DANIEL of the YEAR

MICHAEL MILLER

HONDURAS: A street-level report
MISSOURI: Baptist battle epicenter
ILLINOIS: Life after a tornado
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Monthly costs
Ranges based on age, household size, and membership level

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This is a ministry that is trying to actually do some good out there for the Lord when it comes to health care.
— Cameron & Roanna, members since 2017
‘The slow work of God’
DANIEL OF THE YEAR: In Honduras, many residents feel trapped by poverty, violence, and addiction. Michael Miller has spent two decades hitting the streets and devoting his life to some of the country’s youngest and most vulnerable.

Reclaiming home turf
Migration from Central America has surged, but in Honduras, some Christians are doing unsung work to make their country a safer place to live.

Baptist battles
Some Baptist colleges have not embraced the conservative theology the Southern Baptist Convention adopted almost 20 years ago.

Twists of grace
Six years after a tornado outbreak hit the Midwest, surviving families remember the devastation and the recovery.

The great disappearing film
With a competitive movie environment and new hurdles to distribution, some worthy films go unseen by American audiences.
Thanksgiving is an everyday thing for God's people, at least it ought to be. “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Then this: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

We could go on.

With all of the Biblical encouragement toward thanking God daily (indeed, multiple times daily), why do we need to have one day each year set aside for being thankful?

Probably because we often fail to do so, despite all of the Biblical encouragement. And even when we do remember to thank Him, habitual thanks can sometimes lose its meaning: Saying “thank you” is not always the same thing as thankfulness.

So the whole season of Thanksgiving provides time for prolonged meditations on the Person we’re thanking. His goodness to us in ways that are impossible fully to count, and our own insufficiency.

Those are all valuable meditations, because they tend to reorient our easily disoriented hearts. “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:18-21).

BIBLICALLY OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM THAT INFORMS, EDUCATES, AND INSPIRES
**Exemption attack**

**BETO O’ROURKE’S TROUBLING COMMENTS**

Beto O’Rourke at least had the political sense to backtrack. His earlier response to a reporter’s question about homosexual rights had been preposterous—earning dissent even from his ultra-liberal, fellow presidential candidates. But O’Rourke’s follow-up “clarification” served mostly to show what the former U.S. congressman from Texas really thinks on the subject. And what he thinks suggests he should have no place of influence in government.

The question, from CNN reporter Don Lemon at an Oct. 10 forum on gay rights, was straightforward: “Do you think religious institutions like colleges, churches, charities, should lose their tax-exempt status if they oppose same-sex marriage?”

O’Rourke’s response was immediate and explicit: “There can be no reward, no benefit, no tax break for anyone, or any institution, any organization in America, that denies the full human rights and the full civil rights of every single one of us. And so as president, we are going to make that a priority, and we are going to stop those who are infringing upon the human rights of our fellow Americans.” Yes, he said—to applause. That would include loss of tax-exempt status by any offending entity.

But that was a bit too much. Even fellow candidates Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg said O’Rourke had gone too far. Buttigieg, a practicing homosexual, said, “The idea that you’re going to strip churches of their tax-exempt status if they haven’t found their way toward blessing same-sex marriage—I’m not sure he understood the implications of what he was saying.”

O’Rourke had a chance to clarify matters. Interviewed a couple of days later on MSNBC, he said: “The way that you practice your religion or your faith within that mosque or that temple or synagogue or church, that is your business, and not the government’s business.”

But he didn’t stop there. He went on: “But when you are providing services in the public sphere, say, higher education, or healthcare, or adoption services, and you discriminate or deny equal treatment under the law based on someone’s skin color or ethnicity or gender or sexual orientation, then we have a problem.”

O’Rourke’s understanding of “religious freedom” seems to involve whatever activity is carried on inside a “religious building”—but little else. And even there, the application of freedom is subject to whatever definition of “religious” seems handy. Any American who takes his religious faith seriously should be glad O’Rourke has ended his presidential campaign.

But O’Rourke still has substantial company, both in the electorate at large and in the American judiciary, in telling people that they can’t exercise “sexual orientation discrimination” in hiring, in the sale of products (like wedding cakes), or in providing services (like wedding photography). So it may seem, at first, that O’Rourke is showing a somewhat charitable spirit when he suggests that so long as we keep our discrimination within the walls of our churches, he’ll leave us alone.

But that’s not what O’Rourke said. “We have a problem,” he says, whenever these “religious people” drift over the line and start engaging in activities like “higher education, or healthcare, or adoption services.” He might well have included “publishers of Christian magazines”!

Loss of tax-exempt status isn’t the worst that could happen to faith-based entities. Most of the charitable giving I’m most familiar with is motivated not by a tax deduction but by a love for the mission of the organization. But large donors, especially, appreciate the added clout their gifts enjoy when they are exempt.

Loss of exemption carries other likely threats. Here are three:

- Academic institutions face the possibility of losing accreditation and thus diminished appeal among students, families, and donors.
- Loss of exemption from the IRS may lead to an obligation to pay local property taxes. Institutions with attractive campuses might well face hefty annual bills on this front alone.
- Similar surprises may include sales taxes on a broad variety of products and services that until now have been tax exempt.

Note well that these financially ruinous obligations are not immediately likely. But the fact that Beto O’Rourke can so glibly and dogmatically propose such radical changes, and that both he and some of his colleagues are ready to use IRS exemption as a political weapon—all is cause for appropriate and alert concern.
“The local church is starving for theologically grounded leaders, and Southern is the premier place to train them.”

J.T. English ('14)
Pastor, The Village Church Institute, Dallas, Texas
Racing blazes
Firefighter Giannis Giagos works to contain a wildfire in Santa Paula, Calif., on Nov. 1. Wildfires in California this year have burned about 200,000 acres, destroying hundreds of homes and causing at least three deaths.
NOAH BERGER/AP
The 1991 film *City Slickers*, about a trio of buddies who go on a cattle drive adventure to stave off midlife crises, is mostly fun but offers poignant moments. In one, a main character grieves the mess he’s made of his life back home, which includes adultery and losing his job. Billy Crystal’s character says to his crying friend, “You remember when we were kids, and we were playing ball, and we hit the ball over the fence out of bounds, and we yelled, ‘Do-over’? … Your life is a do-over. You’ve got a clean slate.”

The Washington Post needed a do-over after a headline about the death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Oct. 26. One quick Post headline declared: “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, austere religious scholar at helm of Islamic State, dies at 48.” An editor quickly changed the headline to: “Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, extremist leader of Islamic State, dies at 48.” But many commentators criticized the Post for characterizing al-Baghdadi as anything other than a brutal terrorist. A Post spokesperson said the “austere religious scholar” headline was a mistake.

As leader of ISIS, al-Baghdadi spearheaded a vicious takeover of territories in Iraq and Syria before forces from the United States and other countries retook them. Reports suggest al-Baghdadi personally raped U.S. hostage Kayla Mueller after ISIS soldiers captured her in Syria in 2013. On Oct. 31, ISIS announced Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi is the group’s new leader.

Meanwhile, Britain is getting another Brexit do-over. The European Union (EU) on Oct. 28 granted a three-month extension for the United Kingdom and the EU to agree to terms on the country’s withdrawal. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson had pushed hard for an Oct. 31 Brexit with or without agreed-upon terms. But Parliament blocked his attempt.

After the deadline extension, Parliament gave Johnson a Dec. 12 election he wanted. If enough Brexit-supporting members win seats, they could ratify Johnson’s Brexit deal before Jan. 31. Johnson, who became prime minister after promising an Oct. 31 Brexit, publicly apologized to supporters on Nov. 2 for not coming through. The United Kingdom voted in June 2016 to leave the EU. The original deadline to do so was March 29 of this year.

California residents are tired of evacuation do-overs. By Nov. 3, firefighters had mostly contained several of the fires that menaced the state. But by then, the Kincade fire in Sonoma County had scorched about 78,000 acres and destroyed about 370 structures in its weeklong rampage. Fire crews gained control of several other blazes burning in Southern California. A break in ferocious Santa Ana winds—some gusts clocked in at more than 100 mph—made containment possible. But forecasters were already warning of more high winds and dry conditions in the weeks ahead.

Throughout October, utility companies in California shut off electricity to millions of residents in an effort to stop the fires. Power lines blown by the wind have caused some fires this year, which prompted the blackouts.

The White House continued efforts to black out ongoing impeachment proceedings, telling several Trump administration officials not to testify in closed-door House Intelligence Committee hearings. The White House says it’s not fair that Democrats won’t let White House attorneys sit in on the testimony, while Democrats in the House of Representatives say the decision is their prerogative. Democrats say they’re trying to determine whether earlier this year President Donald Trump withheld military aid to Ukraine in order to pressure its leaders to agree to investigate the business dealings of presidential candidate Joe Biden’s son.
The Trump administration and Republicans have consistently criticized the impeachment hearings because they’ve been closed to the public. On Oct. 31, the House passed a resolution—with a vote of 232-196 along party lines—to begin bringing some of the proceedings out from behind closed doors. The resolution allowed the House Intelligence Committee to release transcripts of testimony thus far. Republicans will also be able to call their own witnesses, though Democrats must approve them.

Meanwhile, the anonymous whistleblower whose report sparked the impeachment movement said through an attorney on Nov. 3 he is willing to answer questions submitted by Republicans. President Donald Trump and some GOP officials have called for the whistleblower, a CIA officer, to testify publicly. Democrats and the officer’s attorneys protest, saying protecting whistleblower anonymity is paramount to rooting out corruption.

Smithsonian magazine needs another shot at a story for its November issue about Che Guevara. The article follows Guevara’s youngest son as he leads tourists on motorcycle tours to pivotal locations of the Cuban Revolution, including his father’s gravesite. The story illustrates what happened to the Communist revolutionary’s family after his 1967 death. But it paints the warlord in mostly sympathetic hues, ignoring the brutality and despotism—including extrajudicial executions and torture that Guevara personally oversaw—the revolution ushered into Cuba.

Christians especially should understand the need for do-overs. Hip-hop artist Kanye West seems to be making the most of a do-over he proclaims after getting “radically saved.” West’s new album, Jesus Is King, is the talk of the entertainment world (see p. 26). The formerly foul-mouthed West landed an album atop the Billboard 200 albums chart for a ninth time. Many Christians are praising West and Jesus Is King, while others criticize. But we can hope the do-over represented by West’s album continues to bear fruit.

The number of prison inmates Oklahoma released on Nov. 4 in a mass commutation meant to reduce jail time for people convicted of low-level, nonviolent crimes.

The approximate amount Georgetown University plans to allocate each year (via fundraising) for community projects benefiting descendants of slaves whom school officials sold in 1838.

The number of Tiger Woods’ career PGA Tour victories after he won the Zozo Championship in Japan on Oct. 28. Woods is now tied with golfer Sam Snead for most PGA Tour titles of all time.

The duration of a direct flight between New York and Sydney that Qantas Airlines is testing. The airline hopes to open the route—the world’s longest—to commercial travel by 2022.

The share of college students who say they’ve experienced nonconsensual sexual contact since enrollment, according to a survey of 33 major schools by the Association of American Universities.
Died
Phillip E. Johnson, a lawyer and early supporter of intelligent design theory, died on Nov. 2 at his home in Berkeley, Calif., at age 79. Johnson taught law at the University of California, Berkeley, for more than three decades and helped to kick-start the modern intelligent design movement with his 1991 book *Darwin on Trial*. Other intelligent design theorists have dubbed him the “godfather” of the movement. He wrote several books on Darwinism and intelligent design and most recently served as a program adviser for the Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture. He was WORLD’s 2003 Daniel of the Year.

Rescued
Rescuers found a woman, missing for days in the Sequoia National Park, after spotting an SOS formed out of rocks. Mary Joanna Gomez, 56, visited Kings Canyon National Park on Oct. 23 and texted her daughter pictures of the scenery, according to the National Park System’s news release. But Gomez did not show up to her next shift at work, and her family alerted San Francisco Police. Rescuers launched a major operation, including search teams, search dogs, and National Guard aircraft. On the Monday after her disappearance, a pilot spotted the SOS she’d made and informed ground teams. Rescuers tracked Gomez down about 3½ miles from her car, where they found her in good health.

Overruled
A Texas judge issued a ruling in a controversial court battle over the custody of a 7-year-old boy. The case became controversial after the mother, Anne Georgulas, claimed the child is a transgender girl and filed a lawsuit against the father, Jeffrey Younger, seeking to force him to treat the boy as such. Younger, in his blog and various media interviews, claimed the mother wanted to medically transition the boy and that he has been fighting her every step of the way. Initially, a jury gave the mother sole custody of the child, but Judge Kim Cooks overruled that decision, ordered joint custody, and said both parents must agree on any medical decisions about the child.

Died
Deaths of homeless people in Los Angeles have doubled since 2013, according to a report issued by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health. The report found that the death rate has increased by one-third during that time, with 536 homeless deaths in 2013 and 1,047 in 2018. The top cause of death was coronary heart disease with drug and alcohol overdoses a major contributing factor. Researchers also calculated that the homeless were dying an average of 22 years earlier than the rest of the population.

Closed
Blaming “a steady decline in enrollment” since 2004, Cincinnati Christian University announced it will cease academic operations on Dec. 31. CCU’s accrediting body, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), had issued the university a show-cause order on July 11, warning that CCU was in danger of losing its accreditation (see “Drowning in red,” Aug. 31, 2019). The university in recent years had changed its focus to athletics, increasing the number of student-athletes and decreasing the number of nonathletes and the number of faculty members.
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A MASKED SOLDIER to Ovidio Guzmán, son of drug lord El Chapo, in a video released by the Mexican government. As Mexican soldiers attempted to arrest Guzmán, the Sinaloa drug cartel began a string of attacks against military families across the city, and the soldiers were forced to release Guzmán several hours later.

‘I think this stands witness to what America does.’

1st Sgt. SEAN RASH of the Idaho Army National Guard on the military service held for a soldier killed 75 years ago in Germany during World War II. The military identified the remains of Army Pfc. Donald E. Mangan last year and had them returned to the United States for burial in a family plot.

‘I’m thankful to be celebrating this with my first beer with these guys.’

JUAN SOTO, outfielder for the Washington Nationals, after the Nationals won the World Series. Soto celebrated a playoff spot and three playoff advancements with sparkling water, but he turned 21 a few days before the Nationals won the World Series.

‘I do get a sense sometimes now among certain young people, and this is accelerated by social media, that the way of me making change is to be as judgmental as possible about other people.’

Former President BARACK OBAMA on the growth of “cancel culture” in social media. “The world is messy,” he said. “There are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids and, you know, share certain things with you.”

‘This is an exceptionally dark day for one community in Northern Ireland, and that’s the community of the unborn.’

JIM ALLISTER, Traditional Unionist Voice leader in Northern Ireland on the ending of protections for unborn babies in the country on Oct. 21.
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SPENDING

DEBT

ISIS LEADERSHIP

al-Baghdadi  Number 2  Number 3

WE were GOING to MONEY you ABOUT the SECRET MISSION to GET al-Baghdadi, BUT you were PROBABLY busy.

LET'S see SUBJECTS in the DISTRICT KNOW ABOUT PLANNED ICE RAIDS.
Carbon equation

It’s probably not what climate change activists had in mind. Saying the company was focused on making “low-carbon investments,” Houston-based Occidental Petroleum proudly announced in October that it had opened its first solar farm. Energy collected at the 120-acre solar farm near Odessa, Texas, will power the company’s high-carbon investments like oil and gas drilling operations in West Texas. The company also said it plans on purchasing solar power to energize other drilling efforts in the Permian Basin.

Seven-hour sale

All but the timeliest lovers of specialty Spam missed out on a pumpkin spice version of the canned pork meat product. Hormel Foods rolled out Pumpkin Spice Spam using its own website as well as Walmart.com. Just seven hours later, the limited-edition Spam sold out, leaving hopeful customers asking Hormel if it planned on making more. Unfortunately for fans, Hormel said it had no plans to make any more of the pumpkin spice meat product.

