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The Gospel as Film Noir

In the first chapter of John's Gospel, John the Baptist utters a line that most Christians take for granted: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" Whether or not the original Greek comes with an exclamation mark, it is a remarkable assertion. Most believers understand its significance understandably as the need for a savior who will take away the penalty for sin. The doctrine of the vicarious atonement follows from John's recognition of Jesus as that ultimate sacrifice for sin, the culmination of the Old Testament's liturgical calendar of prescribed feasts, fasts, slaughters, and burnings. Finally in the Gospel narratives, comes the redeemer promised in Genesis 3:15: "he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."

THE DILEMMA OF JOHN THE BAPTIST'S assertion is how will this lamb of God be sacrificed. Because almost everyone knows how the story turns out, the end of Jesus' life seems perfectly sensible. But taking a human being's life, even one who is the incarnate Son of God, is not easy to do for said death to register as worthy of taking away the world's sins. For instance, an accidental death would not work, though if Jesus had died under the hoofs of a run-away bull he would still be spotless and could have risen from the dead. But those circumstances could not fulfill certain Old Testament prophecies. Plus, in any murder, the intentions of Jesus' killers would need to be known so that his death looks either unjust or the result of vindictive historical actors. But for Jesus to suffer at the hands of a murderer, his death would not achieve the legal and political significance that his execution by a civil magistrate did. However Jesus died, he needed to be innocent and his killers obviously wicked.

Even so, when John the Baptist called Jesus the lamb of God how did he think Jesus would die a sacrificial? Could he (could we!) have imagined a human sacrifice on the altar in the Temple's Holy of Holies? Or did he think that Israel's officials were so jealous that they might organize Israelites to stone Jesus the way Stephen died in Acts 6? If so, would death by stones have the kind of significance needed for a spotless lamb of God to bring about a cosmic redemption?

ONE POSSIBLE OLD TESTAMENT death that suggested a human could take the place of a lamb in a ritual killing was Abraham's orchestrating the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Although God intervened to spare Isaac's life, many pastors have preached the text in a way that reassures congregants that even if Abraham had gone through with the sacrifice, God could have/would have raised Isaac, the promised seed, from the dead. Parallels between Isaac and Jesus suggest that if John the Baptist were considering them, he might have wondered if Joseph would imitate the patriarch Abraham and use Jesus as a sacrifice on one of the hills outside Nazareth.

The possibility of members of the covenant community carrying out sacrifices on their own, not as part of Temple worship conducted by priests, or as the way Israel's and Judah's kings atoned for their sin, does seem to establish a precedent for Jesus dying in a private rather than public way. The number of private sacrifices in the Old Testament is not large but neither is it unusual. Each morning, for instance, Job offered a sacrifice for his sons (Job 1:4-7). David, of course, was more than a private member of the covenant people, but 2 Samuel records that he not only offered sin and peace offerings to God, but also built an altar to perform those sacrifices. Again, Joshua was no ordinary figure among the Israelites but he too, not as a priest and not in the tabernacle, built an altar at Mount Ebal to offer burnt offerings to God (Jonah 8). None of these were human sacrifices. But conceivably, a prominent figure in the Jewish community – one of the Herods – could have used Jesus as a lamb for a burnt offering. Here's the problem - human sacrifice.

MEANWHILE, THE OBSCURE DEATHS of other biblical saints suggests they need not be part of a legal or political episode to have significance. In the history of redemption, the deaths of Abel, Jehoram, Uzzah, and Lot's wife were important even if those who killed them lacked political power or official standing. John the Baptist's execution by Herod might be the exception.

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The *Nicotine Theological Journal*, sponsored by the Old Life Theological Society, will likely be published four times a year. Its aim is to recover and sustain confessional Presbyterianism.

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But his innocence (relative) and Herod's power could hardly give meaning to John's death beyond his followers' grief and likely lessons about personal holiness and abuses of power.

