s wisdom) challenges Mack to play God and judge who is worthy of love and who is condemned to hell, provoke both heart and mind.

But while *The Shack* may raise good questions, its answers (and its heresies) will make it just another downhill push for those on the slippery slopes of creating a free-form God out of loose-gripped truths and personal experiences.

—by SOPHIA LEE
Give UC Berkeley professor Arlie Hochschild credit for descending into darkest Louisiana to see whether tea party and Trump supporters would eat her alive. She received hospitable treatment but in writing Strangers in Their Own Land (The New Press, 2016) did not change her ideological tune.

Example: Hochschild writes that America has become politically divided since 1960: “This split has widened because the right has moved right, not because the left has moved left.” Really? Did the Democrats’ platform in 1960 endorse abortion and same-sex marriage?

Example: Hochschild says the tea party’s answer to economic problems is “to circle the wagons around family and church, and to get on bended knee to multinational companies,” but, “For the liberal left, the best approach is to nurture new business through a world-class public infrastructure and excellent schools.” Even-handed analysis?

Hochschild’s last chapter includes a 16-line letter to friends on the liberal left about how they should change, and a 54-line letter to “my Louisiana friends on the right” about how they should change. She writes, “Surely it is true that the right emphasizes “obedience to authority” and the left “originality.” (Surely that is a psychological overgeneralization: I’ve seen firsthand how people on both sides tend to worship human idols.)

Lamin Sanneh’s Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam (Oxford, 2016) is much better cultural analysis. The main thrust of Islam has often been a sword thrust to the throat or belly, but Sanneh shows how some converts to Islam from polytheism freely chose Islamic rituals that foster “habits of personal discipline and tidiness.”

Given how the ISIS affiliate Boko Haram has murdered and raped its way across northern Nigeria, Sanneh’s description of some radical Muslims’ second thoughts is pertinent: Abdullahi dan Fodio and others worried “that their original moral goals had long been overtaken by the lust for power and gain.” Also, some Muslims in past centuries grew rich on the slave trade and objected to Christians who threatened their social and economic interests.

Daniel Dreisbach’s Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers (Oxford, 2017) undercut theories that America’s founders emphasized Enlightenment thinking over Biblical wisdom. We have fallen far: Nicholas Eberstadt’s Men Without Work: America’s Invisible Crisis (Templeton, 2016) points out that one-sixth of men in their prime working ages are not working at all, yet some economists glibly say the United States has “full employment.” Many among the one-sixth fill their days with television and video games—and not only they but America are the worse for it.

Spurgeon scholars will relish The Lost Sermons of C.H. Spurgeon, Volume 1 (B&H, 2017): Spurgeon’s handwritten outlines and editor Christian George’s notes let readers tour the great theologian’s brain. C. Ivan Spencer’s Tweetable Nietzsche: His Essential Ideas Revealed and Explained (Zondervan, 2016) comes through on its subtitle promise. Nietzsche was obnoxious in lots of ways but correct in his conclusion that rejecting God yet embracing Biblical values is illogical: “When you give up Christian faith, you pull the rug out from under your right to Christian morality as well ... you smash the whole system.”

Older distance runners will be interested in Frank Shorter’s My Marathon: Reflections on a Gold Medal Life (Rodale, 2016): Shorter, who tells how his father abused him and his sisters, won the 1972 Olympic marathon in Munich. Fans of detective fiction with high tolerance for academic writing (where a paragraph can be two pages long) will relish thoughtful insights in Susanna Lee’s Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction & the Decline of Moral Authority (Ohio State University Press, 2016).

Bruce Feiler’s The First Love Story: Adam, Eve, and Us (Penguin, 2017) features sprightly journalistic writing, fascinating information on perceptions of the Adam and Eve saga over the centuries, and some inexpert howlers: Skepticism about the reality of Eden grew as “no one found a walled garden,” but no one expected to, since the Genesis curse and then the Genesis flood changed the landscape. —M.O.
RELIGIOUSLY THEMED BOOKS
reviewed by Douglas Flanders, Jenny Schmitt, Kim Henderson, & Susan Olasky

CHURCH IN HARD PLACES: HOW THE LOCAL CHURCH BRINGS LIFE TO THE POOR AND NEEDY
Mez McConnell & Mike McKinley
The authors identify two problems with evangelical mercy ministries: failure to share the explicit gospel and a lack of long-term discipleship. Both authors are pastors who serve the poor. McKinley works with immigrants in Sterling, Va. McConnell, an ex-convict who grew up in housing projects, called schemes, in Edinburgh, Scotland, works in those schemes. They combine examples from their ministries with extensive Biblical references to argue that poverty alleviation must come from the local church. Food pantries do not radically change lives—only Jesus does—and addressing poverty in isolation does not meet the underlying need of sinners for a holy God.

THE WONDER Emma Donoghue
Mid-1800s rural Ireland, misty with traditional Catholicism and superstition, looms as an independent character in this atmospheric historical novel. In it Lib Wright, a pragmatic Florence Nightingale–trained nurse, faces an unusual task: observe the “miracle” of an 11-year-old girl who purportedly has not eaten for four months. Skeptical at the beginning, Lib gradually warms to her pious young charge, and her mind opens to the possibility of belief. Though skillfully written, the book drags at parts before rushing to a conclusion. Donoghue doesn’t write from a Biblical worldview, but she raises intriguing questions about belief and reason.

AMONG THE LIVING Jonathan Rabb
As a refugee, Holocaust survivor Yitzhak Goldah comes to live with his cousin in postwar Savannah, Ga. The cousin and his social-striving wife are uncomfortable with Yitzhak’s suffering and hope to turn him into an American with a name change and social invitations. The novel conveys a distinct time and place and offers a twist on the racial conflicts of the Jim Crow–era South. Exploring conflicts between Conservative and Reform Jews, and between Jews who lived through the war and those who watched it unfold from the United States, it leads readers to ponder evil and different responses to great suffering.

HEAVEN’S DITCH: GOD, GOLD, AND MURDER ON THE ERIE CANAL Jack Kelly
Two hundred years ago untrained engineers broke ground on the Erie Canal, learning by trial and error as they went. Kelly tells the story of that engineering feat and the movements that sprang up alongside it. He follows Joseph Smith from boyhood to death, tracing the rise and appeal of Mormonism. He follows William Miller, who reckoned the end of the world was coming in 1843—or ’44—and Charles Finney, who shook up evangelicalism. Although an engaging history, the book suffers from Kelly’s hostility toward Christianity: “The soft glove of concern covered an iron fist of coercion, ready to strike those who persisted in sin.”

—Flanders, Schmitt, and Henderson are graduates of the World Journalism Institute mid-career course

AFTERWORD
In just 158 pages, Jen Wilkin sets out a readable and wise book on God’s attributes. None Like Him: 10 Ways God Is Different From Us (and Why That’s a Good Thing) (Crossway, 2016) argues that to be true “God-fearing” women we need a good understanding of God’s perfections. Wilkin writes in a straightforward yet winsome style and doesn’t use 10 words when one will do.

At the heart of Aimee Byrd’s No Little Women: Equipping All Women in the Household of God (P&R, 2016) is the problem of theologically ignorant women absorbing and passing on bad theology. It’s a problem the church needs to address, and one that Christian women need to guard against. Bad theology is everywhere—especially in Christian publishing, where personal style, vulnerability, and social justice passion count more than Biblical orthodoxy. Learning to read critically is key. To that end Byrd offers excerpts from several popular books and questions to encourage close reading. —Susan Olasky
Wonder and discovery
FOUR RECENT SCIENCE BOOKS reviewed by Emily Whitten

ADA TWIST, SCIENTIST Andrea Beaty
Beaty’s first book in this series, Rosie Revere, Engineer, spent more than 80 weeks on The New York Times bestseller list. Ada Twist, Scientist shares many good qualities with the original, including its cheerful illustration style and rhyming text. One noteworthy difference—this book includes a young black heroine named Ada Twist. Ada bubbles over with questions (What’s that stinky smell?) and goes to great—often very messy—lengths to test her hypotheses. Parents won’t appreciate a climax in which Ada covers a wall with her drawings. However, they may still appreciate this simple introduction to the scientific method. (Ages 4-7)

A BEETLE IS SHY Dianna Hutts Aston
Kids get a vivid introduction to beetles in this 40-page picture book. Award-winner Sylvia Long uses colorful repetition to enliven the visual presentation, and her intricate drawings allow kids to learn about everything from beetle life cycles to habitat just by looking. While the basic narrative uses one sentence per spread (“A beetle is microscopic.”), further explanations throughout let older readers go deeper without overwhelming younger ones. Overall, a delightful marriage of words and images focusing on one of God’s smallest but most artful creations. One note—Aston claims beetles first emerged several hundred million years ago. (Ages 5-9)

SOLVING THE PUZZLE UNDER THE SEA: MARIE THARP MAPS THE OCEAN FLOOR Robert Burleigh
This picture book biography conveys how Marie Tharp, an oceanographer from the early 20th century, came to create the first map of the ocean floor. Soft, inviting illustrations by Puerto Rican illustrator Raúl Colón bring the lackluster text to life. Colón displays the scientific principles involved (soundings made from ships) as well as the beauty and vastness of the sea. Most of all, he paints Marie and other characters in a humanizing way, despite the text’s inability to create drama. The back of the book includes a summary of the real Marie Tharp. (Ages 5-9)

THE WAY THINGS WORK NOW David Macaulay
Originally published in 1988, Macaulay’s classic book on technology gets an update here. Many of Macaulay’s explanations of machines haven’t changed much. However, the new version includes more color illustrations and helps readers understand recent advancements such as 3-D printers and smartphones. Teens and adults who don’t like science will want to pay attention to Macaulay’s woolly mammoth. He uses it to add humor and create a narrative arc throughout the 400-page book. Macaulay again proves himself master of making wise the (technologically) simple, so that even a $35 price tag seems reasonable. (Ages 12 & up)

AFTERWORD
This year’s Newbery Medal for excellence in juvenile literature went to Kelly Barnhill’s The Girl Who Drank the Moon (Algonquin Young Readers, 2016), a fantasy about a town ruled by sorrow and the magic that sets it free. Though it contains elements that could be interpreted as New Age, the story is worthwhile for readers mature enough for nuance. Javaka Steptoe’s Radiant Child (Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, 2016), a picture book biography of Brooklyn artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, won the Caldecott Medal for illustration. The artwork reflects the exuberant style of this tragically short-lived talent. Four medals, including the Printz Award for young-adult literature, went to March: Book Three (Top Shelf Productions, 2016), the conclusion of a gripping graphic nonfiction series by Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., about his role in the civil rights movement. (Includes some harsh language and violence.)

Also noteworthy: Rick Riordan, author of the popular Percy Jackson series, won the LGBT-related Stonewall Award for The Hammer of Thor (Disney Hyperion, 2016), which features a “gender-fluid” character.
—Janie Cheaney
OUR PROFESSORS DO MORE THAN INSTRUCT; THEY PRACTICE WHAT THEY PREACH.

DAVID ALLEN
Dean of the School of Preaching
Distinguished Professor of Preaching
Director of the Southwestern Center for Expository Preaching
George W. Truett Chair of Ministry


swbts.edu
Baseball players are now at spring training—and George Will noted in *Men at Work*, his 1990 baseball book, that training means daily labor, not play. The same goes for being a major league writer, as John R. Erickson, author of the popular Hank the Cowdog series of children's books, has learned. We ran part of an interview with him last May 14. Here's a second part that digs into the discipline needed to keep producing two books each year for 34 years.

*After the first Hank book came out, you wrote the second one in about two weeks. Was that inspiration, financial desperation, or both?* Financial was an important part of it. We were self-publishing these books, paying the printer bills, and buying groceries with what I could sell during the day. I started writing at 5 a.m. or 5:30 and wrote as hard as I could for 4½ hours. Then I went out and sold books and called stores to try to get them to carry the books.

*And you still do your daily 4½ hours of writing: Do you nail yourself to your chair?* No, I go to the coffeepot. It's good to get up and walk around at least once every hour.

*Do you ever wake up in the morning and say, "I'm just not going to do it today?"* I've been sick a few times. But if you're healthy… Sometimes I'll slack and sleep until 7:30; but when you establish the habit of doing your work early in the morning, it's hard to get out of the habit.

*You view yourself not as a tormented genius screaming at the storm but a mule pulling a plow.* Yeah.
Would you advise aspiring writers to set up a schedule like yours, or does each have to discover individually what works? I know some people call themselves night people. When I was at the University of Texas, I slept as late as I could and stayed up as late as I could. Most of the writing I did was after 10 at night. But after I got married and had to work in the outside world, it wasn’t handy for me to be a night person, so I changed. There is a certain amount of free will involved in whether you’re a night person or a day person. I think the early morning hours are unbeatable.

You write that you try to screen out the noise of popular culture and deliberately have a sensory-deprived writing environment. No music? Nope.

No art upon the walls? My daughter cleaned my office a couple of weeks ago and put up some photographs on my wall. I’ve got a lot of books. No magazines, no radio, and I can’t get internet there. I don’t have any desire to go back to the office after I finish my 4½ hours, but for that time that’s where I’m supposed to be.