Intelligence-gathering operation

A Pennsylvania high school is blaming a data breach of a school server on an ongoing water gun battle between students. Officials with the Downingtown Area School District in suburban Philadelphia discovered on Oct. 11 that their system had been hacked for confidential student records. “An attack like this is an attack not only on the school district, but it’s also an attack on our students and their families,” school district official Jennifer Shealy told KYW-TV. But district officials later said the hack was less malicious than originally thought. Apparently students trained in coding had accessed student records including addresses in order to gain an advantage in the “Senior Water Games,” a traditional contest between high-school seniors who try to track fellow students and shoot them with water guns outside of school.

In the zone

Scott Brown of Millcreek, Utah, says he bought his home two years ago for the view of Mount Olympus. “In the evenings you get the alpine glow of the sunset off the peaks,” Brown told KSL. “And in the morning, you get the sunrise.” But in September, Brown said, he noticed a new construction going up just feet away from his home. By October his view of the 9,026-foot mountain was obstructed by a blue 37-foot warehouse that shouldn’t be there. Millcreek Planning Director Francis Lilly apologized on Facebook and called the approval of the warehouse a zoning error. But there’s not much she can do now, she said. Brown said the blue monstrosity has kept him off his back porch, and, though it’s tempting to move, “nobody says, ‘I want to buy that house,’ because there’s a giant warehouse behind it.”
Flood drivers

One British motorist had a simple explanation for accidentally driving into a flood: He forgot he was driving a van rather than piloting his boat. Firefighters near Leicester, U.K., used an inflatable raft to reach the unidentified motorist stranded in a flooded street on Oct. 15. But that driver wasn’t the only one confused. Two separate Mercedes drivers had to be pulled from the waters, prompting a local flood warden to muse on Twitter, “I sometimes think, ‘Why do I bother advising drivers when they think ‘I know better?’”

Eating out in California

Something new is on the menu for Golden State residents. California Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a bill into law that will permit residents to pick up and eat roadkill from California highways. The bill, sponsored by Democratic state Sen. Bob Archuleta, who represents parts of Los Angeles County, will go into effect in 2021. According to the new law, drivers who strike or find downed deer, elk, antelopes, or wild pigs will be able to apply for a “wildlife salvage permit” through a mobile app and take the meat home. The law specifically excludes roadkill reclamation on interstate highways and will allow certain counties to opt out of the program.

Off the wall

San Francisco police are looking for a bold thief who walked into a Bay Area art gallery and walked out holding an original by a Spanish surrealist master. Police say the person walked into Dennis Rae Fine Art on Oct. 13 while the gallery was open and the gallery’s owner was present. Security footage showed the thief walking away carrying a frame containing Salvador Dalí’s artwork titled Surrealistic Bullfight: Burning Giraffe, a painting the Spanish artist finished in 1967. A gallery official, who valued the artwork at $20,000, said the thief simply took the painting off the wall.

Breaking and re-entering

Four inmates of a Texas federal prison were captured by authorities outside Beaumont Federal Correctional Institution in Southeast Texas. But they weren’t breaking out of the prison; they were sneaking back in after escaping and gathering contraband. Jefferson County sheriff’s deputies and U.S. marshals caught the four inmates of the low- and medium-security prison complex cutting through a nearby ranch. According to prison officials, escapes and reentries had become routine at the prison, and an investigation turned up contraband whiskey and cell phones smuggled in by inmates who had escaped and then returned.

Dead on arrival

A Kenyan Cabinet official is facing questions after making an unusual appointment to a government body. On Oct. 17, Kenyan Ministry of Information and Communications Secretary Joseph Mucheru reappointed Robert Kochalle to a seat on the Kenya Film Classification Board for another three-year term. The problem: Kochalle died on May 29, 2018. At the time, the Film Classification Board put out a death notice and published a memorial. On Twitter, Mucheru ally and Film Classification Board President Ezekiel Mutua claimed that criticism of Mucheru was unwarranted. “Small issue being blown out of proportion,” he said.
When my husband and I married, after a two-month courtship, I didn’t know how to cook. Some experience with baking constituted my home-ec résumé, but man does not live on cookies alone (as much as my man would have liked to). As we were both enrolled in college, he insisted I sign up for a noncredit cooking class, an idea that would never have occurred to me. His instinct for self-preservation might have prompted the suggestion, but in practical terms, that was the best class I ever took—much preferable to food poisoning.

My first kitchen was smaller than the average walk-in closet, with an 18-inch-square gas oven and a homemade countertop. Starting with that, I produced at least one meal per day, seven days a week. My prowess expanded to two meals per day once we had kids, and three meals after we started homeschooling them.

Three meals at home every day might have been a rarity then, but even more so now. The decline in families eating dinner together—less than 50 percent on a regular basis—naturally corresponds with the decline in families. But even happily married couples with well-adjusted children sit down to a meal much less often than they did 50 years ago. An Atlantic article titled “How Americans Lost Dinner” blames fractured schedules and less time at home for much of the loss. Less time; more take-out. Millennials who eagerly signed up for meal-kit services like Blue Apron found that it took too much time to unpack the box, cook, and clean up. Or even to remember to collect the box. “Right now,” the article begins, “a box of food from a meal-kit company is probably moldering in my apartment building’s mail room.”

Lack of know-how has also added to dinner’s demise. I suspect young adults generally know less than I did about food prep, in spite of proliferating cooking shows and how-to videos on YouTube. In time, scratch cooking may become a niche field left largely to the “experts.”

With everything else Americans are threatened with losing, like freedom of speech and religious liberty, “losing dinner” seems the least of our worries. Still, we miss it. Spooning mac and cheese out of the saucepan directly into one’s mouth while standing by the stove may be efficient, but it strikes most of us as slightly barbaric. No other creature invests the necessity of eating with something like ceremony. Whether “dressing for dinner” Downton Abbey style, or setting the table for soup and a sandwich, humans tend to give meals an importance beyond consuming calories.

In his 1969 book, Chance or the Dance? A Critique of Modern Secularism, Thomas Howard contrasts the “old myth,” or religious worldview, with the new: The old “saw the world as image; the new sees it as a chance concatenation [linkage] of physical events.” In other words, to a believer, everything in the world speaks of something beyond it, even a practice as mundane and necessary as eating. To a secularist, “nothing means anything” unless you want it to.

The Bible cloaks mealtimes with significance, from the elaborate ritual of Passover to a picnic on the beach with the resurrected Christ. Pilgrims to Old Testament Jerusalem could look forward to the fellowship offering, when, in addition to the sacrificial animal, families were invited to bring “whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household” (Deuteronomy 14:26). Passing around the goat kebabs reminded the Lord’s people of His blessings. Passing around bread and wine during communion service not only commemorates the Lamb of God but also anticipates His wedding feast (Revelation 19:7-9).

Websites like TheFamilyDinnerProject.org list the scientifically proven benefits of families eating together, from higher self-esteem to lower obesity. Those benefits are embedded not in the meal itself but in the importance the family gives to the meal—the ceremony of preparation and table setting and sitting down together and giving thanks. Ritual connects us to the image of the forever, not just on special days like Thanksgiving, but every ordinary day of our extraordinary lives.
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Nothing is more satisfying than a good superhero origin story. And the tale of how the slave Araminta “Minty” Ross became American freedom fighter Harriet Tubman is more than a welcome change of pace from fictional caped crusaders.

While there have been several television specials about Tubman, the famed conductor of the Underground Railroad has never been the subject of a feature-length movie—something to the film industry’s shame. We may wish, now that we have one, that it was a little less conventional and a little more imaginative in telling her story. But there’s no question it does justice to Tubman and the faith that motivated her.

Beautifully staged and tremendously acted, the PG-13 *Harriet* provides fascinating (though awful) legal details on slavery as an institution. How it was enforced through violence has been explored in numerous other films, sometimes to the point of seeming to revel in it. While it’s important not to turn away from the bloody reality, it can also make the perpetrators of that evil seem like far different creatures from us. We can safely judge their wickedness because we see so little of ourselves in it.

*Harriet*, in contrast, explores the banal, daily
pragmatism that allowed the practice to persist for so long. This isn’t the snarling, mustache-twirling villainy of Leonardo DiCaprio in Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*. Instead we see self-justification grounded in ledger books and family finances. Tubman’s oppressors deny both her moral and legal claim to freedom for the most uncomfortably relatable of reasons—the desire to keep up appearances and maintain their standard of living.

The film does an equally fine job depicting the Christian faith that shaped Tubman’s life and motivated her actions. When she was a child, an overseer struck her on the head with a 2-pound lead weight. Along with other ailments, it caused Tubman to suffer from lifelong bouts of narcolepsy. During these periodic dazes, she would see what she believed were visions from God. Some Christian viewers may feel uncomfortable with the mystical way the movie characterizes these dreams. One scene, in particular, has a bit of a “Luke using the force” feeling. But could God use the physiological symptoms of Tubman’s brain trauma for His purposes? Certainly. And there’s no doubt that Tubman believed that’s what was happening. But whether it was audibly supernatural guidance or God simply using her natural intellect providentially to order her steps, the number of times Tubman manages to escape danger and circumvent her enemies is near miraculous.

This is far from the only representation of Christianity in *Harriet*. Her father’s example of trusting the God of the Bible inspires Tubman to take risks in faith. And she can only rise to claim the nickname Moses because her family’s minister helps her flee to the North. Though she can’t read, her fervent prayer life is a clear source for her courage.

Tubman’s life was so extraordinary, some of the most riveting facts about it are told only in postscript. What a crime to see her exploits as a spy for the Union Army during the Civil War covered by a quick placard. Or her work in the suffrage movement. Or her late-in-life romance with her much-younger husband. All of which argues—if Captain America, Spider-Man, and Wonder Woman all merit a multitude of sequels, surely, so does the daring adventurer who, in her own words, “Never ran her train off the track and never lost a passenger.”

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**Waves**

In *Waves*, writer-director Trey Edward Shults’ latest feature, characters suffer tragedy caused by little sins that compound. The film shows a family overcoming darkness through forgiveness, but objectionable material—and a negative portrayal of the pro-life cause—makes this Oscar contender difficult to recommend.

The story follows an upper-class, churchgoing African American family headed by a demanding but loving father (Sterling K. Brown) and hardworking mother (Renée Elise Goldsberry). The family includes a daughter, Emily (Taylor Russell), and a son, Tyler (Kelvin Harrison Jr.), a star high-school wrestler. At 135 minutes, *Waves* acts like two films—the first dealing with Tyler and the family’s decline into a horrific tragedy, the second dealing with Emily’s search for redemption. Neither story-line shies from depicting the teenage characters’ depravity: The film is rated R for drug use, underage drinking, sex, violence, and pervasive foul language.

When Tyler’s girlfriend Alexis (Alexa Demie) becomes pregnant, Tyler drives her to an abortion center. There, the film depicts the worst liberal stereotype of pro-life protesters, complete with angry chanting and graphic posters of aborted babies. Never once does the film show compassionate pro-life individuals.

Nevertheless, Alexis chooses life for her baby. And surprisingly, she does so using a pro-abortion argument: “This is my body,” she says.

The entire family’s sins contribute to Tyler’s downfall, but faith—of a sort—provides the family’s only hope. We see Tyler turn to prayer at his lowest point. Meanwhile, Emily hints at belief in a form of universalism. Other characters turn for wisdom to Scriptures such as Proverbs 10:12: “Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.”

The portrayal of a family choosing reconciliation over division provides moments of hope and points to Christ’s redemption. However, the overload of human depravity on display will chase potential viewers away.

—by RIKKI ELIZABETH STINNETTE

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**BOX OFFICE TOP 10 FOR THE WEEKEND OF NOV. 1-3**

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*Reviewed by WORLD*
Movie

Last Christmas

Among the many genres that have suffered in our age of superhero domination, perhaps none has been harder hit than the romantic comedy. If anyone can bring holiday romance back to the big screen in a big way, however, it’s screenwriter/actress Emma Thompson. In her latest, Last Christmas (rated PG-13 for language), Thompson steals every scene she’s in as the domineering, immigrant mother of the lovely but self-destructive Kate (Emilia Clarke).

We learn that Kate is promiscuous from the morning-after effects of her behavior, but the movie portrays this as all of a piece with her other bad choices, like drinking to excess and treating her friends and family with selfish disregard. Then she meets Tom (Henry Golding), who teaches her that finding true love isn’t the most important thing in life. Rather, it’s to give of yourself to others. Rather it’s to give of yourself to others. And no one, not even a xenophobic ranter, is ultimately left out in the cold.

Some viewers will dislike a late twist in the story. But thankfully it does nothing to subtract from the overall feeling Last Christmas leaves us with—goodwill toward men. —by MEGAN BASHAM

Documentary

Spitfire

A single-propeller Spitfire loops and soars over the green British countryside, its pilot reveling in the craft’s liveliness. Spitfire, a documentary available on Netflix, tells the tale of the last of the fighter planes without a jet engine, a plane that became a symbol of British courage during the Second World War.

By 1940, the Nazi war machine had conquered nearly all of Europe. Adolf Hitler set his sights on the British Isles, and rather than launch an immediate invasion, the German dictator relied on the powerful Luftwaffe and its thousands of bombers and fighters to soften up resistance.

Airplane manufacturer Supermarine had developed a fast, powerful, and responsive fighter plane, the Spitfire. With a unique wing shape, a Rolls-Royce engine, and a narrow fuselage, it became an instant favorite of the Royal Air Force. British pilots were outnumbered 4 to 1 in 1940, although they had the advantage of radar technology.

The documentary lets veteran pilots tell most of the story. From the vantage point of their advancing years, they look back with amazement on the exploits of their late teens and early 20s, shaking their heads at their own youthful courage and naiveté. They describe the intense fear of every mission, when sweat poured down over their eyes and faces as they saw enemy planes all around. Some recall their prayers as they fought. They lost close friends and comrades, and the memories remain near the surface all these decades later. (A few instances of profanity dot the TV-14 film.)

After months of intense aerial fighting, the pilots won the Battle of Britain and the nation lived to fight on. The Spitfire saw 24 different iterations during the war years, becoming more powerful, able to chase and shoot down the hated German V-1 rocket missiles. By the end of the war, jet engines made the Spitfire less relevant. But the plane remains today a powerful reminder of when the freedom of the Western world hung in the balance. —by MARTY VANDRIEL
Immigrants and others
A LOOK AT THE CHURCH’S HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE by Marvin Olasky


For decades Baptists and Presbyterians were “particularly active at the southern border, establishing churches and services for primarily Mexican immigrants” who went back and forth across the border and would sometimes “share their newfound Protestant faith with others upon return to Mexico.” Many Chinese immigrants also returned to their homes after several years in America, so B.W. Johnson, editor of The Evangelist, did not want to “prevent them from coming to our shores. The Christian should hail [Chinese immigration] as a means of carrying out the mission of his savior and sending the gospel to China.”

Attitudes varied by ideology and denomination: “Liberals of the Social Gospel variety were often supportive of immigration restrictions, while conservative Baptists often favored increased immigration,” as did others who emphasized evangelism. Some Christians emphasized “Americanization through Evangelization,” but conservative Presbyterian leader J. Gresham Machen waxed sarcastic about attempts “to proceed against the immigrants now with a Bible in one hand and a club in the other... That is what is sometimes meant by ‘Christian Americanization.’”

Both the National Association of Evangelicals and the Assemblies of God in 1981 pushed congregations to sponsor refugee families and passed resolutions emphasizing “the Christian and moral obligation to respond positively” to refugees, in part because they “represent a very responsive people to the gospel.” In recent years the tide has turned, with many leaders supporting travel bans and strict immigration limits.

BOOKMARKS

The Other Press publishes books off the beaten track. Theodor Kalifiatidis’ The Siege of Troy, translated from Swedish (2018), is a lovely little novel of a teacher and students hiding in a cave from bombs in German-occupied Greece during World War II: She calms their fears and captivates their minds by telling them the story of The Iliad. Peter Stamm’s Agnes (translated from German) is a haunting tale of modern alienation, with intimations of sex and abortion. Ahmet Altan’s I Will Never See the World Again (translated from Turkish) is the moving memoir of an imprisoned writer.