THE BIG OBSTACLE TO JESUS DYING A sacrificial death was that human sacrifice was not acceptable in Roman society. No matter how brutal the Romans could be, they considered human sacrifice barbaric. Using puppets to mimic sacrifices did sometimes occur, but this indicates that using real humans was wrong. What is more, pagan authors accused Christians of barbarity when they ate Christ's body and drank his blood in the Lord's Supper. Conversely, Christians accused the Romans of barbarism when they observed an annual sacrifice of a *bestiarius* or criminal on the altar of Jupiter Latiaris at the festival *feriae Latinate* (a ceremony conducted by consuls who offered milk as a libation, cities sent cheese, and culminated in the sacrifice of a white heifer).

With human sacrifice not a real option, the only semi-"respectable" way of taking Christ's life was public execution. This is not an easy solution, though since Jewish authorities and Roman government needed to tread gingerly around Hebrew customs, public perceptions, and provincial law. For Jesus' part, he knew where the story was headed. In Matthew's gospel (chapter 16) he tells his disciples that he needs to go to Jerusalem where he will suffer and be killed. In John's gospel, as early as the tenth chapter readers become aware of plots among Jewish authorities to kill Jesus. Would a first time reader of the New Testament, without any context for the life of Christ, have any idea how Jesus was going to die?

THOSE WHO FOLLOWED JESUS HAD no idea. They did not even understand that Jesus' death was part of his mission. Some even thought he would restore the kingdom of Judah and sit on David's throne - literally. Even after the resurrection, the disciples had trouble connecting the dots. John in his gospel does not feel compelled to expound on the liturgical significance of the crucifixion. John merely wrote, "these [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). By contrast, the Letter to the Hebrews instructs believers about the full implications of Christ as the slain lamb: "he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him" (Heb. 9:26-28).

WHEN JOHN CALVIN WROTE ABOUT Christ's death, he underscored the significance of the mechanism but not so much about the challenge of hanging a controversial figure on a cross. Because crucifixion underscored the cursed nature of this kind of death, Calvin said that the cross helps believers "perceive more clearly that the burden with which we were oppressed was laid upon him." In addition, by enduring this gruesome means of death, Jesus "annihilated" all the force of the curse for sin. The cross then became a triumph rather than defeat, as "the symbol of ignominy, had been converted into a triumphal chariot." This also turns Christ from victim (or martyr?) into a substitute and ransom for sin.

But unlike the butchering of lambs and goats in the Temple, Jesus' death possessed the added drama of legal proceedings and courtroom debate. Just as an ordinary who-dun-it film noir acquires greater suspense if the story goes into the courtroom, so the sacrifice of the lamb of God comes with the intrigue of Jewish leaders trying to convince Pilate of Jesus' offenses and the Roman governor's cross-examination of the accused. These political and legal aspects also allow those in the N. T. Wright school of finding Christian subversion of Roman rule in the New Testament to see Jesus' death as Rome's failed attempt to take out a rival to the Emperor. When John Piper writes about the death of Christ, he pays less attention to the politics surrounding the crucifixion than he does to the brutality. For Piper, the cross was the most graphic way of contrasting Christ's glory as the Son of God and humiliation as the suffering servant.

FOR ALL OF THE COMMENTARY ABOUT the import of Jesus' death, the riddle persists: how? Who will do it and in

what manner? What will be the grounds? How will these circumstances add up to a notorious death that will achieve cosmic significance? As common as death in the ancient world was, finding a way for Jesus to die that satisfies God's demands, conforms to local circumstances, and then has the resonance to convey timeless, even eternal significance, is perhaps harder to imagine than an adolescent Hebrew virgin giving birth to the second person of the Trinity.

