

WORLD

EARNING YOUR TRUST, EVERY DAY | OCTOBER 2025

POWER STRUGGLE

Will the long-standing battle between the executive and judicial branches
tear the country apart? *p.66*

by EMMA FREIRE





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C O N T E N T S

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WORLD

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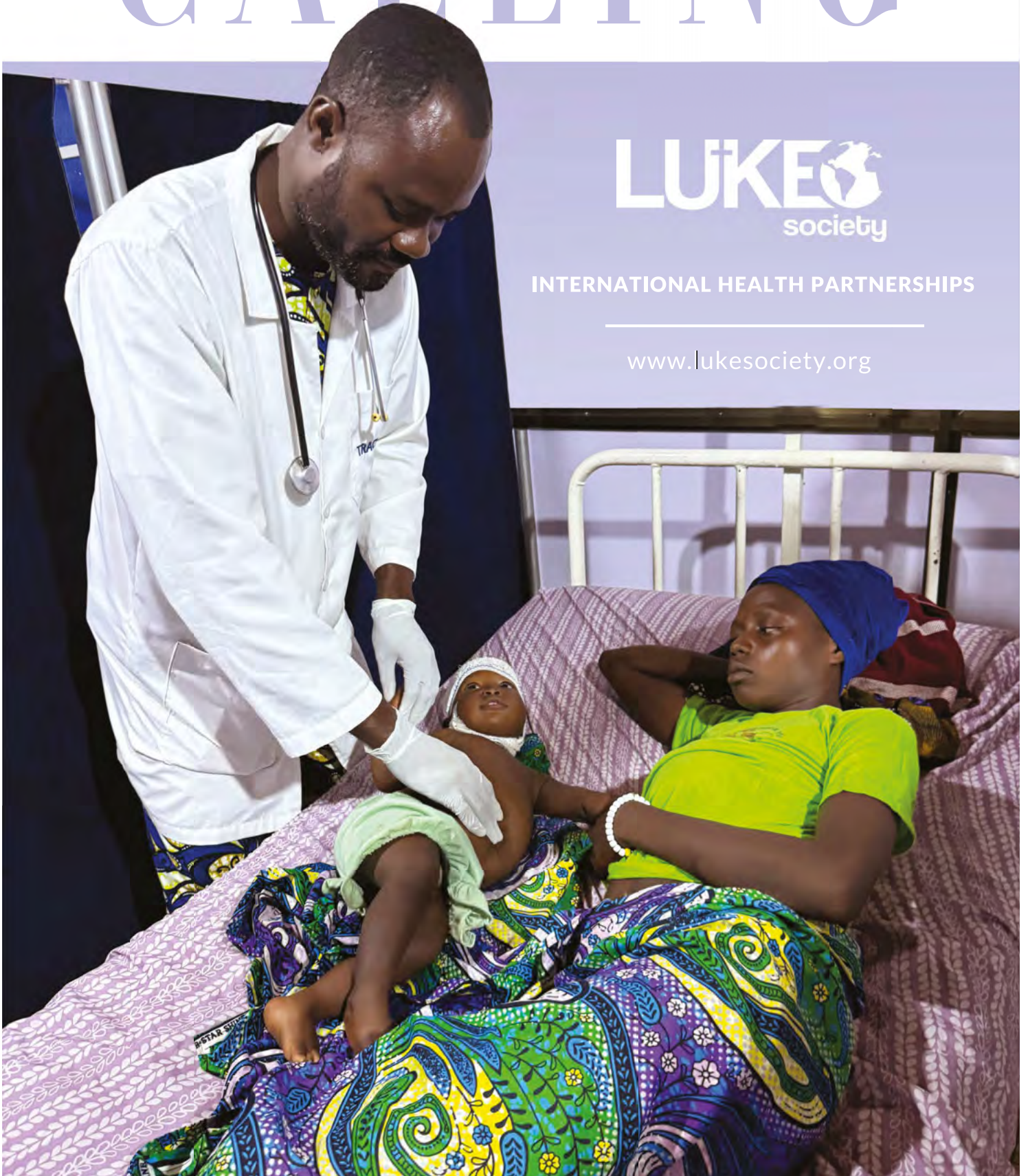
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WORLD NOTES



Perhaps you recall listening to *The World and Everything in It* on Monday morning, Sept. 30, 2024, and hearing something unusual. After the familiar introductions, you heard a report that floodwaters had swept through our headquarters in Asheville, N.C. Hurricane Helene had pushed the Swannanoa River over its banks, leaving our offices in Biltmore Village destroyed. Our business offices, *WORLD Watch*'s TV studio, and our Asheville radio studio—all of it was submerged under rushing water that rose higher and faster than anyone expected. Remote operations kept us on the air and publishing, and, by God's grace, we didn't miss a single deadline.

That was what you heard. What we experienced up close was God's provision through His people. Nearby, but on higher ground, Evangelism Explosion International opened its doors to us—not only with office space but with friendship. During this past year, EE staff have invited us to every one of their lunches, they included our families in their Christmas celebration, and week after week they showed us what Christian love looks like. Their mission is evangelism, and this year, for us, they have preached powerfully through hospitality.

Now, after months of improvising, we are finding new space for our staff and operations. *WORLD Watch* production is anchored in Charlotte, and a new office in Asheville will soon be ready, so we will be reducing our footprint at EE's headquarters over the next month. We'll be sad to leave, but the friendships God gave us in a season of hardship will remain.

That season was a reminder of how much we need one another. And it inspired us to think creatively about how to strengthen fellowship across the wider WORLD family. That's the vision behind a new initiative we are "piloting" this fall: The WORLD Stage.

The idea is simple but vital: to gather our readers, listeners, and viewers—along with friends who may not yet know WORLD—for face-to-face conversations with thoughtful, Biblically sound speakers. For years, we've experimented with live formats, from podcast recordings before an audience to *WORLD Watch* events for students. The shutdowns of 2020 interrupted those efforts, but the desire never left. Those earlier experiences gave us a glimpse of the potential, and time has only reinforced our conviction of the value of meeting together.

This new project is a little different. In Houston on Sept. 15, we asked podcast favorite David Bahnsen to be our first speaker. We call it a "pilot" not because of Houston's role in the space program but because we intend to test, refine, and improve the format. We are planning more, and you can follow updates at wng.org/theworldstage. We hope many of you will join us in person as this effort expands.



WORLD staffers Naomi Balk and Harrison Watters tied the knot in August.

Community is not only something we receive in crisis or something we build through programs. Sometimes it happens in very personal ways. Weddings among WORLD staff families are a big deal here, and it seems that just about every month brings another. We never get tired of celebrating, but in the past year, we've celebrated two that are especially close to home—weddings between colleagues.

Last fall, two of our Washington, D.C., reporters, Carolina Lumetta and Josh Schumacher, were married. This summer, their colleague in the Washington bureau, Harrison Watters, married Naomi Balk, assistant director of the World Journalism Institute. Two weddings in two years among co-workers is rare for us, but each one was a joyful reminder of God's providence.

From storm recovery to live events and wedding celebrations, the theme remains the same: God provides for His people through the gift of community. We are grateful.

KEVIN MARTIN
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
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M A I L B A G

“God has given us doctors, counselors, and yes, medication to help us. Can those good gifts be abused? Of course! But that doesn’t mean you should refuse their help.”

STAY IN THE CRUCIBLE

Page 111: Although I sympathize with the author’s concern over excessive drug prescription and diagnoses in response to mental health issues, I found many of the points in her column deeply concerning.

Responding to someone who has suffered sexual abuse and has attempted to take her own life as a child with platitudes such as “life is hard,” “get a good night’s sleep,” and “sit quietly and think” is unhelpful. Good sleep is, of course, important for physical and mental health, but people who have suffered in this way may also suffer from insomnia, or horrifying nightmares. Sitting quietly and thinking may only bring more thoughts of despair and suicide—something the Reformer Martin Luther knew all too well.

Calling chemical imbalances a “myth” is also troubling. Many (but not all) of the people who suffer from mental illness do so because their neurotransmitters are not producing sufficient dopamine, serotonin, and so forth. In other words, their bodies are not functioning properly—one of the marks of living in a fallen world.

And of course, preaching the gospel to people with mental illness is one of the most important things you can do, but insisting that’s the only thing you should do is wrong. God has given us doctors, counselors, and yes, medication to help us. Can those good gifts be abused? Of course! But that doesn’t mean you should refuse their help.



AUGUST 2025

We are called to take up our crosses and follow Christ (Matthew 16:24), but we are also called to bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2). The idea that we should all just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps—that we should “just try harder!”—is a very American idea but not a very Christian one.

BETHANY ROCHELLE PALMER
Offerle, Kan.

Thanks to Andrée Seu Peterson for addressing the problem that “the normal human struggles of a thousand generations of young people are suddenly seen as a pathology to be labeled, treated, and numbed with meds.” This is a huge issue today. But your article seems to imply that no one should ever take any psychiatric medications.

During my college years in the late 1970s, I sank into a suicidal depression.

As a Christian, I turned to God for help. My relationship with Him grew in incredible ways that couldn’t have happened without this experience, and He saw me through some very difficult times, but He didn’t heal me. It took an antidepressant to do that.

The problem isn’t that psychiatric medications are worthless. The problem is that, just like technology and the environment and sex, they’re a God-given blessing that’s being misused due to our fallen human nature.

LYDIAN DAVIS
Tempe, Ariz.

Had others in the church shown the courage of Andrée Seu Peterson over the past 40 years, surely fewer individuals would be “numbed with meds” today. However, I would urge caution regarding advice that mimics the therapy industry such as “trusting in the process ... [as] His much-loved children, meant to thrive” and that God “proffers trustworthy rules for living.” Christians must neither offer techniques nor label struggles as normal or abnormal but rather “stay in the crucible,” described in Romans 5:1-5, waiting on Him as He fits us for glory. Thank you, *WORLD* and Andrée for reminding us of this.

CAROL ALMY
Long Grove, Ill.

CHATGPA

Page 66: Your article on AI in the classroom should be a wake-up call to all →

parents. The primary purpose of education should be to teach a child how to think, be disciplined, and be creative and to instill virtue, things that were at the forefront of the minds of educators until the progressivism of John Dewey became widespread in the early years of the 20th century. Any vestige of these four worthy goals will be completely eradicated if AI is allowed to fester in our classrooms.

DAVID DEBOOR CANFIELD
Bloomington, Ind.

AI is a new tool just like a calculator or typewriters in their time. Invest the time to learn how to use it. Teachers need to adapt education to AI and encourage students to learn its use. Human creativity and technology are ever evolving to reduce drudgery work. AI is no different. Think of the release of human intellect that will occur because of this new tool. Start a conversation with ChatGPT by asking it what it can do for you to reduce drudgery in your work. Have fun, explore.

BILL CHAMBERS
Corvallis, Ore.

Grace Snell's article about AI forcing educators and students to redefine education is excellent. Detecting plagiarism is indeed a broad concern, but so is protecting students falsely accused of using AI. My son was an honors student at a local Christian university who, in his senior year, was accused of plagiarism by a tool even the developer said should not be used due to the high incidence of false positives it flagged. Despite my son showing them progressive drafts of his original work and his lifelong commitment to Biblical integrity, the university closed ranks and awarded him a "D."

TRAVIS L. ZIMMERMAN
Hershey, Pa.

IS NATO GOING NUCLEAR?

Page 30: The title is slightly misleading. NATO currently may be considering force posture elements from a previous time (1960-1991), when thousands of U.K., French, and U.S. nuclear weapons

were based on European soil to deter the Soviet Union. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1988 and later the dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted the removal of most U.S. theater nuclear weapons and all U.S. battlefield nuclear weapons from Europe by the early 1990s. In the decades since, the theater nuclear weapon stockpiles of the United Kingdom and France largely disappeared. While that may have been good policy 30 years ago, Russian aggression under Vladimir Putin now suggests a different approach for NATO.

PAUL BERG
Bellevue, Neb.

HANG ON TIGHT

Page 82: Abi Dunning did an excellent job writing about Lucas Divino and bull riding. I felt like I was riding the bull with him. Great article. It was like reading and riding at the same time—and fast! Good job!

PARKER BENSON
Tallassee, Tenn.

The story about a bull rider is a welcome addition to WORLD, but Abi does bull riders a disservice when she writes, "Last night, Divino fell off," and again where she writes, "The rider gets on. The bull bucks. The rider falls off." In the history of rodeo no professional rodeo cowboy has ever "fallen off." They get "bucked off." They get "thrown." But they never fall off.

REGINALD LEQUIEU
Mount Vernon, Ore.

EMERGENCY EXIT

Page 64: There's something parents should know regarding opt-out in public schools. Students who are in the hallway or the main office while offensive books or topics are being discussed in class usually end up finding out what was talked about afterward through other students. Those other students often say much worse things than what the teacher actually taught, or give inaccurate information. Talking with the teacher ahead of time about what is being taught and why can help parents make the best decision for their child. As a teacher, I value parent communication.

LYNN RIDER
Cortland, Ohio

HOW TO SPOT A CALVINIST

Page 14: I had tears running down my cheeks as I read Lynn Vincent's comments about the Standard Evangelical Side Hug (SESH). I grew up in the Lutheran Church in Missouri, and I don't remember anyone doing any hugging, even on the side! I arrived in Houston 30 years ago and quickly learned about full body hugs from my Southern Presbyterian friends. It took a while to get used to it, but now I am all in.

BEVERLY UHLMER ROBERTS
Houston, Texas

Lynn made me laugh out loud. I don't like the SESH, even though I am a staunch member of the Jesus People—founded Calvary Chapel. I don't like hugging strangers or even acquaintances. Maybe it's a holdover from my infant baptism in the Lutheran Church.

URSULA MACDOUGALL
Modesto, Calif.

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Please include full name and address.
Letters may be edited to yield
brevity and clarity.

CORRECTIONS

Beth Novak is an associate professor at Ohio University ("Destination detour," September, p. 40).

Kerrville, Texas, sits along the Guadalupe River, which flows directly into the gulf ("Troubled waters," August, p. 17).

The Arlington Hotel is located in Hot Springs, Ark. ("Field of grace," August, p. 94).

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VOICES LYNN VINCENT

Awake?

Influencer Jen Hatmaker test-drives
“exvangelicalism”

I’m out of the church right now. I don’t know that I will ever go back, and I don’t know that I will never go back,” Jen Hatmaker told *Time* in September. “My lifelong exposure has left me in a place where I know too much. I have been a part of the problem. So, I need a break from the machine.”

Hatmaker’s September interview coincides with the release of her latest book, *Awake*, in which she chronicles the devastating collapse of her 26-year marriage. It would be easy (and cynical) to suspect the podcaster and bestselling author of serving up tasty soundbites—such as calling the Church a “machine,” a quote other media have already picked up—to juice sales of her new book. After all, “exvangelicalism” has turned into something of a cottage industry, churning out, among others, books like Sarah McCammon’s 2024 bestseller, *The Exvangelicals: Loving, Living, and Leaving the White Evangelical Church*.

I’m not sure what “white” has to do with evangelicalism, but the secular media seem to love the racist distinctive. They also love the “leaving” part. Secular media don’t interview liberals who join the Church, only former conservatives who criticize or abandon it.

Jen Hatmaker’s trendy critiques of evangelicalism have cut a broad swath through secular media: *The Washington Post*, *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic*, NPR. The list goes on. But I don’t think she’s in it for the fame.

Decades ago, Hatmaker and I shared a literary agent, Lee Hough. One summer, Lee and his wife Paula hosted a small group of authors at their home in Colorado Springs. I remember sitting on the Houghs’ lush lawn with Hatmaker and the other guests, astonished at how unbelievably hot

the sun was. Not the air—the sun itself, its searing intensity.

Someone told me it was the altitude. At 7,100 feet above sea level, the sun simply feels hotter on your skin. That’s how finely tuned God’s creation is: Though the sun is about 94 million miles from Earth, just a mile and a half makes a big difference.

Degrees of error make a big difference, too. When I sat on that lawn with her, Hatmaker was an up-and-coming writer, a young Christian conservative whose style was fresh and sincere. That’s why I don’t think she left the Church to boost her brand. It’s sadder than that: Hatmaker is saying what she really thinks ...

On abortion: “Women deserve agency over their own bodies and their own futures.”