Hitler by Brendan Simms (Basic, 2019) brings 700 pages to bear on the question debated for decades: What made Adolf Hitler tick? Simms quotes Hitler’s statements that he “acted in the world as a representative of the ‘have-nots.’” His primary foes were capitalists, particularly British and American ones, and he portrayed Germany as a “socialist people’s state” opposed to “global high finance,” in which German Jews were involved.

I’ve long contended that placing socialists on the left but national socialists (Nazis) on the right is a device to leave liberals in the middle, and a mistaken charting. Both kinds of socialists want more centralization: The difference is that socialists want government ownership of industries and Nazis are satisfied with governmental control of them by terrorizing their owners.

Donald Whitney’s How Can I Be Sure I’m a Christian? (NavPress, 2019) notes that assurance lies not in our works but in Christ’s finished work. The associate dean of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary shows we should not expect perfection but should be able to answer this question positively: “Over the past few years, has it been your habit to do what is right more and more and to sin less?” Whitney writes that neither financial success nor perfectionism is an indication of blessing: “People with false assurance are either legalistic or loose.” He notes, “Concern about your inability to live up to God’s standards is also a good sign. Don’t be so stringent and ruthless in your self-examination that you lose sight of the Cross and the power of Jesus to save sinners.”

Mez McConnell’s The Creaking on the Stairs: Finding Faith in God Through Childhood Abuse (Christian Focus, 2019) is a great book to give those who suffered greatly as children and are far from God. —M.O.
Books for mothers
reviewed by Mary Jackson

MAMA BEAR APOLOGETICS
Ed. Hillary Morgan Ferrer
This book asserts that parents—not the church—have the primary responsibility to train their children how to think Biblically. The authors seek to harness mothers’ protective instincts (since they often spend the most time with their kids) by equipping them to address the cultural lies their kids encounter in worldviews like self-helpism, naturalism, postmodernism, and pluralism. A “Mama Bear” apologist is able to discern the good and bad; present a Biblical perspective; and reinforce with discussion, discipleship, and prayer. Each chapter ends with prayer points and discussion questions.

AFRAID OF ALL THE THINGS Scarlett Hiltibidal
Fear gripped Hiltibidal as a young girl when her parents divorced and her security evaporated. As she aged, it included everything from her appendix bursting to tornadoes, cancer, and home security. She writes with humor, honesty, and a unique perspective as the daughter of a Saturday Night Live cast member and adoptee of a SWAT cop and, later, a pastor’s wife and adoptive mother to a deaf girl from China. As she better understood the gospel, she realized she couldn’t fix or protect herself and began to overcome her anxiety: “Fear is still here, but it is defeated.”

THE BRAVE LEARNER Julie Bogart
Most parents want their children to love learning, but they stick closely to traditional methods of measurement, such as grade levels. Bogart, a veteran homeschooling mother of five, thinks this is problematic. She encourages mothers to add “enchantment”—surprise, mystery, intrigue, and adventure—to their homeschool routines. The book gives helpful tips about altering the home environment and family practices to facilitate more connections and enjoyable learning experiences. It also represents a growing emphasis on child-directed learning within the homeschool movement: As children get older, parents in their role as educators should be “collaborators,” not dictators.

THE BURDEN IS LIGHT Jon Tyson
Culture pressures us to perform, achieve, and accumulate: One Manhattan mother told Tyson and his wife that their son would be disadvantaged if they put him into the wrong kindergarten. But this book urges readers to consider the wonder of God’s grace. It contrasts the world’s tyranny of comparison, competition, control, cursing, complacency, judgment, pride, and distraction with the freedom of calling, compassion, surrender, blessing, passion, mercy, humility, and presence. Tyson challenges readers to live “the way that produces the fruit of the Spirit … and the fruit of the kingdom as a preview of the life to come.”

AFTERWORD
In Until Every Child Is Home (Moody Publishers, 2019), Todd Chipman relates his own experience as an adopted child, a pastor, and a father of two adopted daughters from the foster system. He says orphan care is essential for Christians not only because the Bible mandates it, but for its transformative work in believers and local congregations. The book includes narratives from evangelical leaders and adoptive parents like Russell Moore, Rosaria Butterfield, and David Platt, whose stories illustrate specific areas of growth they and their local churches experienced through orphan care.

Discussion questions following each chapter are conducive to group study. Chipman provides a rich theological framework for those called to foster care and adoption, showing how it unifies ministries, cultures, and races—and disrupts the sex-trafficking pipeline. He challenges pastors to lead the way, calling orphan care “an opportunity to exemplify the gospel for their congregations and to the world.”

— M.J.
SOCIAL SKILLS ACTIVITIES FOR KIDS
Natasha Daniels
For some kids, making friends comes easily. Other kids excel at listening or discerning how people are feeling. In seven chapters, Daniels covers a variety of social skills and settings, providing prompts, exercises, and SO activities to help children build confidence and learn how to handle the intricacies of relating to others. As children gain these social skill “superpowers,” they also learn character traits like deference, compassion, discernment, and kindness. Daniels writes with lighthearted humor and includes lots of fill-in-the-blanks that invite children to become active participants and add their own flavor to the discussion. (Ages 6-12)

GROWN-UPS NEVER DO THAT
Davide Cali & Benjamin Chaud
Even though parents ought to teach their children manners, any kid knows parents break the rules, too. This picture book presents a comical look at what is all too true: Grown-ups make mistakes, complain, lose their temper, burp, interrupt, waste time—the list goes on. Parents and children will laugh together as colorful illustrations contradict the book’s 23 dubious and irony-laden claims, ending with, “Adults are always good. So you really should be just like them.” Beyond the humor, the book may foster disrespect, but it could provide an opportunity for parents to talk about the ways they and other adults fall short and why young and old need the gospel. (Ages 5-8)

CONNOISSEUR KIDS Jennifer L. Scott
Scott, author of the Madame Chic books, wants to help kids become “experts in the art of living.” This book covers a wide range of topics including etiquette, manners, tidiness, hygiene, and health. With charming illustrations throughout, each chapter includes brief explanations and admonishments. Activities, rhymes, DIY crafts, and games help kids practice what they learn. Tidbits like dinnertime conversation starters, homemade wrapping paper ideas, and recipes for snacks, stain remover, slime, and house spray add fun and flavor kids will appreciate. Scott also emphasizes selflessness, reminding children, “Thinking of others and how you can help them doesn’t come as naturally.” (Ages 6-12)

365 MANNERS KIDS SHOULD KNOW Sheryl Eberly
This book gives parents a comprehensive guide to manners, covering everything from telephone talk, gender-specific etiquette, introductions, and internet safety. The short lessons are intended for daily reading with simple follow-through activities. Originally published in 2001, the updated version includes sections on technology and digital communication penned by Eberly’s daughter, Caroline Eberly. Parents might want to alter or elaborate on topics like inappropriate touch, dating, and social media usage. The book is already outdated without discussion of popular apps like Instagram and Snapchat, but it refreshingly upholds traditional practices such as young men holding the door for others. (Ages 8-15)

AFTERWORD
VeggieTales co-creator Phil Vischer is passionate about Biblical literacy, a desire evidenced in his popular What’s in the Bible? video series and now his first children’s Bible, the Laugh and Learn Bible for Kids (Hachette Book Group, 2019). Vischer wrote it to “make the entire flow of Scripture accessible” to kids and to help them see they have a part in the most epic story.

Like Vischer’s other funny and lovable characters, this book uses humor, good storytelling, and language children can relate to while giving them a better understanding of the Biblical narrative. Its 52 five-minute stories, geared for ages 5-8, span Genesis to Revelation. Each colorfully illustrated story points to “God’s rescue plan and the good news of Jesus’ love” and ends with opportunities for families to connect with questions called “tricky bits,” talking and prayer points, and fun facts. —M.J.
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Brian Miller, former inspector general of the U.S. General Services Administration, is one of Those Who Dared: 30 Officials Who Stood Up for Our Country, according to a report from Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. Miller graduated from Temple University on a wrestling scholarship and from Westminster Theological Seminary and the University of Texas School of Law. He is now special assistant and senior counsel to President Donald Trump, but those doings are confidential.

What is the General Services Administration? The GSA is one of the largest federal agencies you’ve probably never heard of, because it works behind the scenes. It handles federal property. It’s the federal landlord. It also buys things for the federal government, so it’s a procurement agency.

What does an inspector general do? An inspector general tries to root out fraud, waste, and abuse in federal programs and make them more efficient and effective. There are 73 inspectors general, one for each federal agency. President Bush appointed me and the Senate confirmed me in 2005.

Do IGs try to avoid publicity? Yes, except to the extent that publicity can deter others. Many times we’ll investigate misconduct and we want to deter others from doing the same, so we will send out a press release.

One time you did not go running toward the cameras, but the cameras came running toward you. Indeed. We investigated a conference the GSA had in Las Vegas in 2010. Millions of dollars, little value, except as an opportunity for GSA officials to encourage one another. They had, for example, a contest as to who had a lot of talent. GSA officials on GSA government time were singing, and the first-place song bragged about never being under investigation. The irony: They were under investigation and didn’t know it.

“America’s Got Talent”? Yes, the winners kidded about not being subject to pay caps and bonus caps. To give you an example of how wasteful it was, GSA officials eight times visited Las Vegas to determine where to have the conference.

Eight visits? Eight visits. GSA officials stayed at every big resort in Las Vegas on separate occasions to determine which had the best rooms and food. They had parties at night in two-story loft suites. They ordered room service at room service prices to feed the guests, all at taxpayer expense. One of the dinners cost more than $100 each. A mind reader and clowns performed. That story captured the imagination of the media and Congress. I testified six times in two weeks about the conference.

I looked at the records: four days, 300 government employees, $146,000 for food, including $7,000 in sushi, along with a $19 per person American artisan cheese display. You found the session with a mind reader cost $3,200. Yes.

So they had minds to waste. Indeed. Four hundred dollars for rented tuxedos. Yes, tuxedos for the people giving the awards and receiving the awards.

How about $75,000 for the team-building exercise, which was building bicycles? That was one of them. They had another one where they blew bubbles through tubes.

The goal of blowing bubbles through tubes was … Team building. I’d like to say my team building was working on computers is a good way to build rapport. But at the Las Vegas conference, what was the clown for? The clown was part of a training video. I didn’t put the photo in the final report because it had plenty of other information, but Congress and the White House requested more, so we sent pictures of the clown. They ended
up in the media along with pictures of the mind reader.

**Did anyone go to jail?** The person who organized the conference also arranged to have a trip to Saipan. He went snorkeling at various places with his wife, all at government expense. He eventually pleaded guilty and served, I believe, eight months in a federal correctional institution.

Margaret Thatcher said, “The problem with socialism is that eventually you run out of other people’s money.”

**How swampy is the Washington swamp?** It’s swampy. The growing administrative state tends to steamroll enumerated powers and separation of powers—but inspectors general determine whether fraud has been committed against the government, and to work in that area is honorable. You can avoid the swamp if you’re aware and stay away from political agendas.

**Is the work of inspectors general somewhat like playing Whac-A-Mole, where you hit one mole and another pops up?** It’s a lot like that. The General Services Administration had 12,000 employees, so any town with 12,000 people will have people doing stupid things and criminal things. Every town has a jail.

When so much power and money is sloshing around in Washington, is corruption inevitable? When I was asked why there are always scandals at GSA, I gave them the same answer the bank robber gave: That’s where the money is, and a lot of it flows through GSA.

**You were special counsel on healthcare fraud for the deputy attorney general. What was your most interesting case there?** A case against TAP Pharmaceuticals where a drug company gave kickbacks if doctors would prescribe certain prescriptions.

**Stories keep coming up about healthcare fraud. Will healthcare now, with so many billions of dollars sloshing around, always be a game of Whac-A-Mole?** There’s always the incentive to maximize your reimbursement from the federal government. If you’re a healthcare provider, you want to get paid for the work that you actually did. We want to make sure you don’t get paid for more than what you did. There are lots of judgment calls in the billing. Regulations have gotten so complicated that it’s hard to follow all the regulations in precisely the way the government has prescribed.

**From your experience of seeing the corruption involved, any advice on what we should do?** Make sure rules are clear and people understand what they are and how to follow them. Then make sure they’re followed.

**Easier said than done.** Agreed.

**Looking at other aspects of your background: How did you salvage a major drug case when the local U.S. Attorney’s Office was disqualified?** Things go wrong in all aspects of government, including law enforcement. The conviction of one of West Virginia’s biggest drug dealers was a big victory. Then it turns out the lead detective was having a sexual relationship with the wife of the drug kingpin who was convicted. The wife had not passed a polygraph, and somehow the results got lost. The assistant U.S. attorney did not know she had failed the polygraph, so she reached a very nice plea deal resolving her potential liability. The proceeds of drug deals were in baggies buried in the yard, and when they dug up a bunch, there was a discrepancy in the amount of money reported. The Department of Justice asked me to lead a team of assistant U.S. attorneys to see if we could salvage the conviction of the drug dealer. We impaneled a grand jury, heard testimony, and talked to individuals. We were able to add charges like perjury, and some pleaded guilty to obstructing justice.

Some people have proposed moving the 73 federal inspectors general out from under their agencies and into an independent agency that would become an extension of Congress. Bad idea? Inspectors general have to have a degree of independence to do their work. If you’re reporting to the Congress in that fashion, your independence is jeopardized.
Audacious and good
KANYE WEST USES HIS UNDENIABLE TALENT WELL WITH JESUS IS KING
by Arsenio Orteza

“Everybody wanted Yandhi. / Then Jesus Christ did the laundry.”

So raps Kanye West in “Selah,” one of 11 tracks from his new album, Jesus Is King (Getting Out Our Dreams II/Def Jam). Perhaps you’ve heard of it. It’s only the most talked-about (and written-about) album of the year so far.

And the Yandhi that “everybody wanted”? It’s the album that Jesus Is King almost was. Initially scheduled for release in September 2018, it fell victim to West’s infamous procrastination, during which time West, in his own words, got “radically saved” and let the author of his newfound faith put Yandhi through the wash cycle.

(And, yes, based on the version that leaked earlier this year, there was plenty to launder.) Jesus Is King is the result.

Leave aside for the moment whether Jesus Is King is any good and simply savor the fact that, thanks to West, the expression “Jesus is King” is now on the lips of anyone conversant with pop culture and will probably remain there until some other social-media superstar achieves mega-meme status by going rogue vis-à-vis the dominant narrative. Even people who hate the music or the message (or both) of Jesus Is King won’t be able to say that they hate Jesus Is King without saying “Jesus is King.” Strictly in terms of Top 10 album titles doing double duty as (for lack of a better term) passive-aggressive evangelism, Jesus Is King sure beats Slow Train Coming.

And, still leaving aside whether Jesus Is King is any good, savor its audacity. In addition to being an unabashed gospel album made by a (formerly) foul-mouthed rapper and member (by marriage) of the Kardashian family, it’s also a beats-savvy hip-hop album that’s home to a mellow, acoustic-guitar-accompanied funny-yet-serious love song—to (drumroll please) Chick-fil-A restaurants.

That’s not the funny part. The funny part is that West doesn’t love Chick-fil-A for its sandwiches or waffle fries but for its lemonade (!) and for its Sabbath-observing policy of staying “Closed on Sunday.” (That’s the serious part.) While some songwriters think outside the box, West denies the box’s existence altogether.

There are other not-very-hip-hop tracks as well, including the first one, “Every Hour,” a 1-minute, 52-second gospel-choir explosion courtesy of West’s own Sunday Service ensemble. “Water” follows six songs later, its subject’s spiritual symbolism and the 14 one-line prayers to Jesus that West offers up midsong buoyed by aqueous, billowing synthesizers. “Jesus Is Lord,” in which West sings a paraphrase of Philippians 2:10-11 for 49 glorious seconds, brings the album to a worshipful close.

Still leaving aside whether Jesus Is King is any good, savor the fact that, thanks to West, the expression “Jesus is King” is now on the lips of anyone conversant with pop culture and will probably remain there until some other social-media superstar achieves mega-meme status by going rogue vis-à-vis the dominant narrative. (which West would like to see amended), the paranoia about Christians judging West hastily, and the line dissing “religion,” which could portend some risky theological free-styling down the road. For the most part, however, he charts and sticks to a straight-and-narrow course.