How have those pictures on the wall affected your writing? I don’t even notice them.

Elmore Leonard says writers should leave out the boring parts, so I’m wondering after you’ve done a draft of the Hank story, how do you know what the boring parts are? I let Hank books sit for three years. I go back and read them 10 or 15 times.

After a book has sat for two years and you go back to it, you don’t remember exactly what was on your mind at the time you wrote it, so you’re reading it as a reader.

You write: “Preachers can tell us, but storytellers must show. You can’t begin a story with the ending. You can’t start a story with the finished product. You can’t reach a resolution without tension and conflict.” Do preachers in your experience tend to tell and not show? The best preachers are storytellers. Jesus did it with parables, and nobody even called it preaching, probably. I was raised in a Southern Baptist church, and we often had preachers whose approach was, “If they don’t get it the first time, talk a little louder. And if they still don’t get it, yell.” You can’t do that as a storyteller.

Teachers sometimes tell children writing with nouns and verbs, “You have to dress it up with adjectives and adverbs.” In your ideal piece of writing, how often would an adverb pop up its ugly head? I never use adverbs. I despise them. Anytime I’m proofing any kind of writing, I strike adverbs automatically. People use them to cover emptiness or to create false emotion.

Good writing deals with the specific instead of the general. You really can’t approach the universal directly. You have to approach it in a small way, and we access the universal by doing a thorough and honest job of describing one tiny part of it. One man and one woman living together in a marriage. Not marriage in general, not marriage on Mount Olympus, but just one man and one woman. Or one mother raising a handicapped child.

What was the last novel you read, and when? I read a lot of fiction during my apprentice years, before 1982; but when I came up with the template for the Hank stories, I began to realize that this was an artistic vehicle perfectly suited to the talents and experience I had, the place I was living, and my deepest beliefs, plus my desire to laugh and enjoy what I was doing. I didn’t invent that myself. I stumbled into it, or it fell out of the sky like a dead pigeon and hit me on the head. I didn’t want to risk messing that up by continuing to imitate other writers.

Hard not to do that? When I was reading Philip Roth or J.D. Salinger or Norman Mailer, I would imitate the style even if I wasn’t doing it consciously. So when you’re given a gift like the Hank stories, you’d better stop being a mimic and just figure how to do the best with the gift you were given.

So the last novel you read was… Probably by a Texas writer, Elmer Kelton. That was 30 years ago.
Critics have written much about the break that occurred in the 20th century between the traditional and the experimental branches of classical music, usually with an aim toward explaining the dwindling popularity of the genre as a whole.

Two recent articles shed new light on the situation.

In a Balkan Insight piece headlined “Classical Music Boosts Bulgaria’s Public Radio,” Mariya Cheresheva reports on a 20 percent listenership increase experienced by Bulgarian National Radio since a contract dispute with Bulgaria’s largest music copyright holder has limited BNR to playing music produced before 1945.

The data, based on a monthlong survey of a dozen BNR outlets, provides no explanation for the uptick. But a BNR representative, while granting that “recent political events and news” may play a role, opined that the new (or is it the old?) musical diet—one rooted in centuries’ worth of tonal melodic refinement—probably explains a lot.

To put the matter simply, Bulgarians apparently prefer music they can hum along to. Serialism and atonality, the movements most responsible for making 20th-century serious music distinctly less hummable, existed before 1945. But not until much later did they usurp the place of baroque, romantic, and classical-period music in the hearts of tastemakers, composers, and performers.

Critics have tended to explain this usurpation as just one more shift in fashion. As the possibility of making fresh music with the elements of old forms dwindles, imaginative composers inevitably seek new ways to combine notes and rhythms. And (so the argument goes) thus has it always been.

The problem with that logic is that new fashions generally become fashionable because lots of people like them. How is it, then, that serialism, atonality, and their offshoots have become “cool” while simultaneously alienating the masses?

Writing at The Duran, Adam Garrie lays the blame on, of all things, the CIA—particularly its funding of the anti-communist organization that it founded in 1950, the Congress for Cultural Freedom.

As part of its anti-Soviet Cold War strategy, the Congress for Cultural Freedom promoted art and music condemned by the USSR. And, because of its radical emphasis on freedom, no music was more condemned by the Soviets than that without a tonal center.

Thus, Garrie reasons, a generation of critics, musicians, and professors were raised on a steadier diet than they otherwise would’ve been of composers who, all things being equal, would have remained marginal. It was these gatekeepers who eventually shaped, or distorted, the contours of the classical landscape.

If Garrie is right, listeners have been living downstream of a dam dividing them from one of their heritage’s most important streams for over two generations. It’s that stream that Bulgaria has begun rediscovering.

16TH-CENTURY CHORUSES

Three new recordings hold out the hope that the Bulgarian revolution may spread—and that it may prove as spiritual as it does aesthetic.

Da Pacem: Echo der Reformation (Deutsche Harmonia Mundi) by RIAS Kammerchor and Capella de la Torre and the two-disc Ein Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott: Luther and the Music of the Reformation (Ricercar) by Vox Luminis and the organist Bart Jacobs have been timed to honor the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses. Both albums showcase devotionally rich compositions contemporaneous and consonant with that watershed moment in breathtakingly radiant settings.

Missa Reges terrae (MSR Classics) by the a cappella ensemble Choir of St. Luke in the Fields comprises compositions by the 16th-century Catholic composer Pierre de Manchicourt. The prismatic glories of the choir’s dozen voices permeate the entire project, but it’s the world-premire recording of the 37-minute title suite that makes Manchicourt’s belated recognition feel the most overdue. —A.O.
**SHAKESPEARE-MUSIC ALBUMS**

**SHAKESPEARE SONGS**
**Ian Bostridge, Antonio Pappano**

On 22 of these 29 Shakespeare-based art songs, Sir Antonio Pappano earns his co-billing by providing a piano accompaniment that’s as sensitive and precise as the tenor singing of the top-billed Bostridge. How precise? Even listeners unfamiliar with Elizabethan English or these specific texts will have little trouble making out the words. And, if anything, the lutenist Elizabeth Kenny’s accompaniment on the six compositions by the Shakespeare contemporaries William Byrd, Robert Johnson, Thomas Morley, and John Wilson casts Bostridge’s technique into even sharper relief.

**TWELFTH NIGHT & RICHARD III**
**Claire van Kampen & the Musicians of Shakespeare’s Globe**

Anyone curious about the kind of music, incidental or otherwise, that the King’s Men’s audiences would’ve heard will relish this recording’s fidelity to history. In terms of its instrumentation, its source material, and its live ambience, the album lacks only the period’s visuals and smells to transport the listener back to pre-Enlightenment days, when women were banned from stage and bear baiting was cool. Equally appropriate, neither the singing nor the playing flirts with over-refinement or anything else that might’ve gone over the heads of the groundlings.

**SHAKESPEARE IN MUSIC & WORDS**
**Various Artists**

In a sense, this compilation takes the easy way out. Combine the best-loved melodies from operas and other classical works inspired by the Bard (Disc 1) with recitations of his best-loved sonnets and his plays’ best-loved soliloquies and dialogues (Disc 2), and, voilà, Shakespeare’s Greatest Hits. Of course, for those hitherto immune to the riches of high culture, such an approach is also the easy way in—not only to Shakespeare, but also to Prokofiev, Mendelssohn, Vaughan Williams, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, and Sir John Gielgud.

**SEARCHING FOR WILLIAM**
**Woods of Birnam**

These five Germans take their name from Macbeth’s “moving grove.” And since 2013 they’ve been doing for Shakespeare what The Alan Parsons Project once did for Edgar Allan Poe: setting passages of his work to varieties of catchy art-rock. Unlike Parsons, however, there’s no residue of Pink Floyd, not with the folk loveliness of “My Rude Ignorance” (Sonnet 78) and “Where the Bee Sucks” (from The Tempest) as likely to spring up among the artier bits as the pop loveliness of “Seals of Love” (Measure for Measure).

**ENCORE**

Last summer, the piano duettists (and sisters) Katia and Marielle Labèque signed a contract merging their KML imprint with the venerable German label Deutsche Grammophon. The deal has resulted in a windfall for their fans. November alone saw the release of the six-disc box *Sisters* (previously released KML material circa 2006-2013) and the new recording *Invocations* (which features a rousing rendition of the original 1913 piano-duet arrangement of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*).

Now the Labèques have jumped into the Shakespeare-music sweepstakes with *Love Stories*, a bold, *Romeo and Juliet*-themed pairing of their 2011 recording of *West Side Story* with a new recording of David Chalmin’s avant-garde ballet *Star-Cross’d Lovers*. Scored for two pianos, electric guitar, electronics, and drums, the music inflates the Capulet-Montague tragedy to turbulent, dystopian dimensions. By requiring the sisters to operate well outside their putative comfort zone, it uncovers fresh facets of their talent and musical flexibility. – A.O.
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Brett & Christina

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* As of January 2017
Longtime WORLD members may remember that for the past two decades we’ve published our annual books issue at the end of June, in line with the annual convention of the Christian Booksellers Association. That convention, though, is now the “International Christian Retail Show,” and one big bookselling chain, Family Christian, decided last month to close all 240 of its stores.

With other products sometimes drawing more attention than books at the retail show, we’ve decided to move our main books issue to December, when we can honor the calendar year’s top books more quickly. This issue is an intermediate step: In it we praise books that came out during the last nine months of 2016. We’ll have another books issue this December that will offer Books of the Year for 2017.

Since many WORLD members are voracious readers, we also plan to publish at the end of June a special section on Beach Reads—light reading for the summer—and another this fall on heavy reads, particularly books in connection with the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

We began honoring a Book of the Year in 2008: Tim Keller’s The Reason for God was our first. Other winners during our first five years of awards were the ESV Study Bible, The Battle by Arthur Brooks, The Triumph of Christianity by Rodney Stark, and two books focusing on Darwinism: Should Christians Embrace Evolution? and God and Evolution.

In 2013 we started having categories and short lists, and year by year we’ve expanded: 10 short-listed books in three categories, then 14 and 16 in four categories. Among the honored books: Melanie Kirkpatrick’s Escape from North Korea, Rosaria Butterfield’s Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert, Tim Townsend’s Mission at Nuremberg, William Easterly’s The Tyranny of Experts, and Bret Stephens’ America in Retreat. Last year’s winners were Vinegar Girl by Anne Tyler, The Prodigal Church by Jared Wilson, Wind Sprints by Joseph Epstein, and In Those Nightmarish Days by Peretz Opoczynski and Josef Zelkowicz.


And the 2016 Books of the Year are:

**History/Ideology:**
- **Illiberal Reformers**
  by Thomas C. Leonard (Princeton)

**Understanding America:**
- **Hillbilly Elegy**
  by J.D. Vance (Harper)

**Understanding the World:**
- **Street of Eternal Happiness**
  by Rob Schmitz (Crown)

**Science, Math, and Worldviews:**
- **Undeniable**
  by Douglas Axe (HarperOne)

**Accessible Theology:**
- **The Life We Never Expected**
  by Andrew and Rachel Wilson (Crossway)

**Novels:**
- A short list of five, but no winner

Read on, please.
L
eaders in academia and media have long pressed upon us a fable about the nature of progress: “Progressives” are on the side of the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to be free, and “conservatives” front the reactionary forces mainly interested in protecting their privilege and suppressing the weak. The abortion battle over the past four decades has certainly shown up that thinking, but thoughtful historians are doing the same.

One 2016 example: Thomas Leonard’s *Illiberal Reformers*, published by a mainstream outfit, the Princeton University Press. Leonard shows how the early progressive founders of the American Economic Association (AEA) in 1885 argued that the needs of the state trumped individual liberty, and the progress they sought included running over the poor and anyone else in their way.

Leonard provides fascinating information on proposals for a minimum wage a century ago. The big idea from big-time economists: “The minimum wage would throw the least productive employees out of work or prevent their employment in the first place. … Removal of the less productive [was not] a cost of the minimum wage but … a positive benefit to society.” They could be “brought under the surveillance of the state—institutionalized, segregated in rural colonies, or even sexually sterilized.”

The progressives wanted progress, and they feared that caring for the least and the lost would slow human evolution. After all, Charles Darwin had written in the decade before the AEA’s founding: “With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated. … We civilized men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man.”

AEA presidents were forthright in their Darwinian emphasis on survival of the fittest. Harvard economics professor Frank Taussig, AEA president in 1904 and then Woodrow Wilson’s economic adviser, thought the minimum wage would weed out “the feebleminded … those saturated with alcohol or tainted with hereditary disease … [and] the irretrievable criminals and tramps. … We have not reached the stage where we can proceed to chloroform them once and for all; but at least they can be segregated, shut up in refuges and asylums, and prevented from propagating their kind.”