On marriage: The Church “idolizes marriage to such a degree that it pushes people into unhealthy spaces, and it keeps them there. It has done a real disservice to marriage overall.”

On divorce: “When I got far enough away from the trauma ... and I started examining all the bricks that built that house—patriarchy, religious subculture, body shame, gender limitations, purity culture, misogyny—I started to realize that maybe it just wasn’t such a shock that that house came down.”

On homosexuality: “Any two adults have the right to choose who they want to love.” In 2016, after a year of studying what the Bible says about homosexuality, Hatmaker and her pastor husband concluded that marriage sanctifies same-sex relationships, that “a same-sex marriage, as a life-long monogamous commitment, can be holy before God.”

In making such pronouncements, Hatmaker has joined the stream of others—including singer Katy Perry, former pastor Joshua Harris, and John Piper’s son, Abraham—who first dabbled in doctrinal detours, then fell over the cliff.

Today, Hatmaker enjoys 1.5 million followers on social media. I’m not a follower. I’m a mourner. I mourn the unjaded young woman who sat with me on that soft green lawn.

Now 51, Hatmaker told *Time* in September, “I still love Jesus but church is hard for me.”

It seems strange to claim to love Jesus—who is the Head of the Church—while rejecting the Church. Or to claim to love Jesus—who is the Word of God—while leading people away from the Word of God. The red letters in the Gospels offer no sanctuary, either, for David declared, “The *sum* of your word is truth, and *every one* of your righteous rules endures forever.” (Emphasis mine.) So which Jesus is Hatmaker loving?

She told *Time* that leaving the Church makes her sad, “like I am missing my childhood home.”

I’m sad, too, Jen. I hope you come home. ■



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DISPATCHES




IN THE NEWS

Dark forces

FBI cracks down on nihilistic terror groups targeting teens online

by GRACE SNELL



On Sept. 3, former FBI agent Pat McMonigle sat at a Catholic Mass in Washington state with three of his four children. They were celebrating the start of their school year exactly a week after a shooter opened fire at a near-identical gathering in Minneapolis.

“It was very eerie,” McMonigle said. Everyone was on high alert. “The ushers at the back of the church are more on guard thinking about who’s entering,” he said. The previous week’s events had seared into their minds the worst-case scenario of what could happen.

Looking at the students sitting in pews around him, McMonigle’s heart broke. “These poor kids are just like sheep,” he thought.

Mass shootings are always senseless. But the one in Minneapolis bore every hallmark of a new kind of crime now being tracked by the FBI: Nihilistic Violent Extremists, or NVEs. The label refers to the troubling trend of violent crimes carried out for no apparent reason except a glorification of chaos and depravity for its own sake.

Investigators sifted through hundreds of pages of scribbles from the Minneapolis perpetrator, a 23-year-old male who identified

as transgender. The writings expressed hatred toward many different groups: black people, Mexican people, Christians, and Jews.

“In short, the shooter appeared to hate all of us,” acting U.S. Attorney for Minnesota Joe Thompson said at an Aug. 28 press conference. In other words, NVEs lash out against a world they believe is meaningless.

“There’s always been a subset of people that just want to watch the world burn,” said Seamus Hughes, a policy associate in counterterrorism at the University of Nebraska Omaha. Law enforcement used to call this the “Joker effect.” Only more recently, in April 2025, did the FBI start using the NVE label for this phenomenon.

The twisted ideology behind these attacks is difficult for rational people to make sense of, Hughes said. But it runs something like this: “We can hurt and kill and maim whoever we want because it doesn’t matter in the long run.”

NVE groups aren’t formally organized in the way foreign terrorist groups like ISIS are, Hughes said. They are loose webs held together in dark corners of the internet, particularly on platforms like Discord and Telegram. NVEs often have ties to satanist and neo-Nazi groups like 764 and the Order of Nine Angles (O9A) that target isolated and vulnerable children online and manipulate them into explicit acts, self-harm, or violence.

“Think of it like an online troll who decided to go very violent very quickly,” Hughes said. Researchers don’t yet have good metrics on the →

A mother hugs her son after the shooting at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis.

size and scope of this problem, he added. FBI Director Kash Patel said his agency currently has over 250 active NVE investigations across the United States. But this may only be the tip of the iceberg.

Because of the insidious nature of the threat, it's nearly impossible for agents to predict when the next NVE might come out of the woodwork. But former FBI agent McMonigle said it helps to know the general profile for these predators.

They are usually loners with mental health issues and significant suicidality. Most of them are males between the ages of 15 and 25, and often, their names are already in the FBI database for one reason or another, McMonigle said.

They are also marked by a grudge against humanity. "That's why their manifestos or whatever really make no sense," McMonigle said. "It's just kind of grievances with everybody. Everybody did them wrong."

Mourners visit a growing memorial for the victims of the school shooting.

"There's always been a subset of people that just want to watch the world burn."

This issue is deeply personal for McMonigle. In 2022, he helped investigate a local Washington case in which a 13-year-old recorded his own suicide at the urging of an online groomer and 764 ringleader.

"Our victim here was a child," McMonigle said. "And he had just fallen into the trap of being convinced that this person was a friend and then becoming more and more manipulated by the predator."

The case was one of the first to bring attention to the issue, and after that, the FBI designated particular squads to tackle this growing online threat, McMonigle said. But he worried the same perpetrator would target others. "These guys are on the prowl," he said. "They want a bigger and bigger kill."

But fighting these online gangs is harder than busting more organized terrorist groups. And McMonigle said FBI agents often find themselves in the difficult position where they can't do much about the threats until someone actually commits a crime.

In 2024, just before McMonigle left the FBI, he got a call to interview a teenager who made comments about wanting to be a school shooter. The boy was living in a state home and didn't have any parents. He had recently gotten pulled out of school and was at risk for suicide.

"But, he hasn't done anything yet other than talk, right?" McMonigle said. It isn't possible to keep everyone fitting the profile of a potential shooter under 24-hour surveillance, he said. So, the agents could only give the teenager a stern talking to and hope for the best.

"All I could do was think about giving this kid a hug," McMonigle said. He knew there were a lot of complicated layers behind the teenager's dark threats and volatile emotional state.



It's a situation underscoring one of the most difficult aspects of NVE cases. Often, the perpetrators targeting children were victims first. And many of them are still legally minors when they first start committing crimes against others.

Because of that, McMonigle said law enforcement has to strike the right balance of compassionate intervention beforehand and absolute deterrence and prosecution after a crime.

And it's absolutely essential for parents and teachers to know the warning signs of online grooming and be on the lookout for them, McMonigle said. Sometimes predators will encourage children to scratch swastikas and other symbols into their skin.

Church leaders and school administrators need to find ways to make their facilities less vulnerable to attack, McMonigle added. Often, NVEs are just looking for a soft target and will strike elsewhere if an institution takes basic security measures.

After investigating the 764-related case in 2022, McMonigle wrestled with the depravity of what he'd encountered. "It was hard to see such senseless evil committed on a child who was just a victim," he said. German police recently arrested one of the suspected 764 leaders and charged him with 123 counts, including involvement in McMonigle's case. But that won't bring back the group's victims.

That case displayed the same depravity manifested in the Minneapolis attack. "When somebody mows down kids who are literally praying—that's evil," McMonigle said.

McMonigle feels compassion for today's young people who are growing up in an increasingly dark world. They're worried about a lot of things: AI, climate change, and foreign wars. And that makes them more vulnerable to the lure of NVE.

In some ways, McMonigle said, Christians have a target on their backs as this nihilistic ideology takes root. But faith also helps people understand the way evil operates in the world and offers hope: "That is the one kind of antidote we have to this in a faithless, really depressed world." ■



BY THE NUMBERS

D'oh, Canada

Canadians shun visits to the U.S. as tensions remain high between the two neighbors

BY JOHN DAWSON

35%

The decline in the number of Canadians visiting the United States by car or airplane in July 2025 as compared to July 2024 according to Statistics Canada. The decrease in Canadian tourism to the U.S. comes amid heightened tensions between the two nations after President Donald Trump suggested annexing Canada and imposed high tariffs against America's second-largest trading partner.

\$20.5 billion

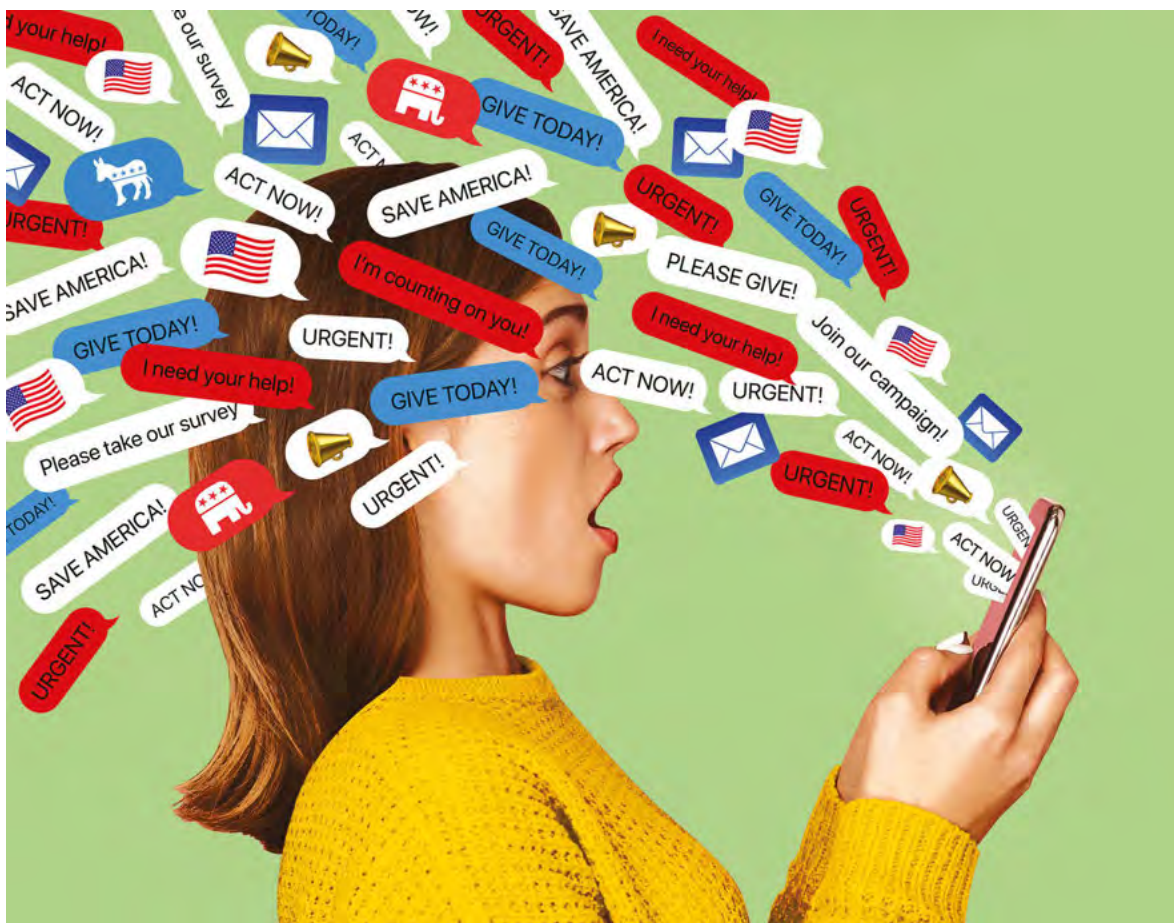
The money generated by Canadian tourism to the United States in 2024, enough to support 140,000 American jobs, according to the U.S. Travel Association.

9.5%

The drop in U.S. exports and imports with Canada in June 2025 compared to June 2024. This decline was before Trump's 35% tariffs on some Canadian goods took effect in August.

15%

The share of Canadians with a positive view of U.S. leadership, giving the Trump administration higher marks than Russia (9%) but lower marks than China (23%), according to Gallup.



WASHINGTON MEMO

Cutting through campaign spam

Shady political fundraising tactics finally meet with pushback

by CAROLINA LUMETTA

➔ It can feel like a never-ending flood: flyers, texts, phone calls, and emails all asking for money to fund political candidates and causes. My more than 17,000 unread emails and texts are mostly from various political action committees telling me that President Donald Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance, Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, and former Vice President Kamala Harris are eagerly awaiting my opinion and my minimum \$5 donation. A brick at Mar-a-Lago could have my name engraved on it, and former presidential hopeful Nikki Haley needs me

to know she supports Sen. Susan Collins for reelection and I should, too.

But the barrage of politically themed texts asking for money could get reined in this fall.

In September, Apple rolled out an iOS 26 update for iPhone that hides suspected spam in a folder instead of notifying the phone owner. Campaign strategists aren't thrilled about this update: A National Republican Senatorial Committee memo called on fundraisers to lobby against the "aggressive message filtering."

"NRSC alone could see a \$25M+ revenue hit," the memo read. "Since 70%

of small dollar donations come via text, and iPhones make up 60% of U.S. mobile devices, the macro effect could be over \$500M in lost GOP revenue."

Americans received roughly 15 billion political texts in 2022, according to Robokiller, a call blocking service. YouMail, a political text and robocall tracking company, reported that Republicans used text campaigns twice as often as Democrats in 2024. But most users would prefer hiding those types of messages for good. Their angst stems from a deeper exhaustion with "dark patterns"—unethical but legal ways of

tricking political donors into taking actions they normally wouldn't.

"The No. 1 metric is always the open rate," Republican campaign strategist and former fundraising email writer Jacob Perry told me. "That's how they're valued, and that was always my specialty—writing good subject lines. Nothing matters if you don't read the email."

Conventional marketing wisdom says that a 15-20% email open rate is excellent. Text messages have a 90-98% open rate. A 2017 marketing study found that text messages reported six to eight times higher engagement rates in retail. Political consultants quickly jumped on board and flooded potential and active voters with texts phrased in candidates' first-person voices.

Perry worked as a strategist for Prosper Group, a consulting company, in 2010—the height of the switch from mail-in campaign flyers to emails. His job: writing snappy, attention-grabbing email headlines to ensure the open rate remained high. But he regrets the industrywide spiral into heightened rhetoric, scare tactics, and a means-justifies-the-end approach to campaign fundraising language that continues today.

"President Trump is going to see your name on this list,' or, 'There's a 10-to-1 match on your donations,' or whatever nonsense that these people come up with," Perry said, reading off common email and text notifications. "It's blatantly shady, but it works, which maybe is an indictment on our society."

British researcher Harry Brignull coined the term "dark patterns" to describe these deceptive practices: hard-to-find exit buttons, an easy online sign-up but a requirement to call a phone number to cancel a subscription, or an automatically checked box to set up a recurring charge. Political dark patterns include data tracking, design options that force a donation before seeing the full webpage, and a ramping up of extreme rhetoric to get a donor emotionally involved.

"I thought it was bad when I was in office," former Rep. Reid Ribble, R-Wis.,

**"It's blatantly shady,
but it works,
which maybe is
an indictment on
our society."**

told me. Ribble, who served from 2011 to 2017, sometimes used consultants to run online fundraising campaigns. He said the rhetoric was frustrating, and fees ate up much of the donation anyway. "They've discovered that by making someone feel like they're a victim or could be victimized, they can inspire them to do something to defend themselves. And if you would just give your \$50 to \$500, you're contributing to saving American democracy."

Last year, a CNN investigation found that hundreds of elderly people had fallen for dark patterns that drained their bank accounts. One woman had no idea she was signed up for monthly donations through ActBlue, a nonprofit fundraising arm for Democrats. Richard Benjamin, 81, thought he was personally communicating with then-candidate

Donald Trump and his son, Donald Trump Jr. He gave around \$80,000 to the campaign. Through Federal Trade Commission complaints, sometimes family members could recover a portion of the funds. The FTC called prechecked boxes a "trick" and a "psychological tactic," but it does not have jurisdiction to ban them.

Furthermore, while the FTC requires a campaign to abide by a "stop" text response, it does not regulate where the phone number goes after Election Day. Lists of voters sourced from registration rolls get passed on to political action committees, which aren't subject to the National Do Not Call Registry. Even a voter who texts "stop" can have his number recycled next election.