The tragedy of West’s output until now has been his symbiotic attachment to lyrics all too deserving of the parental-warning label. But there was never any denying his gift for whipping beats, melodies, and samples into a sumptuous hip-hop blend. He is, in other words, someone to whom much has been given and from whom therefore much will be required.

Consider Jesus Is King a thrilling first deposit in his new account. ©
**FOLK MUSIC OF CHINA, VOL. 2 Various artists**

Like the similarly estimable *Folk Music of China, Vol. 1* (subtitle: *Folk Songs of Qinghai and Gansu*), this multi-vocalist collection presents recent a cappella recordings of songs from the Chinese public domain (subtitle: *Folk Songs of Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang*). But whereas the keys to appreciating Vol. 1 were the hilarious routines of Guo Jianming and Guo Changhui, this volume’s Rosetta Stone is Nei Shumei’s yearningly soulful “In Retrospect.” You won’t understand the lyrics, but play it a dozen times and you’ll know exactly what it means.

**CIRCLE LINE Lautten Compagney**

This 13-member Berlin ensemble won’t convince everyone of its latest album’s thesis—that the music of the 20th-century avant-gardists Philip Glass, Steve Reich, John Cage, Meredith Monk, and Wim Mertens has roots in the predominantly sacred music of the 15th-century composer Guillaume Dufay. But give the company’s director, Wolfgang Katschner, this much: He has chosen pieces that serve as mutual and uncommonly euphonious foils and sequenced them for maximum flow. One would never guess that in other contexts minimalism sometimes comes across as dull.

**HEIRLOOMS The TENG Ensemble**

According to the TENG Company’s director Samuel Wong, one of the purposes of these pieces and the Forefathers Project of which they’re a part is to “put a fresh spin on” Singaporean folk melodies. How fresh, you ask? A bona fide trance-music throb runs throughout the aptly named “Contemporary.” Mainly, though, it’s traditional instruments or their descendants making the past-present connections. “Hang Gai” moves with playful, feline grace. The florescent “Remembering” begins and ends in evanescence. Would requesting a follow-up be asking too much?

**MORTON FELDMAN: PIANO Philip Thomas**

One way to get at the otherness of Feldman’s radically unconventional piano music as replicated on these five-hour-plus discs is to think of it as the “note music” analogue of “language poetry.” Another way: Using your favorite audio-editing software, chop the 90-minute “Triadic Memories” into five 15-minute segments, layer them atop each other, export them as a single file, and hit “play.” Vistas unthinkable in Feldman’s lifetime, and quite possibly at odds with anything that Feldman himself would have ever approved, unfold.

**ENCORE**

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, critics began singling out the compositions of the Georgia-born composer Giya Kancheli as prime examples of the musical riches that the Iron Curtain had been keeping from the free world. “Now comes a man,” wrote Michael Walsh in *Time* magazine, “who may well be the most important composer to emerge from the old Soviet Union since Dmitri Shostakovich.” Kancheli, 59 at the time (and, according to Walsh, a “devout Orthodox Christian”), would still have a quarter century to go.

Kancheli died in October. And, ironically, given his reputation for large-scale compositions characterized by only partially resolved internal conflicts, the latest recordings of his works focus on his sweet, nostalgic violin-and-piano miniatures: Mariya Nesterovska and Nenad Lečić’s *18 Miniatures for Violin and Piano* (Cioccapri) and Frédéric Bednarz, Jonathan Goldman, and Natsuki Hiratsuka’s *Sunny Night* (Metis Island). Their considerable overlap notwithstanding, they complement each other and eulogize Kancheli simultaneously.

—A.O.
American Steve Gumaer had only been in Syria for hours when he learned 138 more families had arrived with no place to stay. The residents from the town of Tel Tamer fled Turkish bombardments, piling into open-bed trucks for a 40-mile trip that could mean the difference between life and death.

Gumaer, president of Partners Relief & Development, leads one of a handful of NGOs on hand to receive the displaced amid a sudden humanitarian crisis. An estimated 300,000 Syrians have been forced from their homes by the Turkish invasion of northeast Syria that began shortly after President Donald Trump announced a U.S. withdrawal Oct. 6.

Many of those fleeing have nowhere to go. The UN rejected one proposal to set up a temporary camp in Hasakah, where Gumaer’s operations are based. Options along with resources are scarce in a country at war for eight years.

Gumaer and his team found the families in a park, the women sleeping in a long, hastily made tent with their children. The men gathered further away. “We gave them blankets and pads to sleep on,” said Gumaer. “It’s a huge challenge to know what else to do.”

Large grain elevators on the way into Hasakah signal it once was the breadbasket of Syria. Now it’s taking the brunt of forced displacement from Turkey’s monthlong campaign to create a “safe zone” inside Syria. At least 180,000 Syrians have fled there, doubling the city’s size.

At a meeting with Gumaer and other aid and church leaders, local officials agreed to close Hasakah’s 68 schools to convert them into shelters. Partners already was running emergency kitchens out of 65 of the schools, so Gumaer leveraged contacts with teachers and administrators to convert classrooms into bedrooms and living spaces.

“We have 270 volunteers,” Gumaer told me, nearly all of them locals whose lives also have been upended by weeks of Turkish incursions. Yet they went to work, clearing space and rearranging furniture.

Partners has worked in Iraq and among the Rohingya in Myanmar, but this crisis is unlike other, much larger ones, because the workers are so few. International aid agencies and government agencies normally on the scene are staying away from a chaotic, dangerous landscape.

Turkish forces have deployed drones to attack civilian areas, despite a cease-fire agreement, plus they have attacked outside their agreed-to buffer zone, where the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) still have control.

President Donald Trump initially ordered the withdrawal of 100 U.S. soldiers embedded with the SDF at border positions, then a few days later ordered withdrawal of the entire U.S. contingent (about 1,000 troops), and in late October reversed that decision, sending U.S. troops back to secure oil fields.

As Turkish forces arrive, Syrian forces are moving north to take positions opposite them, Kurdish forces remain, and U.S. convoys can be seen moving in every direction. Yet none of the key players have a plan for protecting civilians—leaving that to volunteers from Kurdish groups, local churches, and NGOs like Gumaer’s.

One came under deadly fire Nov. 3, when a Turkish mortar killed Free Burma Rangers medic Zau Seng. Seng was part of a team that for weeks had rescued civilians and wounded. He was working at a casualty collection point when it came under fire.

“Zau came in love and he left in love,” said Dave Eubank, the group’s director, but Eubank blamed Turkey for creating “not a safe zone, but a zone of invasion, a zone of death.”

Leaders in the Syrian Democratic Council that has controlled northeast Syria since 2015 say the United States can monitor and stop Turkish strikes. “We hold the Pentagon responsible for all the crimes committed by Turkey if they don’t close the airspace,” said co-chair Ilham Ahmed. “It doesn’t require any military commitment.”

Alberto Fernandez, a former U.S. diplomat in the region who heads the U.S.-supported Middle East Broadcasting Networks, said in a Facebook post: “Turkish controlled Islamist fighters in Syria shell American Evangelical Christian humanitarian group, killing one (Burmeese Christian) aid worker and wounding another. Meanwhile this President talks about ‘protecting the oil’ in Syria after abandoning religious and ethnic minorities to these thugs. Shameful moral incoherence at work.”
The Luke Society is a Christian international medical ministry which partners with indigenous health professionals and uses medicine as a tool to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world.

Encouraging healthy lifestyles happens as much outside a clinic as inside with directors supporting education efforts on healthy habits and choices.

Training health promoters with basic medical skills increases the ministry’s impact exponentially as they return to serve in their remote villages.

Community health education instruction includes topics such as hygiene, disease prevention, clean water and sexual health.

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www.lukesociety.org

“The basics of the community health ministry of the Luke Society Odisha are teaching, preaching and healing, through which we use ourselves for the Lord’s kingdom. We eliminate the gap of unhygienic habits of villagers to promote healthy, happy living. Through our 20 years of holistic ministry in Odisha’s tribal villages, there have been remarkable changes in the physical and spiritual lives of these villagers.

REV. PREM ROUT
ODISHA, INDIA
In Honduras, many residents feel trapped by poverty, violence, and addiction. Michael Miller has spent two decades hitting the streets and devoting his life to some of the country’s youngest and most vulnerable. / BY JAMIE DEAN in Tegucigalpa, Honduras

photos by REBECCA DREXEL
Miller with two boys at Micah House
It’s a bright Sunday morning in Tegucigalpa, and Michael Miller is late for church.

Miller serves as an elder at the bilingual Union Christian Church, but he’s spent the morning trying to talk a 15-year-old boy off the streets and back into the Micah Project—a Christian ministry Miller’s led for nearly 20 years.

It’s been a long night.
A little after 2 a.m., another boy in the residential home awoke in a panic. Years of living on the streets of Tegucigalpa as a child left trauma in the teenager’s mind and soul that still disturbs him at night. Miller and another caregiver sat with him and calmed him in the early morning hours.

But by the time the congregation at Union Christian Church receives communion, Miller is sitting in his usual Sunday morning spot. He’s thankful the 15-year-old has agreed to return, and he’s focused on listening to a sermon that includes a reminder from Christ’s words: “Man does not live by bread alone.”

That’s a lesson Miller chews on often. He talks about it over a lunch of authentic Palestinian food here in the Honduran capital. Tegucigalpa’s large population of Palestinian immigrants is one of the unexpected layers in a city with other famous anomalies, including the dramatic 45-degree turn pilots execute when landing on the airport’s short runway in a valley surrounded by mountains.

These days, Honduras is famous for other reasons: Years of violence, corruption, and poverty have driven a surge in Honduran and other Central American migrants seeking to cross the U.S. border. The situation has created a political crisis in the United States as well.

But on a Sunday afternoon in Tegucigalpa, Miller is more interested in talking about the Hondurans who stay—particularly a deeply vulnerable population of street children who spend their days inhaling yellow glue from empty Coke bottles and begging for enough money to buy a meal.

It’s this population that Miller, 47, has devoted himself to helping for the last 20 years.

Some of the boys in the Micah Project have kicked addiction, turned to Christ, grown up, and built careers and families of their own. Some have returned to the streets. A few have died tragic, early deaths. Miller loves each group, and he doesn’t expect quick or predictable results. When he sees a 13-year-old street kid, Miller imagines what he could be like in a decade.

He often thinks about what Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called “the slow work of God.” Miller says: “For us, trusting in the slow work of God means realizing these guys we really love may still have a very hard road ahead.”

For 20 years of praying, working, and waiting for the slow work of God in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in one of the world’s most dangerous cities, Michael Miller is WORLD’s 2019 Daniel of the Year.

For Miller, life in Honduras began in a literal storm. In 1998, Miller moved to Tegucigalpa to work with another ministry to street children, but found himself dealing with a different calamity: Two months after he arrived, the deadliest hurricane to hit the Western Hemisphere in 200 years swept straight through Honduras: More than 11,000 people died across Central America.

From his balcony in an apartment high on a mountain, Miller says, “I could see the city just coming down.” He could hear the river swelling far below in the valley, and he watched a neighborhood wash down the mountainside.

The entire city was devastated: Bridges collapsed, buildings fell, and thousands of homes were destroyed. Food and water shortages quickly followed. With no electricity and no cell phone, Miller wasn’t sure what to do or how he could help anyone else.

In some ways, a different kind of storm had prepared Miller for such a tumultuous start.

Miller was raised in a Christian home in St. Louis, Mo., and still maintains close ties to Central Presbyterian Church (EPC)—the same congregation where he grew up. (His mother’s Sunday school class at the church has supported the Micah Project every month for the past 20 years.)
After his junior year at Wheaton College, Miller spent a few months living in Honduras, working with a street ministry. He grew more passionate about helping vulnerable people but found his childhood faith shaken. “I fell off a cliff spiritually,” he says. “I really was trying to figure out how we can talk about a just and loving God when there are 9-year-olds using yellow glue on the streets.”

For a few years after college, Miller lived in Houston and worked as a bilingual schoolteacher. He was still struggling spiritually, and he calls those years his “wilderness experience.” Over time, he learned to grieve the sorrows he’d encountered, and he came to a deeper understanding of how God works in the brokenness of the world.

The crisis was formative: “If my faith had just been a straight line up, I wouldn’t have had an understanding or compassion for our guys when they go through dark nights of the soul.”

By 1998, Miller was back in Honduras, looking for ways to help those going through dark nights in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. He learned that a large group of residents from a neighborhood near the river had taken shelter at a church near Miller’s apartment. He stayed with them in the shelter for a week.

When electricity returned, Miller made treks to an internet café and started writing simple updates for friends and family back home. Supporters wanted to help, and they began sending donations.

Over time, Miller and other locals identified a large tract of land for sale high up a mountainside. Miller used the funds to help purchase the property, but the group didn’t have enough money to build homes.

Meanwhile, a Red Cross representative visited the area and said the relief agency had funds for building materials, but no access to land. The agency offered to donate the
materials to the residents to begin building simple homes. Miller helped the 165 families form local councils, and they sent representatives to city meetings to ask for water, electricity, and other services.

When they completed the project, the residents asked Miller to let them name the neighborhood after him. He demurred, but eventually agreed to let them name it after his mother. Two decades later, many of the same families still live in the “Villa Linda Miller” community—a neighborhood locally known as “the Miller.”

But as the hurricane victims were building new homes, Miller was still thinking about children who had no homes at all.

Visit downtown Tegucigalpa, and it won’t take long to find children and teenagers living all or most of the time on the streets and under the bridges of one of the oldest cities in Central America.

In front of a Catholic church built in the 1700s, street merchants sell avocados and boys clutch empty soda bottles with a goopy mixture in the bottom. For less than a dollar, drug dealers sell enough industrial-strength shoe glue to keep a child high for most of the day. It works like a depressant, giving little boys a vacant, hollow stare.

Some of the children have been abandoned by parents who have gotten caught up in gangs, drugs, prostitution, or other crimes. Others have family members at home, but sometimes flee an abusive environment.

Miller says he started the Micah Project with the goal of providing a Christian home and family environment for street boys to live in. Pedro Martinez was one of the first boys Miller met after establishing the Micah Project in 2000. Today, the ministry’s Micah House sits on property adjacent to “the Miller” neighborhood.

On a recent Monday evening, Martinez, now 31, stopped by the ministry on his way home from work to lift weights with some of the older boys. He vividly remembers what it was like to be in their position.

Martinez says he first hit the streets when he was 7 years old. His mother abandoned him in a hotel room, and his father wasn’t in the home. His aunt took him in for a time, but she grew sick from cancer and died within a year.

“That’s when the reality of street life started for me,” he says. “There was no food. There was no one who told us right from wrong. No one who gave us limits.”

Martinez says he quickly started using yellow glue, and then moved to harder drugs. He spent his days looking for food and stealing money to buy drugs. He spent his nights with seven other boys looking for a safe place to sleep. Safety often eluded them. Martinez says he was sexually assaulted twice when he was 8 years old. When he was 10, he was caught in the crossfire of a gang attack and was seriously injured by a machete.

Still, his aspiration was to become a powerful gang member. That was the only life he could envision for himself. Martinez eventually met Miller and other staff members from Micah. But he was almost 13 before he agreed to live at the Micah House.

The transition was painful. He struggled with his addictions. He hated his mother for abandoning him. He thought about going back to the streets. He thought about killing himself.

Things eventually changed when he realized Miller and the others at Micah House were his family. “When they told me they loved me and they cared for me—when Michael told me that I could do it—I had never heard words like that before,” he says. “Sometimes we don’t understand that a fraction of a second can change a person’s life.”

Martinez still had plenty of struggles ahead, but he says Miller was like a father to him. He attended church, and began to learn God could bring good out of the evil he had experienced.

He graduated from high school, and Miller helped him enroll in college. Martinez graduated with a degree in civil
engineering a few years ago. On the day of his graduation, he says, he realized how big God is: “To be able to take someone like me from nothing ... and now I was becoming a member of society.”