As if these details are not enough, the gospel story also plays on the mixed motives of readers. If Christians identify with Christ (is "if" really possible?), then we do not want him to die, especially in an unjust, undignified, and brutal way. But then again, we do want Jesus to die because his death removes the guilt and penalty of our sins. This motive could prompt readers to side with Pilate and hope he gets over his passivity. It may be hard for Christians to root for the Sanhedrin, but deep down we know they need to be successful in using the Roman system to have Jesus executed. Otherwise, we have no salvation. The gospel narratives, as perverse as it may sound, encourage believers to cheer for the bad guys. Our interests as sinners actually lie with the Sanhedrin and Pilate, that for our own sake it is better for Jesus to suffer and die, brutally at that, than to be exonerated.

THESE ARE SOME OF THE REASONS FOR likening the dark and scheming sides of the gospel narratives to film noir. What may be a bridge too far is imagining a figure in the gospels like a private-eye, someone trying to take the measure of Jesus, who has a romantic interest with Mary Magdalene, and who winds up trying to protect Christ both from the Jews and the Romans only to see his efforts used to convict Jesus of leading an insurrection. Would such a wrinkle in the story produce a happy ending when the private-eye hears about the resurrection and connects the dots between Christ's atoning work on the cross and his own need for redemption?

THE RESURRECTION DOES INDEED calm the disturbing features of the gospels – it is a happy ending like no other. But it should make us forget the parts that read more like Joseph Conrad than William Dean Howells. In fact, every time we partake of the Lord's Supper, we are supposed to remember the dark and disorienting events, that if captured in a movie, would keep us up at night.

DGH

______ *SC88*

Pastors as Professionals

It seems like another life when David F. Wells' 1992, *No Place for Truth* was for evangelical Protestants what Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) became for college-educated Americans. A theologian, Wells turned to sociology and history to contend against the flimsiness of evangelical theology. At roughly the same time that Bill Hybels and Rick Warren were setting the agenda for many aspiring pastors, Wells argued that modernity – free markets, mass communication, fast transportation, urbanization, and shifting demographics – contributed massively to theology's decline. Technique mattered now more than truth, therapy more than forgiveness.

ENDORSEMENTS FOR BOOKS ARE always positive but even the line-up of endorsers for *No Place for Truth* has the feel of opening a time capsule. James Davison Hunter, Carl F. H. Henry, Os Guiness, and Luder Whitlock (then president of Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando campus) sang Wells' praises. Whitlock said Wells had "thrown an anchor to the evangelical ship floundering in the storms of modernity." The sociologist, Hunter, also invoked "modernity." "David Wells boldly nails his theses of biblical Christianity to the doors of modernity," he wrote. He added what turned out to be true for about a decade or so. "This may be the most provocative book evangelical pastors and lay people ever read."

What was particularly striking about Wells' book was its first chapter, a roughly fifty-page social history of the Congregational Church in Wenham, Massachusetts, from 1643 to mid-nineteenth-century. (Wenham is the town next door to Hamilton, Massachusetts, which is home to an evangelical Congregationalist Church where Wells worshiped and to Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary where he taught.) Theologians doing intellectual history is not unusual.

BUT SOCIAL HISTORY IS ANOTHER matter and it may explain why Wells' book made such a mark. Not only did he argue that evangelicalism was in serious decline even if reporters at *Christianity Today* were misreading the early returns on Willow Creek and Saddleback. Wells went a step farther and blamed modern social forces for the decline of theology. A comfortable suburban life, complete with a big, box-store church and its theater seats and coffee kiosks in the lobby, had led evangelicals to take less consolation and instruction from historic theology than from a pastor who sounded more like a life-coach. Sappy and funny illustrations now superseded biblical exegesis.

ONE OF THE POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF church life before the onslaught of modernity, according to Wells, was the length of pastorates. "The most remarkable thing about pastoral life in

the eighteenth century was the extent to which pastors and their communities were bonded together.

For example, of the 221 who graduated from Yale College between the years of 1745 and 1775 and went into the ministry, 71 percent remained in the church to which they were first called until their deaths. Only 4 percent held four or more pastorates. By contrast, today the average pastoral stint is as low as two years in some areas and denominations and seldom more than three years.