"Campaigns are the bedrock of our democracy," said Daniel Jellins, a former staff attorney at the Communications & Technology Law Clinic at Georgetown University. "If we are manipulating donors who are trying to use their voices in elections by giving money to a campaign that they support, then we are tampering with that bedrock."

But the First Amendment also protects the right of campaigns to say what they want, even in political ads. While federal regulations ban donations from foreign nationals, limit campaign gifts from government employees, and require campaigns to disclose large donations, no laws restrict how campaigns can ask for money. It could be a slippery slope if the government begins telling campaigns in what manner and how often they should contact prospective donors. Conservative fundraisers worry the iPhone update allows Apple to take on a similar policing role.

Dark patterns have drawn attention in Washington, but as of yet, they are unlegislated. In July, Rep. Mike Levin, D-Calif., reintroduced the Uncheck the Box Act, a bipartisan bill to prevent campaigns from using prechecked boxes in online donation forms for things like recurring payments.

Will an iPhone update turn the tide on shady fundraising? Not necessarily. But it does indicate that companies recognize consumers are fed up. ■

DEPARTURES

Italian fashionista left mark on Hollywood

by JOHN DAWSON



Giorgio Armani

A fashion icon and businessman who created a world-renowned luxury brand, Armani died Sept. 4. He was 91. Coming of age in war-ravaged Italy in the 1950s, Armani found his life's work while selling menswear in a Milan retail shop. Eventually he began designing clothes and opened his own fashion house in 1975, fusing luxury branding with off-the-rack convenience. Armani generated international acclaim when he placed his designs in popular movies, working as costume designer for films such as *American Gigolo* and *The Untouchables*. During his career, Armani popularized power suits for women and pushed back against the proliferation of underweight models by requiring them to meet BMI minimums.



Lee Roy Jordan

A championship football player in college and the NFL who anchored the famed Doomsday Defense of the Dallas Cowboys, Jordan died Aug. 30 at the age of 84. An Alabama native, Jordan played line-backer for Paul "Bear" Bryant and the University of Alabama. By 1961, Jordan led a fearsome Crimson Tide defense to six shutouts and a national championship. He was elected to the College Football Hall of Fame in 1983. In the professional ranks, Jordan became a defensive captain and started a Cowboys record of 154 straight games at middle line-backer and in 1972 helped the Cowboys to their first championship in Super Bowl VI. Jordan retired in 1976 but still ranks second on the club's all-time tackles list.



Randy "Duke" Cunningham

A decorated Navy hero who later fell into disgrace as a California congressman, Cunningham died Aug. 27. He was 83. Cunningham flew the F-4 Phantom II fighter jet during the Vietnam War, becoming one of a handful of American fighter aces during the conflict. For his service, he received a Navy Cross, a pair of Silver Stars, numerous Air Medals, and a Purple Heart. Cunningham ran for Congress in 1990 and won a narrow victory. A member of the House Defense Appropriations subcommittee, Cunningham pleaded guilty in 2005 to taking bribes from defense contractors in exchange for securing government contracts. He resigned from Congress and spent more than eight years in prison.



James Dobson

A psychologist who became an evangelical leader fighting what he called a "civil war of values," Dobson died Aug. 21 at age 89. The son of a Nazarene minister, Dobson was a professor of pediatrics at the University of Southern California School of Medicine. With his 1970 book *Dare To Discipline*, he began positioning himself as an evangelical home-life guru advocating for corporal punishment and traditional gender roles. He founded Focus on the Family in 1977. Along with dispensing child-rearing advice through his growing broadcast empire, Dobson also turned his attention toward politics and became an influential voice of the Religious Right, spending decades pushing back against what he saw as key elements of American cultural rot.



Mike Castle

A centrist Republican who loomed large in Delaware politics for decades, Castle died Aug. 14. He was 86. Castle cut his political teeth in the Blue Hen State as a member of the state legislature in the 1960s and '70s. He later succeeded Pete du Pont as governor in 1985. Term-limited out of office, Castle won election to Delaware's lone House of Representatives seat in 1992, an office he held for 18 years. Castle helped shape the 1996 welfare reform act and created the 50 state quarters program. Running for Joe Biden's vacated Senate seat in 2010, Castle lost the Republican primary to anti-establishment fire-brand Christine O'Donnell—Castle's first electoral defeat. O'Donnell would later lose the general election by a wide margin.

ARMANI: DAN KITWOOD/GETTY IMAGES; JORDAN: AL MESSERSCHMIDT/AP; CUNNINGHAM: LENNY IGNEZ/IA; DOBSON: HARRY LANGDON/GETTY IMAGES; CASTLE: MATT SLOCUM/AP

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HUMAN RACE

Vaccine rollback

by ADDIE OFFEREINS

→ Florida Surgeon General Dr. **Joseph Ladapo** announced Sept. 3 that the Florida Department of Health will work with Gov. Ron DeSantis to eliminate childhood vaccine mandates in the state. “Every last one of them is wrong and drips with disdain and slavery,” Ladapo said during the announcement. The Sunshine State currently requires students who attend public school to receive half a dozen vaccinations.

Ladapo immigrated to the United States from Nigeria at age 5 and later studied medicine at Harvard, earning a Ph.D. in health policy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he questioned the effectiveness and safety of mask and vaccine mandates, and after being appointed Florida’s top doctor in September 2021, he repeatedly issued pandemic guidance at odds with mainstream medical organizations. Ladapo also teaches medicine at the University of Florida and researches ways to minimize the risk of cardiovascular disease among low-income populations.

President Donald Trump had considered appointing Ladapo to lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention earlier this year, but did not nominate him. Dr. Richard Besser, the CDC’s former acting director, criticized Florida’s idea of sending kids to school unvaccinated as “absolutely frightening.”

REQUESTS TO REMAIN

Some 600,000 Venezuelans and thousands of Haitians are fighting in court to stay in the United States after the Department of Homeland Security terminated their temporary legal status. A federal judge in San Francisco on Sept. 5 blocked the department from ending those protections, which allowed Venezuelans and Haitians temporarily to stay and work in the United States since their home countries were deemed unsafe. The Trump administration was expected to appeal that ruling. DHS recently said the designation for Venezuelans was no longer in the United States’ best interest and conditions in Venezuela had improved. But the State Department still warned Americans against traveling to the socialist-run country, the judge noted. —Elizabeth Russell

INNOCENT FREED

A man incarcerated for 27 years for a murder he didn’t commit walked out of Minnesota’s Stillwater Correctional Facility on Sept. 4, exonerated by court order. In 1998,



a Hennepin County judge sentenced **Bryan Hooper Sr.**, now 54, to life in prison for the murder of 77-year-old Ann Prazniak in Minneapolis. But this July, Chalaka Young, a key witness at his original trial, confessed in a handwritten letter she had killed Prazniak and falsely testified against Hooper. She cited her newfound Christian faith: “I am not

OK any longer with an innocent man sitting in prison. ... God has opened my eyes.” The Great North Innocence Project worked with Hennepin County Conviction Integrity Unit to secure Hooper’s release. —*Sharon Dierberger*

PRESIDENCY ENDED

Northwestern University President Michael H. Schill announced his resignation on Sept. 4, the latest in a batch of elite university leaders stepping down amid the fallout from pro-Palestinian campus protests in 2023 and 2024. Schill had clashed with the Trump administration over how to address anti-Semitism on campus, with the federal government freezing at least \$790 million in research funding earmarked for the institution. Last year, Republican lawmakers grilled Schill at a congressional hearing and criticized him for negotiating with student protesters. In addition to Schill, the presidents of Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Harvard universities have also departed their posts. Schill became Northwestern’s

president three years ago and plans to continue teaching law at the school following a sabbatical. —*Grace Snell*

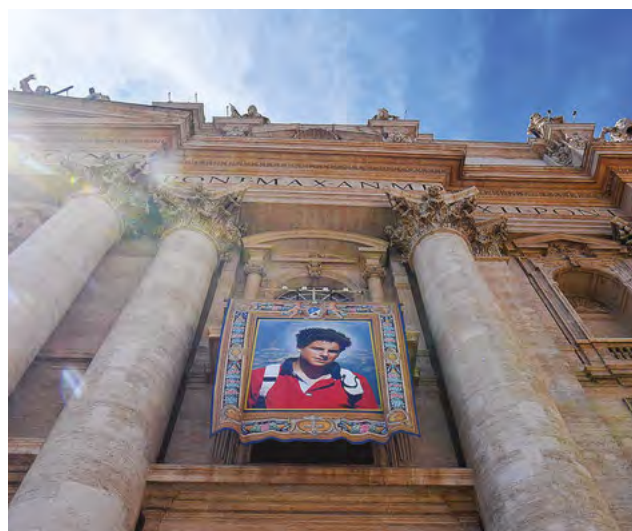
RACE ANNOUNCED

Mississippi District Attorney **Scott Colom**, a Democrat, announced Sept. 3 that he will run for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Republican Cindy Hyde-Smith. Colom has been the top prosecutor representing a four-county swath of eastern Mississippi



since 2016, just a year after activist George Soros contributed more than \$1 million to help

unseat conservative district attorneys in Louisiana and Mississippi. Recently, Colom has criticized Hyde-Smith for voting for President Donald Trump’s One Big Beautiful Bill Act, but it’s not his first run-in with the senator. In 2023, Hyde-Smith blocked President Joe Biden’s nomination of Colom for a federal judicial seat. Republicans control all statewide offices and both chambers of the Mississippi Legislature. —*Kim Henderson*



MILLENNIAL SAINTED

The Roman Catholic Church canonized **Carlo Acutis** on Sept. 7, nearly two decades after his death. The act makes Acutis the Catholic Church’s first millennial saint. Nicknamed “God’s influencer,” Acutis was raised in Italy and developed a deep love for religion and God at a young age despite his parents not being devout Catholics, according to his family. He was also passionate about video games and computer programming and built a website to document claims of Eucharistic miracles around the world. In October 2006, at age 15, he was diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukemia and died the same month. The Vatican has since attributed two purportedly miraculous healings to Acutis. In Protestant theology, all true Christians are considered saints. —*Lauren Canterbury*

FOOD FRAUD CHARGES

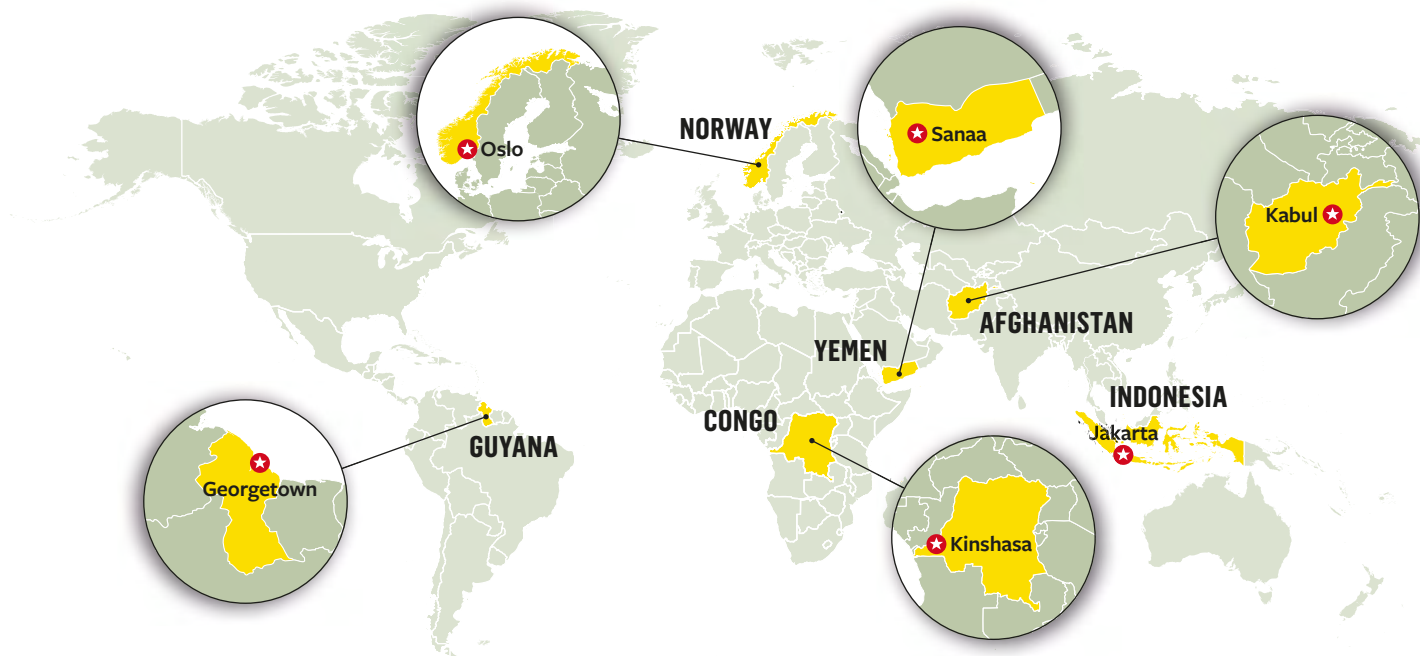
Justice Department officials indicted Muna Wais Fidhin Sept. 4 on 10 total counts of wire fraud, bribery, and money laundering—making

her the 75th person charged in what has become the country’s largest coronavirus fraud case. The 44-year-old resident of a Minneapolis suburb allegedly enrolled her company, M5 Café, in a federal child nutrition program in 2020 and eventually sought \$1 million in reimbursements for serving 300,000 meals to children. The acting U.S. attorney for Minnesota says she fed few, if any, children, instead paying off her home mortgage, buying a car, and wiring money internationally. Fidhin also allegedly gave kickbacks to an employee of Feeding Our Future, a now-disgraced nonprofit that recruited people to open sites throughout Minnesota and submitted false claims for serving meals to children. Feeding Our Future went from receiving about \$3.4 million in federal funds in 2019 to receiving nearly \$200 million in 2021 before federal officials began investigating. More than 50 of the people charged in the nearly \$250 million scheme have pleaded guilty or been convicted. —*Todd Vician* ■



Michael Schill

Afghanistan suffers from aid deficit



Afghanistan A 6.0 magnitude earthquake and series of aftershocks near Jalalabad in late August and early September highlighted the humanitarian challenges facing the terrorist-run nation. Foreign governments were hesitant to respond to the Taliban government's request for aid after the earthquakes destroyed thousands of mud-brick homes, killed more than 2,200 people, and injured thousands more. Meanwhile, some all-male Afghan rescue teams reportedly refused to help injured women due to Taliban rules against male-female contact. The United Nations urged countries to fund relief efforts made difficult by mountainous terrain and blocked roads. The U.K. and Australian governments sent money to relief organizations, but not to the Taliban. India and the UAE pledged tents and relief items. International aid to Afghanistan has plummeted since the Taliban seized control in 2021. —*Elisa Palumbo*



POPULATION

40.1 million

LANGUAGE

Afghan Persian,
Pashto,
Uzbeki, English,
Turkmani,
Urdu

RELIGION

99.7% Muslim

GOVERNANCE

Theocratic

GDP

\$82.2 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS

Coal, grapes,
tropical fruits,
gum resins,
other nuts

Yemen In the capital city of Sanaa, hundreds of mourners chanted against Israel and the United States on Sept. 1 as they gathered to attend the funeral of Houthi Prime Minister Ahmed al-Rahawi and 11 other government officials killed in an Israeli airstrike. The attack a week prior came after the Houthis, an Iran-backed Islamist terror group based in Yemen, launched a cluster-bomb ballistic missile at Israel days earlier. Meanwhile, the Houthis said they were renewing their missile attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, targeting the oil tanker *Scarlet Ray*, owned by a company with ties to an Israeli billionaire. Houthi attacks over the past two years have increasingly disrupted maritime trade in the Red Sea. Some 12% to 15% of the world's maritime trade—including 30% of global container traffic—passes through the region.