William Ripley, elected AEA president in 1913, was one of the many eugenicists with plans to constrain immigration. He had contempt for Jewish immigrants from Europe who were part of the “great Polish swamp of miserable human beings” and too stupid to be useful. Psychologists had developed the first IQ tests: They showed that 54 percent of Army draftees were “morons” with the intelligence of 8- to 12-year-olds. Immigrants from Eastern Europe were particularly below par.

Columbia University’s Henry Rogers Seager, AEA president in 1922, said “we must courageously cut off lines of heredity that have been proved to be undesirable by isolation or sterilization.” Another AEA president, A.B. Wolfe, called elimination of the inefficient consistent “with the spirit and trend of modern social economics.” University of Chicago pastor and sociologist Charles R. Henderson also proposed forcible sterilization of the obviously unfit to “deprive them of liberty and so prevent their propagation of defects and thus the perpetuation of their misery in their offspring.”
SHORT LIST

HEYDAY  Ben Wilson (Basic)
As the debate about free trade vs. Trump protectionism intensifies, Wilson’s fact-filled but fluidly written history of the 1850s—“Dawn of the Global Age,” as the subtitle argues—is worth reading. Wilson shows how the 1850s in Europe and America were years of economic advance via international trade and tells how the decade’s cotton boom enriched Southern plantation owners and hurt slaves. He connects technological developments with wars and rumors of war in China, Japan, India, Australia, and Nicaragua, largely omitting religious influences and showing in the process that capitalism without Christianity makes us go fast but not straight. —M.O.

LIBERTY OR DEATH: THE FRENCH REVOLUTION  Peter McPhee (Yale University Press)
In one volume, Australian historian Peter McPhee tells the story of the French Revolution, showing how France’s involvement in the New World—including the French and Indian War and our Revolutionary War—drained France’s treasury and fed popular discontent with the monarchy. The book’s scope means that some aspects of the Revolution get less attention than others. For instance, McPhee mentions the support that Protestant clergy gave to the radicals but doesn’t give an adequate explanation of how they squared their support with Scripture. What we do get is a well-written account of a period that bears some resemblance to our present unhappy time—including occasional bad language. —Susan Olasky

MY BROTHER’S KEEPER: CHRISTIANS WHO RISKED ALL TO PROTECT JEWISH TARGETS OF THE NAZI HOLOCAUST  Rod Gragg (Center Street)
The loss of 6 million Jewish lives is, of course, the main tragedy of the Holocaust. A secondary one: Many non-Jews, even those who called themselves Christians, were passive—but not all. In brisk, frills-free prose with helpful historical context, Gragg details the extraordinary courage of 30 ordinary people who believed Jewish lives mattered and did extraordinary things to preserve them. Among the heroes: a London stockbroker, a 13-year-old Austrian girl, a Scottish schoolteacher, and a French farming couple. Some were former Hitler supporters who became disillusioned and disgusted with his regime. For most, their Christian faith was the propelling force behind their sacrifice. —Sophia Lee

LUSITANIA: THE CULTURAL HISTORY OF A CATASTROPHE  Willi Jasper (Yale University Press)
When a German submarine in 1915 sank the Lusitania, a British luxury liner, almost 1,200 civilians, including 128 Americans, died. British journalists saw the act as proof of German perfidy, and the United States started its slow movement toward entry into world war. Historians, though, have often overlooked the effect on Germany. Citizens there could have reared back in horror, but the effect was the opposite: One German newspaper “regard[ed] with a wry smile the general howls of anger and screams of indignation. … No sentimentality: just a fight to the finish with this nation of vulgar shopkeepers.” German professor Jasper shows how his people tried to justify becoming their brothers’ killers, and even enlisted the writings of Goethe to their side. —M.O.
Hillbilly Elegy is the most moving book of reporting we read last year. With poignant writing, realistic descriptions, and thought-provoking reflections, J.D. Vance takes us into lives and places many readers do not know or understand. The book has hard-to-ignore scenes, such as when a mother's rage terrifies young Vance, or when a 13-year-old girl writes on her boyfriend-rotating mother's Facebook page, “Just stop. I just want you and this to stop.”

Vance shows us proud, dignified people who have given up; neglected kids victimized by their parents' mistakes and vices; generational dysfunction that spirals all the way to the soul; and lonely, fellowship-deprived “faith” detached from gospel transformation. The people he describes don't represent all Appalachians, but we glimpse an alienated, ignored group of fellow Americans—and Vance does not absolve his subjects of personal responsibility and human sin.

Vance grew up amid family chaos in southern Ohio but joined the Marines and graduated from Ohio State and Yale Law School. He loves his extended family but vividly describes its pattern of personal and financial irresponsibility. Happily, a handful of people inspired Vance to love learning, and his work in a grocery store—and seeing taxes from his small salary going to people who gamed the welfare system—turned him into a social critic who scolds both left and right for letting individuals off the hook.

Vance writes that churches help, but attendance of poor whites is low, and at a church he attended he “heard more about the gay lobby and the war on Christmas than about any particular character trait a Christian should aspire to have.” Vance shows how young men who choose to work fewer than 20 hours per week or get fired for coming in late or stealing merchandise blame others for their failure, even though they don't walk the values they praise in the abstract.

One caveat: Vance when growing up heard lots of obscenity and profanity, sometimes from people—like his grandma—who saved his life. He reports what he heard, so WORLD members who do not want to read raw words should not pick up this book. Crude language is a problem that reflects the bigger problems of miseducation and bad theology, and Hillbilly Elegy throws a spotlight on them.

Another problem is the breakdown of marriage, which is most evident among the poor. Even though it's a history book, Ellen Wayland-Smith's Oneida also made the short list in our Understanding America category. She documents the way heretical Christian beliefs led a group of “perfectionists” to pursue free love as a way to establish God's kingdom on earth. John Humphrey Noyes established the Oneida commune in 1848. Members put to the test his teaching that “sexual love is not naturally restricted to pairs.”

After a few years of sexual anarchy that led to some Oneidans assaulting others, Noyes took charge and began deciding who could sleep with whom, ostensibly as part of a “selective breeding” program. (Noyes made sure that he could have a “joyful act of fellowship” with any woman he fancied, including 13-year-olds.) Eventually, Oneidans rebelled and the commune disintegrated, as dozens of other communes in American history have done. Wayland-Smith does not write from a Christian worldview, but the story she tells can warn us about increased cultural carnage to come if polygamy and eugenics become the new old thing.

Vance at age 10 with his Mamaw

VANCE: HANDOUT • NOYES: SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
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SHORT LIST

ONEIDA  Ellen Wayland-Smith (Picador)
Wayland-Smith, a descendant of Oneida commune founder John Humphrey Noyes, describes vividly the theory and practice of “Bible Communism” pioneered in Oneida, N.Y., beginning in 1848. Residents established community ownership of both property and bodies, but neither approach proved successful: Some people didn’t work very hard, and many people fell prey to “sticky love,” the desire to pair off permanently. They then had to go before a “Criticism Committee” for confession and correction. From anarchy to dictatorship to demise: That’s the repeated pattern not only politically but socially. At least some of the Oneidans eventually made good silverware. —Marvin Olasky

THE UPSIDE OF INEQUALITY
Edward Conard (Portfolio)
Conard attacks the notion that the richest 1 percent of Americans are causing slower or no wage growth among the rest. He shows how innovators or entertainers who achieve economywide success will multiply their money in comparison with teachers or bus drivers who can’t serve more people than they used to. Knowledge-based startups with little need for capital have become all-or-nothing lotteries. Poor education holds down many, and low-skilled immigration slows wage growth. Mitigating inequality is not the solution: “The single biggest improvement America could make to grade school education is firing incompetent teachers. To make improvements, we simply have to run schools on behalf of students, and not teachers.” —M.O.

THE PERMISSION SOCIETY
Timothy Sandefur (Encounter)
Sandefur begins with this sentence: “Not having to ask for permission is one of the most essential parts of freedom.” His last chapter begins: “The basic principle of the Permission Society is that freedom is a privilege the government may give or take away as it sees fit.” In between, Sandefur shows how the United States has morphed from its founding ideal of inalienable rights to an opposite understanding. In chapters on prior restraint and speech, prior restraint and business, and the competitor’s veto, he shows how a Permission Society favors those with power and connections and raises costs for those trying to exercise their freedoms. —S.O.

HOW SHOULD WE TREAT DETAINEES?
J. Porter Harlow (P&R)
Harlow offers a convincing and convicting brief against the U.S. armed forces’ use of torture. Citing the experience of King Hezekiah, Harlow argues that “Christian leaders should take righteous actions to fight wars and terrorism while rejecting evil and while hoping that the Lord may choose to bless their righteous and just actions with effectiveness.” Harlow opposes waterboarding, as well as the use of torture even in “ticking time bomb” situations, calling them “oversimplified intellectual fraud.” —M.O.
By the time I applied for my first passport, I’d already traveled the continents. Books like *Kidnapped*, *The Flame Trees of Thika*, and *Through Gates of Splendor* carried me to foreign lands. I learned the wilds of East Africa could become an adventurous home for a British girl like Elspeth Huxley, and maybe a girl like me. I saw how an orphan like David Balfour could find his courage in a flight through the Scottish Highlands heather. I learned about the high cost of following Christ through the martyrdom of Jim Elliot and his companions on a remote beach in Ecuador.

Books launch some of us out into the world, to the places we first visited on a page. Thomas Friedman’s *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, his 1989 memoir that captured the everyday of a war-torn land, grounded my own reporting in a changing Middle East starting a decade later.

Besides expanding our knowledge base, good books on faraway lands grow our imagination. Our Understanding the World category will take you to China, Russia, Japan, and into the heart of Islamic State territory and the world of Islam, all without taking your shoes and belt off to pass airport security.

We chose books that are global in kind but local in scope. Reporter Rob Schmitz’s genius was to craft a picture of rapidly transforming China by telling the stories of one potholed street in Shanghai. There’s the homeless Old Kang, the flower shop owner Zhao, millennial CK—an accordion factory profiteer turned sandwich shop owner—and Uncle Feng, who makes by hand 180 scallion pancakes every day.

Through them we see China’s soaring economic growth, and those who’ve been left in its wake. We learn about the country’s education systems, migration flows, collectivist policies, and corruption. Most of all, we come away wanting to be a good neighbor like Schmitz.

You may ask whether the strange and exotic is integral to knowing our own place in the world. You really have no need to look further than to Christian history. Moses received a pharaoh’s education, and with it led God’s people across the Sinai and into the strange lands of Canaan. The Apostle Paul was a Roman citizen who found himself in the wide deserts of Arabia after his conversion. Augustine was the son of a Berber who spoke Latin with an African accent. And what of those English Separatists, French Huguenots, and Dutch Reformers who sailed an ocean to settle a New World?

Regrettably, our short-list picks take little explicit note of Christians’ roles in the gripping topics of our day—save Nabeel Qureshi’s latest work, *No God but One*, a timely and theologically astute look at where Christianity and Islam intersect, and how they dramatically part ways. Post-Christian publishing needs more Biblically grounded and well-written works of nonfiction.

The Great Commission call to make disciples of “all nations” historically has pushed Christians into the farthest reaches of the inhabited globe. In the process of understanding the world, we come to appreciate our own place in it. ©

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Understanding the world  
As our vision expands, so does our appreciation by Mindy Belz

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Shoppers on Changle Lu, the “Street of Eternal Happiness” in Shanghai that Rob Schmitz wrote about.
SHORT LIST

THE WAY OF THE STRANGERS
Graeme Wood (Random House)

Many books about the Islamic State (ISIS) focus on the group’s terrorism. Graeme Wood, after meeting influential ISIS adherents in Tokyo, Melbourne, London, and elsewhere, examines its ideological core. He also tracks online a former Greek Orthodox believer from Texas whose father worked for the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Yahya Abu Hassan, once John Georgelas, is in charge of translating jihadist screeds into English from Raqqa, Syria. The overall ISIS message is clear: “Our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam.” Although Wood largely skips by the suffering ISIS has inflicted on its infidel victims, particularly Yazidis and Christians in Iraq, he does see the Islamic State’s religious core. —Mindy Belz

NO GOD BUT ONE: ALLAH OR JESUS?
Nabeel Qureshi (Zondervan)

The warmth and candor Nabeel Qureshi brings to each work enhances his sharp intellect and apologetics. Qureshi, a Pakistani-American medical doctor who grew up a devout Muslim but converted to Christianity in 2005, comprehensively shows why the evidence for Christianity overwhelms that for Islam. He shows that Muslims and Christians do not worship the same God: Christ commands His followers to love their enemies, and Allah offers permission to kill them. No God but One is an important tool for a vital task before us: learning to engage Muslims, and their sympathizers. —M.B.