These statistics indicated "increasingly shallow bonds between pastors and their churches." In the late seventeenth century, "the average pastoral tenure" of Presbyterian and Congregational ministers was two decades. This did not change until the middle of the nineteenth century.

Wells surmised that the typical eighteenth-century arrangement was for a pastor and congregation "to enter into a compact that was sometimes legal in character but always morally binding and generally understood to last for the duration of a minister's life." The loss of this bond was one factor in the decline of theology. "The links between pastors and churches became as thin and tenuous as the links between audiences and the circuit riders or wandering evangelists who visited them." The worst example was the television pastor "who 'serves' a flock whom he or she never sees, and who remains ignorant of their troubles, distant and detached."

WELLS DISCUSSED THESE STATISTICS IN a section about the professionalization of the ministry. He argued that this vocational trend nurtured impermanence in a pastor's career. Professionalization could well be to blame for shorter pastoral tenures. But is that so bad?

Attorneys and physicians are also professionals and few object. Sometimes people develop life-long relationships with these practitioners. If a lawyer retires or a family doctor dies, a family or couple looks for another professional in town who performs the same services. Patients or clients may not feel close personally to the new doctor or lawyer, but a personal relationship is not the most important factor. Making accurate diagnoses and prescribing effective treatments are what people look for in a physician, irrespective of his demeanor or personality. The same goes for an attorney – can he or she give effective advice and solve legal problems? You do not judge a professional by their personal presence at a dinner party. You may not even invite your lawyer or doctor to dinner (in the first episode of season three of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," Larry David experiences first-hand the pitfalls of socializing with his dentist). In a professional relationship you mainly want the trained expert to manage aspects of human existence beyond your own competency. Friendship and bonding may be a benefit. But expectations arising from friendship could hurt a professional relationship if it allowed a patient to see a side of his physician that undermined trust in the doctor.

HOW DIFFERENT IS A PASTOR FROM A lawyer or doctor? One answer might be that church members expect pastors to be someone who could in fact be a valued dinner guest. They might also want someone who can make all social interactions pleasant. If a pastor were more like a lawyer, someone to whom you went for advice and instruction not on all of life but on specific spiritual topics revealed in holy writ, why would he need to be friendship material? Why couldn't someone who is formal in demeanor, not emotionally transparent, answer your spiritual and theological questions? Surely we would not want a pastor to be a glad hander like a car salesman.

A PROFESSIONAL PASTOR ALSO IMPLIES a corporate figure – someone who stands for a body of truth and is experienced with a set of skills beyond his own personal qualities. J. Gresham Machen argued that every pastor in a confessional communion ideally adheres to the same convictions, doctrinally, liturgically, and in church government. Ordination exams and vows imply as much. These denominational standards – which also reassure sister denominations that pastors from one communion are worthy of pulpit exchange – are behind Machen's phrase, "the corporate witness of the church." "Under Presbyterian law," he wrote, "no man can permanently occupy a pulpit of the church without the church's endorsement; the preacher therefore speaks not only for himself, but for the church." Machen added that "if a man is to speak in a *Presbyterian pulpit*, . . . he must be in agreement with the message for the propagation of which the church, in accordance with its constitution, plainly exists."

Of course, Machen was concerned about liberal Protestants preaching in Presbyterian pulpits. Even so, professionalization of the ministry and the standardization it encourages function as a conservative influence within the church. Although the corporate witness of the church guards against error, it also undercuts the need for long-term pastorates.

THE CORPORATE WITNESS OF THE church may undermine long pastorates but it could also increase the bonds between a congregation and the wider communion. In lengthy pastoral tenures a congregation becomes so comfortable with their minister (and vice versa) that the identity of the place has more to do with the people in this particular setting than with the denomination. Such a situation makes it harder to find a successor to the long-term pastor. A congregation might need to conduct a lengthy search to find that one person who has just the right gifts for this group of Christian. At that point, the

congregation might well forget the nature of the ministry according to the common standards of the denomination. They might want "our guy" more than, for instance, a generic Presbyterian pastor who can do all the things that a man trained for the Reformed ministry is supposed to do. The congregation might forget what it means to belong to a certain communion because it functions largely within its own local context with its own pastor. A pastoral search could then depend more on personal qualities than on the demands of presbytery and the denomination's corporate witness.