—*Jenny Lind Schmitt*



Indonesia Hundreds of women wearing pink and brandishing brooms joined protesters marching in the capital city of Jakarta on Sept. 3. The Indonesian Women's Alliance said their brooms symbolized the need to sweep out "the dirt of the state, militarism, and police repression." The weeklong, sometimes-violent protests, driven by frustration over cost of living problems and a perception of indifference among politicians, grew after a police vehicle struck and killed a 21-year-old taxi driver. President Prabowo Subianto has promised to cut parliament members' housing and travel allowances, but protesters said the concession fell short of full governmental reform. —*Amy Lewis*

Norway The Scandinavian nation and the United Kingdom have announced a warship deal and planned joint operations meant to deter Russian submarine activity in waters near Europe. Norway agreed to purchase at least five new antisubmarine frigates from the British navy for 10 billion pounds (\$13.5 billion). Norway, which already has four frigate warships, will operate its fleet jointly with eight British frigates to strengthen NATO's northern flank. Construction of the new warships is expected to last into the 2030s. Since the beginning of Russia's war with Ukraine, Russian submarine and warship activity has increased in the North Atlantic. Russia continuously builds and commissions new submarines—including several nuclear-powered attack submarines destined for a navy base less than 40 miles from the Norwegian border.

—*Evangeline Schmitt*



POPULATION
5.5 million

LANGUAGE
Bokmål,
Nynorsk

RELIGION
68% Lutheran,
3% Muslim, 3%
Roman Catholic

GOVERNANCE
Parliamentary
constitutional
monarchy

GDP
\$507.7 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Natural gas, oil,
fish, aluminum

Congo A high court in Kinshasa sentenced former Justice Minister Constant Mutamba to three years of forced labor Sept. 2 after convicting him of embezzling more than \$19 million in public funds. The 37-year-old former minister had pleaded not guilty to the embezzlement charges, which involved money intended for a prison project in the country's north, and argued the accusations were part of a "political plot." A 2023 presidential candidate, Mutamba had once campaigned as an anti-corruption advocate. In 2024, he proposed the death penalty for officials caught embezzling public funds. His case was seen by analysts as a key test in the country's ongoing battle against deep-rooted corruption. The court also barred Mutamba from running for elections for five years after his sentence. —*Olalekan Raji*



POPULATION
115.4 million

LANGUAGE
French, Lingala,
others

RELIGION
30% Catholic,
27% Protestant,
3% Kimbanguist

GOVERNANCE
Semi-
presidential
republic

GDP
\$164.4 billion

MAJOR EXPORTS
Copper, cobalt

Guyana President **Irfaan Ali**, sworn into office Sept. 7 after his reelection days earlier, will have his hands full during his second five-year term. Guyana is enjoying an off-shore oil boom, and in the past five years the country's GDP has nearly quintupled. Ali, 45, has promised to continue investing the wealth into schools, roads, and hospitals. But critics of Ali's administration say the windfall has been shared unequally, favoring groups connected to his political party. Ali also faces an escalating territorial dispute with neighboring Venezuela. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has threatened to annex a resource-rich area that constitutes two-thirds of Guyana's territory. Earlier this year, Venezuela held elections for officials who would govern the annexed region. —*Evangeline Schmitt*





U.S. BRIEFS

Space defense agency lands in Alabama

→ On Sept. 2, President Donald Trump announced that Space Command will relocate from Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs to Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, Ala., a move described as both political and practical. During the announcement, the president suggested Colorado's mail-in voting practices played a role in the decision. Established in 1982, Space Command works closely with Space Force, both of which are responsible for "protecting and defending the space domain." Colorado Springs has been home to Space Command headquarters since 2019, but the Secretary of the Air Force recommended relocating to Alabama two years later. Former President Joe Biden canceled the move due to concerns about impairing military readiness. Colorado's congressional delegation issued a joint statement arguing the move to Alabama may "not result in any additional operational capabilities." The lawmakers also warned civilian employees may not relocate to Alabama. But once operations begin in Huntsville, Space Command could save more than \$400 million. The move is expected to take up to four years to complete.

—Bekah McCallum



POPULATION

5.1 million

GOVERNOR

Kay Ivey **R**

U.S. SENATORS

Katie Britt **R**,

Tommy

Tuberville **R**

INDUSTRY

Aviation and aerospace, biotechnology, agriculture and forestry, beverage and food production

Oregon In early September, Portland General Electric and Mitsubishi Power canceled plans for a hydrogen generation facility near Boardman. Developers have begun abandoning hydrogen fuel projects due to the high cost of production and low consumer interest. Last year's cancellations included a hydrogen factory in Washington. And a Seattle-based maker of hydrogen-powered vehicles declared bankruptcy. Companies like Shell, BP, and Airbus also have scaled back plans for hydrogen fuel development. Project funding comes from the Pacific Northwest Hydrogen Hub, a \$1 billion program aimed at reducing dependence on fossil fuels in Washington, Oregon, and Montana. In May, Department of Energy Secretary Chris Wright announced his agency would review "wasteful" grant programs.

—Bekah McCallum

Maryland Gov. Wes Moore signed an executive order on Sept. 3 aimed at accelerating the construction of new housing in the state after similar legislation died in a Senate committee. The state currently needs about 96,000 more units to meet demand, a shortage Moore's order attributed to "insufficient housing construction" during the last 15 years. The governor, a Democrat, argued the lack of affordable housing options for working families in his state has "created an imminent threat of widespread social and economic disruption" that harms the state's business climate and companies' ability to retain workers. Moore's order urged state agencies to speed up the approval process for housing developments and created a housing ombudsman to oversee the approval of new projects.

—Addie Offereins



Texas College students sued the University of Texas System in early September over a law banning free expression on public university campuses between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) filed the complaint on behalf of a collection of student groups that spans the ideological spectrum. The law turns universities into speech-free zones after dark, FIRE said, noting students could be punished for anything from wearing a political shirt to attending a candlelight vigil. The state initially set strong protections for campus speech in 2019. But legislators later amended the law to censor students after sweeping on-campus protests in 2024 over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The law also bars student groups from several forms of protected expression during the last two weeks of a semester, including events using amplified sound or hosting guest speakers. Campus ministries, for example, would be barred from having an off-campus pastor host a prayer event during finals week, FIRE noted. The University of Texas System would not immediately comment on the case to WORLD, saying it had not yet reviewed the lawsuit. —Christina Grube

Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti on Sept. 2 appealed a court ruling that overturned two long-standing state gun laws. The decision, made by a three-judge panel in August, could significantly change when and where Tennesseans can carry guns. One of the overturned laws generally limits carrying a gun in public parks, playgrounds, and civic centers to owners with permits. The other involves the more ambiguous offense of carrying a firearm “with the intent to go armed.” Both are misdemeanors. Petitioners sued in 2023, saying the laws violated the Second Amendment and state constitutional gun rights. The subsequent 44-page ruling in *Hughes v. Lee* prompted Republican and Democratic lawmakers to join forces to challenge it. They say the judgment appears to allow gun possession by minors and people unfit to carry in public places. Skrmetti has asked the court to pause the ruling while the state appeals. A new Tennessee law, the first in the nation, requires students to learn gun safety beginning in kindergarten, an unprecedented approach to gun injury prevention.

—Kim Henderson

Wisconsin Environmental and climate activists clashed with energy and jobs advocates at a Sept. 3 public hearing in Madison over plans to reroute a decades-old pipeline. Enbridge Energy pumps up to 540,000 barrels of crude oil and liquid natural gas daily through the pipeline that runs from Superior’s port to refineries in Canada. Twelve miles of the pipeline cut through the center of a nearly 200-square-mile reservation belonging to the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Tribe of Chippewa Indians. The tribe didn’t renew the pipeline’s lease in 2013, but the Canadian-based company continued operating the pipeline anyway. The tribe sued in 2019. Four years later, a federal judge ordered Enbridge to stop piping oil through the reservation by June 2026. Opponents likely hoped the company would shutter the 72-year-old pipeline, but Enbridge proposed rerouting it around the reservation, adding about 40 miles of pipe. Additional public hearings are planned while the litigation continues. —Todd Vician



POPULATION
5.9 million

GOVERNOR
Tony Evers ^D

U.S. SENATORS
Ron Johnson ^R,
Tammy Baldwin ^D

INDUSTRY
Biohealth,
energy, food
and beverage



Pipes used to carry crude oil sit at the Superior, Wis., terminal of Enbridge Energy.

Are there any rules against gerrymandering?

by LEO BRICENO



→ A redistricting effort that began in Texas has opened a new front for Democrats and Republicans to explore previously untapped partisan advantages. In Texas, where Republicans hold a governing trifecta, the Legislature in August redesigned the U.S. congressional districts of five Democrats, spreading their representation over areas that historically voted Republican. Alarmed, Democrats in California announced their own plan to eliminate five Republican districts. The efforts highlight the practice of gerrymandering, in which politicians redraw district boundaries—often in convoluted ways—to favor their own party.

Why do states have to draw new districts, anyway? States redraw their congressional maps regularly to adjust for changes in population. The Supreme Court has ruled that each congressional

district must represent roughly the same number of people. But aside from that requirement and from prohibitions against drawing district lines on the basis of race, the U.S. Constitution leaves the process largely up to individual states.

What's different about this redistricting effort? States normally redraw their congressional districts only once per U.S. census, which occurs every 10 years. The next census is set to take place in 2030. Even so, Texas and California have each advanced maps designed to unseat members of their political opposition in the U.S. House of Representatives in time for the 2026 midterm elections.

Is that legal? California's constitution forbids midcycle redistricting and puts redistricting in the hands of an independent commission. So voters will have to

A Texas state senator looks over a redrawn U.S. congressional map.

consider a statewide referendum in November that, if successful, would temporarily suspend that process and implement heavily partisan maps. Texas has no such restrictions on redistricting.

Do any states forbid midcycle redistricting? Tennessee has a statute forbidding the practice, and at least 10 state constitutions also rule it out. But it is not explicitly banned elsewhere.

Will other states follow Texas and California's lead, then? Missouri on Sept. 3 launched a special legislative session to consider a midcycle redistricting of its own. Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Florida, Ohio, Kansas, Maryland, New York, and had floated similar plans.

Do any states prohibit gerrymandering outright? About two-fifths of the states have constitutional or statutory language prohibiting partisan redistricting. A handful of states have also tasked non-partisan commissions with redrawing district boundaries. In Virginia, for example, former Delegate Mark Cole, a Republican, sponsored reforms in 2019 that set up an independent redistricting commission making it nearly impossible to gerrymander. In the absence of meaningful restrictions, Cole told *WORLD*, he's surprised states like Texas haven't tried a midcycle redistricting effort sooner. "Gerrymandering will always be a factor to some degree or another as long as politicians are involved with drawing their own districts," Cole said.

What does the current redistricting fight mean for Congress? Control of the U.S. House hangs in the balance, with Republicans presently holding a slim three-seat majority. If Republicans grow their majority by even one seat, it would make it easier to advance GOP priorities. On the other hand, if Democrats gained seats in the House, it would allow them to slow or block President Donald Trump's agenda. ■



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It's true. So often, someone experiencing an untimely pregnancy may not know about alternatives to abortion, or that confidential counseling and pregnancy services are available. **That's why PROLife Across AMERICA's Billboards have proven to be vital and life-saving.**

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Mary Ann Kuharski, Director

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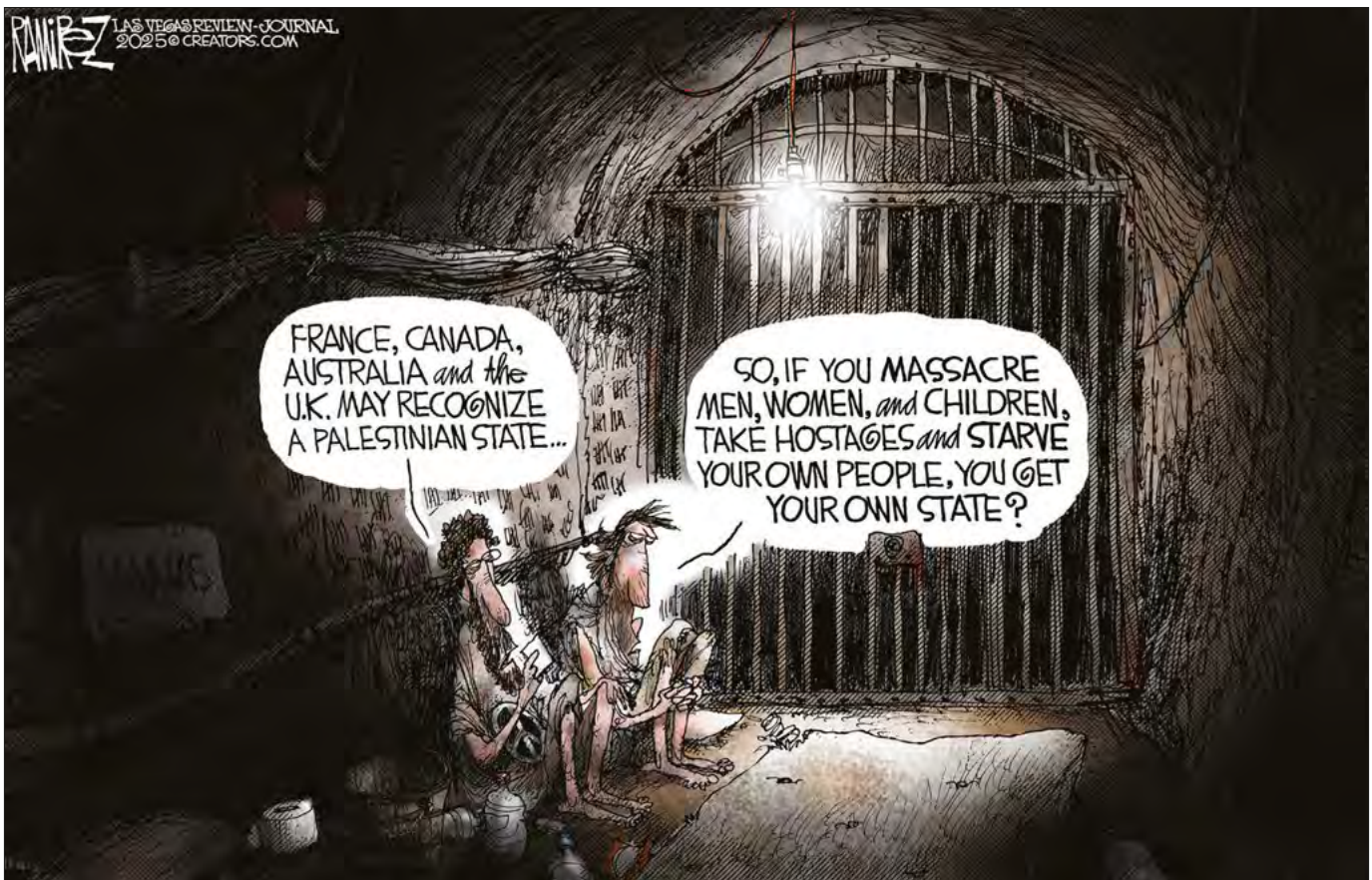


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QUOTABLES

“So far, all I see over there is chaos. I mean, it’s a goat rodeo.”

Sen. JOHN KENNEDY, R-La., questioning Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s leadership as secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services after personnel shakeups at the agency.¹



MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP

“If there’s anything I can do for you and the people of Russia ... I will consider it as a brotherly obligation.”

North Korean dictator KIM JONG UN, speaking to Russian President Vladimir Putin Sept. 3 at a rare summit in China with Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

“As Popeye used to say, ‘I am what I am.’”

Former CBS anchor DAN RATHER, explaining why he’s still publishing a thrice-weekly newsletter covering politics and culture at age 93.²

“I just felt so calm.”

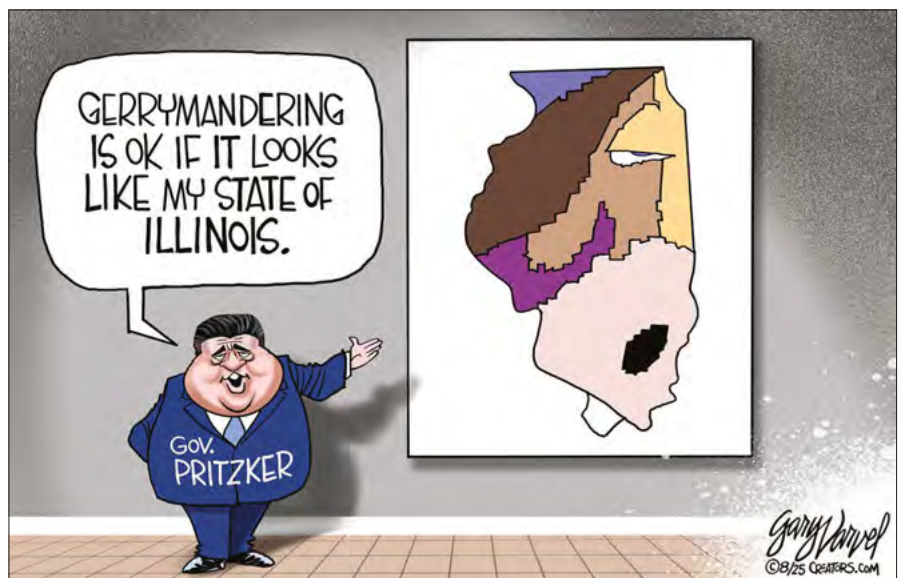
Salt Lake City resident KYLIE DARLING, 21, describing how 30 minutes before her wedding in July she took a beta blocker, a class of pills Americans are increasingly using to deal with anxiety.³

“Our job is like being a bunch of ants crawling on an elephant trying to figure out how the elephant works.”