SALAFI-JIHADISM: THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA
Shiraz Maher (Oxford University Press)

Many publishers reacted to the sudden emergence of ISIS by rushing out superficial books purporting to explain what made ISIS followers into ticking time-bombs carrying bombs. If a Christian were held hostage by ISIS leaders with time on their hands and a desire to debate theology, those books would be useless, but Maher’s, while academic, would be extraordinarily helpful. He shows where classical theorists of Salafi—the strictly orthodox Sunni sect—would oppose ISIS. He explains how ISIS justified its infamous, brutal burning of a Jordanian pilot. He shows the relationship of holy war to Islamic belief in predestination and delves deeply into many other theological aspects. —Marvin Olasky

SILENCE AND BEAUTY
Makoto Fujimura (IVP)

Japanese-American artist-author Makoto Fujimura points out that Japanese write their word for Christianity in katakana (the alphabet used for foreign objects) rather than traditional-ideograms kanji. He then offers an outside-inside look at Japanese culture in light of the resurgent novel Silence (by Shusaku Endo) and the new film by Martin Scorsese based on the book. Silence and Beauty is part memoir, part cultural treatise, and part expedition into Japan’s 16th-century hidden Christians—the subject of the Shusaku novel, which Fujimura summarizes in an appendix. He has much to offer 21st-century Christians who ponder how faith can express itself in a hostile culture. —M.B.
In 1985 biologist Michael Denton noted—in *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*—that Darwinism was cruising for a bruising. Now he’s back with *Evolution: Still a Theory in Crisis*, which shows—with three decades of new research—that Darwin’s theory needs hip replacements, for “there is now a growing chorus of dissent within mainstream evolutionary biology.”

He’s right. Darwin himself wrote, “If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous successive slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.” It has broken down, as advances in paleontology, genomics, and developmental biology show.

For example, mainstream researchers Douglas Erwin and Eric Davidson have noted that “classic evolutionary theory, based on selection of small incremental changes,” is clearly inadequate. Günter Wagner in *Homology, Genes, and Evolutionary Innovation* writes, “Adaptive modifications often involve only the modification of existing cis-regulatory elements,” but truly new developments “require large-scale reorganizations of the gene regulatory network.”

A generation ago Harvard’s Stephen Gould acknowledged that the lack of transitional forms was “the trade secret of paleontology.” He wrote: “Can we invent a reasonable sequence of intermediate forms—that is, viable, functional organisms—between ancestors and descendants in major structural transitions? ... The answer is no.” Gould compared Darwin’s writing to Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories*, such as “How the Leopard Got His Spots.”

Darwinists continue to scoff at scientists who point out the implausibility of materialism, but can the scoffers take ridicule? Tom Wolfe, at age 86 still America’s best and funniest nonfiction writer, is ready to push Darwin off his pedestal. He follows Gould in comparing Darwin to Kipling, but notes: “Kipling’s intention from the outset was to entertain children. Darwin’s intention, on the other hand, was dead serious. ... Neither had any evidence to back up his tale.”

Gould proposed big jumps, not little ones: “punctuated equilibrium,” now called “punk eek”—but his theory also lacks evidence. Research in recent years has pointed out a key Darwinian flaw that Dutch botanist Hugo de Vries noted even in 1904: “Natural selection may explain the survival of the fittest, but it cannot explain the arrival of the fittest.” In the beginning, when there was little to reorganize, how could things have begun, apart from God? Douglas Axe, author of *Undeniable*, writes, “The scientific facts are in complete harmony with the universal design intuition.”

Fred Hoyle, a late 20th-century astronomer and mathematician, but not a religious person, calculated the probability of randomly drawing a specific atom from the entire universe is 1 in 10 with only 80 zeros. By comparison, the probability of enzymes producing a single amoeba is 1 in 10 followed by 40,000 zeros. Other scholars have confirmed that math. Another comparison: Poland’s Michael Chaberek says the odds of winning the Polish national lottery are 1 in 14 million, and the odds of originating the enzymes in the simplest cell are the same as winning the lottery 6,000 times in a row.

Some desperate scientists are now pushing the notion of billions of universes, because that’s the only way that one of those universes, ours, could have generated something out of nothing. We shouldn’t rule that out, but multiverse proponents should acknowledge that they have no evidence and are merely engaged in a desperate attempt to avoid admitting that the existence of a Creator is the most likely explanation for the existence of the universe, life, and human life. Since science is an attempt to learn more about the nature of reality, they should also not rule out anything that might contribute to our understanding—including the possibility of a Creator.
SHORT LIST

EVOLUTION: STILL A THEORY IN CRISIS
Michael Denton (Discovery Institute)
When Denton in 1985 wrote Evolution: A Theory in Crisis, he was a lonely Ph.D. holder in biochemistry crying out in the wilderness. Now, just about everyone who doesn't have a monetary or professional stake in defending Darwinism is seeing the theory’s ability to explain small changes but its incompetence in explaining macroevolution—and the adaptive transitional forms Darwin predicted we’d find are still absent without leave. Denton shows how advances in our knowledge of genetics, paleontology, and developmental biology have threatened the faith that macromutations by chance put together complex structures like a diaphragm, a bat’s wing, a branched bipinnate feather, etc. —M.O.

THE KINGDOM OF SPEECH
Tom Wolfe (Little, Brown)
Tom Wolfe has fun with Darwinism and then linguistic theory. Wolfe sees Darwin as an ambitious but fearful upper-class Brit beaten to the punch on natural selection by the lowly Alfred Russel Wallace, and evolution as a fable for atheists, about as reliable as the Apache belief that the universe began with a ball of dirt from which a scorpion pulled strands that became earth, sun, moon, and stars. (Wolfe calls that “the original version of the current solemnly accepted—i.e., ‘scientific’—big bang theory, which with a straight face tells us how something, i.e., the whole world, was created out of nothing.”) —M.O.

THE UNDOING PROJECT
Michael Lewis (W.W. Norton)
The Undoing Project’s subject—theories developed by two brilliant Israeli psychologists—seems more suitable for a dissertation than an enjoyable read. Yet, the humor and harrowing stories Lewis includes in his well-crafted narrative make seemingly dry subject matter compelling. Executives, government officials, doctors, and others now use the research of Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky to reduce the likelihood of making a mistake that could cost a company millions of dollars, or individuals their lives. Note: some foul language, and some rabbit trails on minor details. —Ray Hacke

TAKING PASCAL’S WAGER
Michael Rota (IVP)
Rota defends the idea of 17th-century mathematician/philosopher Blaise Pascal that faith in Christ is reasonable because there’s much to be gained and little to lose. Rota addresses the criticism that such a commitment is self-serving, and then relies on decision theory and common apologetics arguments about the fine-tuning of the universe and the historicity of Christianity, as well as the simpler and possibly more satisfying argument that Christianity simply makes sense of humanity’s situation. He then moves from abstract arguments to concrete examples of the power of Christian commitment through the stories of the lives of faithful individuals. —Laura Hendrickson
what do five adult coloring books, three titles by Joel Osteen, and two volumes full of jokes for kids have in common? They’re all in the Top 50 best-selling Christian books of 2016.

When the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association released the rankings in January, Christian author Jared Wilson called the list “an indictment.” It’s worth noting some books in the Top 50 were solid titles, including The Jesus Storybook Bible by Sally Lloyd-Jones and The Broken Way by Ann Voskamp.


Other titles were problematic: Five versions of Sarah Young’s Jesus Calling made the Top 50. Christian blogger Tim Challies pointed out the most serious problem with the title first released in 2004: The author claimed to record thoughts God gave directly to her.

Three titles by megachurch pastor Joel Osteen hit the Top 50, with an emphasis on the power of positive thinking to bring health, wealth, and success.

I wondered: Is harmless, fluffy, and troubling the best we can do?

For some alternative suggestions, I asked a handful of Christian pastors, authors, and leaders: What is one book you’d like to see on a list of books most read by Christians?

Carl Trueman of Westminster Theological Seminary nixed fluffy for Augustine’s Confessions, with its famous prayer: “You stir us to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Instead of demanding health and wealth, pastors Terry Johnson and John Piper both picked J.I. Packer’s Knowing God, with Packer’s reminder the Bible doesn’t teach God will “shield his loved ones from trouble when he knows that they need trouble to further their sanctification.” Speaking of sanctification, pastor Kevin DeYoung picked J.C. Ryle’s Holiness.

Joni Eareckson Tada underscored the need for Biblical preparation for suffering, and suggested last year’s title When Trouble Comes by Philip Ryken. Christian author Carolyn McCulley chose Paul David Tripp’s Lost in the Middle, with its helpful teaching on trusting and obeying God when life doesn’t turn out the way one expects.

Some suggested books with contemporary themes. Thomas Kidd—a professor of history at Baylor University—chose Fundamentalism and American Culture by George Marsden. The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Jarvis Williams pointed to Removing the Stain of Racism from the Southern Baptist Convention: Diverse African American and White Perspectives, a book he co-authored with Kevin Jones.

Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile chose Conscience, a 2016 book by Andrew David Naselli and J.D. Crowley that includes a timely chapter on how Christians can relate to each other when their consciences disagree.

Others stuck with the Puritans. Author and blogger Melissa Kruger suggested Voices from the Past, a devotional collection of Puritan writings with selections by pastors like John Owen: “be killing sin or it will be killing you.” Author Rosaria Butterfield suggested The Letters of Samuel Rutherford. The correspondence of the Scottish Presbyterian pastor offers an important reminder not to rely on books alone for growth in Christ, as he notes some “talk of Christ by the book and the tongue, and no more; but to come to Christ... and embrace him is another thing.”

BOOK OF THE YEAR

THE LIFE WE NEVER EXPECTED
Andrew & Rachel Wilson
(Crossway)

The Wilsons begin their short but powerful book in an arresting way: “This is a book about surviving, and thriving, spiritually when something goes horribly wrong.” Their somethings are two children, apparently normal at birth, who developed regressive autism, losing over time their ability to do the normal things that children do. The Wilsons invite readers into the messy reality of their lives, their exhaustion, and the strains on their marriage. They paint a picture of difficult yet delightful children. And they show how they make sense of their lives in the light of Christ. The book carries the reader through cycles of weeping, worshiping, waiting, and witnessing. It’s theologically rich and full of hope that in the face of many unknowns “the future will include the grace, blessing, and goodness of God.” —Susan Olasky

SHORT LIST

MAKING SENSE OF GOD  
Timothy Keller  
(Viking)

Keller with an inviting tone respects the God-given dignity of skeptics, and then assaults their logic with impeccable arguments and a barrage of carefully chosen citations—often from their own camps. He quotes authors, thinkers, bloggers, and even a handful of voices from the modern-day peanut gallery (internet comment boards) and deconstructs their often-unchallenged assumptions. Keller focuses on the materialism and secular humanism of the contemporary skeptics he encounters most often as a superb pastor-preacher in Manhattan. Keller uses Biblical wisdom steeped in Ecclesiastes and Romans but quotes Scripture sparingly: Bible verses don’t usually work on modern skeptics unless they’re couched in a winsome argument, rather than given as argument enders. —Tom Pfingsten

THE BROKEN WAY  
Ann Voskamp  
(Zondervan)

With her typical writing style of wonder, vulnerability, and beauty, Ann Voskamp strips one question bare strand by strand: “How do you live with your broken heart?” Though a tad tortured, Voskamp’s introspection penetrates soul and senses as she invites Christ and her readers into her raw, pungent brokenness—because “there isn’t one of us not bearing the wounds from our own bloody battles.” Her writing is a slow-cooked stew of theology, poetry, and memoirs, meant to be stirred and savored with long pauses and deep sighs, as Voskamp challenges readers to share and give away their broken hearts, as Christ gave His. —Sophia Lee

PARENTING  
Paul David Tripp  
(Crossway)

Paul Tripp begins with a diagnostic test: Do we believe we are owners of our children or ambassadors to them? Then he lays out the big picture of our God-given parenting task: We are “his tool for the forming of the souls of your children.” With lavish reminders of grace, Tripp guides readers through 15 principles and warns fathers and mothers, “If you are not resting as a parent in your identity in Christ, you will look for identity in your children.” Tripp writes as a pastor, not a scold, and offers many specific examples along with Biblical wisdom: “No parent gives mercy better than one who is convinced that he desperately needs it himself.” —S.O.

UNION WITH CHRIST  
Rankin Wilbourne  
(David C. Cook)

Los Angeles pastor Wilbourne doesn’t say Christ-bonding is easy, but he rightly insists that it’s essential and explains how tough times can produce great benefits: Imagine a storm blowing a sailboat so fast that all night long death seems moments away, but in the morning you’re hundreds of miles closer to your destination. We can rejoice amid suffering not because we’re masochists but because a deeper and sweeter joy will come in the morning. And, when we stop thinking so much about our own story that we enter into God’s story, we learn that’s the biggest and best of all. —Marvin Olasky
We do not have a Novel of the Year for 2016. Our committee looked for superbly written stories with engaging characters set in a fallen world, clean (or almost-clean) language, and a redemption flavor without preachiness. That's a tall order these days: We list five good ones on the next page, but none really stands out.

Instead of reading a new work of fiction, you might try three published in past years that are oddly relevant to our own time. First is the oldest of the oldies but goodies: Homer's *The Iliad*, in a new translation by Barry Powell (Oxford, 2014). Forced in college to read this eighth-century-B.C. epic in a translation that made Greco-Trojan wrestlers sound like British lords, I was bored—but Powell's vibrant work makes the ancient belligerents sound like Republican candidates insulting each other during debates.