Conversely, expectations for relatively short pastorates, say from five to seven years, likely nurture a sense of belonging to a wider communion in which ideally all of the ministers should be able to serve in any congregation. Instead of building up a kind of co-dependency between minister and congregation thanks to a long tenure, a series of medium-term calls may encourage church members to deepen their membership in the broader communion beyond the congregation.

THE CORPORATE WITNESS OF THE church also has the virtue of setting proper expectations for a pastor in all the congregations. As a professional, a pastor needs to study and prepare sermons, conduct worship, participate in church government at all levels of ecclesiastical courts, and shepherd the flock especially in the big moments of life – birth, profession of faith, spiritual doubts, marriage, illness, and death. Delivering those services is much more important than the pastor's ability to mix with young mothers or relate to the senior saints.

Professionalism may not sound very pious because it connotes standards that prevail outside the church. But thanks be to God for all the other people in a Christian's life with whom to cultivate non-professional relationships – family, friends, colleagues, auto mechanics, the waitress at the diner. With those other sources of camaraderie and fraternity, pastors are free to be stewards of the mysteries of God.

Townsend P. Levitt

_______ *SC88*

Muizenberg Diarist: Whitefield Endures

On a trip to Cape Town, South Africa last year, your sometimes humble diarist gave a talk at George Whitefield College, located in a resort town south of the city. The college is under the umbrella of the Reformed Evangelical Anglican Church of South Africa and has had significant involvement from the Diocese of Sydney in the Anglican Church of Australia. The college's motto is "theological training in Africa for Africa." Since the white population of South Africa is roughly eight percent, the student body present for the lecture mentioned above was predominantly black – upwards of ninety percent. The college also attracts students from outside South Africa – according to one website, the national representation includes Namibia, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, Cameroon, Uganda, Kenya, Congo, the Gambia, Nigeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, UK, Germany, Canada, Chile, Norway, USA, Ireland, Bermuda and Australia.

THE COLLEGE'S PROMOTIONAL material and self-description says little about George Whitefield. For Anglicans who lean evangelical, however, the Church of England priest who made the eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic awakenings "great," Whitefield is a natural choice for name recognition. He was evangelical, Calvinistic, Anglican, and had a career that was almost exclusively evangelistic. For whites in South Africa or Australia who support the institution, Whitefield is more than respectable. He was likely the greatest evangelist in the history of the church (Protestant anyway) before Billy Graham. His name signals conservative evangelical and pairs comfortably with the college's theological commitments: a high view of Scripture, affirmation of Christ's death and resurrection as fundamental to salvation, the unity of the body of Christ, assent with other Anglicans to the Thirty Nine Articles of Religion, the Lausanne Covenant, and the GAFCON Declaration, and acceptance of the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 as the standard for worship and church order.

Whitefield was not the theologian that his contemporary Jonathan Edwards was, but throughout his life he drew support from conservative Protestants (who feared the broad-church influences of the Enlightenment) in North America and the United Kingdom.

STUDENTS, FACULTY, AND STAFF AT the Muizenberg institution would likely be surprised that the University of Pennsylvania, an institution with Ivy League bona fides has a distinctly different view of Whitefield than blacks and whites in South Africa and Australia. This is not surprising at the level of appreciating Whitefield's ministry. No one might have expected politically liberal and religiously indifferent faculty and administrators to warm to someone who advocated the "new birth." But the university did have a statue of Whitefield on campus, thanks in part to the evangelist's warm friendship with the institution's founder, Ben Franklin. At the time of the bicentennial of Whitefield's birth,

Methodist members of the university's New York City alumni association proposed a statue to honor the evangelist and his ties to Penn's founding. The university eventually commissioned R. Tait McKenzie, a sculptor who was also – get this – the director of physical education at Penn – to create the statue. Completed in 1918, the university unveiled Whitefield at the 1919 Alumni Day (June 15). A prominent Methodist pastor in Philadelphia, Wallace MacMullen delivered the speech that explained Whitefield's significance and a choir sang "For Famous Men" which included verses about the evangelist. The entire enterprise was the product of the university's Methodist Alumni Committee.