Hawaiian Volcano Observatory chief KEN HON describing the task of predicting eruptions on Hawaii’s Kilauea volcano, which began spewing lava again Sept. 2.⁴

¹Semafor; ²The New York Times;

³WSJ. Magazine; ⁴Associated Press





QUICK TAKES

Stay safe, be aloof

A spate of bizarre heists prompts police to warn the public about people who seem too nice

by JOHN DAWSON



Canadians are known for being nice. But an Edmonton, Alberta, police official is warning people to beware of strangers being *too* nice.

Constable Shiva Shunmugam said law enforcement in the nation has received some 63 reports of so-called hugging bandits since May. According to authorities, an organized band of thieves is preying upon Canadians across the country by employing distraction tactics. In a typical encounter, the bandits strike up a conversation with the victim and then steal valuables when they move in for a hug. “Don’t let people in your personal space,” Shunmugam told reporters during his Aug. 19 press conference. That may be hard advice for Canadians to follow. The country’s reputation for amiability is buttressed by its No. 1 position in *U.S. News & World Report*’s friendliest country rankings. According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the distraction schemes tend to target the elderly and have a particular penchant for lifting jewelry. The best defense: Doubt the intentions of strangers. “If somebody is ... overtly friendly to you and trying to enter and breach your personal space by confusing you,” Shunmugam said, “tell them to stop and [that] you will call police.”

Unexpected delivery

Nevada’s infamously debauched Burning Man festival is no place to give birth. And the Thompsons of Salt Lake City wouldn’t have gone—had they known Kayla Thompson was 36 weeks pregnant. On Aug. 27, flummoxed by what she thought was appendicitis, the 37-year-old woman gave birth to the couple’s first child on the floor of their camper. Moments after, husband Kasey Thompson ventured out into the rain-soaked playa seeking help. He quickly found an obstetrician and a neonatal nurse from among the thousands of revelers. “I don’t know where they all came from, they just came,” Kasey Thompson told the *New York Post*. An emergency helicopter flew the 3-pound, 9.6 ounce baby girl, named Aurora, to a hospital NICU. Both mother and child are reportedly doing well.



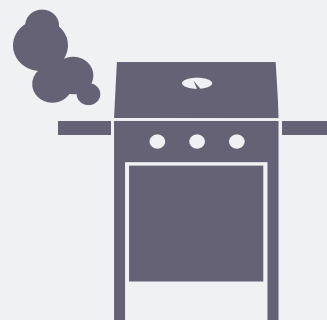
Overcooking the cargo

This was not the way these steaks were meant to flame broil. A tractor trailer traversing Missouri’s Route 174 on Aug. 18 broke down, ignited, and prematurely cooked 20 tons of rib-eye steaks aboard the semi-truck. Firefighters said flames engulfed the entire trailer near Doolittle, Mo., and turned the approximately 40,000 pounds of rib-eyes into a total loss. In August, Walmart advertised its cheapest rib-eye steaks at \$14.97 per pound, giving the lost meat an estimated market value of at least \$600,000.



Lawn service proscription

Voters in one Switzerland city have the chance to do something that others in the developed world can only dream about. On Sept. 28, the citizens of Zurich will head to the polls to vote on a measure to prohibit gas-powered leaf blowers. The noisy lawn care machines have drawn the ire of Zurich residents. In 2022, the city parliament moved to ban the equipment. Opponents of the ban successfully delayed the prohibition by calling for the September plebiscite. If successful, the measure would ban gas-powered blowers and permit electric blowers only in the fall season.



Couple gets a grilling

The phone calls began in January. Owing to a typo on Google and Apple directory listings, home grill owners seeking customer service from grill manufacturer Napoleon began calling the phone number of Canadian couple Jim Klassen and Mirjana Komljenovic. Rather than hang up or change their number, the British Columbia pair went to work dispensing grilling tips and troubleshooting for customers as best they could. Komljenovic said her husband was just trying to be helpful and didn't mind talking to customers on the phone. Eventually, Napoleon discovered the mistake and changed the listing. In August, the company awarded the couple with a new barbecue grill and named them honorary customer service ambassadors.

Staying for the season?

There will be no Friday Night Lights in the Twin Cities suburb of Apple Valley, Minn. That is, not until the ospreys move out. Back in June, school officials noticed a pair of ospreys building a nest atop one of the football field's floodlights. And because the birds are a federally protected species, the school can't risk turning on the high-powered lights, since the heat might ignite the flammable nest or overheat the birds and their chicks. To compensate, school officials decided to reschedule the team's initial September home games and hold them during the day to avoid the need for the lights. In the meantime, officials are periodically

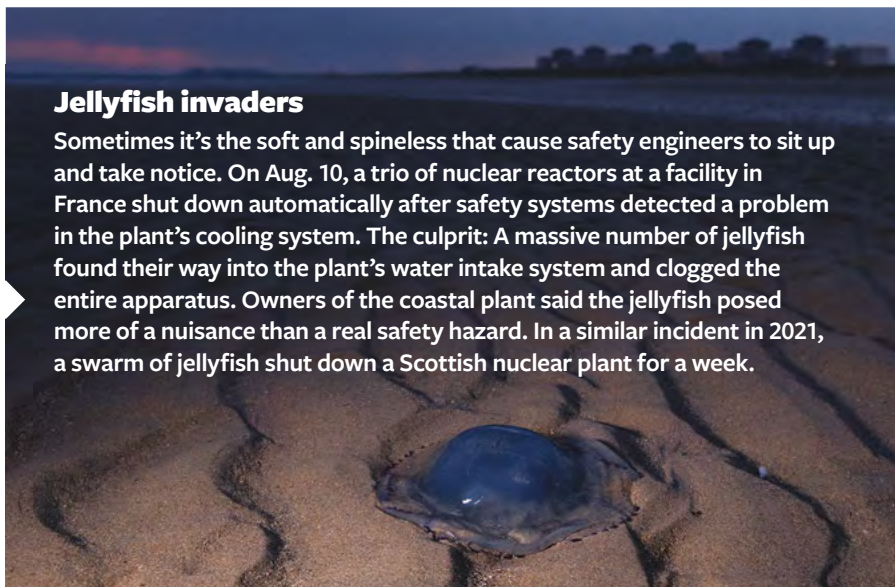
checking the nest with a drone to see when the birds move out.



Komljenovic said her husband was just trying to be helpful.

Jellyfish invaders

Sometimes it's the soft and spineless that cause safety engineers to sit up and take notice. On Aug. 10, a trio of nuclear reactors at a facility in France shut down automatically after safety systems detected a problem in the plant's cooling system. The culprit: A massive number of jellyfish found their way into the plant's water intake system and clogged the entire apparatus. Owners of the coastal plant said the jellyfish posed more of a nuisance than a real safety hazard. In a similar incident in 2021, a swarm of jellyfish shut down a Scottish nuclear plant for a week.



Call to renewal

Social critic Os Guinness on power and politics, American evangelicalism, and hope for the future

by NICK EICHER



Os Guinness is an astute cultural commentator and author or editor of more than 30 books, including *Our Civilizational Moment*. He is also co-host of *Truth Rising*, a documentary released on Sept. 5 online for free—with the intention of maximizing reach. In the first few days, more than 95,000 people viewed the 90-minute film. I spoke with Os about the themes in the film, as well as current challenges for American evangelicals. Here are edited excerpts of our conversation.

YOUR FILM DESCRIBES HOW YOU SPENT FORMATIVE YEARS AT L'ABRI IN SWITZERLAND UNDER FRANCIS SCHAEFFER. HOW DID THAT SHAPE YOU?

L'Abri was truly revolutionary for me. I came to faith in January 1960, and there was a huge shock in evangelical circles in 1963 with Harry Blamires' book *The Christian Mind*. He said the chief thing about the Christian mind was that there was no Christian mind. I was a student at the University of London. We were schizophrenic: We had wonderful teaching—Martyn Lloyd-Jones, John Stott, Michael Green—rich, deep blocks of theology. And then here was Swinging London: the Beatles, film director Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, the free speech movement. There was no link between them. Then came this unusual little man with a high voice and knickers and strange pronunciation of English words. But he connected all the dots. Francis Schaeffer taught us to think about anything and everything from a Christian viewpoint. I lived with him for three years, and I owe him an immense debt.

SPEAKING OF SHOCKS, WE'VE SEEN DRAMATIC CHANGES IN AMERICAN POLITICS. IS ANOTHER SHOCK COMING?

I think we're in the middle of a profound crisis. There are a number of tectonic shifts happening. One is the modern and postmodern subversion of the Christian subversion of the pagan notion of power—the idea that power is all. You see this in Friedrich Nietzsche, whose last words in his last book were, "Do you

want a name for this world? ... [it's] the will to power—and nothing besides.” Worldwide today you see the shift to authoritarianism and totalitarianism, to the so-called Eurasian landmass. We just saw Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Kim Jong Un getting together—you can see there's an anti-Western alliance. But the same crisis is in the West itself.

ON THE LEFT OR ON THE RIGHT?

The obvious part of it is the left, where you have power in the state and cultural Marxism. But Christians need to be aware of the examples on the right in America too. Take, say, the present administration saying, “We want to make America great again.” They never say what made it great in the first place. Again and again, they're trying to reassert American strength through power. That's dangerous. We're in a generation with a love for the strongman and therefore, eventually, for the strong state.

HOW INSTEAD SHOULD WE REASSERT AMERICAN STRENGTH?

We need to go back, as followers of Jesus, to the Biblical, Jewish-Christian understanding. The Bible has a different view of power. The supreme example is the cross. What the Romans saw as a symbol of shame, utter degradation—the punishment reserved for criminals and rebels—Christians turned that inside out, upside down, made it a matter of glory. Why? Because God's way of dealing with the world is not from a position of power. We need to understand the deep Biblical theology of power so that we are faithful to our Lord and not captured by the spirit of the age.

YOU SAY WE ARE IN A “CUT-FLOWER CIVILIZATION”—WE'RE CUT FROM OUR ROOTS. WHEN THAT HAPPENS, THE FLOWER EVENTUALLY SHRIVELS AND DIES.

Unless there's renewal. Take the American experiment. Go back to John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and many of the Founders. There's a tie among faith, virtue, and freedom. I call it the Golden Triangle of Freedom: freedom requires virtue, virtue requires faith, and faith requires freedom. Today, the Framers'

“We need to understand the deep Biblical theology of power so that we are faithful to our Lord and not captured by the spirit of the age.”

republic is on its last legs. The challenge is to restore it, but no one's talking about that. “Make America Great Again” is always a matter of economy or the military. But America didn't become great through economics or the military.

BUT YOU'RE STILL AN OPTIMIST?

Secular historians have a cyclical view of history—decline always leads to fall. But decline and fall is not the Biblical pairing. The Biblical pairing is exile and return. Reject the way of the Lord, and there will be displacement, dislocation, exile. Adam and Eve were east of Eden. Israel was under Babylon. The Church, again and again, has been corrupt and decadent. I love G.K. Chesterton's line: Looking at history, he said five times the Church has gone to the dogs, and in each case “it was the dog that died.” So, we have the grounds for renewal. Will there be renewal? Only the Lord knows. I'm wary of announcing revivals, but we cannot be pessimists.

WHERE ARE EVANGELICALS TODAY NOT HAVING THE INFLUENCE THEY OUGHT TO?

I think evangelicals are in a sad crisis today. There's a huge part of evangelicalism that's been politicized. The maxim is true: The first thing to say about politics is that politics is not the first thing. It's Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the left that tried to make everything political. Evangelicals have now become toxic in the public eye because we're seen as purely political. But we are the people of the good news—the best news ever. We've got to go back to exploring the greatness of that good news, and not tie it down just to politics. Politics is important, but we mustn't make it more than it should be. That's the way of being acculturated into oblivion.

POLITICS IS NOT THE FIRST THING, BUT YOU WOULD SAY IT'S A THING?

Yes, it's incredibly important. But you've got to get churches, families, and schools right first—that's where freedom is won and preserved. Then you'll have a healthy politics.

THE 2022 DOBBS SUPREME COURT DECISION OVERTURNED ROE V. WADE, YET INDIVIDUAL STATES STILL ALLOW THE KILLING OF UNBORN CHILDREN. WHAT CHARGE WOULD YOU LEAVE WITH EVANGELICALS TEMPTED EITHER TO A WRONGHEADED TRIUMPHALISM OR A WRONGHEADED DESPAIR?

Consider the difference between abolition of slavery and Prohibition. Abolition took nearly 50 years of intense prayer, apologetics, and political action—in other words, 50 years of persuasion. And then they passed a law that enshrined it. With Prohibition, Christians had the numbers, so they rammed it through. It was disastrous. There was no persuasion, only legislation. *Dobbs* should have called us back to persuasion. It wasn't so much the question of states versus federal government—that's a matter of American governance, important for freedom. The real thing is, we've got to do the persuading. We're increasingly in a culture of death: We've got to make arguments for the sanctity of life. We've got to become persuasive voices again. ■



VOICES JANIE B. CHEANEY

Ruthless practicality

What it takes for an entire culture to embrace death

Living with a terminal husband has me thinking about the mystery of death. Armchair philosophers often say that death is simply part of life: becoming one with the universe, committing your matter to next year's wildflowers and your luminous being to some eternal consciousness.

Or, alternatively, you rot.

How grateful I am to cling to something better than fuzzy eschatology or cold materialism! Still ... this person I've traveled beside for 55 years, who has plowed deep furrows in time, co-created and nurtured other lives, influenced real events, and moved large objects (literally, as a railroad transportation consultant), will soon cease to be. Death is a profound contradiction, even as our earth testifies to it with centuries of buried bones. What does it take for an entire culture to embrace it voluntarily?

A very long article in *The Atlantic* raises that question with a stark title: "Canada Is Killing Itself." Staff writer Eliana Plott Calabro begins with a jaw-dropping statistic: Canada's Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) Act, passed in 2016, now facilitates 5% of all deaths. That's "about one in 20 ... surpassing countries where assisted dying has been legal for far longer." Calabro attended a conference of MAiD providers, interviewed physicians and patients, and surveyed test cases to create a picture of a nation preoccupied with do-it-yourself death.

Patients plan "weekend house parties before a Sunday-night euthanasia in the garden; a Catholic priest to deliver last rites; extended-family renditions of 'Auld Lang Syne' at the bedside." Children may be prepared for a family

member's demise by "a pajama party at a funeral home [or] painting a coffin in a schoolyard." Physicians recall their mixed feelings when first performing a procedure that's now routine, while some still wonder if it should ever become routine.