His new career has kept him close to home: Martinez worked on a city project to pave roads in the Miller neighborhood. He also planned the community’s water treatment plant. Five years ago, he married a woman he met in the neighborhood when they were teenagers. He points to the spot nearby where they married under the gazebo. They now have two children.

He’s come far from the underbelly of Tegucigalpa: “And you can go by and see any kid on the street with his yellow glue or his marijuana or his cocaine,” Martinez says, “and you realize—he could be somebody too.”

These days, Martinez drops by to have coffee each weekday morning with Miller, and he marvels at the sacrifices he’s seen Miller make over the years to serve generations of street kids. Martinez says Miller, who is single, has given his life for them. “He really is my father,” Martinez says. “That doesn’t mean he doesn’t have his own defects or failures ... but he’s my family.”

Miller is quick to point out that not all stories have happy endings. He’s deeply thankful for Martinez and other men who have grown up in the Micah Project and gone on to live productive lives.

But he’s also known plenty of heartbreak. Sometimes boys leave the project. (He estimates 20 percent to 25 percent end up leaving.) Some return, but still struggle on and off for years as they continue to grapple with sin and sorrow.

“A long time ago, I stopped doing the missionary speech—where everything is all happy and great,” Miller says. “There’s another side to it that American Christians especially need to know about—that often preaching the word of Christ to a broken population means that you’re going to deal with very significant loss and pain and disappointment.”

That loss has been especially acute over the last few years.

In 2015, the ministry staffers experienced the first death of a boy they had cared for. In the last four years, they’ve buried eight boys they’ve either cared for or known from the streets. All the losses are hard, but a particularly excruciating loss came two years ago: A teenager who left the Micah Project in 2016 was later kidnapped and killed at the age of 14.

The losses left the staff reeling, and they left Miller grappling with what 20 years of ministry has reinforced for him: “I can’t save another human being.”

For the first few years, Miller says, he was uptight about showing results. “But I’ve learned that being a caregiver with a broken heart is much more effective than being a caregiver who thinks he has all the answers,” he says. “It makes me more compassionate, it makes me more forgiving of myself and the boys, and it makes me have to trust God—come what may.”

Despite the heartbreak, there are still plenty of reasons to be hopeful.

On a recent weekday morning, 15-year-old Elvin dropped by Miller’s office to show him his schoolwork. He’s one of 16 boys living in the Micah House now. Most are between the ages of 13 and 19.

Elvin came to live at the Micah House in January. He had been on the streets since he was 9. It took almost two years after he met the Micah staff before he decided to live at the home.

That’s not uncommon. Children living on the streets usually have been making their own decisions for years. If they’re addicted to glue or other drugs, it’s hard to imagine giving that up. If they’ve bonded with other children for protection, they may feel they’re leaving a family behind.

When boys do arrive at Micah, the staff assesses their needs, including their academic level. Some have never been to school at all. The ministry provides teachers and tutors on-site and sets a schedule that’s realistic for each child. (Some children haven’t slept or eaten on a regular schedule for years, so the staff doesn’t impose a single formula on all the new residents.)

Wendy Varela, a Micah social worker, tries to contact and work with any existing family members before bringing a boy to live at the home. She also works to keep the boys connected to their families while they stay at Micah.

This week, it was Elvin’s turn for a visit home. On a sunny morning, he loads the ministry van with a few simple gifts he wants to take to siblings and other

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children back home: a soccer ball, candy, and some shoes he asked permission to take from a storage closet at the ministry.

The van climbs high along rocky mountain roads before stopping at a street corner. Elvin runs to a tiny, two-room shack perched on the side of a steep hill overlooking a craggy hillside that runs down to a river where locals are bathing.

A group of five children and an older teenager greet Elvin, laughing and talking as he passes out gifts in the tiny house filled with a few beds. (His mother isn’t at home.) The group moves outside, and Elvin asks Varela for help to buy lunch for the group. They disappear down the steep roads and reappear a while later bearing a bag full of fried chicken and French fries. Elvin eagerly passes out plates full of food.

Later, he seems happy and content on the ride back to Micah. It was a good day, he says.

Back down in the city streets of Tegucigalpa, Miller and other Micah staffers spend an afternoon visiting boys still living on the streets where they met Elvin a few years ago. They hand out a bag of simple food from a local vendor and spend time talking with people they meet regularly through their ministry.

One of the boys, Jesús, has recently started using yellow glue. He’s 13 years old. He follows the group around, but has a vacant stare as he huffs on a bottle he grips in his hand. Miller hopes the staff can work to bring him into the Micah House in a few weeks. (Admission is voluntary and the boys are free to leave if they choose.)

For Jesús, the need appears urgent. His addiction will only grow worse, and the dangers of living on the streets will escalate. That may not be enough to convince him to give up street life, but this afternoon he gets a boost from someone who knows what it’s like.

Junior, a 19-year-old who has lived at Micah House for a few years, is on his way through the square after going to an English class.

He meets Jesús and throws an arm around his shoulder. He talks to the boy for a couple of minutes before moving to others in the crowd. Later, he explains what he told the boy—that he used to be just like him, but he’s found a better life: “I told him there’s still time.”

Miller knows time does run out for some boys eventually, but he’s thankful to see how God has blessed his desire to create a Christian family for children living without one.

It’s a modest picture of the larger family of God that was on display at a Micah event last summer, when an American staff member decided to have her wedding at the Micah Project instead of back in the United States.

The couple invited family and friends from back home, but they also invited friends from the streets: On the wedding day, Micah staffers sent buses to the streets of Tegucigalpa to pick up street kids and prostitutes the ministry had befriended. When the buses arrived, volunteers offered a mini spa day, helping the women and children pick dresses, clothes, and shoes from a collection of beautiful garments sent by a donor.

Near the same gazebo where Martinez got married a few years ago, a picture of the kingdom of God came into full view: People from different nations, from every walk of life, from the highways and hedges, standing together and celebrating a wedding feast.

Twenty years after Miller started the ministry with just a few other people and a desire to nurture a family in one small corner of the world, he smiles when he thinks about the day. And he’s grateful for “beautiful signs of God’s grace on a daily basis. ... It give us the energy to keep going forward.”
What does the Bible actually say about Spiritual Warfare and how do we apply it to our lives?
RECLAIMING HOME TURF

Migration from Central America has surged, but in Honduras, some Christians are doing unsung work to make their country a safer place to live / BY JAMIE DEAN in Tegucigalpa, Honduras

When Omar Rivera agreed to join an independent commission to purge rampant corruption from the Honduran police force, he and other Christians on the panel had at least three things, he says: “We had moral strength. We had Christ in our hearts. And we weren’t worried about whether we’d be killed.”

As it turned out, the commission would need all three. President Juan Orlando Hernández formed the panel in 2016 after leaked evidence revealed senior Honduran police officers conspired with drug traffickers to assassinate the country’s top drug-enforcement agent. Even in a country accustomed to widespread corruption, the scandal produced outrage.

The president agreed to form an independent commission to purge corruption from the police force. The six-person team included four outspoken Christians. Omar Rivera and Carlos Hernández joined the panel as part of their work with the Christian organization Association for a More Just Society (AJS).

One morning before work, Hernández unfolded a note on the front steps of his home in Tegucigalpa. The message inside: “We found you. We know that you live here. You’re going to pay.” Hernández hid the note from his teenage son, and thought, “What am I doing?”

Jorge Machado was a commission member and the executive director of the Evangelical Fellowship of Churches in Honduras. A few months after the panel’s work began, Machado returned home from grocery shopping with his wife. Six men emerged from two SUVs and opened fire. Machado and his wife escaped injury, but their bodyguard was killed.

For Rivera, death threats grew serious enough to convince him to send his young family out of the country for a time. But Rivera stayed. “We had to be brave Christians,” he says. “We were all in.”

Eventually, the independent commission removed six out of nine police generals and 5,000 out of 13,000 police officers on the Honduran force.

Three years later, Rivera still travels with security and tries to avoid public areas where he might be a target. “Our lives have changed, probably forever,” he says. “But Jesus would tell us not only to pray for the country, but to do something for it.”

The stories of what Christians and others are doing for Honduras don’t get as much attention as news about Hondurans migrating to the United States. But it’s important to pay attention to both.

The conditions that drive many Central Americans to flee to the United States—including poverty, violence, and corruption—are the same problems some Christians are combating in Honduras, often in particularly courageous ways.

Kurt Ver Beek, a Calvin University professor in Tegucigalpa, helped start AJS more than 20 years ago. For him, the goal is as simple as it is sweeping: “We are doing our very best to make Honduras a place people don’t want to leave.”

It’s understandable why some people do want to leave Honduras.

Though the nation’s murder rate has dropped significantly in the last few years, it remains high. (In 2012, Honduras had the highest homicide rate in the world.) Poverty also remains stubbornly high, with more than 60 percent of the population living below the poverty line.

Corruption has long been notorious: In October, U.S. prosecutors accused the Mexican drug lord known as El Chapo of giving $1 million to the brother of President Hernández, with the intent of funneling the money to the president. The Honduran president denied any knowledge of the scheme.

But corruption is also a daily reality for many Hondurans.

Want to drive a taxi or start a small business? Prepare to pay a “war tax” to gang members who control large swaths
Omar Rivera, with other members of the Honduran government commission responsible for purging corrupt cops, speaks during a press conference in Tegucigalpa.
of urban areas. The gangs demand the extortion payments in exchange for not harming or killing a business owner or his family. (Since 2010, an estimated 1,500 Hondurans driving buses or taxis have been murdered.)

Ver Beek, the AJS founder, says such conditions create a sense of hopelessness. Even if the murder rate has gone down and the poverty rate isn’t significantly higher, many Hondurans despair that conditions will ever get any better. When they hear about crackdowns on migrants at the U.S. border, some may think, If we’re going to go, we have to go now.

Many are going: U.S. Customs and Border Protection reported more than 250,000 Hondurans apprehended at the U.S. border in the 2019 fiscal year. Many migrants cite economic factors as their primary reason for leaving, though violence often contributes to economic woes.

Confronting the woes in Honduras means grappling with a painstaking reality: Changing a whole system happens case by case, community by community, and family by family.

Arranging a meeting with a family affected by violence can be a painstaking affair itself. On a fall afternoon in Tegucigalpa, I headed out to meet two families that AJS staff members are helping through grueling trials: Both families have lost loved ones to murder.

Finding the families involved rendezvousing in an unmarked office in a nondescript building away from AJS headquarters.

The secrecy comes from fear. When family members lose a loved one to violence, they’re sometimes afraid to call the police: What if an officer is corrupt and tells a perpetrator about the report? For someone who witnesses a crime, it’s often even more frightening: What if a witness loses his own life for testifying against a gang member or other criminals? The deep fears have led to a high rate of unsolved crime: Some 90 percent of homicides in Honduras are never prosecuted.

One couple I met described the murder of their adult daughter in front of her two young children a year ago. The woman was standing at a corner store when three gang members forced her into a car.

Her father called police, but says officers told him they had to wait 24 hours before investigating. He searched the streets all night, and the next day he heard a news report about a woman found dead in an alley in Tegucigalpa. He went to the morgue and asked to see the body. It was his daughter. He could see the marks of strangulation on her neck.

In this case, the murdered woman’s children recognized one of the perpetrators. Police caught the offender, but the other two men remain uncaptured. The grieving grandparents moved to another community for safety and are now raising their five grandchildren.

Another woman I met witnessed the murder of her brother on a street corner four years ago. The accused is still awaiting trial, and the woman may have to serve as a witness. That frightens her, but she says she’s convinced it’s important
of the 150 staffers a two-month notice. “We’ve had success, and not in tiny things,” he said. “This ought to be the time to double down.”

Lucy Espinal has doubled down by staying at the same church in the same Tegucigalpa community for nearly 40 years.

The church runs a large children’s program with assistance from the Christian organization Compassion International. Espinal and her husband have served as pastors in the congregation for 37 years and have seen the community go through many changes—most notably a shift to gang violence that made the neighborhood one of the most dangerous in the city.

That didn’t deter the Espinals. Instead, church members put banners along the electric poles near the church with a simple message: “This territory belongs to Christ.”

Local gang members initially didn’t approve of the church reaching out to children they intended to recruit to their ranks. Espinal says several years ago a gang threatened her husband to scale back the church’s work or face death.

The pastor told the gang members he would plan arrangements for his funeral, but he wouldn’t back down from telling children and their families about Christ. Lucy Espinal says he told them: “We’ve already lost one generation, and we’re going to fight not to lose another one.”

The gang backed off. Espinal says some of the members now send their children to programs. The neighborhood is still dangerous, but she says the church encourages members to stay in Honduras, and the members are hopeful: “We still believe that one day our area won’t be a hot zone for gangs. We want to be known as the zone that flourishes.”

Carlos Alvarez also sees plenty of need, but he also encourages locals to stay. He leads a church in a rural area a few miles away from the city center. In some cases, he says, families thinking about fleeing to the United States decide to stay when the church offers simple help.

For example, a woman who nearly lost her home in a landslide despaired of life in Honduras, but the church gave her $20 to keep her modest business selling corn tamales. She says she wants to stay, and she finds the connection to the local church as compelling as the money they gave her.

Alvarez says he understands why many Hondurans flee to the United States, but he says part of his work as a pastor is helping people consider how to stay and serve their communities. “We are the salt of the earth and the light of the world,” he says. “We need to be the light in Honduras.”

When I interviewed Ver Beek in his office in October, he was working on a plan to give 60
Clint Bass was thrilled when his alma mater, Southwest Baptist University (SBU), offered him a job. He graduated from the private Christian school in 2000 and nine years later joined the faculty as church history professor. He and his wife (also an SBU graduate) settled in a modest brick house in small-town Bolivar, Mo., and joined the Baptist church across the street from the school.

But Bass grew alarmed when he realized other professors’ teachings didn’t sound Biblical. He began to question whether the school, associated with the Missouri Baptist Convention, was still teaching historic, Christian doctrine. Ten years after his hiring, Bass was no longer instructing in the classroom. After an abrupt firing, he was helping his father-in-law hang Sheetrock part time, unsure whether he’d teach again.

Bass’ story may serve as a warning: Even though the Southern Baptist Convention embraced conservative theology nearly 20 years ago, not all Baptist colleges followed suit.

Jeremiah Greever, a 2012 alumnus, said that as he prepared to graduate, his academic adviser told him he would never
recommend students attend the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (the denomination’s flagship seminary) because it was a “bastion for Calvinism” and “there won’t be a Calvinist on my street in heaven.”

Hayden Spray, a 2018 graduate, said some SBU students went on to attend liberal seminaries, while others denied the inerrancy of Scripture and were open to theistic evolution and the existence of purgatory: “The students are the fruit of the professorship.”

Bass was surprised. The Missouri Baptist Convention (MBC) provided around a million dollars in yearly funding to SBU and elected the school’s 25 trustees. SBU’s charter states that the school must teach in line with the churches of the MBC, which affirmed a doctrinal statement known as the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (BF&M 2000). Bass began taking notes about his colleagues, but he decided to stay: “I didn’t want to give up on the university. I’m an alum.”

Over the next few years, he saw more evidence that several colleagues disagreed with the BF&M 2000.

In 2017, Rodney Reeves, then dean of SBU’s College of Theology and Ministry, and theology professor Zach Manis spoke at a school forum about the doctrine of hell (audio of which was heard by WORLD). Reeves spoke about his belief in annihilationism, with Manis saying he was sympathetic to the doctrine. Manis also said Christians who prioritize the Bible over church tradition should take annihilationism and universalism (the belief that all people will eventually be saved) more seriously.

In a 2018 email thread, Reeves asked the theology faculty for responses to a parent questioning whether faculty affirmed...
Biblical inerrancy and a literal interpretation of Scripture. Professor Kelly Malone wrote that if the parent or student was looking for “strict adherence” to the BF&M 2000, he would likely not be satisfied. Reeves and Malone declined to comment to WORLD and referred all questions to SBU’s administration.

In the fall of 2018, Reeves denied Bass’ application for a routine promotion, saying Bass had spied on SBU for the Missouri Baptist Convention (Bass had answered questions from a concerned Missouri pastor and MBC committee member about his colleagues). Bass met with the provost and SBU President Eric Turner. A month later, they fired him.