By 2013, almost to the tri-centennial of Whitefield's birth, Penn's awareness of Whitefield was no longer supplied chiefly by Methodists but the university was still not embarrassed. A story at the website of *Penn Today* – now scrubbed from Penn's pages but still accessible through web.archive.org – portrayed Whitefield as a swell guy, very much an advocate of education. Whitefield was an original trustee of the Charity School of 1740, which was created on the grounds of his revival meeting house at Fourth and Arch Streets. The school, a forerunner of the University of Pennsylvania, offered free instruction "in the knowledge of the Christian religion and in useful literature" to low-income children. Franklin later purchased Whitefield's meeting house as the site for the Academy of Philadelphia, which became the College of Philadelphia, and later, the University of Pennsylvania. The story also credited Whitefield with soliciting "the first donations to Penn's Library."

THE 2013 STORY DID NOT MENTION slavery in Whitefield's track record but played up his "strong interest in education" which "also led to the creation of other schools," such as the Log College, forerunner to Princeton University, and Dartmouth College. To do the math, that meant the better known revivalist of the New Calvinists' favorite awakening – the one responsible for the Jonathan-Edwards-Is-My-Home-Boy T-Shirts – was instrumental in starting three of the United States' most universities.

No wonder the 2013 story had to be scrubbed once many institutions in 2020 decided to be on the right side of the nation's racial reckoning. At that point, how crucial was the statue of a Protestant itinerant located in a private quad to a progressive university? Actually, Whitefield was crucial but in a negative way. Removing him showed that Penn was serious about racism and America's wicked history. The university's administration explained that taking down the statue came "after careful consideration." "The case for removing Whitefield is overwhelmingly strong" because he "notably led a successful campaign to allow slavery in Georgia." His promotion of slavery was not so notable that Penn's Methodist alumni knew about it, or *Penn Today's* 2013 staff, or that anyone in the history department who sent an email message to correct university's description of the statue. What had become notable by 2020 was that slavery was "undeniably one of Whitefield's principal legacies." Within seven years, a Whitefield statue had become "inconsistent with our University's core values," even if the same object had been unobjectionable for one hundred years prior to the apprehension and death of George Floyd by Minneapolis police.

IF SOME WONDERED ABOUT Benjamin Franklin's own slaves, administrators were quick to observe that although "some of its trustees, including our founder Benjamin Franklin, had owned enslaved persons," he "changed course in his life and went on to become a leading abolitionist." Good thing since removing the huge statue of Franklin that sets in front of one of the oldest and handsomest buildings on campus – College Hall – would have been as hard as teaching a cat to play fetch.

THE IRONY IS THAT FOR EVANGELICAL Anglicans in South Africa, a society whose history is – ahem – a tad more disturbing than the United States', Whitefield does not spook either the white administrators and staff at Whitefield College or provoke objections from the predominantly black students enrolled there. Maybe if the administrators at Penn had considered Whitefield's message of forgiveness for sin, his statue would have escaped the university's strict code of historical justice.

DGH

SC88

39 Alexander Hall

Idolatry in the Negative World

AARON RENN SAYS THAT AMERICAN Christians now experience a culture that is hostile to the Christian faith in contrast to previous eras that either viewed Christianity positively or in which believing was neutral, neither offensive nor appealing. He argues the change came sometime around 2014.

Another change seems to have occurred that may say more about American Protestants than about the nation they inhabit. Somewhere in the mix of changing perceptions of American society and churches, conservative Protestants developed a different conception of sin. One sign of this change was a worship service recently broadcast from Moody Memorial Church in Chicago (Moody, of course, named after the urban

evangelist, Dwight L. Moody). The broadcast included the prayer of confession. In it the pastor asked forgiveness on behalf of the congregation for desiring sex, money, and power.