For example, Agamemnon attacks the media: “Prophet of evil, never have you said a word pleasing to me.” He tells his chief adversary among the Greeks, Achilles, to get lost: “There are plenty who will honor me, and Zeus above all, whose wisdom is great. You are most hateful to me of all the god-reared chieftains. … I don’t like you. I don’t care if you are angry.” Achilles fires his verbal torpedoes: “Shameless fool! Greedy, how now can your speech gladly persuade any of the Achaeans either to go on an ambush or to fight in the hand-to-hand?”

Remember Donald Trump’s sneers at “Little Marco” Rubio? Here’s Trojan hero Hector reproaching his younger brother: “Little Paris, nice to look at, mad for women, seducer boy—I wish you had never been born. … Evil Paris pretty-boy, girl-crazy, con man.”

Meanwhile, polytheistic gods Zeus and Hera are locked in a bad eternal marriage: Hera mocks him—“Who, my clever fellow, have you been making deals with?”—and “Zeus, who assembles the clouds” responds with invective: “Shut up and sit down! Obey my word, or all the gods in Olympus will do you no good as I close in and lay upon you my powerful hands.”

This energetic translation of *The Iliad* does have bits of bad language along with many explicit depictions of battlefield deaths—and that note leads me to a second book, Jose Gironella's *The Cypresses Believe in God*, a novel about the five years (1931-1936) that led to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and 1 million battlefield deaths.

Gironella sautéed his country’s major political and social movements—in alphabetical order, anarchist, Catholic, communist, existentialist, fascist, royalist—while telling the poignant story of two parents who want peace and cannot sustain it, and two sons: one phlegmatic, one saintly. Other memorable characters include young fanatics on opposite sides, a cynical chief of police, a hate-filled anarchist, a middle-class Communist intellectual who becomes a mass murderer, and two hippie socialist teachers.
Gironella, a political moderate who died in 2003, showed how a country unravels to the point where people indicate which side they’re on by the shirts and shoes they wear. The names of the political movements are different now, but the novel—published in 1953 and translated into English in 1955—is a warning to us: One of the socialists learns that when a leader “shouts ‘Long live our historic mission!’ you ask yourself how many coffins are going to be needed.”

Distinguished author Hilary Mantel’s A Place of Greater Safety, originally published in 1993, is a third fictional work of life and death relevant to our own time (and with lots of bad language). Her three French Revolution protagonists—Robespierre, Danton, and Desmoulins—also show what happens when our egos insist that a country is made up of sodium and chloride rather than salt: God-ignoring ideology poisons everything.

SHORT LIST

THE BLACK WIDOW Daniel Silva (Harper)
The Black Widow is the latest in a series of cleverly plotted and ethically thoughtful spy novels featuring Gabriel Allon as the main character: He is a superb restorer of classic paintings, an agent/leader of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, and a person willing to take on ISIS. A small warning: Suicide bombers bring violence, characters five times in 500 pages use expletives, and one agent comments on Obama foreign policy: “Madness, absolute madness… what does the American president tell us? ISIS is not Islamic. ISIS is the jayvee team…. Does he truly believe this drivel?” —Marvin Olasky

THE DEATH’S HEAD CHESS CLUB John Donoghue (Farrar, Straus and Giroux)
In Auschwitz during the Holocaust and in Amsterdam two decades later, Donoghue’s characters learn about vocation, forgiveness, and repentance. Emil, a Jewish watchmaker from France, survives through championship chess, while Paul, an SS administrator, questions his own beliefs. Plot twists and tightly written prose gently bring to the forefront hard questions: Placed in Emil’s shoes, could we indeed forgive “seventy times seven”? Were we in Paul’s place, would we have done more to resist the evil of the Nazi regime? Knowing its history, how should we confront evil today? —Charles Horton

THE NOISE OF TIME Julian Barnes (Knopf)
In this literary novel, Barnes tries to get inside the head of Russian composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who survived Josef Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s and smaller Soviet terrors later by appeasing Communist bullies while trying to retain at least a shred of integrity. Barnes has Shostakovich eventually conclude that Soviet architects “had failed at a very basic level … with the result that the House of Communism was built all disproportionate, and lacking in human scale.… It made everyone—adults and children alike—fearful.” It also makes for a depressing book, but an educational one about life under intellectual tyranny. —M.O.

NO WITNESS BUT THE MOON Suzanne Chazin (Kensington)
The contemporary topic makes this an educational read: Police officer Jimmy Vega responds to a 911 call and then chases and kills an unarmed suspect. Vega becomes a target for those wary of “killer cops,” including his college-age daughter and former-district-attorney girlfriend. He confronts bigotry, fame, hypocrisy, his mother’s unsolved murder, and brutality, giving readers insight into how police struggle in the aftermath of shootings and why others fear them. After Vega almost becomes unhinged, the story wraps up too nicely; but Chazin through most of the novel weaves her two main threads with realism and insight. —Ron Friedman

EL PASO Winston Groom (Liveright)
Largely set in northern Mexico a century ago, El Paso is chock-full of men with big personalities who sometimes act more like chest-thumping boys. Arthur, the central character, is an orphan who grew up in a wealthy adoptive family headed by an extravagant Rough Rider disappointed that his son isn’t as “manly” as he is. Both grow in character while chasing Pancho Villa: Arthur develops courage, his father gains a bit of humility, and both become more manly as they come to view their family as more important than their assertions of manliness. Groom’s biting take on socialist idealists such as John Reed is amusing. —Sophia Lee
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The charred interior of the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Qaraqosh (this page) and other scenes from Qaraqosh, Mosul, and Bartella
Iraq’s grisly liberation

Areas freed from the Islamic State’s grip display the depth of the terror group’s war crimes. As Iraqi forces continue that fight, American aid groups are staking out front-line positions, too

BY MINDY BELZ

in Mosul, Iraq

In the Nineveh Plains cities destroyed by ISIS, the devil lies in the details. In Qaraqosh, the largest such town, ISIS militants left behind cooking pots and vacuum cleaners wired with explosives. Piles of rubble concealed pressure plates made of metal tape measures, wired to detonate when even a child stepped on them.

The destruction also is comprehensive. One photo, or two or three, can’t fully capture the wrecking ball that was Islamic State occupation over the last two years, especially in areas where Christians historically have lived. Every street, every doorway, every wall in some way is marred or destroyed. A run of metal fencing, even, stands twisted, deformed, melted. Militants tunneled passageways running 30 feet deep beneath houses, leaving the dirt piled high inside bedrooms, where it reached above the curtains. They punched large doorways through houses so they could pass house to house undetected by U.S. reconnaissance aircraft. Piles of rubble replace furniture, and debris substitutes for artwork and signage, anything that made everyday life beautiful and meaningful. In a church cemetery in Bartella, militants uncovered and desecrated nearly every gravesite, even prying open caskets, then leaving bodies exposed but still wrapped inside.
At first look the upheaval appears chaotic, as though an earthquake has struck. But on closer examination the destruction proves to be grimly systematic, the work of a sick but highly organized bureaucracy—a manquake.

The Islamic State “perpetrated crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes against Christian, Yezidi, Turkmen, Shabak, Sabaean-Mandaean, and Kaka’i people in [Nineveh] province between June and August 2014,” declared the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in a 2015 report. What you see along the streets of Qaraqosh—and dozens of other towns—is evidence of those war crimes and more.

Besides forcing those people groups from their homes en masse, looting or destroying all their possessions, killing and enslaving thousands of them, ISIS made its daily vocation over a two-year period to desecrate or reduce to rubble their residences, shops, and churches. They brought in earthmovers and bulldozers to do what chisels and explosives could not. Their goal, in short, was to eliminate for these non-Muslims their past, present, and perhaps their future.

The air was cold but the sun shone bright on the recent February morning when I walked through devastated Qaraqosh. The last time I visited the city, also called Hamdaniyah, was in 2008, when a boisterous parade of Christians, mostly Assyrians and Chaldeans, filled the streets to protest an election law. A noisy crowd carried banners, local TV crews followed, men stood on corners chain-smoking, and delicious aromas rose from open-air bakeries churning out flatbread and kebab stands sizzling with lamb and beef. Afterward my driver bought a whole roasted chicken cooked with onions and peppers, and we ate it, picnic-style, in the open sunshine.

This time the same streets were silent as graves. Once a city of more than 60,000 residents, a near-empty Qaraqosh was liberated last November. ISIS cut electricity and running water, and that along with the ongoing dangers—IEDs, tunneling, and stray weeks a jihadist emerged from the tunnel system ISIS built beneath Qaraqosh. Army members shot and killed the fighter, then discovered he was a 13-year-old boy.

ISIS adores death. Anything they did not burn was only because they used it.
Islamic State fighters—was still keeping residents away. Occasionally a car passed, former residents touring the damage. A soldier bicycled by, almost noiselessly. The only real sound was my own feet crunching into rubble outside St. George's Church.

St. George's faces a roundabout in a once-busy market area. The shops across the street where soda, cigarettes, and children's clothing had once been sold were now black holes. Metal doors had been twisted from their hinges and the walls spray-painted with black ISIS inscriptions. The acrid odor of burnt metal, oil fumes, and decomposing flesh lingered. Dead electrical lines lay across sidewalks, but glass, all blown from upper story windows, had been swept away.

Beneath the soaring entryway leading into the church were three guards, all soldiers from Qaraqosh attached to the Nineveh Plain Protection Units, a Christian militia incorporated into Iraqi army regiments at the start of the campaign that began last October to liberate Iraq from ISIS. “ISIS adores death,” said Martin Bassam from the militia. “Anything they did not burn was only because they used it.”

Unlike other churches I saw, where militants sprayed walls with oil then torched them until they charred black, St. George's sanctuary was intact: ISIS had used it as a cache to store missiles.

In a classroom building across a rubble-filled courtyard, ISIS had set up a bomb-making factory. Much of it still remained as ISIS left it, because church leaders and local officials awaited some official inquiry. After all, these were the scenes of war crimes. Sacks of open fertilizer and barrels of sugar sat on the floor alongside makeshift detonators. On a table were strewn kitchen scales, mixing bowls, and a measuring scoop, along with a coil of wire and a notebook on concocting lethal IEDs. In a corner was a pile of screws and empty shell casings used to pack suicide vests. The army caught some of the bomb-makers inside tunnels beneath the church, Bassam said. But months now of holding the city can’t erase years of violence.

When ISIS, also known as Daesh, seized Iraqi territory in 2014, the extremists gave Christians four options—leave, convert to Islam, pay a jizya tax, or be killed. Nearly all the Christians, an estimated 120,000, fled. Those left behind were tortured and subjected to sexual abuse and forced conversion. At least a dozen Christian women and girls disappeared from Qaraqosh, all believed enslaved by ISIS fighters. Esam, a refugee living in Jordan, said ISIS crucified his brother-in-law in Qaraqosh: “He was crucified and tortured in front of his wife and children, who were forced to watch,” he told World Watch Monitor. “They told him that if he loved Jesus that much, he would die like Jesus.”

“There were killings and horrible things happening in the church courtyards,” said Bassam. His own family members were forced out and are living in Iraqi Kurdistan about 10 miles away. His brother, a monk at Mar Behnam Monastery about 10 miles south, barely escaped execution when ISIS took over the site, a fourth-century monastery built by Assyrian King Sencharib. ISIS blew up and destroyed parts of the site in March 2015.

Such catastrophic losses haven’t dimmed Bassam’s family’s hopes of returning. “They will all be coming back for sure,” he said.

Not everyone is optimistic Christians will be allowed to return to their homes or will want to. “Security is the most critical need we have,” Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda told Catholic News Service. “We want to first build houses for our people so they can live with dignity, and we need infrastructure in the villages. But all this is only possible if we can have security.”

Emanuel Youkhana, an Assyrian Church of the East priest who heads Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq, said he’s no longer sure there is a future for Christians in Mosul. Besides destroying Christian landmarks and homes, ISIS eliminated public records, making legal claims over contested property difficult. When Youkhana visited Mosul in late January, he
visited two damaged churches used as warehouses by ISIS. Already one of them had been turned over to a contractor, who was dismantling the building until the Iraqi army intervened.

“We will hear nice statements, but it will be impossible to get some of this property restored,” said Youkhana. “On the ground Daesh is defeated, but we are the losers.”

Complicating the situation are the competing armed forces currently fighting ISIS in and around Mosul. Besides the Iraqi army and the U.S.-led coalition supporting it, Kurdish peshmerga hold territory east of Mosul toward the semiautonomous Kurdistan region, separate Kurdish militias from Syria and Turkey hold territory in the west, and Iranian-backed Shiite militias fight alongside the Iraqi army in Mosul. They also control some of the territory in Nineveh, including once-Christian towns like Bartella. For Christians hoping to return, knowing who will control their hometowns and whether they can be trusted is the challenge.

“I notice discouragement most with Christians. They are finished,” said Darrell Yoder of Christian Aid Mission (CAM), a Virginia-based nonprofit. “They have seen Saddam; they have seen ISIS; they have seen enough.”