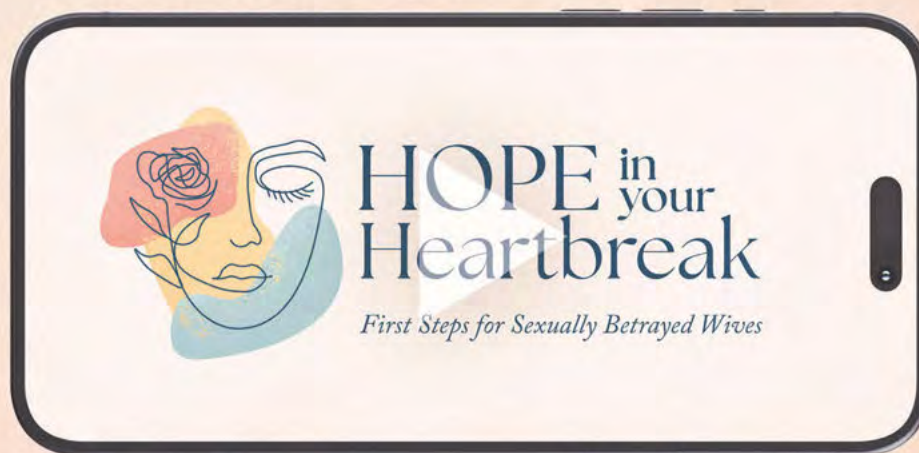
The guidelines that supposedly hedged the original law have stretched to include an ill-defined "Track 2" protocol. Since March 2021, applicants do not have to be terminal but can choose death after "serious consideration" that their lives are not worth living. Beginning in March 2027, mental illness will be considered a legitimate condition for euthanasia (although, in practical fact, it already is). Meanwhile, the Quebec College of Physicians has proposed euthanizing infants born with "severe malformations," and a Special Joint Committee in Parliament has recommended offering MAiD to "mature minors" with serious medical conditions. Quebec has already legalized advanced directives from Alzheimer's patients or others facing progressive dementia who would rather die than decline past a given point.

MAiD applicants often dread becoming a burden on loved ones. But what lurks beneath the surface is the burden on the state. Calabro cites the case of Sathya Kovac as a chilling reminder of where state-sanctioned death often leads. Kovac would have chosen to live longer if there were any way to stretch the 55 hours of home care support per week covered by her province. In her obituary she wrote, "Ultimately it was not [ALS] that took me out, it was a system." Calabro spoke with Marcia Doherty, who has suffered most of her life from chronic illnesses and can no longer afford the cost of pain management. MAiD is not a benefit for her; it's a "ruthless practicality."

MAiD was sold to the public on the principle of autonomy. For example, a man in his 30s, diagnosed with treatable cancer, insisted on MAiD because he didn't want to endure any pain or discomfort. Given the ambivalent Track 2 guidelines, how could he be refused? As one physician put it, "Once you accept that people ought to have autonomy—once you accept that life isn't sacred and something that can only be taken by God, a being I don't believe in—then, if you're in that work, some of us have to go forward and say, 'We'll do it.'"

Whether through physical pain or emotional torment, life can seem unbearable. But once you accept that life isn't sacred, it becomes almost weightless. George MacDonald wrote that the first principle of hell is, I am my own—the shrinking center of one's existence. But autonomy as a guiding principle won't last long because societies can't be built on individual preference. If no other moral framework emerges, raw power is the default. Death becomes a ruthless practicality, not a dilemma solved by the living God. And the end is hellish, or even hell itself. ■

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CULTURE




TRENDING

Final season?

TV streaming platforms reconsider their model for success amid the endless fight for viewers' attention

by ABI DUNNING



When CBS announced in July that it would cancel *The Late Show* after more than 30 years, fans of Stephen Colbert's program were shocked. But the top-rated show was the leader of a weakening pack. In the last decade, late night shows have steadily shed younger viewers and, with them, advertisers. Ratings or no, *The Late Show* was losing CBS \$40 million a year.

It's just one of the many shows crumbling amid a shifting TV landscape. But the streaming services that strangled the old networks have their own problems keeping viewers' attention. Younger audiences are spending more of their time consuming social media.

When streaming TV took off in 2013, it revolutionized the industry. Dubbed the "peak TV" era, it was marked by the incredible growth of original, scripted content on subscription video-on-demand giants like Netflix. The number of scripted shows on streaming platforms jumped from 28 in 2013 to 599 at its 2022 peak.

As streaming shows became more popular, they slowly but surely poached subscribers from cable TV. At the start of peak TV, more than 80% of U.S. homes had a cable subscription. Today, less than 40% do. Now 80% subscribe to at least one streaming service. Younger generations, millennials and Gen Zers, average five paid streaming services per household.

For cable TV, losing viewers was a one-two punch: First, subscription fees dwindled, then ad revenue soon followed, especially for the prime 18- to 34-year-old range that advertisers are most eager to find.

"It's been a gradual progression of the business model of cable crumbling," said Brad Adgate, an independent media consultant with more than four decades of experience. The loss of subscriber fees and ad revenue, he explained, "led to a dearth of quality programming on cable television." Naturally, that drove even more viewers toward streaming, then packed with fresh content.

As various streaming services feverishly competed for viewers, the market became increasingly crowded. Studios climbed to new spending heights and approved show after show in eager bids to stand out.

In return, streaming-exclusive shows raked in Emmy nominations and critical acclaim, netting new subscribers for their home platforms. But the benefits didn't outweigh the cost.

In 2022, Netflix announced its first-ever quarter with a net subscriber loss. Stock prices for Netflix and other streaming services promptly dropped. In 2023, the screenwriter's strike delayed some shows and forced the cancellation of others.

Streamers have responded by focusing more on quality and profits, and less on relentlessly →

chasing subscribers. They've raised prices, cut costs, explored new revenue streams, and cracked down on password sharing.

Today, the average household pays \$69 a month for streaming services, up 13% from last year. These price hikes are sending providers into dangerous waters, with 47% of consumers complaining they already pay too much.

Most notably, many streamers started supplementing their traditional subscriber fee revenue with advertising dollars through cheaper, ad-supported tiers. In the first quarter of 2025, 72% of all TV watched in the United States was on an ad-supported platform.

Streaming services are also trying to improve their margins by trimming or entirely canceling popular shows like *The Diplomat* or *The Wheel of Time*. Netflix, the leading producer of original content, has decreased its output every year for the past decade. Instead, platforms are offering reruns of familiar shows like *Grey's Anatomy* or *Suits* that offer cheap, ad-friendly content.

But streamers aren't just competing with other TV providers for attention and advertising revenue. Social media, filled with a seemingly limitless reservoir of easy-to-produce, free content, is challenging the TV business model.

Deloitte research shows that the average person spends about six hours a day on media and entertainment. Despite the rapid influx of options, that number has held fairly steady, leaving media and entertainment companies scrambling to prove themselves worthier than their competitors.

And social media is winning the race with younger generations. More than half of Gen Zers report feeling that social media is more relevant to them than TV shows or movies. They spend about 50 more minutes on social media



Former Vice President Kamala Harris makes a July 31 guest appearance on Stephen Colbert's show.

“It’s been a gradual progression of the business model of cable crumbling.”

and 44 fewer minutes watching TV and movies than the average consumer.

While streaming services work to find their footing, user-generated content continues to explode on social media, with personalities like Charli D’Amelio or MrBeast and more relatable influencers producing content that attracts hundreds of millions of followers—and the ad revenue that comes with them.

Three years ago, then-Netflix CEO Reed Hastings predicted cable and satellite TV would go extinct within a decade. But will streaming be on top of the entertainment world when that happens? As TV fights to attract new viewers and maintain profits in an age seemingly dominated by social media, tomorrow’s leader is harder than ever to predict.

Maybe a TV influencer on TikTok could say. ■

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BOOKS

Vying for civilization's soul

Ben Shapiro argues the West faces a choice

by DOUGLAS GROOTHUIS



Protesters march in London several weeks after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel.

(Threshold Editions, 256 pp.), Ben Shapiro concurs that the principles and ideals that have shaped Western civilization are under siege and we must summon the courage to preserve them and to fight evil. Shapiro, 41, an Orthodox Jew and a media-savvy commentator, co-founded the large conservative news and entertainment company The Daily Wire in 2015. He hosts the most popular conservative podcast in America and is a *New York Times* bestselling author. Shapiro combines the battle-tested instincts of a world-traveling activist and the bravado of a broadcaster (who hurls epithets at leftists) with the mind of a scholar (even if he leaves some quotes unattributed). Despite its subtitle, the book is not a history of America but an examination of its ideals.

Shapiro sets up a battle between two opposite forces vying for supremacy over America and civilization. The Lions preserve and advance America and Western civilization according to their Judeo-Christian worldview and manner of life, but they are in jeopardy of being overwhelmed by a group he calls the Scavengers, who undermine it and destroy it. Shapiro identifies two mind-sets, broadly conceived, that play out in politics and culture.

Each chapter begins with Shapiro recounting his involvement in an event that frames his discussion. He begins in London, where he witnesses massive pro-Hamas protests just a few weeks after the savage Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel, which left 1,200 Israelis dead and many others wounded or taken hostage.

For Shapiro, those who support the terrorism of Hamas are the epitome of the Scavenger. These and their kindred hate the West for its success and blame the failure of other countries on Western exploitation. How could anyone be brought to the place where he celebrates the murder, torture, and rape of civilians, simply because they are Jews? This book explains that erroneous and egregious perspective.

→ Many conservatives, Christian or otherwise, sense that we are living through a consequential turning point. Os Guinness writes of a “civilizational crisis” in which the constitutive commitments of America and Western civilization—such as liberty, sexual sanity, and human dignity—are in danger of dissipating forever. Civilizations and nations can claim no eternal security. They can fall, as have previous empires, from Egypt to Rome to the USSR.

In *Lions & Scavengers: The True Story of America and Her Critics*



Lions & Scavengers

BEN SHAPIRO

The worldview of the Scavengers differs radically from that of the Lions. Lions are hunters (prizing innovation), warriors (willing to defend what is good), and weavers (preserving the social fabric through sacred tradition). They fear God. Scavengers are envious, concerned with power dynamics over justice. They believe in their own victimhood and easily resort to violence to correct perceived wrongs. They deny God.

Most books that explain ideological, moral, and political conflicts employ rather dry terms with little imagery, drama, or narrative. Shapiro avoids this by personifying the essential conflict over civilization as two kinds of animals locked in mortal combat. He does not speak so much of political left and right but of two opposing approaches to reality. He uses vivid and poetic imagery throughout.

“The Lion understands that the universe is constructed by a set of rules that he can discern; he thrills in his capacity to choose, knowing that it lifts him above the beasts; he embraces his moral duties in the world, revels in his responsibilities.” Although Islam is monotheistic, Shapiro does not include it in the Lion camp, presumably because of its stand against leonine principles. He claims that America, honoring the best of Western ideals, was built by Lions. But in the face of Scavengers, the Lions may seek cover and lose their roar. “The Scavenger is driven by a burning impulse to escape his own failures and shortcomings by blaming others. The Scavenger believes that his own failure is the fault of the stars, of the fates ... but mostly of the Lions.”

The Lions believe in a free society with free markets in which success and failure are possible. This contrasts with the Scavenger mentality, which favors a controlled society operating on envy, where the rich are rich because the poor are poor and the rich must be made to redistribute their wealth. Similarly, the Scavengers are anti-Semitic, since they wrongly believe the success of the Jews comes at the expense of other peoples and nations. Thus, the Jews are hated, and any attack against them is legiti-

**“The Lion
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mate, including the horrors of Oct. 7, 2023.

Dividing the field into two categories risks oversimplification, but it highlights a real antithesis in the world of ideas, which have life-and-death consequences. Christians know that there is a kingdom of light and a kingdom of darkness. Thus, such binary judgments are not out of line. To avoid Manichaeism, Shapiro writes, “For if we all have two impulses beating within us—the Spirit of the Lion and the Spirit of the Scavenger, vying for supremacy—then the failure of the Lions is the success of the Scavenger.” Shapiro is not speaking of the saved and lost in religious terms, but rather of those who discern the basic shape of reality and act in alignment with it and those who don’t. His concern is more the survival of America and the West as opposed to who will inherit the kingdom of God. We should be concerned with both, of course, and Shapiro is generally an astute (if often acerbic) guide on politics and culture.

This book mixes paragraphs of documented argumentation with one-word paragraphs, fired off in staccato fashion. It passionately denounces what Paul Johnson called “the enemies of society” in strident and starkly binary terms. Shapiro combines a fiery personality and tongue with razor-sharp intellect. He both quotes Shakespeare and refers to Bernie Sanders as “a putrescent Marxist pimple on the posterior of the body politic.” Christ exhorts us to love our enemies, but there is little evidence of Ben Shapiro loving his. Of course, as John Senior, author of *The Death of Christian Culture* (Arlington House 1978), wrote, loving your enemies doesn’t mean pretending they are your friends.

Shapiro is Jewish, but he appeals to the New Testament as well as the Old in explaining and defending the worldview of the Lions. Most Christians, I wager, will recognize themselves in the person of the Lion and will be roused by Shapiro’s arguments. Without Jesus as Lord, however, all political philosophy and all calls for preserving and increasing the good in society will fall short—an eternity short. ■



BOOKS

Finding worthwhile work

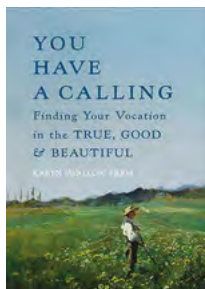
Classic literature and Christian vocation

by CHELSEA BOES

→ In her latest book, *You Have a Calling: Finding Your Vocation in the True, Good & Beautiful* (Brazos Press, 160 pp.), English professor Karen Swallow Prior has delivered a book whose small size belies its considerable wisdom.

Far from a spangly, quick, self-helpy read, it's worth buying for a recent graduate. Or for someone wondering if he's stuck in the wrong job. Or even for someone who doesn't get paid for her work at all.

It's a book of hope—albeit practical hope. On one hand, Prior acknowledges



You Have a Calling
KAREN SWALLOW PRIOR

that vast scores of people, past and present, don't get to choose a career in line with their passions. She also evokes Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" to remind us how few people of history make a splash, that there "may be little essential difference between these anonymous souls and the great, remembered names of history beyond their circumstances."

She's delivering the tough pill every '90s kid was warned by Disney *not* to swallow: Many people have died in obscurity. *You* will likely die in obscurity, and that is 100% OK.

But that fact hardly means your work doesn't matter. Au contraire. It's OK to die in obscurity when God remembers you. Our work matters because work is good; because we're working in God's economy of plenitude, not lack; and because God creates each of us according to His plans and gives us desires that draw us toward His purposes. She asks: "When was the last time you thought of your work as the medium—the paint, the film, the ink, the lead, the stage, the viola, the field, the boardroom, the Zoom call, the dough, the sewing machine, the knitting needles—for God's creative activity?"

Other books have thoroughly traced the concept of vocation through church history into the present. Prior quotes several of these books, including my favorite, Gene Veith's *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Crossway 2011).

What sets her book apart, though, is a vision of life that can be arrived at only through reading copious amounts of great literature—and reading not to dissect but to enjoy and acquire wisdom. For instance, Prior writes: "The idea of having a calling slowly evolved from holding a spiritual office (whether in the church or family) into making a living and having worldly success."

To illustrate this point she repairs not to a history book but to Daniel Defoe's 1722 novel *Moll Flanders*. For help discussing discouragement in toil she turns back four centuries to Welsh poet George Herbert and "The Collar." For illustration of what happens when

“When was the last time you thought of your work as the medium ... for God’s creative activity?”

our internal passions and outward calling finally collide, she appeals to *Jane Eyre*.

It’s worth noting that Prior’s prose in *You Have a Calling* does not feel like a lecture, and in addition to illustrating her points with examples from classic literature, she’s not above alluding to Pam Beesly of *The Office*, whose pursuit of art school ended in failure.

Any book called *You Have a Calling* should invite self-examination, and this one does. In that way it reminds me of Emily P. Freeman’s *The Next Right Thing*. “If your work is taking you along a course that you do not love,” Prior warns, “it might be time to get off the train before it carries you further and further in the wrong direction.” But she also writes of the underappreciated benefits of staying in one workplace for a long period, since we often grow passionate about what we devote our time to.

This seemingly contradictory advice feels like an echo of Proverbs, which, like all great literature, recognizes that in the vast array of human experiences a variety of statements can be true at once. “I’m afraid I have no secret formula, surefire plan, or *six steps to finding your one true calling*,” Prior writes. “I’m sorry.”

But wise readers will not be sorry. They’ll be reassured. ■

BOOKS

The gospel for all

Removing barriers for those with disabilities

by CHELSEA BOES



Sandra Peoples’ *Accessible Church* (Crossway, 200 pp.) is a slim, practical, open-hearted read. I devoured it quickly because I’m the mom of a kid with a disability, but this book is really for everyone who loves the church—everyone ready to look around their own congregation and ask, “Who’s missing?”