THAT TRILOGY STRUCK THIS LISTENER as odd. As the descendant of members of the Greatest Generation, people who may not have called themselves fundamentalists, but clearly quacked and waddled like such low-church, moralistic Protestants, I could not imagine my parents thinking they struggled with inordinate desires for sex, money, or power. Since they only had two children and contraception was likely not an option, they must not have struggled with lust of the flesh. Money was a concern but mainly to pay bills and tithe. Calculating the U.S. economy to find a lucrative job so they could live more like June and Ward Clever instead of Ralph and Alice Kramden was never a consideration. They were content with the two-bedroom Cape Codder in suburban Philadelphia. And power? Wasn't holding the office of deacon in the local Baptist church sufficient to satisfy the urge to lord over others, not to mention being a husband and father with all that heterosexual male power? If our Baptist worship had a prayer of confession, the corporate sins confessed were those thrown at us by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Those sins haunted even the average people who lived in suburbia.

This raises the question of how and when "sex, power, and money" replaced the "world, flesh, and devil" as the sins of consequence. One explanation could be the popularity of Tim Keller's 2011 book, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*. Three years before Renn's Negative World began, Keller's book may well have been evidence of Christianity in the positive world. By then, Christians had become so successful, so conversant with life in cities like New York, London, and Paris, and so committed to prospering in them, that the obsessions of characters like those depicted in the Showtime series, "Billions" – ways to make more money, use it to lord over staff and markets, and find release in kinky sex – became more of a problem for urban Christians than the ordinary temptations of middle-brow, low-church suburban Protestants.

THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT SEX, power, and money are inconsequential – though it is also true these activities are not inherently sinful. It is merely to note that the old sins manufactured by the world, flesh, and devil were not restricted to Christians of a certain class or location. They lured the poor as much as the rich, and implicated whites as much as blacks. But if you are ministering to people who think they are special and gifted (or if you are overwhelmed by people who seem special and gifted), you look at sin more from the perspective of Gotham than Warwick, Rhodes Island.

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Tested Positive

[**Ed**. Adapted from *Religion and Liberty*, January 9, 2023; "The Existential Threat of Anti-Christian Nationalism"]

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IS NOT obviously connected to COVID-19 but the recent work of sociologists indicates that testing for this strain of patriotism is as important as the PRC test was for the pandemic. One of the parallels between Christian nationalism and COVID is the level of hysteria that both provoke among those who keep the gates of information in the United States (and western societies more generally). Christian nationalism has not generated international conferences of scientific experts presenting papers the way climate change and COVID have. But thanks to Donald Trump and the events of January 6, 2021, many editors, scholars, and government officials regard people who think America has a Christian character a threat to liberal democracy. To find the Americans carrying this religio-political virus (CHRISTNAT-21?), sociologists have created a test. Actually, it is a social science survey the answers to which indicate whether someone carries the contagion of Christian nationalism.

Both *Taking America Back for God* and *The Flag and the Cross* use the following six statements to discern levels of attachment to Christian nationalism:

"The federal government should declare the US a Christian nation."

"The federal government should advocate Christian values."

"The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state."

"The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces."

"The success of the US is part of God's plan."

"The federal government should allow prayer in public schools."

The Flag and the Cross uses one more statement from a different data set:

"I consider founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution to be divinely inspired."

THIS DIFFERENCE DOES NOT PREVENT the books from establishing a metric by which to detect strains of Christian nationalism. On a spectrum of 0 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), the authors arrive at totals (0-24 or 0-28) that in turn place respondents in the categories of "Rejecters" (opponents), "Resisters" and "Accommodators" (undecided), and "Ambassadors" ("wholly supportive"). The totals

indicate that 19.8 percent of Americans are Ambassadors, 32.1 percent Accommodators, 26.6 percent Resisters, and 21.5 percent Rejecters.