Yoder, who has directed CAM aid projects in Iraq for a decade, is among a number of Christian workers not running from the challenges of the ISIS conflict. Remarkably, as fighting has intensified and Iraq again has become a war zone, some aid groups are pressing toward the front lines.

CAM has been partnering with other organizations to provide food, blankets, kerosene, and necessities to residents who’ve been surviving ISIS occupation, particularly in Mosul. At casualty collection points run by military commanders during fighting, CAM provided blankets and water under armed escort. Yoder, a Mennonite, avoids using weapons himself but isn’t averse to the danger. “It’s been our opportunity to be in the middle of the difficulty, because that’s where we see the gap.”

One of the partner groups Yoder has helped supply is Free Burma Rangers (FBR), an American-led aid group with 20 years’ experience providing help to war victims—though thousands of miles from Mosul in Burma. Director David Eubank, a former U.S. Army Special Forces officer, got a call to help in Iraq and Syria in 2015, and by November 2016 he was handing out badly needed supplies to civilians caught in combat.

“Over and over we’d hear this part of Mosul was clear of civilians, nobody was living there, and when the bullets stopped flying people would pop up from their houses by the hundreds. They were desperate for help,” said Eubank.

Besides material help, FBR also offers spiritual teaching and neighborly kindness. Eubank’s team—which includes his wife Karen and three children—hosts “Good Neighbor Clubs” in the areas where they work. These include mornings of singing and storytelling, usually featuring Bible stories, plus games and T-shirts for school-age children.

Mortar rounds and gunfire sounded from West Mosul as the FBR team led children in a round of “duck, duck, goose” in East Mosul in February. The approximately 1,000 people living in the suburb of Shahrazad, mostly Muslims and Turkmen, survived two years of ISIS control plus its fight with the Iraqi army in December. ISIS dug mortar pits in the school playground where FBR held its program, and surrounding buildings are pockmarked with bullet holes. Earthen berms surround the area.

As children played on playground equipment erected by FBR, Haiman Abdulkadem said Mosul residents were just glad to be outdoors: “We had to burn our furniture to cook and stay warm during ISIS occupation.”

He himself was held for seven days by ISIS, he said, tortured alongside Yazidi and Christian prisoners in central Mosul. “We
need the love and forgiveness of Jesus. What’s wrong with my people is we love chaos. In chaos we can do as we want.”

Eubank has been caught in the crossfire. His team was pinned down alongside Iraq’s 36th Brigade during several days’ fighting at Al-Salam Hospital, one of Mosul’s largest medical facilities. Soldiers advanced quickly into the area then became surrounded by ISIS fighters, who called for reinforcements from throughout the city. ISIS deployed suicide bombers, destroying half a dozen tanks and killing about 20 soldiers, before U.S. airstrikes successfully targeted the ISIS positions.

The airstrike left the hospital in ruin, but three weeks after the battle the surrounding area was coming back to life. Merchants opened shops displaying mannequins dressed in colorful gowns—all forbidden under ISIS. Taxis again were running, and children walked debris-strewn streets. “We’re no longer needed here,” said Eubank, who only weeks before had ferried battle casualties across the same roads. “Our main purpose is helping the people in greatest need, and that means continuing to the next front alongside the army.”

The most prominent U.S.-led aid work at the battlefront with ISIS is the newly constructed emergency field hospital set up by North Carolina–based Samaritan’s Purse in January. The hospital sits on a heavily fortified 5-acre plot across the highway from Bartella, the devastated Christian town 10 miles east of Mosul. The 54-bed unit has two operating rooms beneath tents, plus its own blood bank and pharmacy. It sits on cleared ground behind two rings of blast walls, with both internal security and a cordon of protection provided by the Iraqi army.

The facility treats only trauma victims, who include civilian casualties from bombings and combat, Iraqi military personnel, and those treated as enemy combatants, such as ISIS fighters. Nearly all arrive from Mosul, where bombed-out bridges and medical facilities make on-site trauma care impossible.

In its first month of operation, medical personnel at the field hospital performed more than 260 surgeries. On the day I visited, the women and children’s ward had 11 patients in recovery, including a 10-month-old girl who had lost both feet in an IED explosion. A boy of about 10 years old was exiting surgery, having had a rod inserted in his leg following shrapnel injuries.

To keep pace with the steady stream of urgent care, the hospital has a steady rotation of mostly American trauma veterans. And each day begins with group devotions.

Edwin Carns, hospital director, likes to say he’s “not a surgeon,” but the 77-year-old emergency physician spent most of his career in the U.S. Army and earned a Distinguished Service Medal in Vietnam. More recently he’s managed crisis care in Haiti and in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak.

“It’s either calm or chaos, there’s no middle ground here, and the largest influx of casualties usually stacks up at the end of the day,” said Carns. “There’s also a palpable sense of God’s presence, and everyone pitches in. It’s not unusual to see the IT guy holding a kid who is dying.”

Trauma surgeon Warren Cooper has worked in Sudan and now is based in the Democratic Republic of Congo. “I’m always in a place that’s in chronic disaster,” he said. For many of the professionals here, it’s their first exposure to mass casualties that include many children. Cooper said “a lot of emotion comes” with trying to treat whole families of wounded.

The field hospital seemingly came into being overnight, much of the facility flown here aboard a DC-8 jet as part of joint effort with the World Health Organization and Iraqi officials. But it’s also the fruit of two decades of work in Iraq providing emergency relief and housing, said Samaritan’s Purse vice president of programs Ken Isaacs: “This is the same dynamic we have used before, getting right behind the front line and helping to address acute needs, but it’s not possible without contacts and experience on the ground.”

Isaacs resists “a growing movement for political actors to put humanitarian pressure on political problems. It’s not going to work. If people want to talk about durable solutions in Iraq, let’s start by treating the people where they are and helping them to live, period. As followers of Christ we have that obligation.”

The presence of a clean, up-to-date hospital in so littered a scene of destruction suggests at least the possibility of restoration and a future for war-ravaged Iraqis.
Moments before the wedding, Grant Funk turned to his bride and said, “I don’t know if I love you, but I know God wants us to get married.”

It was a rocky start to a marriage that after 35 years is going strong—and a reflection of Funk’s growing pains from a traumatized kid who didn’t know love to a pastor who loves on the traumatized Alaska Native youth. Once a broken-spirited Southern boy, Funk now stands on the shoulders of many individuals who took a chance on him—most of all his wife Lenna, a lifelong optimist who married him despite the red flags.

Grant Funk grew up with his parents and three sisters in a 19th-century, 12-by-16-foot log cabin with no running water in Fairview, N.C., a mountainous, rural town near Asheville. His father earned meager wages at a textile mill, but those early years were the closest to a normal childhood for Funk. They had a regular church life, where Funk memorized Scriptures, professed Christ at age 8, and was baptized. Then debt started stacking up, and the family spiraled into dysfunction. While Funk’s father withdrew from his family by seeing other women and slumping before the TV for hours, his mother sought escape in her heavy-duty lupus medications.

As a teenager, Funk worked at a warehouse until 2 a.m. each day to help pay the bills. Often he returned home to learn his mother was missing, so he would drive out searching for her, usually finding her high and suicidal on prescription drugs. He says he sometimes had to break open a locked door because he spotted her attempting to slice her wrist with a kitchen knife. One day, he became so fed up that he sat beside his overdosed mother with a magazine and waited for her finally to die (she didn’t) instead of calling for help.

While one sister reacted against the family situation by sleeping around and getting pregnant at age 14, Funk stuffed it all in and bore each day with his head down. Not even his best friend knew what was happening because Funk was too ashamed to tell anyone. At age 21, he finally cracked: He stopped communicating beyond answering basic “yes” and “no” questions and became like a zombie, feeling no emotion but deadness.

But God also placed certain men—all strong believers—into his life. His best friend’s father let him dine at their table when he didn’t want to go home, which was often. A carpenter and his son gave him a carpentry apprenticeship that
BROKENHEARTED

Funk at the airport in McGrath, where he lives and ministers to Alaskans.
boosted both self-confidence and skills to start his own remodeling business. That carpenter didn’t talk much, but he demonstrated to Funk what a godly, self-sacrificial man looks like. Later, Funk would credit these men for turning his life around: “I was a statistic waiting to happen, but I was rescued by God and others who stepped into my life.”

One day, while remodeling a cabin in Tennessee, alone with his thoughts and the sounds of his tools, a 22-year-old Funk started remembering the old Sunday school stories he used to cherish. He wondered what had happened since:

Where was he heading in life? Was Christ part of his life at all? Convicted, Funk plunged a stake into the ground behind the cabin with his hammer and prayed, “I don’t know if I belong to you, Jesus, but from this day forward, it’s no turning back. I’m all for you.” Instantly, an inexplicable joy bubbled within him—for the first time in years he felt “all bubbly.” Charged with a desire to know God more, Funk soon applied to a summer mission project in Alaska.

In the summer of 1980, Funk arrived in Glennallen, Alaska, to spend the summer with a mission agency now known as SEND North. Other than the agonizing promise to abstain from tobacco (which he once considered “native food” and “nourishment” to North Carolinians), Funk thought he had landed in heaven: pretty Christian girls; wholesome, fun fellowship with Christian men; beautiful snow-draped mountains; and best of all, solid Bible teaching. He developed such thirst for spiritual nourishment that he also met an older man every morning for one-on-one discipleship. “I was like a sponge for God’s Word,” Funk recalled. “I was so dry, and suddenly there’s moisture, and I was just soaking it in all the time. I was ecstatic!”

When the summer was over, Funk stayed an extra month to continue helping with the mission project. Because he lived in a tiny trailer parked at a mission hospital, he liked hanging out at the hospital waiting room to read magazines. Soon, he was visiting every evening to chat up a sweet young nurse called Lenna Weaver. Funk started setting his alarm clock for midnight so he could pick her up at the end of her shift and take her for a three-hour walk before he went to work. They married five months later.

God continued to work in Funk. The newlyweds joined a church in Asheville that included many missionaries. Two of them, a 90-year-old missionary couple who served under Hudson Taylor, took special interest in the Funks and taught them about missions and Chinese food. One day, Funk suddenly snapped in a harsh tone to his wife, “I’m not going to be a pastor!” Taken aback, Lenna exclaimed, “I didn’t say anything!” Funk muttered, “Well, I’m not!” His bewildered wife consulted another church lady, who said, “Oh, honey, don’t worry. It’s the Holy Spirit working in him. Just pretend nothing happened, and God will do it.” So Lenna kept quiet, and soon after, the Funks were back in Alaska to do ministry—with no money, no job, no house.

Since then, they’ve managed an apartment full of prostitutes and trigger-happy drunks in the Wild West of Fairbanks, learned wilderness survival in Anaktuvuk Pass (a village of 200 above the Arctic Circle), and pastored various villages throughout western Alaska, including 15 years in Hooper Bay, a coastal, predominantly Catholic village of about 1,000 Yupik Eskimos. At one point, Funk was juggling several part-time jobs, pastoring two churches, and taking seminary classes all at once.

Finances were always tight, but the Funks’ children didn’t realize how tight because God always provided. One morning after breakfast, the Funks realized they didn’t have anything left for lunch, so the whole family prayed together. Immediately after the “amen,” a stranger knocked on their door with a white pickup truck loaded with canned goods. The Funk children never enjoyed as many sweet treats as the native children did, but they always had enough.

However, everywhere they went, the Funks met people starving for God but foraging in all the wrong places. The Funks’ hearts broke and rebroke as young men and women, once burning with fire for Jesus, one by one fell into abusive relationships, destructive addictions, and suicide. One family Funk visited in Hooper Bay had five children who committed suicide—a case that’s sadly not too shocking in some communities. Funk said these young people are like precious “love cups” chipped down by years of trauma and spiritual darkness—no matter how much love the Funks pour into them, it seems to leak out through the cracks of loneliness, desperation, and despair. “It’s a long process,” he said. “This is a devastated youth generation. At best, all we can do is take two pieces together and pour a drop of love into it.”

That drop of love must have somehow seeped in, because the children love the Funks and call them “mom” and “dad.” Funk’s oldest daughter, Sarah Stewart, said friends would frequently visit her house only to cling around her parents, so starved were they for parental love. Everyone—even the adults who gave the Funks trouble—
knew their home was a safe place. When a crisis hit the village, Funk was usually the first person to receive a call, and the first to respond.

Domestic, sexual, and substance abuse haunt many households, so children feared going home. That meant the Funks shared their 700-square-foot living space with a dozen teenagers who ate their food and dominated their couch all day. Come bedtime, Funk had to drag these visitors physically out the door and bolt it. But when he peered out the window, he saw several still loitering outside. Sometimes the kids would sneak into the house through the back window, and the whole huff-and-puff wrestling match would replay itself.

Then one evening, the Funks and their young guests were hanging out in the living room when one teenage boy blurted out, “My parents are drinking again.” That’s when Funk flipped on a revelatory switch: “Oh, it’s not that these kids won’t go home—they can’t!” From then on, every morning a limp, snoring tangle of brown arms and legs greeted Funk on his way to the kitchen.