A letter of dismissal gave five grounds for Bass’ firing: collecting evidence and ascribing views to his colleagues without personal interaction, using noncredible information to form accusations, failing to discuss his concerns with his colleagues, failure to follow Matthew 18 and address concerns with colleagues, and breaking the school’s lifestyle statement, which speaks to understanding and submitting to Scripture’s authority.

Manis wrote in a blog post, “Clint Bass did not [come] to any of us, ever, to express his concerns about our theological views and to allow us to address his concerns in person. Never. Not one of us.” But Bass had taken notes on multiple discussions he had with colleagues about their differing views. His notes recorded that on Aug. 14, 2013, he and Manis had a “lengthy discussion” in which Manis articulated his belief in purgatory, and on Aug. 27, 2015, Manis told Bass he was no longer prepared to regard universalism as a heresy. Manis referred questions to the administration.

Students created a Change.org petition calling for Bass’ reinstatement and providing links to the 2018 email chain and the hell forum audio. In April 2019, a group of 14 alumni published a letter online attesting to the theological concerns Bass raised.

Turner refused to answer specific questions about Bass’ firing, writing in an email: “As an employer, the University has a responsibility to keep the contents of personnel files confidential, and it is policy of SBU not to comment publicly on personnel issues.”

Between the late 1970s and early ’90s, a concerted effort by church leaders transformed the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) from largely theologically liberal—for example, denying the inerrancy of the Bible and a literal interpretation of some of Jesus’ miracles—to conservative. With conservative trustees, the convention’s six seminaries shifted back toward historic Baptist doctrine. In 2000, Southern Baptists adopted a conservative revision of their doctrinal statement, the Baptist Faith and Message.

State Baptist conventions followed this national shift only slowly and inconsistently. While the seminaries belong to the national Southern Baptist Convention, colleges are connected to state conventions. John Mark Reynolds, former provost at Houston Baptist University, said for parents of prospective students, knowing a school is “Baptist” is just the start of a conversation—and an investigation. He noted colleges with Baptist roots tend to take one of three paths: leaving the denomination, embracing the denomination, or respecting their roots while shifting to become more broadly Christian.

After the conservative resurgence, many colleges cut ties with the state conventions, trading financial support for self-governance. In 1990, Baylor University trustees passed a measure to restrict the Baptist General Convention of Texas from selecting more than a quarter of the school’s trustees. Two months after the vote, Michael Bishop, Baylor’s vice president for communications, told the Los Angeles Times, “We’re told the fundamentalists are going to launch an attack against Baylor. . . They are enraged because we just outmaneuvered them.” Today, Baylor presents itself as “a private Christian university and a nationally ranked liberal arts institution.” Faculty members don’t sign any statements of faith. In 2018, a little more than a quarter of students identified as Baptist.

The same year Baylor acted, Furman University trustees voted to allow themselves to choose future trustees. But in late 1991, the South Carolina Baptist Convention decided to use funding allocated for Furman to sue the school and regain control. The convention eventually dropped the legal action and distributed the money to the state’s other Baptist institutions. Furman and the SCBC ended their formal relationship in 1992.

But not all schools successfully left. The trustees of Shorter University, a small Baptist college in Georgia with a reputable performing arts program, voted to go independent from Georgia Baptists in 2002, but lost a subsequent legal fight. When Donald Dowless became president in 2011, one of his first actions was to require faculty members to sign a statement of faith he described as “much in concert with the Baptist Faith and Message.” The statement included affirmation of Biblical inerrancy. A lifestyle statement also acknowledged that homosexuality is un-Biblical. Faculty had to sign or risk not getting their contracts renewed.

One-third of Shorter’s full-time faculty left, according to an Inside Higher Ed report. Now Dowless says Shorter is doing well: Georgia Baptists provide $2.2 million in funding a year, close to 6 percent of the school’s annual budget.

Some schools chose to celebrate and strengthen their relationship with the state convention that founded them.

In 1995, David Dockery was elected president of Union University in Jackson, Tenn., and began strengthening ties with the state’s Baptist pastors. Union hosted 40-80 pastors each month for career development meetings, encouraged faculty members to preach at Tennessee churches, and partnered with the state convention on projects. The school hosted conferences about Baptist identity and heritage, started a pastor training program, and offered pastors free “retreats” on campus with a room, meals, and use of the library.

Tennessee Baptists select all of Union’s trustees and contribute $1.8 million a year, about 2 percent of the school’s annual budget.
Randy Davis, executive director of the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, said he believes “Dr. Fowler will help right the ship theologically.”

In Missouri, Southwest Baptist University announced in December it would appoint an outside committee to “lead a University-wide dialogue regarding faith and learning.” Led by Dockery, the committee twice visited campus and talked with trustees, professors, staff, and administrators. It also interviewed alumni, Missouri pastors, and MBC leaders.

A report from the committee in July found that the school’s statement of faith was inadequate and not implemented effectively (“virtually irrelevant” in the hiring, promoting, and tenure process). Dockery said the school’s statement of faith was more than 100 years old and only covered Baptist distinctives, not Christian essentials, like the Trinity and the gospel. The school had not adopted any form of the Baptist Faith and Message. Dockery said it could take two or three years to know if SBU has implemented all the recommended changes, but the MBC demanded the school make two changes in the next few months: adopt the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 and name the convention as the “sole member” of the corporation.

Meanwhile, Clint Bass is training to be an Army chaplain. As a tenured professor abruptly fired, his chances of getting another teaching position are slim. But if this is the end of academia for him, so be it: “The academy is not my God.”

Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, said he believes “Dr. Fowler will help right the ship theologically.”

#ADVICE FOR PARENTS

John Mark Reynolds recommends parents and prospective students searching for theologically conservative Baptist colleges focus on the school’s leaders: What kinds of questions do they ask new hires? Which departments are getting full-time professors and resources? Another good indicator can be academic papers that professors in the school’s psychology or sociology departments publish. Finding conservative Christians in those departments is rare, Reynolds said, and their academic publications will reveal their true positions: “Personnel is policy. You can have the longest policy statement in the world, but if you don’t bring in the right people, then you have a problem.”

David Dockery recommends asking five things: Does the school hire only faculty and staff members who are Christians and members of local churches? Are Bible or religion professors members of Baptist churches? Do opportunities for worship and service create a Christian context for students on campus? Are professors in every subject asking how the Christian faith relates to their discipline? Is there a clear statement of faith? Seminary president Albert Mohler said schools must implement a confession of faith for professors: “I don’t think there’s any way to ensure any form of consistent Christian identity and teaching without it.” —C.K.
Six years after a tornado outbreak hit the Midwest, surviving families remember the devastation and the recovery

BY LEAH HICKMAN in Washington, Ill.
DAN AND CAROL LEARNED were at church half an hour away when a tornado hit their Washington, Ill., neighborhood. As the congregation returned from the church basement, cell phones began to vibrate and buzz with updates from Washington. A neighborhood friend texted one of the Learned kids: “The whole street’s gone.”

The Learneds arrived at their house to find the roof torn open and every window broken. Two-by-fours stuck through holes in the walls. Their cars were destroyed. Furniture from a front room had blown into the backyard, and insulation was everywhere. “It looked like a blender had gone through the house,” says Carol.

Matt Whitworth and his family were at home when the tornado hit, and he was in the garage with his oldest son. As he tried to get into the house, strong winds threw them into the entryway, where they landed by the basement door. His wife Terri was on the floor nearby, and his youngest son lay crouched over their small family dog, protecting her from the debris. Whitworth opened the basement door and pulled his wife and sons to the stairs.

Minutes later, the tornado passed and the family returned from the basement. “It look[ed] like a bomb went off,” says Whitworth. Their immediate need was for medical attention. Their youngest son’s back was bleeding from the debris that had struck him while he was shielding the dog. The 911 line was clogged with callers, and their own cars were unusable due to damage from the storm, so Whitworth walked into the destroyed neighborhood to find another vehicle. He came across two men in a golf cart. They had come to help. One handed him keys and told him where he could find his old Ford Escort. “We’re very fortunate that… somebody came to our aid that quickly,” says Whitworth.

Nov. 17 marks the sixth anniversary of a devastating tornado outbreak in the Midwest. At least 73 tornadoes peppered the region on that Sunday in 2013, and the strongest one, categorized as an EF4, touched down in Washington, Ill. In less than an hour, the tornado destroyed more than 600 homes and damaged hundreds more. More than 120 people suffered injuries, and three people died.

The town of Washington today bears few visible scars from the devastation. Brand-new houses line the streets in several older neighborhoods, and the occasional lot seems to be missing a tree. Compared with the appearance of these neighborhoods minutes after the tornado—piles of debris, trees torn apart, houses gone—these sixth-year “scars” are unnoticeable.

But while the town looks as if it has moved on, memories of that traumatic day still make Washington’s residents cry. Some remember the difficulties of recovery both for those giving help and those receiving it, and their experiences offer lessons for towns facing tragedy.

Today, Whitworth sits at the kitchen table in his beautiful new home. It’s in the same location as the one that was totaled. The warm glow of the sun sifts through the red curtains on the sliding glass door to
the back deck. It’s been a while since the sound of the air turning on in the house made him recall “the deafening sound of the tornado,” but he still holds back tears as he remembers the feeling of reality setting in after the storm. “You quickly start to realize... you’re not going to go home, you know,” says Whitworth. “Everything has been taken from you.”

Ben Davidson, associate pastor at Washington’s Bethany Community Church, was in a church service when phones started buzzing with the tornado warning. The Bethany congregation meets in Five Points Washington, a community center less than half a mile from the path of the tornado. The churchgoers gathered in the building’s shelter that morning, praying and singing as the lights went out and the howl of the tornado crescendoed.

Once the storm passed, the Bethany congregation acted quickly. Members went to the surrounding neighborhoods—littered with downed power lines and piles of debris, water spurting from broken pipes, and the smell of gas filling the air—and told the newly homeless to gather in the building’s shelter that morning, praying and singing as the lights went out and the howl of the tornado crescendoed.

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Today, Davidson says, a group from the community still meets to plan ahead for other potential disasters. They’ve designated who will organize volunteers, donations, lodging, and food in the event of another community crisis. They’ve selected a location for the first post-disaster meeting. They’ve also printed yard signs and banners to place at community checkpoints to give people information about how to help and how to get help next time something happens. However, as Davidson acknowledges, “You can never be fully prepared.”

LEANING BACK IN THE family-room couch of his rebuilt home, Dan Learned begins to choke up as he remembers the help he and his family received from their friends. Some of them, he says, were already there when they arrived at their home the day of the tornado. Carol talks for her husband as he fights back tears, and she recalls how one friend put his arm around her and said, “Let’s go in and look together.” It was a simple act but, as Carol says, “It’s kinda like maybe at a funeral: You never know what to say, but just your presence is a big deal.”

Support from friends continued to sustain them in the difficult weeks and months that followed. Family and friends helped them find temporary housing. Neighbors joined them to sort through scattered papers and bills. Friends washed their debris-littered clothes and made them meals. Some gave them money, gift cards, and handwritten notes. Others texted and called saying they were praying for them. These contributions, the Learned says, were helpful.
Not all help was equally helpful, though. Some well-meaning people called asking for a list of specific prayer requests. The Learneds laugh about it now, but the request was too much at the time. "I [didn’t] even have enough energy to change my clothes. I [wasn’t] going to call them back with a list," says Dan. Some well-meaning people said unhelpful things like "at least you get a new house." Others unaffected by the tornado saw the disaster as an opportunity to get rid of their unwanted possessions. Dan remembers one person who talked about a "bunch of junk" from his garage that he was "trying to get rid of."

During the weeks of recovery, local churches provided necessities to families that had been affected by the tornado: food, shampoo, shoes, healthcare. Karen Frey is on staff at Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria. Her house was not damaged, but she helped collect and organize donations for the families affected by the tornado. She and the other volunteers stored these donations in an empty storefront and called it the "free Walmart." Local families donated clothes, toiletries, and other items for tornado victims to have.

Some of the donations, Frey says, made the volunteers chuckle because they were obscure and unusable—like turpentine. But even some seemingly useful items, such as clothing, became a hassle. They collected so much clothing that they ran out of storage space. The most helpful items were cleaning products like laundry detergent. Things like this, Frey says, allowed tornado victims to care for the possessions they still had and find a sense of normalcy.

Frey says the tragedy has given her and others in their town a greater capacity to care for others. She says she looks at people differently now: "When you see people at Walmart or at a store or wherever you are, you don’t know what their story is and you don’t know what they’re going through."

**WHILE HELPERS FACED** the challenge of offering the right help in the right way, people on the receiving end—like the Whitworths and the Learneds—faced the mental challenge of receiving charity. One local church provided food to homeless families in the days after the tornado, and Dan and Carol learned remember going there for a meal. They were surprised by the fresh fruit—a luxury that demonstrated the church’s generosity. Dan felt uncomfortable accepting service, so he asked the volunteers for a nametag. He wanted to look like one of the helpers. A friend rebuked him and called him out for pride.

Dan was offended at first: "I’m like, ‘Hey, thank you. I lost my house. Our cars are destroyed. Everything’s a mess. And now you’re calling me prideful.’" But he now sees the truth of the rebuke. Dan says, "It was a very humbling thing to have someone tell [me], ‘Receive the help. Don’t keep track. Don’t try and pay everyone back. You’ll never catch up. Just receive it.’ That’s what grace is.”

Matt Whitworth also struggled with this reversal of roles. He saw himself as someone who had worked hard to get a good education and a good job so he could give of his money and resources: "[I] never really saw myself as a recipient. ... I tried to be very self-sufficient.” Whitworth laughs and adds, "When a tornado happens, you’re not self-sufficient. You have to rely on other people."

The tornado also reminded them to rely on God. The Learneds say the disaster gave them a new perspective on God’s mercy. The destruction and loss of life were terrible, yes, but had the track of the tornado shifted a couple of blocks, it could have struck church buildings and two nursing homes, where residents would have struggled to get out of harm’s way.

God had mercy in His timing too. Flipping through the images on Dan’s laptop, the Learneds point out photos of the destruction in each of their bedrooms. In their daughter’s room, the wall and ceiling were open, and glass from the window was scattered across the room. "If it was at night and we were in those beds,” Carol says, “it would have been a different story.”

In the short term, the trauma of the event stuck with the families who lost their homes. About a year after the tornado, a friend rebuked Dan for not moving past his sorrow. Some days, he says, he could do little more than “lay in my bed in the fetal position and just cry.” But his friend reminded him that his neighborhood was being rebuilt, his family was safe, and it was time to move on. "I was so mad at him,” says Dan. "I thought, ‘How insensitive of you to say that.’ But he was dead right. ... This was very hard. But it doesn’t mean we need to sit in it forever. The Lord’s mercies are new every day.”

Now, six years later, the Learneds say the raw pain of the tragedy is mostly gone. Down the street, builders recently completed a new house in a lot that had been standing empty since the tornado. The Learneds’ own house is rebuilt, and a for-sale sign sits in the yard. Now that their kids have moved out, they’re ready to move on to a smaller home. As a family, they all escaped major physical and emotional scars, but not all families were so fortunate. For some, the trauma and stress of the tornado led to divorce or premature deaths.

Even with those permanent changes, memories of the tornado have faded, and some of the neighborhood warmth that came with the teamwork of recovery is gone. The town didn’t experience a revival. But Dan Learned hopes for at least one long-term effect of the storm: “I hope we never forget what we went through as it relates to how we … love others in time of crisis.” - - see p. 55 for a report on recovery efforts after an October tornado in Dallas
THE GREAT DISAPPEARING

With a competitive movie environment and new hurdles to some worthy films go unseen by American audiences

BY EMILY BELZ IN NEW YORK
One night in 2016, New York resident Joel Darling accompanied some friends to the Tribeca Film Festival and watched a film he knew little about. *El Clásico*, from Kurdish director Halkawt Mustafa, tells the story of two bickering, soccer-obsessed brothers in Iraq. Both of the brothers are little people (dwarfs) who travel to Madrid on a mission to meet a famous soccer player.