. . . JUST LIKE THE PCR TEST IN ITS TAKE-home version, readers of these books can also take their own Christian nationalist temperature. (Forgive the use of first person singular, but I know no other way to report on my own responses.) Bottom line: I tested positive though at the low end of the Accommodators (which runs between twelve and seventeen on the 0-24 spectrum). For instance, I strongly oppose the federal government issuing a declaration that the United States is a Christian nation (0 points). But for the government to advocate Christian values, like banning murder, lying, and stealing, I am unsure about the way to do this (2 points). On the strict enforcement of separating of church and state, I tend to disagree (1 point) but the word "strict" is a hang up because zeal in doing so can wind up with French-style *laicite* which has never been the American version of relating church and state.

On government allowing for religious symbols in public spaces (agree 3 points), and prayer in public schools (agree 3 points), I put a lot of weight on "allow." The verb suggests government is not going impose such religious expressions but will stand back and let other institutions decide (like local governments or neighborhood associations – even teachers unions). Then on the idea that the United States' success is part of God's plan (agree 3 points), how could anyone who believes in a sovereign God not believe some divine purpose is responsible for America's place in the world. At the same time, "success" is imprecise since it could indicate approval of America's emergence as a superpower or it could mean approving of religion's remarkable prevalence in American society.

ALL OF WHICH IS TO SAY THAT AS WITH many pollster questions, these phrases are either misleading or imprecise in ways that hardly invite firm conclusions about a response's meaning. That said, my total points (12) make me a Christian nationalist, a classification that would surprise many who have criticized me in the past for divorcing faith from politics and arguing that the church should mind its own business. If a conservative Presbyterian who has long argued that the church should stay out of politics tests positive for Christian nationalism, someone could wonder if sociologists need to factor asymptomatic carriers of this political virus.

THE AMBIGUITY OF THE SURVEY questions extends to the repeated use of "federal government." Not to be overly precious, but the federal government does have three branches. What sort of results would surveys have yielded had they inserted "executive order by the President" in one or "law passed by Congress" in another, or if "the Supreme Court ruled" in yet another. The repetition of federal government not only ignores the branches and agencies in Washington, but also confuses respondents with localist or states' rights convictions. If prayer in public schools admits of everything from a football coach praying with his team before a game to a student crossing herself after praying over a meal in the cafeteria, the use of "federal government" as a stand in for nationalism borders on silly.

STILL, THESE BOOKS FOLLOW THE science. They rely on imprecise social scientific instruments to sound the alarm about the threat that Christian nationalism is to American society and institutions.

______ *SC88*

Second Hand Smoke

The Mechanics of Cigarettes

No one who enjoys novels about American small town life where light industry is either disappearing or gone can avoid Richard Russo for long. His main character in Nobody's Fool *(1993), Donald "Sully" Sullivan, may live on more in Paul Newman's rendering of him in the movie of the same name (1994). Among Sully's quirks are drinking, stubbornness, a perceptive eye for humor, and, yes, smoking cigarettes.*

When Sully collapsed, exhausted, back into the Queen Anne and took out his cigarettes, Miss Beryl headed for the kitchen, where she kept her lone ashtray. Sully was the only person she allowed to smoke in her house, this exception granted on the grounds that he honestly couldn't remember that she didn't want him to. He never took note of the fact that there were no ashtrays. Indeed, it never occurred to him even to look for one until the long gray ash at the end of his cigarette was ready to fall. Even then Sully was not the sort of man to panic. He simply held the cigarette upright, as if its vertical position removed the threat of gravity. When the ash eventually fell anyway, he was sometimes quick enough to catch it in his lap, where the ash would stay until, having forgotten about it again, he stood up.

By the time Miss Beryl arrived back with the crystal ashtray she'd bought in London five years before, Sully already had a pretty impressive ash working. "So," Sully said, "you decide where you're going this year?"

______ *SC88*