In 2007, thanks to a million-dollar contribution from Samaritan’s Purse, Funk built a teen center so that the Hooper Bay youth had another safe place for wholesome activities such as pingpong, board games, and foosball. The teen center also doubled as a job-training site that ran a weekly all-you-can-eat restaurant. For $8.50, villagers could feast on pizza, roast beef, hamburgers, and “the world’s best” milkshakes—all under the operation of 20 local teenagers and the Funks.

The restaurant business turned out to be a valuable bonding and character-training experience: The Funks taught the teenagers how to host, serve, cook, show up on time, and resolve conflicts in a healthy way, while the young staff had no problem calling the Funks out on their own mistakes. Many said, “This is like the family I never had.”

Today Funk, 60, and his wife Lenna, 61, live in McGrath, a rural Athabaskan Indian village of 350 people. They have no plans to retire and are in the worst financial state of their lives, having transitioned out of missionary support for a teaching job that Funk later lost due to budget cuts. Funk also used all his funds to launch an online educational program called Av-STEM, which blends aviation courses with science, technology, engineering, and math to get teenagers excited about learning again. The couple has five grown children and 17 grandkids—not all biological—and is currently fostering three: two in their early teens and one 5-year-old, all Alaska Natives.

Every summer, the Funks still rent an RV and invite a select group of Alaska Native young adults on a 10-day road trip across America. For most of these teenagers, it’s the only opportunity they get to visit the Lower 48 states. For the Funks, it’s a chance to reach each individual on a deeper level.

Something about the intimacy of sharing a mobile home in a strange land breaks down all sorts of barriers—the RV erupts with tears and laughter, conflicts and resolutions, resistance and breakthroughs. By the end of the trip, everyone is emotionally exhausted yet oddly renewed. “Every year you want to give up, and each year God gives you the strength to do it again,” Lenna Funk said.

After 31 years of ministry, there are still times when the Funks feel so overwhelmed by the bleak circumstances of these children that they fall on their knees begging God for hope and endurance to carry on. Funk described the ministry as one marked with “excruciating pain”—one that even his deep empathy would not have endured were it not for the prayer that he engraves daily into his heart: “Go ahead, God, break my heart for the people you love.”
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Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth

Systematizing the robust theology that has undergirded Dr. MacArthur’s well-known preaching ministry for decades, this comprehensive overview of basic doctrines taught in the Bible will give Christians a solid foundation for what they believe.
Sitting in her high chair at lunch, 1-year-old Christie was inconsolable. Though her dad brought her various foods and toys, the baby persistently fussed and cried, with tears sliding down her rotund cheeks.

“Sorry, she’s really tired,” apologized Christie’s mom, Agnes Kong, as she boiled dumplings and cajoled her elder daughter, Abigail, 3, to eat the food on her plate. In the family’s living room, the girls’ toys were strewn on the floor, yet the room seemed oddly empty. Besides the exhausting daily routine of keeping two small children washed, fed, and entertained, the Kongs are packing up their small apartment in preparation to move.

This is not how Agnes Kong spent her first four weeks after Abigail’s and Christie’s births. Instead, she followed an old Chinese custom meant to prepare women for the stresses of motherhood: She stayed in bed.

In a practice that might seem perplexing (or wonderful) to Western mothers, Kong and other women in Taiwan and China spend an entire month after childbirth mostly in bed, eating specific foods and following a series of traditional rules. The purpose of the practice, called zuo yuezi (“sitting the month”), is to give mothers a chance to fully recuperate from nine months of pregnancy and childbirth by using Chinese medicinal practices to bring balance to the body. Postpartum confinement dates back to first-century China and remains popular today with some modern adjustments: While traditionally the mother-in-law takes care of the new mother and baby, now women can hire “yuezi nannies,” have food delivered to their door, or even stay at a resort-like yuezi center.

Some rules of zuo yuezi seem draconian: Mothers...
may not go outside, wash their hair, take showers, drink cold water, pick up heavy items (including their children), or use air conditioning. The belief is that after childbirth a woman is in a weakened state, and any chill or gust of wind could get her sick. Mothers must also follow a strict diet. According to traditional Chinese medicine, during childbirth the mother’s body loses blood containing the “chi” life force, so the body is rendered cold (yin). To keep illness at bay, she must eat foods that are hot (yang), such as ginger, chicken, various soups, and teas. Research on zuo yuezi has mixed results—while some studies have shown the long recovery time promotes mothers’ health, others have linked the inactivity to cardiovascular problems and postpartum depression.

Still, for 31-year-old Kong, there was no question whether she would adhere to the practice. “Every mother tells you that you need to zuo yuezi,” she said. “If you don’t do it right, then you’ll have aches and pains.” After the births of both of her daughters, Kong stayed in a hospital a few days, then came home to a yuezi nanny who spent eight hours a day caring for her and her newborn. The nanny cooked meals for the family, cleaned the apartment, and changed the baby’s diaper.

Kong felt restless lying inside all day. But when she tried to help wash the dishes, the nanny scolded her and told her to stay away from cold water. In a month’s time Kong went outside only a few times to the stores below her apartment, and even then she had to bundle up in a hat and coat. She ate pig knuckle and peanut soup, as well as dishes seasoned with sesame oil, ginger, and other Chinese herbs meant to restore the body and stimulate milk production.

Contrary to tradition, Kong showered and kept the air conditioning on after Christie’s birth during a hot and humid Taiwanese summer. At night, she and her husband tended to the baby’s cries themselves, then waited in anticipation for the nanny to ring the doorbell each morning. Nurses wheeled in five meals a day full of traditional yuezi dishes and taught new mothers how to care for their newborn. At night, Tsai could ask the nurses not to disturb her between 8 p.m. and 9 a.m. and to feed the baby during those hours with pumped breast milk.

Tsai knew that once her month was up, she’d not have such peaceful sleep or so much time for rest. “After you leave the center, the baby is by your side all night, and she’ll be acting either like a devil or an angel,” Tsai said. She believes her time resting gave her more energy to care for her two daughters and prevented aches and pains.

Kong, who spent her month at home, said that if she had a third child, she’d want to go to a yuezi center like Tsai, as it provides one of the main benefits of zuo yuezi—reduced stress. “The focus is on eating well, sleeping well, resting. That is what’s important.”

Sophia Tsai (right) with daughter Catherine and Agnes Kong (left) with daughters Abigail and Christie.
Six years ago Dallas residents Stephen Reiff and David Luttrell, two recent college grads with steady jobs and incomes, found they both had the same question: “How would God have us steward His money?” Out of their conversation came an idea: Why not form a group of young professionals with a heart for Biblical stewardship of resources?

Soon, the Ambassadors Club (AC)—a nod to 2 Corinthians 5:20, “we are ambassadors for Christ”—started meeting. Reiff, a business management consultant, calls it “a stock-picking club, except instead of sitting around in a circle talking about what stocks to invest in, we talk about what charities to invest in.” Since 2011, AC members have put nearly $400,000 to work with Christian organizations in Dallas and around the world. In 2016, with the help of matching gifts, 28 members gave $113,541.

Last year’s funds supported a Christian microfinance organization in South Sudan and gospel outreach groups in Paris and Spain. Locally, AC supported a pro-life group, a group helping homeless families out of the cycle of poverty, and a Christian school in a poor neighborhood.

Similar organizations often require a set annual donation from members—say, $1,000 that goes into a pot to be allocated to worthy nonprofits. In contrast, AC members submit “giving narratives,” which adhere to strict criteria inspired by the book When Helping Hurts. After the group identifies a cause, a three-week period of fundraising begins. Individual

Giving by group
YOUNG PROFESSIONALS CLUB FOCUSES ON BIBLICAL FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

by Katie Gaultney

While charitable “investment clubs” abound, stewardship groups like AC are harder to come by. Debbie Ledoux, a former attorney in San Antonio, started her own Christian giving organization, The Sister Project, through NCF six years ago. Today, the all-female, 97-member group supports Christian nonprofits that “make known the gospel to women and children.” Ledoux only knows of one other such Christian women’s stewardship club.

Outside financial experts say groups like AC have to avoid two kinds of problems. One is lack of clarity about mission. Financial author Ethan Pope says having a statement that defines terms like “faith-based organization” and “gospel” is important: “Are we talking about a universal, social, works-based gospel or a Christ-centered gospel?”

Another problem occurs when a group uses its money as a means of control. Former church finance director Caleb Dean says members have to check their motives: “In some cases, it becomes almost like having a board seat [in the nonprofit], and any large donation is like a business transaction, as opposed to saying, ‘God is sovereign, he cares about this ministry more than I do, so I’m going to give what I believe is the right allocation of resources while encouraging my friends to learn and give as well.’”

Reiff, 29, says AC has also organized “fireside chats,” educational talks by seasoned Christian professionals on topics ranging from political donations to how to be a leader in the home in the area of financial stewardship.

Co-founder David Luttrell, an MBA candidate at Stanford, talks about the joy in being part of what God’s doing: “It’s all His; we just get to be the money manager.”
Do genes equal destiny? Anatomically speaking, yes: A child with two X chromosomes will be a girl, and a child with one X and one Y will be a boy. Genes help determine everything from height and hair color to whether a person will enjoy certain flavors. They can also act like mosquitoes and ticks, transmitting disease.

Research on the genome is inspiring ideas for genetics-based treatments. Already, surgeons often send tissue samples from malignant tumors for genetic analysis, so that they can customize a patient's chemotherapy to target his cancer's specific genetic mutation. This genetics-inspired technique merely guides treatment: The treatment does not modify a patient's DNA.

What if a treatment does? That's gene editing, an attempt to change DNA in living patients. Since all cancers and many other diseases are caused by genetic mutations, successful treatments might lessen much human suffering. We may not know the side effects of a given attempt, but for the kind of dreaded diseases attracting research attention—Huntington's, muscular dystrophy, sickle cell anemia—a patient might reasonably want to take a chance. Moreover, as with surgery, any benefit or harm is limited to that one patient, who can make an informed decision about whether to proceed.

Much more powerful—and controversial—is heritable gene editing, also called germ line gene editing. These edits would happen at the embryonic stage, meaning that they would affect every cell of a patient's body and pass to subsequent generations like any gene. The studies of this technique require human embryos, which researchers destroy at the end of each experiment. One source, according to England's Francis Crick Institute: “Those left over from patients' fertility treatment and donated by patients. They will be surplus to the patients' treatment or family-building needs.”

Advocates of caution point out that we do not understand much of the human genome and can't accurately predict what effect a change would have. Some of what we know from human nature also discourages here: In a Wall Street Journal opinion piece, Marcy Darnovsky of the Center for Genetics and Society argues that “a few advocates of gene editing for reproduction are openly enthusiastic about ‘enhancing’ future generations.... It’s all too easy to imagine fertility clinics offering ‘offspring upgrades’ to affluent parents.”

Science fiction writers have long contemplated such a thing, but life may soon imitate art: CRISPR, a technology used to edit DNA sequences, has become routine for genetic research in mice and other small animals. In 2014, experiments with it led to the birth of twin genetically modified macaque monkeys.

Restrictions on human embryo research are common. Germany's law, the 1991 Embryonenenschutzgesetz (embryo protection law), is among the most stringent, effectively banning any use of human embryos for research. The country's past shaped its attitude: John Robertson of The University of Texas School of Law wrote in the Columbia Journal of Transnational Law that “revulsion to... the cruel medical experiments that inspired the Nuremberg Code for human experimentation” led to the law. Human genome editing and the creation of human-animal hybrids in Germany both carry penalties of up to five years in jail.

Elsewhere, attitudes are more lenient: In 2015, researchers at China's Sun Yat-sen University edited the genomes of human embryos with CRISPR. The experiment did not lead to pregnancy, but laid a technical groundwork for future attempts. A second Chinese team published its attempts to engineer embryos' genomes for HIV resistance in 2016, intensifying debate and leading to calls for a worldwide embargo on embryo research.

As gene editing tools gain power, ethical dilemmas multiply. When, if ever, is it acceptable to use powerful tools with poorly understood effects? As geneticist J. Craig Venter noted in Time, “the techniques have become easier to perform, [but] the ethical issues are not easier.”

A fresh pair of genes?
GENE EDITING COULD ALTER HUMAN EMBRYOS FOR LIFE

by Charles Horton
The Russian hacking of Democratic National Committee servers during the recent U.S. presidential campaign was an opportunistic act. That’s the conclusion of cybersecurity expert Christopher Cleary, a former U.S. naval officer with experience at U.S. Cyber Command. Cleary believes the hack came about largely because the United States has not had a credible cyber deterrence strategy—and he’s among those calling for clearer consequences for cyberattacks.

“I personally think... that the Russians took that opportunity to poke us in the eye,” said Cleary, now the head of federal cyber programs at Tenable Network Security. “What the Russians did is saw an ability to destabilize our election, and they took a run at it.”

Cleary noted that every time the United States fails to respond to a cyberattack, adversaries become emboldened to probe our vulnerabilities until they bump up against our public “red line,” or the point at which U.S. officials will retaliate.