For many families with disabled members, church can pose formidable barriers to entry. Peoples, a professor, ministry consultant, and mom to an autistic son, points out that children with autism are 84% less likely to attend church than their typical peers. She notes that, like

the friends of the paralytic in the Gospels, the church can band together to carry disabled people to Jesus.

This book isn’t only about autism ministry. It’s about welcoming people with all kinds of disabilities. “Churches aren’t academic settings,” Peoples writes, but they often have academic expectations in Sunday school or small group settings where kids with disabilities may struggle—whether their disabilities are visible (obvious physical impairments) or invisible (dyslexia, dysgraphia, nonverbal learning disabilities, ADHD, difficulty with executive function, etc.). Peoples urges readers to remember that “children



Accessible Church

SANDRA PEOPLES

with disabilities reflect the image of God.”

It’s a trend in Christian publishing to sprinkle book chapters with mini application sections and recaps—additions thoughtful readers may find condescending—but in this book, these segments offer real help for launching disability ministries. Peoples covers everything from “how to communicate the Word to children who don’t communicate with words” to how to train volunteers; stock unique “buddy bags” with assistive, person-specific items; and craft ISPs—individualized spiritual plans—for disabled church members.

Peoples grounds her practical advice in a thoroughly Scriptural vision in which the last shall be first and in which we must become like little children to enter the kingdom of heaven. “Appearing weak isn’t rewarded in our society,” Peoples writes. “Answering with anything other than ‘I’m fine!’ on a Sunday morning takes humility and trust. Those with disabilities often can’t hide their dependence on others.”

She writes that after she received her son’s diagnosis she had to “tear down the idol of control” she had been serving. On the other side of the idolatry was fruitfulness. She writes, “Including all types of people is at the very heart of God.”

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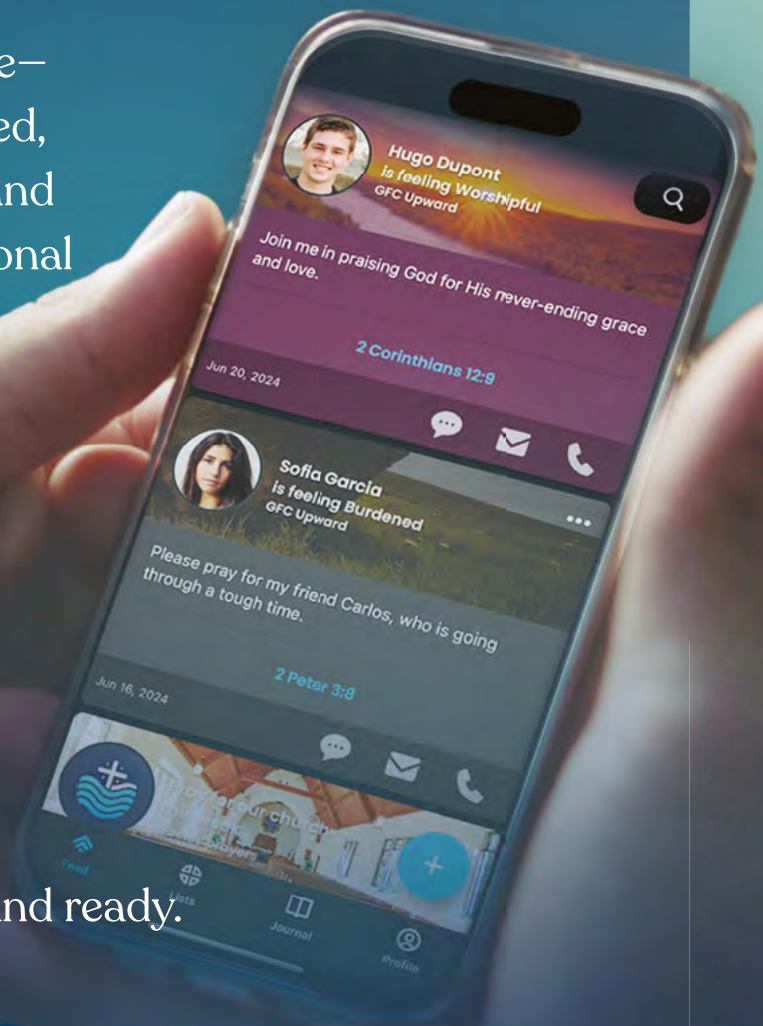
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BOOKS

Words of truth and life: seven books

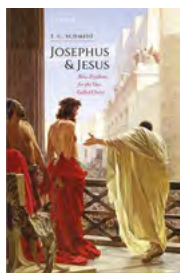
CHRISTIAN HISTORY

Josephus and Jesus: New Evidence for the One Called Christ

T.C. SCHMIDT

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 336 PAGES

T.C. Schmidt's *Josephus and Jesus* is a thrilling gift for Christians, offering robust historical evidence for the historicity of Jesus and the authenticity of the New Testament writings about Him. Freely accessible as a PDF, this work transforms the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus' *Testimonium Flavianum* into



a cornerstone for defending the Gospel accounts. The text confirms Jesus as a historical figure—a wise man, miracle-worker, and crucified leader whose followers persisted—offering

Christians the earliest non-Christian testimony to Christ's life, documented just decades after the Crucifixion. Contrary to skeptics' claims of Christian tampering, Schmidt demonstrates the authenticity of the *Testimonium*, a first-century passage in *Antiquities of the Jews*. Most exciting for believers, Schmidt reveals Josephus likely knew Sanhedrin members involved in Jesus' trial, making the *Testimonium* a near-primary source. This bolsters the Gospels' reliability, showing a Jewish historian corroborating Christ's crucifixion under Pilate. Schmidt's appraisal of Jesus' extraordinary deeds and resurrection in light of contemporary reports strengthens our confidence in the historical reality of Christ's miracles and victory over death. Endorsed by major scholars in academia, this accessible book equips evangelicals to proclaim the historical Jesus with boldness. *Josephus*

and Jesus is a must-read, affirming Christ as the undeniable truth of history and faith. —A.S. Ibrahim*

THEOLOGY

The Gospel After Christendom: An Introduction to Cultural Apologetics

COLLIN HANSEN, SKYLER R. FLOWERS, & IVAN MESA, EDS.

ZONDERVAN, 224 PAGES

Tim Keller's approach to preaching and persuasive presentation of the Christian faith to a skeptical world has inspired this book's contributors. They seek to emphasize the utility of Keller's approach to defending Christianity as an effective form of "preevangelism," preparing hearts and minds in a post-Christian world to more clearly perceive the gospel as the most satisfying answer to life's problems. The book focuses on the theoretical aspect of cultural apologetics, and it also explores the disposition and motivation of cultural apologetics as fundamentally evangelical, focusing primarily on helping individuals come to know the fullness of joy in Christ rather than simply vindicating Biblical truths for their own sake. What is most



refreshing about these essays is their insistence on timelessness and applicability. The authors consider the various contexts for cultural apologetics, stretching from the church itself to the neighborhood and the workplace. Trying to decide how best to present the faith to a diverse world can quickly become overwhelming. Thankfully, each of the contributors appreciates the importance of what must remain central when trying

to explain Christianity to anyone: It's the ultimate story that best depicts our greatest needs, which can be met only in the divine drama consummated in Christ alone. —Flynn Evans*

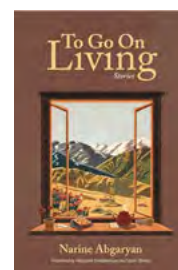
LITERARY FICTION

To Go On Living

NARINE ABGARYAN

PLOUGH, 220 PAGES

Berd is a small Armenian town near the border of Azerbaijan. This collection of 31 linked short stories focuses on Berd's inhabitants and how they fared when the decades-long war between the two countries reached their area. Each family



in each story has been touched by loss. Loss of homes. Loss of fathers and sons. Loss of mothers and daughters. Despite the losses, those who remain find a way to keep living in the shadow

of violence. Abgaryan's prose is quiet and understated with a beauty that complements Berd's old-world pastoral existence and highlights the Armenian suffering. The stories contain few direct descriptions of the horrors of war. Instead we see the characters grappling with the aftermath of conflict, either searching for a way forward or staring into the abyss of grief. Abgaryan writes with a bracing moral clarity. Her work contains no prevarication over questions of whether both sides are to blame. Azerbaijanis shattered the tranquility of Berd, and she testifies to her people's pain. But even more importantly, she testifies to their resilience. —Collin Garbarino

POLITICAL HISTORY

The CIA Book Club: The Secret Mission To Win the Cold War With Forbidden Literature

CHARLIE ENGLISH

RANDOM HOUSE, 384 PAGES

Charlie English's *The CIA Book Club* reveals a remarkable Cold War operation. The CIA smuggled banned books across the Iron Curtain to undermine →

Communist regimes. This book centers on 1980s Poland. Official CIA files remain classified, but English reconstructs Operation QRHELPFUL through interviews with dissidents, publishers, and resistance figures. He chronicles how sophisticated smuggling networks put books by Solzhenitsyn, Orwell, and others into the hands of intellectuals behind the Iron Curtain. Polish underground publisher Miroslaw Chojewski emerges as a key figure. So does *Mazovia Weekly* editor Helena Łuczywo. Imported literature became powerful resistance tools. English argues books proved more effective than traditional espionage. They eroded



Communist legitimacy from within. Smuggled literature provided “fresh air” to imprisoned minds. The operation contributed to Solidarity’s rise and ultimately helped topple the Soviet

Empire. English combines thorough investigation with compelling storytelling, illustrating how cultural warfare succeeded where military action failed. Essentially, smuggling books into Eastern Europe rewired thought from within. The story is more than a historic account. In many ways, it’s a warning. The same battles over truth, control, and resistance rage on. Only the platforms have changed. —*John Mac Ghlionn**

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

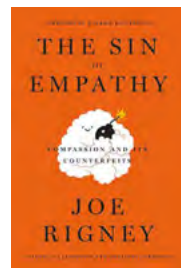
The Sin of Empathy: Compassion and Its Counterfeits

JOE RIGNEY
CANON PRESS, 164 PAGES

Christians must embody the virtue of compassion if they want to be Christ-like, but this book highlights two key ways we tend to miss the mark: being deficiently compassionate and being excessively compassionate. Rigney defines excessive compassion as empathy. He argues that we commit the sin of empathy when we allow the negative emotions of other people to “overthrow other virtues, such as charity, honesty,

and justice.” Some readers might dismiss the book based on its title and definition of empathy, but Rigney is preeminently concerned about the phenomena in which the fear of man leads to infidelity in parents, pastors, and church leaders. When secular therapists and doctors ask, “Would you rather have a

dead son or a live daughter?” Rigney calls this “a hostage situation, filled with manipulation.” This book aims to add steel to the spine of those who want to walk in fear of the Lord without undue regard for what anyone has to say about it. —*Seth Troutt**

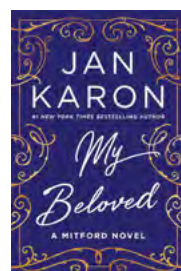


FICTION

My Beloved

JAN KARON
G.P. PUTNAM'S SONS, 432 PAGES

Jan Karon has proved for decades that cozy, Christian novels don’t have to be didactic sermons in fiction form. *My Beloved*, Karon’s 15th book in the Mitford series, begins in November as retired Father Tim anxiously ponders a Christmas gift for his wife Cynthia. He decides on a sincere, intimate love letter and addresses it to his “Beloved.” It’s a sweet gesture, but then the letter goes missing, and no one can identify who it was intended for. Even though it wasn’t meant for them, the letter imparts profound lessons to the neighbors who read



it. As characters agonize over things like how to avoid overdoing the holiday carbs and carving spoon racks, *My Beloved* has plenty of the inflated, small-town drama that Mitford readers have long loved. The book doesn’t spend much time on backstory, so those new to the series may have trouble keeping up. There’s some mild profanity, a discussion of suicide, and one character’s brief admission that she

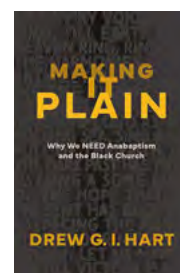
might be gay. *My Beloved* doesn’t include any of the sermons that main character Father Tim is known for. But, as Karon told me in an interview, “The book is the sermon.” —*Bekah McCallum*

THEOLOGY

Making It Plain: Why We Need Anabaptism and the Black Church

DREW G.I. HART
HERALD PRESS, 240 PAGES

Making It Plain reads like a manifesto. Hart writes with passion and urgency, but also with a narrowness that distorts the faith he seeks to renew. From the first page, he frames “mainstream Christianity” as nothing more than MAGA sloganeering—anti-BLM, anti-LGBTQ, pro-birth but anti-family. This caricature sets the stage. Faithfulness, for Hart, is measured by progressive policy commitments. Disagree, and you’ve



failed Christ. Here lies the central flaw: The gospel becomes activism, and salvation becomes social programs. Hart judges the Christian life by one’s alignment with movements of the

moment, and he dismisses what he calls “liberation-of-the-soul Christianity.” Accepting Christ, he says, isn’t enough. Faith must manifest in structural change. The Christian life truly involves more than private piety, but Hart sets up a false choice: either personal salvation or social transformation. History shows otherwise. John Wesley preached conversion and fought slavery. William Wilberforce opposed the slave trade precisely because of his reborn conscience. Hart reduces the tension to a binary and, in doing so, separates the gospel from its foundation: reconciliation to God through Christ. The Church’s mission will always outlast political fashions. Christ’s kingdom doesn’t rise or fall on the sound bites of the age. Justice matters. Righteousness matters. But they flow from the cross, not the other way around. Hart gets this backward. And that makes all the difference. —*J.M.G.** ■



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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Seeking common ground

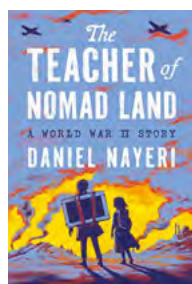
A middle-grade adventure set in World War II

by BEKAH MCCALLUM



At the beginning of World War II, the shah declared Iran neutral, but that didn't last long. To keep Hitler from snatching Iran's valuable supply of oil, the British and the Soviets invaded Iran in 1941. An Allied-occupied Iran serves as the backdrop for *The Teacher of Nomad Land* (Levine Querido, 192 pp.). Award-winning author Daniel Nayeri gives just enough detail to set the scene, though readers may wish to consult the author's note at the end for historical context.

After being mistaken for a resistance fighter, teacher Mohammad Noori dies during the six-day Anglo-Soviet invasion. With "their last parent" now dead, Babak and Sana are left orphans. A year after chiseling their father's headstone, the children run away from their caretakers, hoping to be taken in by the Bakhtiari, a



The Teacher of Nomad Land

DANIEL NAYERI

nomadic tribe that migrates over the mountains every winter. But they have little to offer the Bakhtiari in return for hospitality. Eight-year-old Sana has plenty of charm, but teenage Babak only has a blackboard and some books. He straps the cumbersome blackboard onto his back and lugs it across the desert, hoping to teach the nomadic children to read.

Babak promised his sister that they wouldn't be separated. Daily, his promise is tested, especially after they accidentally provoke the ire of a murderous, if klutzy, Nazi spy. The story particularly highlights Babak's journey into young manhood as he attempts to become a leader like his father. Boys might benefit from the book's emphasis on taking personal responsibility: "Everywhere, Babak can see the need for a teacher, and in himself the desire to be one. But he doesn't know what to say." Even though he initially struggles to provide answers, Babak learns to make confident decisions on behalf of those who depend on him.

Thanks to the frequent blunders that often come when people from diverse cultures attempt to communicate, *The Teacher of Nomad Land* has plenty of funny moments. For example, they meet a British soldier named Callum. To the children, that sounds a lot like *kalam*, the Farsi word for cabbage.

The book doesn't gloss over the weightiness of war, like when a Jewish boy describes the horror of being loaded onto a train to be taken to a concentration camp. Nayeri also doesn't shy away from entrusting young readers with profound ideas: "The countries are lines drawn and redrawn. Some of the lines are worth dying for. Some of them are meaningless. Everyone disagrees on which is which."