Darling loved it. The unusual road trip film has all the Hollywood magic: love, comedy, sports, and drama. War and terrorists threaten the brothers throughout their journey. The brothers, Alan and Shirwan (actors Wrya and Dana Ahmed are also brothers in real life), run a tea shop in a small Kurdish town in northern Iraq. Alan is in love with Gona, but her father says he will never allow his daughter to marry a man like Alan. (The implication is clear to a tearful Alan that the father is referring to his stature.)

In the story, Gona’s father is a huge fan of Real Madrid soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, and so Alan decides to win his favor by traveling to meet Ronaldo and giving him a gift on behalf of Gona’s father. The brothers buzz across Iraq in a four-wheeler, navigate Baghdad traffic, and then turn to smugglers to find a way to Spain. It’s intense, sweet, and ultimately uplifting. The film won an award for best cinematography at Tribeca.

Still, three years after *El Clásico* played at Tribeca, there is no way for Darling to rewatch the film or share it with others. It never got U.S. distribution. Even in this age of seemingly infinite internet streaming, no one in the United States can see this film, for now.

Darling still thinks about *El Clásico*. “There are so many great moments that I want to experience again,” he recently said of the movie. “I think it would be so successful if it was mass-released.”

Awards season is arriving, with buzzy films like *The Irishman* and *1917* hitting theaters in search of golden statues. But there are also great films that have no statues, that go unnoticed, and—as in the case of *El Clásico*—are entirely unviewable. As theaters and online platforms get swamped with middling content, high-quality films can go unseen.

“Some say, ‘If it’s good, people will find it and people will see it,’” said Erik Løkkesmoe, who heads Aspiration Entertainment, which markets and distributes films. “I tend to think that is glossing over fundamental challenges. Really good films are never found and never watched, because they get lost in the massive clutter of content.”

Awards season highlights the commercial side of filmmaking and the importance of distributors to bring a great film to an audience. Big studios muscle independent films out of movie theaters, demanding more and more screens for the latest Marvel or Star Wars installment. That leaves independent films with a slimmer chance of finding a theatrical audience.

Distributors can more easily disseminate films through online platforms, but they find it harder to attract eyeballs there. Even when an independent film sells to Netflix or Amazon, it may disappear into their clutter of content. Distributors are struggling to figure out good models...
for what one called this “very strange new world.”

Aspiration Entertainment tries to find surprises from smaller independent filmmakers that big studios overlook for marketing and distribution. It marketed films like 2018’s Won’t You Be My Neighbor and this year’s The Peanut Butter Falcon. It’s about to pick up a film from the Heartland Film Festival, a nontypical festival that Løkkesmoe said exhibits films with “richer values, stories that reflect more rooted ideals of community.”

Aspiration is not explicitly faith-based, but Løkkesmoe is a Christian. As a distributor, the company is essentially a curator for audiences that share its vision of what makes a good film. Just as parents want to take their children to a Pixar film, Aspiration hopes its audience will want to see an Aspiration film.

In the current movie environment, theatrical audiences tend to have specialized interests, Løkkesmoe explained. When people have the option to stay home, only a movie that feels like a “rally or a concert” brings them out. Audiences will go to theaters with like-minded friends and fans, whether to Star Wars or faith-based films.

Those passionate fans help sell a film by word of mouth, so it’s easier for distributors to sign on to a film that already has a built-in fan base. But that creates a problem for the independent, off-beat films that Aspiration likes to promote.

“If you don’t have the romantic comedy with a big celebrity... it’s going to take a lot of work to find an audience never been inside a movie theater, much less been the stars of a film. But Mustafa moved in with them for a year, both to learn their way of life in northern Iraq and to prepare them for being on camera. When Mustafa first arrived in their village of 350 people, he couldn’t find the brothers’ house, so they met him on their four-wheeler, which became a fixture in the film.

Most movies set in Iraq are filmed in locations like Jordan. Mustafa took the risk of filming on-site in Iraq, even as ISIS romped the country. The El Clásico producers said they couldn’t find insurers to cover the production. When the crew filmed in one village that Saddam Hussein had destroyed, it rebuilt with the locals’ help the bazaar at the center of town.

At one point as the team was filming in a hotel in Baghdad, a blast went off nearby, shaking the set. The team later learned that bombing had killed two dozen people. At the time, ISIS was not far from Baghdad, and Mustafa, in the YouTube series, recalled the Baghdad security tips he’d been given: wait to leave the hotel until after 9 a.m., when most of the road bombs would have already gone off, and always drive with the windows down so the glass wouldn’t kill you if it exploded.

The month after El Clásico premiered at Tribeca, its story came a little too close to reality: ISIS terrorists attacked a café of Real Madrid fans, killing 16. The terrorist group believes soccer is against Islamic teachings. In the film, a scene shows terrorists beating the brothers and telling them never to watch soccer again.

Unfortunately, no Americans can currently see any of these scenes.

Good films that don’t get U.S. distribution are often international in origin. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences nominates only five foreign films for an Academy Award, and each country can submit only one film for nomination. Iraq submitted El Clásico for its national entry, but it was one of 85 countries entering films, and El Clásico didn’t make the short list.

Mark Stucke, a former war correspondent who founded and runs Journeyman Pictures, a British distribution company for international documentaries, said there has been “almost no appetite” in the United States for international documentaries. Without companies like Journeyman, many such films would never be sold in the United States.

Journeyman has an unorthodox approach: When it acquires a
documentary, it releases it on all platforms at once—broadcast, digital, or subscription-based services. Under the traditional model, Stucke would tease a film at a festival, do a limited theatrical release a few months afterward, and then later release it on iTunes or another digital platform.

“We ignore all of that old-school stuff,” Stucke said. He thinks a one-time, all-out blast is the best strategy in an industry that releases 25,000 documentaries a year. Studios are shortening theatrical release times because fewer people go to theaters nowadays, he said. “We’ve simply completely truncated it.”

Journeyman distributed a great documentary from last year’s Tribeca Film Festival, Tanzania Transit. Tribeca has its own clutter, with movie critics often facing down nearly 100 features at the festival, but Tanzania broke through.

The film is a beautiful observational documentary following three characters on a train ride through Tanzania. There’s a Masai grandfather traveling back with his son from the big city, where the son is an aspiring YouTube star. There’s a woman who owned a bar and is trying to start a new life after being taken advantage of by her husband. And then there is a prosperity gospel preacher, who traverses the train cars trying to squeeze money from the poor by doing healings.

The camera never leaves the inside of the train. Film director Jeroen van Velzen wanted viewers to feel as if they were passengers aboard the train the whole time. That allows him to give intimate portraits of the characters and allows the viewer to experience part of a particular African society that is divided by class, ethnicity, and religion.

Van Velzen spent about four years working on the project, and a month and a half riding the train to film. But when it came to distribution, he laughed. “I don’t actually know that much…. It’s a very strange system, distribution of films,” van Velzen said.

One of his producers connected with Journeyman for distribution. Journeyman got the film into festivals and sold it as an exclusive release on Amazon, where it now streams free for Prime members. Without Amazon, Stucke said, the documentary probably wouldn’t have attracted any interest stateside because it was “too foreign.”

“Who is going to run that film? [PBS] maybe, beyond that pretty much nobody,” Stucke said.

If Stucke had gone the traditional route of a theatrical release for Tanzania Transit several months after Tribeca, he estimated “perhaps a thousand eyeballs, or pairs of eyeballs,” would have seen it.

“There’s so much to attract anyone’s attention, most of it rubbish,” said Stucke. For the films you want people to see: “You’ve got to blast it out.”
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The Walnut Hill neighborhood of Dallas looks less like a cluster of 1960s ranch homes and more like a war zone. Downed power lines drape across brush-strewn roads, and tree-tops are lopped clean off—where trees are left standing at all.

Shea Sumlin, pastor of Northway Church, recalled the aftermath of the violent tornadoes that struck the Dallas metro area on Oct. 20. “All the power’s out. It’s dark. All you could hear is chainsaws and tears. You could smell the gas leaking as firefighters tried to turn off the gas lines,” Sumlin said.

Sunday Night Football was well underway when residents heard sirens, began receiving text alerts, and took cover in hallways and closets. The storms left a 15-mile swath of bricks and timber, with damage estimates reaching the $2 billion mark. Remarkably, there were no fatalities in Texas.

But Sumlin’s 1,500-member church—and the schools and homes surrounding it—took a direct hit. Insurance adjusters deemed the sanctuary a total loss. The church classrooms...
are salvageable, but barely. The Sunday night service concluded just an hour and a half before the tornado struck.

“We had people standing right here where I’m in the chapel where it’s obviously demolished, and you can see the glass missing and the large wood pieces missing from the top. I can’t imagine what was going on inside there when it hit, but what a blessing that no people were inside there to receive the brunt of that,” Josh Womack, a longtime Northway worshipper, said as he surveyed the damage.

In the light of day, neighbors and congregants began to clean up. Some took to social media to reunite homeowners with mementos, like 1970s wedding photographs and baby pictures. Electric utilities, insurance companies, and tree removal specialists lined whatever streets they could maneuver in the area. Sumlin made an action plan.

“No. 1 was how can we minister to the brokenness around us?” Sumlin said. “No. 2 was how can we secure our building in the meantime to all the danger spots that were part of it? And No. 3 was we need to send some folks out and start figuring out what our future is.”

Northway’s insurance will cover the bulk of necessary repairs, as well as funds to lease church space during the 18 months it will take to rebuild. Right away, nearby Watermark Church offered its facilities at no cost for Northway to host its Sunday night service through the end of the year. Park Cities Presbyterian Church offered its facilities for Northway to hold a prayer and lament service, and Grace Bible Church will house the congregation for its once-monthly prayer and worship night. Children’s volunteers from half a dozen churches across North Texas are stepping in to man classrooms over the next month so Northway’s adults can worship corporately at Watermark.

Northway is in an economically diverse area, and it will be hard for some neighbors to rebuild. Sumlin noted that out the east door of the church are “some of the wealthiest homes in Dallas.” Out the west doors, though, are “some of the most impoverished people in all of Dallas,” many without insurance.

With Northway’s insurance covering the cleanup and repairs, and a temporary meeting space in hand, the church started raising money to help its neighbors recover. In seven days, it collected over $150,000, all of which will go to the surrounding community. Plus, nearly 1,100 church members went door to door after the tornado with tools, supplies, and food, ready to help.

“There was even one point when we ran out of supplies that we needed and we put a social media post out, and within 19 minutes we had everything that we needed for hundreds and hundreds of families in the neighborhood,” Sumlin said.

But the church staff is tired. They had expected to spend the week at a staff retreat in the Texas Hill Country. Instead, they faced the aftermath of a natural disaster, working in shifts around the clock for days straight, after the tornado struck.

“It’s just like a funeral,” Sumlin said. “You’re grieving the death while at the same time having to exert so much energy to plan a funeral. We’re trying to exert the physical energy to serve needs, but at the same time lamenting our own loss.”

A week after disaster struck, Northway’s worshippers filled an unfamiliar building. The choir lined up on a new stage. Volunteers got their bearings in children’s classrooms they hadn’t set foot in before. It will be a long time before they’re back home. But Sumlin said that emphasizes a spiritual reality.

“The church is not a building, it’s a people,” he said. “We know that cognitively, but effectively, it becomes a very visceral reality. And there’s beauty in getting to rest in that.”
Sports

Success and setback

WHEN AN ACCIDENT AND INJURY LEFT SEAN RODRÍGUEZ IN A SLUMP, HE CHOSE TO WORK HARD AND LEAVE RESULTS TO GOD

by Sharon Dierberger

Sean Rodríguez, right-handed versatile player for the Philadelphia Phillies, has just completed his 12th season of major league baseball—a season he wasn’t sure he’d ever play.

In November 2016, following his best season ever, Rodríguez signed an $11.5 million contract with the Atlanta Braves. Two months later, a stolen police cruiser T-boned the SUV he was driving with his wife, Giselle, and two of their four children. Giselle and his children suffered serious injuries. The driver of the stolen vehicle died as the cruiser burst into flames.

Rodríguez says he only remembers standing next to his crumpled Suburban and seeing his wife and boys lying on the ground with paramedics kneeling over them. He was so focused on helping his family through the ordeal that 10 days passed before he realized he’d suffered significant shoulder damage, including a torn left rotator cuff.

His surgeon said it was the second-worst shoulder injury he’d seen and that even after surgery and rehab a comeback would be tough. Rodríguez responded: “I know my work ethic, and I know my Healer.” Even so, he labored long to regain strength and range of motion, at the same time caring for his recovering family.

After five months, he rejoined the Braves for 15 games before they traded him to the Pittsburgh Pirates, where he struggled through the end of 2017 and the 2018 season. “I think I was trying too hard,” says Rodríguez. “I couldn’t relax and just play.”

Last winter, he and Giselle had deep conversations about his baseball future. They decided Rodríguez would train as hard as ever, but they’d continue to trust God. He told me, “The accident brought my wife, my family, me, even closer to each other and to God. We weren’t gonna take any blessings for granted. Whether God wanted me to keep playing or not, so be it.”

In February, he signed a Phillies minor league contract for $100,000, a far cry from 2016. “It’s not about the money. ... I’ve been passionate about baseball since I was 4,” he says. “I love the game.”

As a 33-year-old returning to the minors, he became the fireplug rallying the team. He took his own advice: Work harder than anyone else. Then trust your preparation and just play the game.

In April, the Phillies called him to the majors. He played every position but catcher and finished 2019 with a commendable .348 on-base percentage, the second-highest of his career.

Rodríguez wants to keep playing, but as a free agent he doesn’t know what next year holds. He says his ultimate goal is to play long enough to be able to donate a full season’s salary to church. He and Giselle plan to head to Cuba shortly to do short-term mission work.

John Blanchard, a leadership consultant for pro baseball teams, sees Rodríguez’s Christian faith at work in how he holds himself and his fellow players to a high standard: “Sean is driven by a love for Christ and his teammates.”

Rodríguez credits many for his perseverance, but especially his wife. “Giselle is not only beautiful, but has a heart for Jesus like I’ve never seen,” he says. When he travels, Giselle brings the kids to wherever Rodríguez is so that the family never spends a week apart.

The ballplayer is part of a texting group of about 10 players reading through the Bible together, and he recently attended a Pro Athletes Outreach event designed to exhort players in Christ.

Rodríguez says his parents profoundly influenced him: “My mom is a spiritual stronghold.” His dad, who became a Christian the year Rodríguez was born, taught him baseball isn’t who he is, it’s what he does. Rodríguez concurs: “Baseball is a platform for my faith.”
Dr. Anthony Levatino's story is not for the fainthearted. From 1977 to 1985, he performed nearly 1,200 first- and second-trimester abortions as a routine part of his residency and later obstetrics and gynecology practice at Albany Medical Center in New York.

Personal tragedy forever changed his practice and his life. In June of 1984, as he and his wife Cecelia visited with friends in their backyard, a car struck their 5-year-old daughter, Heather, in front of their home. Despite Levatino’s CPR and treatment by paramedics, Heather died in his and Cecelia’s arms in the ambulance. Grief overwhelmed them. “Our marriage was in crisis. We were mourning apart,” says Levatino.

He had gone back to work, but during his next second-trimester abortion, for the first time he understood what he was doing as he looked at the growing pile of baby body parts he’d pulled from the woman. No longer did he see himself as a great doctor helping a woman with her “problem”: “I didn’t see that I was supporting a woman’s right to choose. I saw that I was killing someone’s son or daughter.”

Levatino says he kept blaming everyone else for the abortions—the women for being pregnant, the hospital for allowing them—but he continued doing them for a few more months. As his marriage worsened and his conviction grew about the reality of abortion no matter the size of the baby, he stopped performing all abortions by February of 1985.

At the same time that God was changing Levatino’s mind about abortion, He was changing his heart. He and Cecelia recommitted to each other. They went from trying to fight the pro-abortion stance of their liberal Protestant church to losing all their friends and eventually finding a pro-life nondenominational evangelical church where they found Jesus and many new friends. “It was a lonely time for a while,” he remembers. “We had to start all over.”