“I don’t think that we as a country have come up with a good enough deterrence policy to say, this is what a red line is,” Cleary told me.

Major cyberattacks in recent years include China’s hack of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management in which records of 22.1 million federal workers were stolen, an attack against the healthcare company Anthem that compromised the health records of 80 million people, and attacks by suspected Russian-government-sponsored hackers against the State Department and the White House.

The senior cyber defense official has also spoken of how the lack of a strong response to hacks only encourages further attacks.

“We’ve got to get to an idea of deterrence,” said Adm. Mike Rogers, head of U.S. Cyber Command, at a 2015 cybersecurity conference at Fordham University. “Because when I look around the world right now, my conclusion is that nation-states, groups, and individuals seem to have come in large measure to the conclusion that there is little price to pay when engaging in these behaviors.”

The U.S. Strategic Command, which oversees the Defense Department’s cyber forces, did not return a request for comment.

Michael Schmitt, chairman of the U.S. Naval War College’s international law department, told The Washington Post that hacking DNC email servers itself was not a breach of international law—but the dump of those emails to WikiLeaks reflected an intent to influence the election, an unlawful intervention into a country’s internal affairs. If Russia did violate international law by its actions, U.S. countermeasures would be lawful as long as they did not cause death or injury, Schmitt told the Post.

Such countermeasures, possibly including retaliatory cyberattacks, would likely be delivered by U.S. Cybercom’s Cyber National Mission Force, which began full operations last October. The overarching Cyber Mission Force—5,000 individuals across 133 teams—has not only a defensive mission, to protect the Defense Department and critical national networks, but an offensive mission as well.

Even if the U.S. red line remains vague, Cleary said, the creation of U.S. Cybercom and other defense measures might help send the message that the United States is serious about deterring cyberattacks.

Soon, your smartphone might be able to identify common skin cancers and deadly melanomas. Using a database of about 130,000 images of skin lesions representing more than 2,000 diseases, computer scientists from Stanford University’s Artificial Intelligence Laboratory trained a Google-developed algorithm to distinguish between benign and malignant growths. During testing, the algorithm matched the performance of 21 board-certified dermatologists in correctly diagnosing benign and malignant lesions. The researchers hope to pair it with a smartphone app that would identify cancer using the phone’s camera.—M.C.
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‘Room with a viewpoint’

**FEB. 4** Marvin Olasky notes the irony of an “inclusive” policy resulting in his and Susan’s excommunication from the Church of Airbnb because of a thought crime. This is a perfect example of progressives using illiberal methods to enforce “virtue,” as author Kim Holmes noted (“Progressive regression,” Feb. 4): Either agree with the leftist agenda, or they will hurt you.

—DON STUART / Nashville, Ind.

Airbnb’s policy is not surprising and might be challenged legally. Airbnb, in essence, has stated, “Only secular progressive humanists may use this service.”

—ROBERT CILLEY / Hershey, Pa.

After enjoying a stay through Airbnb, I got the email asking me to affirm its inclusive statement. I did not sign. I thought about opening our home to Airbnb travelers, but now I’ll have to look for another hospitality network. Too bad.

—RACHEL JAMIESON / Harrisville, Mich.

‘No home here’

**FEB. 4** Thank you to Andrée Seu Peterson for her column about the “Hate Has No Home Here” placards. We are to hate what is evil and cling to what is good, but those who preach tolerance have no foundation for saying what is good or evil, defining them according to the shifting tides of political correctness and public opinion. I’m so glad we have God’s Word.

—ESTHER TALBERT / Travelers Rest, S.C.

When God declares particular things hateful, He is protecting what He loves. This modern campaign against hate is popular because it appears to be righteous, but that is a pretense. Righteousness requires standing upright against what God hates as much as standing up for what God loves.

—DONALD WOOLERY / Rockford, Ill.

I’m a millennial evangelical who is heartened every time I see a “Hate Has No Home Here” sign. I recognize the left-leaning message encoded, but the signs strike me as hugs of hope, a small promise of solidarity and affection for those feeling dismayed or personally threatened by Trump’s election. It grieves me to see fellow Christians narrowing their eyes at shows of human solidarity.

—ANGELA TOWNSEND / Flemington, N.J.

These signs are another example of the left redefining words and then assuming that everyone will accept their new meanings. The fact that I don’t want babies to be murdered and think all children should have the advantages of a mother and a father doesn’t mean I hate.

—MARY ANN LAMB on wng.org

‘College loan conundrum’

**FEB. 4** David Skeel concluded that “there is no great solution to the student loan mess.” Might I suggest that the government get out of the business of student loans entirely? In the 1960s my private college tuition was very affordable; even though many jobs for students paid little over $1 an hour, it was relatively easy to pay for school. And then another Great Society program ruined the system.

—BOB SHILLINGSTAD / Hayden, Idaho

As a senior in high school facing college decisions, I appreciated your articles on student loans and college tuition. The true issue is Americans’ attitudes toward debt. If enough students refused to take out loans, then colleges would have to lower tuition or lose too many students to stay in business.

—EMILY ANN METCALF / Bon Aqua, Tenn.

Blogger/professor Glenn Reynolds has suggested making colleges put some skin in the game by shouldering some of the repayment risk. He also points out that much of the additional tuition pays for more administrative staff rather than teaching faculty.

—PHIL HAWKINS on wng.org

‘Future imperfect’

**FEB. 4** What a privilege to trust God as the Author and Finisher of all of world history as well as each moment, day, month, year, and era. It’s understandable that those without this trust will try to direct history on their own.

—NEIL EVANS on wng.org

‘Human rights for all’

**FEB. 4** This column about American efforts to promote a sexual agenda internationally under the guise of “human rights” made me literally sick to my stomach.

—ARLENE DEANS / Mission Viejo, Calif.

‘Up from idolatry’

**FEB. 4** This article about Nomura Takuyuki and his Christian testimony as a doctor in Japan blessed me so

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much. I loved the photos too. Now I have a new brother in Christ whom I feel connected to and can pray for. Thanks, WORLD.

—DAYNA ROBINSON / Clifton, Texas

‘Through a glass, darkly’

Thank you for such an encouraging article. And praise God that someday Don and Karen Winget will be in the multitude who from the new earth will have a view of the universe that we can’t even imagine right now. I can hardly wait!

—FRANK BROWN / Port Republic, N.J.

‘Bitter pills’

Thank you for opening my eyes to chemical abortion. It is insidious because for guilt-ridden mothers it’s less invasive and noticeable. But let’s not sugarcoat this pill: It’s baby poison. Here is yet another way America is leading the way in child sacrifice to the idol of convenience.

—TODD FINCH on wn.org

‘Life on ice’

This article is chilling in more ways than one. The fact that evangelicals have not spoken out about the immorality of in vitro fertilization is shameful. In messing around with the very beginning of human life itself, “extra” embryos are the inevitable result, and the risks are just too great for the children created in God’s image.

—RALPH W. DAVIS / Sterling, Va.

Correction

President Richard Nixon started the process of re-establishing ties to China in 1972 (“No longer shunned?,” Feb. 18, 2017).

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A choice to rejoice

WE DON’T HAVE TO LIVE IN BONDAGE TO WORRIES

When you wake up in the morning, the first thing you try to think of is what day it is. “It’s Tuesday,” you say to yourself. It means you’re not going to church because it isn’t Sunday, and you don’t have the day off because it isn’t Saturday. It will be the regular Tuesday routine plus the errands on your list. All this cogitation takes place in the space of a moment.

The second thing you think of is what it is that’s bothering you about your life—who hates you these days; what talents you lack; how you have messed up your children’s lives. There is a compulsive need to know—right away—what it is you should be worrying about, so that you can pick up where you left off last night in one uninterrupted stream of worry. “Anxieties all present and accounted for? Good, now I can get on with the day.”

Do not envision a conscious and assiduous worry, but more of a back-burner flickering flame of unpeace whose fuel is a finite set of specific regrets and longings.

There is a feeling of safety in this. If you woke up and didn’t remember what your problems were, you would be uneasy till you did remember. Now you are relieved because you can “manage” them. The boogeyman can’t jump out of the dark at you if you know he’s there. So you are happy. Well, not happy. But this is all you know.

What if it didn’t have to be like this? What if you could choose joy when you woke up every day, regardless of the circumstances?

I ransacked my old photo albums looking for a photo for my neighbor’s funeral. When I came across pictures of myself—in a crowd, at a party, at the beach—I thought, “I know what I was thinking when this picture was taken.” I was worrying. I wasn’t trusting God. I wasn’t “in the moment.” Real life was being consumed on the altar of past and future phantoms.

Somewhere we got the idea that this is the human condition, even for a Christian. And why wouldn’t we? Everyone we know is a worrier. Experience becomes normative. Someone has filled us with the notion that we have no free will to change this, but that our wills are still in bondage as before we got saved.

This is a lie of the devil. The last thing he wants us to know is that we are able to wake up on any Tuesday morning and choose joy—and keep choosing it all day long as often as the buzzards of worry start to gather overhead. It may not be easy at first, due to force of habit. But we’re called to warfare, to fighting the good fight. What else can this mean but to talk to yourself rather than listening to yourself?

Choosing joy is what God commands. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4), He says twice, for emphasis. He tells the exile returnees: “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep... Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine, ... for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:9-10).

If God commands it, we can do it. Just because you have never done it before is no proof that you cannot do it starting today. Just because you don’t know anyone who seems joyful is no proof that it’s not possible. Be the first on your block. “Let God be true though every man a liar.”

Someone has told you that God must work joy in you and that you cannot exert effort toward it. Tell that person what God said to Cain—that sin desires to have you, but you must master it (Genesis 4:7). Tell that person about David’s firm resolution: “I will walk with integrity of heart within my house” (Psalm 101:2).

It may take a while to get the hang of it but you will succeed, because you have more power than you thought. After all, “Do you not know that... God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16). ©
Larry had been a hospital patient only when he was 17 and had his tonsils removed. Now a distinguished professor at 57, he knew prostate cancer was common and not a herald of imminent death—but when his doctor on April 1 told him surgery was essential, Larry thought the words at first were part of a tasteless April Fools’ Day joke.

The operation was “picture perfect,” and the pathology report said “cancer-free.” But day after day over the next month, Larry still felt imperfect: Nothing was gnawing at his body, but he missed feeling one flesh with his wife.

He read a purportedly uplifting book by Stuart Scott, the ESPN announcer surprised by disease who wrote: “Cancer wants to take control from you. You’ve got to very purposefully stand your ground. That’s what going to the gym is to me. I decide, cancer. That’s what going to work is. I decide, cancer.” Sure, Larry thought: Scott died of cancer at age 49. Who decided?

Larry had thought his faith in God would bulwark him through recovery, but he felt God had let him down. For years he had attended a vibrant megachurch, Optimal, and heard sermons about how God wants us rich and healthy: “Name it, claim it by faith, and it is yours!”

At the university Larry had been a hero to feminists as he led the battle against colleagues who took sexual advantage of students. He had also seen that sometimes such an accusation is a potent weapon in the hands of a young person who wants to smear a professor. With his own students he kept the office door open throughout office hours and steered conversation away from personal subjects.

When Larry published a pro-life book, though, some of his former fans turned hostile. That was depressing, and even though he knew most of his students loved him and his wife loved him even more, sad thoughts filled his head: What if the cancer comes back? Why is God doing this to me? What’s the next bad thing to come along? Lord, give me a sign.

Instead of a clear sign from God, he encountered more confusion from the university gods. Last year the provost emphasized the need to keep a distance from students. This year the dean of students spoke of the need for closer relationships and more mentoring opportunities.

Larry was conflicted. He knew that Jesus talked to the Samaritan woman at the well and left Himself open to charges of inappropriate behavior. As a Christian, he wanted to show care for all his students. He worried about communicating fear by telling a young woman to leave the door open when she came into his office, or opening it if she did close it.

So, for the last meeting of his graduate seminar, Larry took the students out to eat at a restaurant off campus. Afterward, it was raining, so Larry offered to drop off one student at her home. It was dark and the downpour intensified, so he held his umbrella over Barbara’s head as he walked her to the front door. No one else was around, but he didn’t think that was a problem until... suddenly it was.

The campus newspaper later that week headlined the story: Larry, former defender of students against sexual harassment, faced a rape charge. Talk shows latched on to a man-bites-dog story. First came a formal university hearing, and the trial itself would be even worse. Larry wondered: First the prostate surgery, now this libel. Why, Lord, why?

The dean of students walked Barbara through her testimony. Even Larry’s wife thought he was in deep trouble as the trembling student spun a tale of clothes ripped off. Then Barbara dramatically added more and more detail, graphically describing her professor’s sexual vigor. After a minute, Larry and his wife caught each other’s eyes and began laughing, very inappropriately. The dean’s face reddened: “Do you think this is funny, professor?”

“No,” Larry responded as he thought, Thank you, God, for preserving me. “Not funny at all, but a clear case of false witness. As my wife will tell you, as my doctor will tell you, the prostate surgery left me unable to commit this crime.”
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