A pastor reminded him God had used many people in Levatino’s life to bring him to salvation. Levatino sought out a woman who for seven years delivered a “Jesus loves you” message to him while he was still doing abortions. He thanked her for those messages, told her about his change, and found out she used to picket his office, praying for him.

For more than 30 years now, Levatino, age 67, and Cecelia have ardently supported pro-life causes, speaking at gatherings, conferences, medical and law schools, and colleges around the country. In 2015, Levatino testified before a U.S. congressional committee on what an unborn child at 24 weeks experiences during an abortion. The pro-life bill passed the committee but failed in the Senate when Democrats filibustered.

He testified again in 2018 before the House Judiciary Committee in efforts to defund Planned Parenthood. Congress still funds the organization through Medicaid—our taxes.

Last year, Levatino played the role of the abortion doctor in the pro-life movie Unplanned, and though he relished that moviemaking experience, what drives him these days is urging people to vote pro-life.

Levatino expresses frustration: “People will support pro-life clinics, picket at Planned Parenthood, and say they support unwed mothers. Then they’ll go out and vote for a pro-abortion candidate.” He also bristles when he hears congressional bills promoted that say late-term abortions are OK if the health of the mother is jeopardized.

“You never have to do an abortion to save a mother’s life,” he says. “They may have to deliver the baby early, but you don’t have to kill it... and the term ‘health’ can mean anything.”

He is outspoken on voting pro-life, whether speaking before the Catholic Medical Association, evangelical groups, or in foreign countries like Malta.

Levatino says he’ll keep talking until God lets him know he’s done. He’s grateful for his Christian faith that gives him assurance: “I know with absolute certainty that when my time comes, our daughter will be standing right there.”

Dr. Anthony Levatino holds up a medical instrument that is typical of one used to perform abortions.
Greg and Robin Reynolds were high-school sweethearts, but after graduation, they went separate ways. Halfway through college, Greg became disillusioned and dropped out: He realized the Zen Buddhism he'd adopted didn't deal with the problems of sin and death. Searching for answers, he moved into a commune and, through reading the Bible, became a Christian in 1971. Later that year, Greg moved to L'Abri Fellowship, Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer's study center in Switzerland.

Back in New Hampshire, Robin could not deny how her mother's life had changed after she became a Christian: She displayed a new contentment and joy. One weekend, Robin came home from college and asked, “Mom, what do you have that I don’t?” In February 1972, Greg returned from L'Abri and was “instrumental,” Robin said, in helping her understand and accept the gospel. The couple married the next year.

But when Greg decided he wanted to attend seminary and become a pastor, Robin felt intimidated: She supported his dream, but her reserved personality and New England independence did not match her idea of a pastor’s wife—extraverted and involved in everything. When Greg began pastoring a small Orthodox Presbyterian Church in New York, Robin prayed, “Lord, I’ll do my best.”

Robin felt the pressure of the congregation’s expectations. “There are perceptions that you have to be perfect,” she said. “Even though people don’t really believe that, it’s still there.” She struggled not to overcommit out of a desire to please everyone, and Greg reminded her the Bible does not describe the perfect pastor’s wife. Over time, Robin took on the tasks she could manage and tried to serve quietly behind the scenes. One of her biggest challenges, she said, was hosting presbytery: At the couple’s second church, she hosted five, coordinating multiple meals for 90 visiting pastors and elders. Though tempted to focus on people’s expectations, she tried instead to concentrate on what God expected.

Greg also felt the pressures of ministry. “We really had to rely on the Lord just to survive,” he said. Robin encouraged her husband when he felt stuck in counseling, and she affirmed his preaching. He told her his troubles without gossiping about church members. The Reynoldses stuck together throughout their 35 years of ministry. Today Greg says ministry is such isolating work that he doesn’t know how men do it without a supportive wife.

When Greg retired last summer, the church ladies asked Robin for a list of her responsibilities. It was longer than anyone realized, including “everything from making sure the flowers on the front porch were always there in the summer to hosting presbytery,” Greg said. It took eight people to cover for her.

Now Greg is 70 and Robin is 68. They live in Massachusetts, enjoying time with their grandchildren. Greg edits a journal for officers in his denomination, writes, and preaches several times a year. The couple remains busy, but being free of ministry burdens makes a big difference.

Looking back, Robin said the mark of a good pastor’s wife is faithfulness: showing up and sticking with the tasks she takes on.

In the end, Greg said, “Robin made a better pastor’s wife than she will admit.”
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—Lynn M.

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Walking a tightrope

[Oct. 12, p. 34] The issue is not just opening the door to state regulation but the Church’s failure to stand against a therapy industry that defines addiction as chronic disease and addicts as victims. Teen Challenge has done for years what Christians should do: remove the teen from the old environment, add Scripture and physical labor, and help them move forward in life.

—CAROL ALMY / Long Grove, Ill.

The threat of mission drift is real, but, as executive director of Teen Challenge Detroit and Flint, I have been more than frustrated by Brother Don Wilkerson’s comments about the alleged secularization of Teen Challenge. His framing of the issues is inconsistent, reductionistic, and polarizing. Yes, the gospel alone is the power of salvation, and yes, all addiction is spiritual at its core. But addiction is complex. Our goal is to offer comprehensive, holistic care that addresses physical, psychological, and social dimensions. God’s salvation empowers and sustains true recovery, but it is not a magic pill.

—JEFF BONZELAAR / Detroit, Mich.

Sent into orbit

[Oct. 12, p. 3] In my experience, marriage is really good for the first few years. But after that? It gets better. Until you have kids. That’s when it becomes really good.

—JOHN TORS / Toronto, Ontario

We too are much concerned about failing marriages, but to me the real issue is the kids. When a couple divorces, it is sad. When a couple with kids divorces, it is a disaster!

—RICHARD & SUSAN BREWSTER / Cutchogue, N.Y.

Joel Belz’s advice about marriage is exactly the opposite of the counsel I received all my life from my fervently Christian mother. Belz provided a breath of fresh air, a terrifying mixture of love, hope, and fear.

—GRACE BROADWELL on Facebook

I appreciate Belz’s optimism and am thankful for my sweet wife, but let’s not forget that some people need realistically lower expectations for marriage to keep their sanity.

—ED WALKWITZ on wng.org

Belz asks if it’s true that half of all marriages, including Christian marriages, end in divorce. The evidence, as carefully analyzed by Shaunti Feldhahn in The Good News About Marriage, shows this was never true in America and that the divorce rate among Christians who regularly attend worship services is far below the national average.

—DOUG FRECHTLING / Bethesda, Md.

Human Race

[Oct. 12, p. 10] The attempt to impeach President Trump is an important moment for Christians. Some are so loyal to the president that they will never demand accountability. But we must take the long view, having no political loyalty so great that we fail to be salt in an age needing examples of courage, principle, and hope.

—JOHN-MASON SHACKELFORD / Bay Village, Ohio

Democrats are desperate. They know they won’t be able to beat Trump in the election so they have tried twice to scrape together evidence for impeachment, but he is innocent. Is Joe Biden?

—ABIGAIL KIMBROUGH / Kilgore, Texas

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—KELLY JESSUP CASEBEER on Facebook

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—DOUG FRECHTLING / Bethesda, Md.

Eventually this genre will be either the dominant discourse of a socialist dystopia or shared with quiet laughs in old folks homes over a shared bottle of Ensure. Picture it: Lana Del Rey, Taylor Swift, and Kirstin Maldonado as guests of a Medicare state wondering where it all went wrong.

—DAVID DILEAS / Amherst, N.Y.

Doomsters and extremists

[Oct. 12, p. 33] Mindy Belz’s column on the ridiculous prophets of climate change doomsday is right on target. God “makes the world great,” and He alone will decide what the weather will be tomorrow and when it all shall come to an end.

—CONSTANCE RICE / South Charleston, Ohio

Excellent commentary. Keeping our focus on Jesus balances a call to action with hope for the future.

—MICHELLE OLS / Northborough, Mass.

The other side of Everest

[Oct. 12, p. 63] What a wonderful reminder. Families shift, children leave, and some never get to have the privilege of knowing their own grandchildren. Our duty is to dedicate them all to the Lord and trust in Him.

—SHANNON-MARK BURGDORF on Facebook

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The Mayo Clinic
[Oct. 12, p. 21] I watched the series while receiving chemotherapy. It was encouraging to see such impressive gains in medical care that reaches so many people emerge from such humble beginnings. It’s a testimony to God’s common grace. The nuns’ influence may have been underplayed, but their faith and dedicated service were mentioned often and with admiration.
—KEITH TELLE on wng.org

Telling the truth
[Oct. 12, p. 6] During the 2008 campaign I was concerned by how casually people spread unfounded allegations against Barack Obama; now we’re demanding truth from secular media. If we’re going to demand that others do due diligence, we are going to have to do ours, and I have to start with myself.
—LIZ JONES on wng.org

Ad Astra
[Oct. 12, p. 20] With the exception of the space sequences, this movie felt made for 1 a.m. viewing on a cable movie channel, the sort of late-night introspection where you find yourself wondering how many other lost souls are on the same insomniac journey as you.
—CHRISTA LEHR on Facebook

Correction

Servants and lords
[Oct. 12, p. 19] I normally love Megan Basham’s reviews and went to see Downton Abbey based on her thoughts. I was wildly disappointed. The homosexual kiss overshadowed all the good parts of the movie for me.
—KERRI FEDELE on wng.org

People sold here
[Oct. 12, p. 58] It is so heartbreaking what humans do to each other. I am so thankful that God reaches into such sin and chooses to love and save us sinners.
—AMANDA SMITH on Facebook

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Impasse ahead!
FIND A BETTER WAY, INSTEAD OF THE SAME OLD ROAD TO NOWHERE

If you’re traveling in Tunisia, be advised about the roads. You’ll be driving down a promising thoroughfare with a destination in mind, when suddenly the road dead-ends. Often one of the locals along the street will oblige you with a heads-up, calling out to your car in French: “Impasse!”

Only a slow learner would make the same mistake again and again. Just because it looks to you like logic dictates the existence of a connecting vehicular link at this juncture does not mean that things in this world proceed according to your logic. Frustration must bow to realism, and wisdom means accepting that in Tunisia lots of roads that should go somewhere in fact go nowhere.

Here is my thanksgiving column this year: gratitude to God for allowing me to stay alive long enough to stop assuming that the same road going nowhere will turn out OK this time around.

A sermon I heard mentioned a man who went for a job interview boasting of his seven years’ experience. The human resources person across the desk lifted his eyes from the application and said to the applicant, “Looks to me like you’ve had one year’s experience, seven times.”

We are on this planet “threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength... fourscore.” Our life is “soon cut off, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10). In that brief window we are meant to make “progress” (Philippians 1:25). When we don’t, a divine trip to the woodshed is in store: “Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God” (Hebrews 5:12).

This inspired rebuke would indicate that the longer you are in Christ, the more you ought to have learned about which paths get you to the destination of that Christlikeness you want, and which are a cul-de-sac. Once you know, and have walked it a few miles, then by virtue of that “constant practice” (Hebrews 5:14), you are qualified to “be teachers” of beginner sojourners. And the thing you will teach them is “the basic principles of the oracles of God”—principles like kindness, patience, being slow to speak, and not letting the sun go down on your anger.

I am in my second marriage. God has seen fit to let me confront the same obstacles in my autumn marriage as in my springtime one. I strongly suspect that if I were six more times bereft by death of a husband, and six more times remarried, the same walls would crop up if they have not been mastered. How unlikely a coincidence is it that the walls are every husband’s fault, not mine! The flesh must be put to death or it will continue to rule: “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13).

In the 1993 film Groundhog Day, Bill Murray is caught in some kind of time warp where, however much he hopes that time is advancing and that he is getting somewhere, the next morning his alarm clock wakes him up to Sonny & Cher’s “I Got You Babe” and the same disc jockey banter. What a nightmare to repeat the same day over and over again.

Did your relationship strategies work in the first marriage? What are the odds they will work any better in the second one? Why not venture down a new highway marked “minister” rather than the well-worn furrow marked “manipulate”? It breaks free of the time loop. Now you begin to really change, instead of being just a wrinkled, gray-haired version of the person you were at age 10, 30, and 50.

Like a Tunisian native, I know where the “impasses” are and try to take pains to avoid them, for only fools repeat their folly (Proverbs 26:11). Only the insane go down the same doomed highway all their lives and hope this time it will lead to Elysium. The one who finally sets foot on the narrow road and “walk[s] as Jesus walked” (1 John 2:6) discovers this surprise from the first step: It’s really true that Jesus’ yoke is easy and His burden light.
A powerful force

HOW CHRISTIANITY REMADE THE WORLD

Until this year, the first 20 pages of Witness by Whittaker Chambers (Random House, 1952) comprised the most brilliant preface or foreword I’d ever read. Chambers, who had crossed over from Communism to Christianity, explained that Communism is “man’s second oldest faith. Its promise was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: ‘Ye shall be as gods.” And gods play to win, as Chambers goes on to show during the next 788 pages, which are good but not as good as the beginning.

The first 17 pages of historian Tom Holland’s Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World (Basic, 2019) knock the start of Witness out of first place. Those pages beautifully tell the amazing story of how a culture that had esteemed only big winners began to care about (in worldly terms) big losers. If the familiar Gospels no longer move you to wonder and perhaps tears, read that preface.

Holland begins with a description of ancient Rome’s most dramatic gentrification project. A ditch just outside the ancient walls was littered with the carcasses of dead slaves. Roman builders cleaned it out and created Rome’s first heated swimming pool. Holland notes, “The marble fittings, the tinkling fountains, the perfumed flower beds: all were raised on the backs of the dead.”

Some of those slaves had suffered the most excruciating, contemptible death Rome could offer: crucifixion. To be hung naked, nailed to a cross, every breath an agony, helpless to beat away buzzards: “such a fate, Roman intellectuals agreed, was the worst imaginable.” But sometimes it seemed necessary, for “luxury and splendor such as Rome could boast were dependent, in the final reckoning, on keeping those who sustained it in their place.” Holland quotes politician/historian Tacitus: “We have slaves drawn from every corner of the world in our households ... it is only by means of terror that we can hope to coerce such scum.”

Crucifixion as a deterrent needed to be public, with victims unavailingly crying for mercy, but “so foul was the carrion-reek of their disgrace that many felt tainted even by viewing a crucifixion.” Romans almost never described this ultimate penalty, but “four detailed accounts of the process by which a man might be sentenced to the cross, and then suffer his punishment, have survived from antiquity.” Remarkably, they all describe the same execution—that of “a Jew by the name of Jesus ... resurrected into a new and glorious form. ... By enduring the most agonizing fate imaginable, he had conquered death itself.”

Evangelicals understand this. Here’s what we often do not understand: “The utter strangeness of all this, for the vast majority of people in the Roman world, did not lie in the notion that a mortal might become divine.” Romans thought this had happened to Hercules, Romulus, Julius Caesar, and Caesar’s adopted son Augustus. Winners could gain divinity: They were victors because they had the power to torture their enemies, not to be tortured. Holland writes, “That a man who had himself been crucified might be hailed as a god could not help but be seen by people everywhere across the Roman world as scandalous, obscene, grotesque.”

The societies that developed over the centuries, as more people came to worship a loser (by Roman standards), grew a different set of virtues alongside the old Roman ones of military toughness and tenacity. Anselm, a millennium after the wondrous crucifixion, described them as “patience in tribulation, offering the other cheek, praying for one’s enemies, loving those who hate us.”

Holland’s next 600 pages mix brilliance and some questionable judgments, but they continue to depict the power of Christianity in upsetting the powerful. Even those who turn against the theology have usually absorbed some of the fundamental ethic. For example, the Me Too movement did not emerge from churches, but Holland notes that in ancient Rome sexual predation was unquestionably “the perk of a very exclusive subsection of society: powerful men. Zeus, Apollo, Dionysus: All had been habitual rapists.”

Christianity changed all that in theory and sometimes in practice. Even those who hate Christ pay tribute to Him when they care for a few of the least of these—and, someday, maybe more. 🙏
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