Several of the characters also reference praying to and thanking an "all-wise" God, though, given the setting, it's difficult to know whether they're referring to Allah or the One True God. Even if that's a little confusing, the author doesn't make it difficult to distinguish who the bad guys are. One side character sums it up well: "I would rather be in the capture of the British, than the friendship of the Nazis." ■

Growing in grace and truth

by KRISTIN CHAPMAN



A Big Change Happened

DARBY STRICKLAND
NEW GROWTH PRESS, 32 PAGES

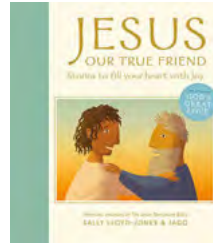
Darby Strickland weaves the comforting truths of Psalm 139 into her story of a young whale experiencing uncertainty and change. Little Wallace is content and happy swimming in the warm waters near the green island of the only home he's known. When Mama whale announces that they will be traveling to a new home in the north, Wallace is overwhelmed with concerns. As Mama addresses his questions, she also reassures Wallace that this change didn't surprise God and he can always be confident of God's unchanging love: "God's love follows you, wherever you go and whatever you do." Kevin and Kristen Howdeshell's vibrant illustrations will captivate young readers, and a note to parents at the end offers helpful ideas for shepherding children through big changes. **Ages 4–8**



Charlie Can't Sleep!

RACHEL JOY WELCHER
IVP KIDS, 32 PAGES

A little boy named Charlie struggles with going to bed because nighttime fears plague his imagination. Under the guise of helping his mom, Charlie looks for ways to delay his bedtime. Eventually, though, he runs out of excuses and dissolves into tears. His parents tenderly listen to his fears and then point him to God's promises in Psalm 121, reminding Charlie that "he will not let your foot slip—he who watches over you will not slumber." Encouraged by Scripture's promise of God's constant care, Charlie offers a prayer to God and finds peace to sleep. Breezy Brookshire's soothing watercolor illustrations echo the book's message, which offers parents a tool for helping young children turn to God in prayer when they wrestle with fear. **Ages 4–8**



Jesus, Our True Friend

SALLY LLOYD-JONES
ZONDERKIDZ, 96 PAGES

Author Sally Lloyd-Jones and illustrator Jago's latest collaboration offers seven stories about Jesus that reveal how Jesus brought Good News to all creation and showed us what true love is like. While the selected Bible stories may be familiar to families (e.g., the prodigal son and the good Samaritan), Lloyd-Jones helps children understand the full scope of the stories by offering insights that point to the deeper spiritual meanings. For example, in the story about Jesus' first miracle at the Cana wedding, Jesus tells the servants to fill six stone purification jars with water. This, Lloyd-Jones writes, was a signpost for how one day Jesus' blood would purify by washing away the sins of the world. Note: Illustrations include Jesus' face, and the opening pages give a poetic paraphrase of John 1:1-5, 14. **Ages 4–8**



The Sword

MARTY MACHOWSKI
NEW GROWTH PRESS, 176 PAGES

In this unique volume, Marty Machowski blends together a fictional story with a Bible study on Romans. When siblings Katana and Brant discover an old journal in an heirloom chest, their father shares the story of Magnus, a Roman soldier assigned to guard the Apostle Paul during his house arrest. As the story of Magnus and his relationship with Paul unfolds, Machowski systematically works through the book of Romans, offering age-appropriate analysis for each Scripture reading. These entries can be stand-alone devotions or could be read section by section, but due to the scope of commentary, the book is not intended to be read in one sitting. Flavia Sorrentino's illustrations complement each spread, and the book's final pages give the Romans Road gospel presentation. **Ages 8–12**



QUEST

THREE BOOKS THAT SHAPED MY THINKING

A tragic vision of the world

by BETHEL MCGREW



I once worked as a hired pen on a difficult project plagued by creative differences. In one conversation, I was told that my services had been solicited because I was a “fun” writer—punchy and light and easy to read—which made it unexpectedly frustrating that I was guiding the project in a heavier, sadder direction.

I could see how someone might form that impression based on a limited slice of my work. But taken in totality, my writing is noticeably informed by a tragic vision of life. My hope as a Christian is built on Christ, yet I’m

always exploring the spaces between hope and lament, between the anticipated joy of the not yet and the sorrows of the now. Even as we are called to labor toward the healing of what is broken and the restoration of what is lost, so often we are confronted with the hard truth that certain things are irreparable, unrecoverable.

Many things in my own life have contributed to this realization, but not least among them are the books that have shaped me. Three works come to mind—one nonfiction, two fiction—that on the surface are quite disparate.

Yet each in its own way has contributed importantly to my tragic vision.

AN INSOLUBLE PROBLEM

Thomas Sowell’s classic work *The Vision of the Anointed* indelibly impressed my high school mind with the insight that the world’s great tragedies are not “solvable.” It’s just politically convenient for people to act as if they are, so that they can cast their political opponents as venal and uncaring.

This is not to say that callousness or injustice *never* play their role in the persistence of suffering and social ills. But

there is no simple fix that would cure those ills if people simply banded together and cared hard enough. “There are no solutions,” Sowell reminds us, only numerous trade-offs and compromises.

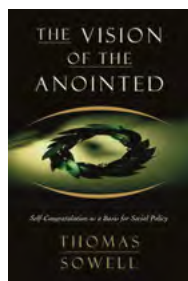
Once I saw this, wherever I looked I couldn’t unsee it. From the war on poverty domestic and global, to the immigration debate, to gun violence, to wars—wherever there are human suffering and devastation, there are always two visions contending over it all: the “anointed” vision versus the “benighted” vision, otherwise known as the tragic vision. The keepers of the anointed vision declare moral superiority as a function of their certainty. The keepers of the tragic vision understand that there is no golden key, no secret passcode, no one neat trick that will untangle the great knotted mess our race has made of the world this side of Eden.

Small gains and small victories are possible, to be sure. But Sowell taught me that such gains and victories belong to the humble, not to the proud.

THE PAIN OF HUMANITY

Chaim Potok is one of the great Jewish writers of the 20th century. His work focuses on the particular struggles of the urban Jewish American diaspora. Though filtered through a progressive lens, often questioning the authenticity of Jewish Scripture, it still made a great impression on me as a young reader. Particularly noteworthy is his debut novel, *The Chosen*, a coming-of-age story about the friendship between two teenagers growing up in mid-20th-century New York. Reuven, the son of an Orthodox scholar, has a dramatic chance encounter with Danny, the son of a Hasidic rabbi, and from that day on their fates are powerfully intertwined. Reuven quickly realizes Danny is a genius, but that extraordinary gift has grown in the shadow of an extraordinary pain: He is being raised in silence.

In Judaism, the word *tzadik* means “righteous one,” a title given to those who have completely sublimated their will to God’s. To be “a *tzadik* for the world” is to bear the burden of the



The Vision of the Anointed

THOMAS SOWELL



The Chosen

CHAIM POTOK



A Canticle for Leibowitz

WALTER M. MILLER JR.

world’s suffering. This is how Danny’s father suffers, and he wants his son to learn how to share it. This silence gradually emerges as a metaphor for the silence of God—a silence Danny tells Reuven you can “learn from,” if you listen closely enough. It doesn’t talk, but sometimes it cries, and in that moment you hear the pain of the whole world.

It is then, when the silence is most unbearable, that you must listen most closely. For, as the rabbi teaches his son, “the world needs a *tzadik*.”

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE WORLD

Apocalypse is a hot topic these days, but a book from 1959 remains surprisingly fresh and relevant. *A Canticle for Leibowitz* was Walter Miller Jr.’s first and last novel to be published in his lifetime. A “fix-up” work, built out of three novellas tracing the fate of a Western American monastery through three historical epochs, it became a benchmark for the postapocalyptic fiction genre. It is deeply infused with Miller’s Catholic faith, though his relationship with the church was complicated, and he took his own life in 1996 after a long battle with depression. This is especially heartbreaking in light of the powerfully pro-life, anti-suicide message he left behind in his work.

This novel will consistently find a place on any short list of books that shaped me, across many topics—Christian humanism, nuclear war, euthanasia and suicide, the clash of church and state. And in its cyclic story of history repeating itself, the human race self-destructing and rebuilding and self-destructing again, it is a fundamentally tragic work. At the same time, tragedy is strangely mingled with hope. On one hand, there is a very real sense in which the good guys lose. The fiery abbot of the last novella fights valiantly, but everything is slipping out of his hands, and by the end, the world is quite literally caving in on him. On the other hand, we are reminded that at the end of all things, there is always a remnant. ■

—Bethel McGrew is a teacher, math Ph.D., and widely published freelance writer. She writes on faith and culture at her *Substack*, *Further Up*.



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MOVIE

The Senior

by JOSEPH HOLMES

Rated PG • Theaters

→ Faith-based films have occupied the “inspirational melodrama” space since the genre’s explosion in the early 2000s. In many ways, this has served the faith-based genre well, with hits like *War Room* (2015) and *I Can Only Imagine* (2018). Other times it’s opened it up to charges of dishonesty, for example when the pressure to have a feel-good story trumps the need to portray man’s sinfulness. Angel Studios’ new film *The Senior* showcases how these two impulses sometimes work against each other.

The film loosely—very loosely—follows the real-life story of Mike Flynt

who, at age 59, reenrolls at his alma mater to finish his senior year of college football. Finishing what he started so long ago forces Mike to confront, with the help of his faith, longstanding issues he has with his abusive father, issues that have damaged his relationship with his son and wife.

A strong premise and solid performances carry this film. The true story of Mike Flynt—an older man going back to college football, showing that it’s possible to defy the odds, correct mistakes, give back to the younger generation, and, yes, follow his dreams—proves inspirational. Likewise, overcoming the toxic behaviors learned from one’s parents and reconciling with family

members you’ve hurt bring tears to the eyes. Where the film hits those beats well, it works.

Michael Chiklis—whom I still have fond memories of from his days as Ben Grimm in 2005’s *Fantastic Four*—is both effortlessly charming and believably complex as Mike Flynt. Brandon Flynn plays the son Micah, and their portrayal of a broken father-son relationship is effectively uncomfortable. (Perhaps too effectively, as we’ll discuss in a moment.) Mary Stuart Masterson as Mike’s wife Eileen brings a warm and grounded presence to the film, and she and Chiklis click as a lovely but flawed married couple. Flynt’s relationship with his teammates is infectious, and I would have loved to see more of it.

The main problem with *The Senior* is that its feel-good premise and execution too often clash with the difficult issues it brings up. The movie wants us to root for Mike as he tries to finish his senior college football year. But to keep the stakes high, the movie has his wife, and

especially his son, frequently calling this dream selfish and irresponsible. Mom and son make strong arguments. They point out how he made this decision without them, with no consideration for how it would force them to restructure their lives. They claim this pattern of behavior has caused real damage to their family (particularly to his son). Mike learned this pattern from his own dad, and the film portrays their toxic relationship vividly. Whenever he's challenged with these things, Mike's response is largely just, "I have to do this."

Eileen's defense of her husband—that they need to support him because he needs to fix this regret so he can fix his other regrets, including how he treated his son—feels weak. Most people with loved ones addicted to self-centered and irresponsible behavior find that having their choices validated merely encourages them to keep making the same kinds of choices. It doesn't usually end with them finally apologizing and changing their ways. Likewise, Eileen's logic strikes me as too close to the argument made in the wider culture that we should uncritically support loved ones in whatever lifestyle they choose. That's not really the message the film is trying to send, but it's trying to have it both ways and tying itself into knots as a result.

You can see many such forced character beats throughout the film. When Mike discovers how his father came to faith before he died, we're told through Micah's voice-over that this created a change in his dad. But we don't see any significant change; we just have to take voice-over Micah's word for it.

The cumulative result is that the emotional rush of inspiration you expect in a movie like this falls relatively flat compared with others in the genre (like this year's *The Last Rodeo*, also from Angel Studios).

There's enough about *The Senior* that works—the typical formula beats, the casting, etc.—that die-hard fans of inspirational dramas and faith-based films may rule this a touchdown. But those spoiled by better recent entries may groan where it fumbles. ■



MOVIE

Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale

by COLLIN GARBARINO

Rated PG • Theaters



Downton Abbey: The Grand Finale promises to be, well, a grand

finale to Julian Fellowes' high-brow soap opera that first premiered 15 years ago. And just to drive home how much he expects fans to love this conclusion, the film begins with an ovation. But does this third movie based on a TV series deserve our applause?

This installment doesn't stray from the franchise's most familiar themes: familial scandal and financial woes. The year is 1930, and as the movie begins, we learn Lady Mary (Michelle Dockery) has recently divorced the race-car-driving husband she married in Season 6 of the television series. (I assume the actor who played him wasn't available.) Mary becomes a social pariah excluded from polite society. Troubles compound when the family discovers part of their fortune has evaporated.

The movie doesn't possess a tight plot—it's more a vague impression of a story. Mary, reeling from her divorce, abandons morality in a scene that should carry greater emotional consequences. The family continually praises her as she pushes her far-from-infirm father out of his role as head of the family. And the film's final dubious lesson is that everything can be solved with a dinner party. Then there's also the moralizing progressive agenda that crops up from time to time.

Nonetheless, fans of the series will undoubtedly delight in the opulent settings and luxurious costumes. The old favorites from the cast are all here, with the notable exception of Maggie Smith's Lady Violet, whose absence looms large. Fellowes offers viewers some clever dialogue, but for the most part the film relies on our craving for nostalgia to impart pleasure, rather than its own merit.

TELEVISION

The Paper

by COLLIN GARBARINO



Rated TV-14 • Peacock

→ It's been more than a decade since *The Office* ended its nine-season run on NBC, but the mockumentary series depicting the ups and downs of a paper company remains firmly entrenched in America's cultural consciousness. Now *The Office* show-runner Greg Daniels returns with a spinoff series called *The Paper*: a show about the woes of a dying newspaper.

In the first episode, the documentary crew from the original series heads back to Scranton 20 years after they began chronicling the lives of Dunder Mifflin employees, and they learn the company was bought by a paper conglomerate called Enervate.

Enervate is based in Toledo, Ohio, in a historic building that once housed the city's newspaper, the *Toledo Truth Teller*. That bastion of Midwestern journalism has fallen on hard times. More than a thousand newspaper employees used to fill the nine-story structure. Now the entire staff occupies half of one floor, sharing the other half with the sales force for Softies bathroom tissue.

But the *Truth Teller* is getting a new editor-in-chief who plans to improve the newspaper's fortunes. Domhnall Gleeson, who's probably best known for his appearances in the Harry Potter films and the Star Wars sequels, plays the idealistic Ned. He's in way over his head, especially since he doesn't have the necessary budget to improve the paper.

He's stymied at every turn by Enervate's management and one of his own editors.

To reinvigorate local journalism, Ned recruits folks from around the office to act as volunteer reporters. Much of the show's comedy comes from watching these painfully inept amateurs try to piece together news stories.

As in *The Office*, *The Paper* doesn't merely focus on the staff's professional activities. We get plenty of personal rivalries and romances as well—the kinds of emotionally fraught situations that made *The Office* both relatable and cringe inducing. But how does *The Paper* compare with *The Office*?

On the whole, Greg Daniels and company are playing it pretty safe with *The Paper*, something they didn't do with *The Office*. Watching the first season of *The Office* can be a startling experience. I still wonder how they got away with putting some of those episodes on network television. The series didn't pull any punches as it skewered social decorum and politically correct office culture. *The Paper* merely tiptoes where *The Office* once gleefully stomped.

Another difference is that since *The Paper* is on Peacock, rather than network television, episodes sometimes include PG-13 language. Overall the series has less innuendo and crass humor than *The Office* had. Maybe that's part of Daniels' playing it safe, or maybe it's because there's no character as outrageous as Steve Carell's Michael Scott.

Instead of having one maniac sucking everyone else up into his whirlwind, this show takes Michael's many eccentricities and dispenses them among the various characters in little doses. Everyone is somewhat quirky, which deprives the audience of having a self-aware Jim and Pam to identify with when the story veers into absurdity. The show does however include Oscar Nuñez reprising his role as Oscar the accountant from the original series.

The Paper has a more subdued tone than *The Office*, and it takes a few episodes to hit its stride. But fans of mockumentaries and cringe comedy will find a lot to like here, if they don't expect too much. ■

COMING SOON...

Maigret

10/5 • Not yet rated • PBS

This latest adaptation of Georges Simenon's beloved novels about the streetwise Parisian Chief Inspector Jules Maigret is the first to have a contemporary setting. Starring Benjamin Wainwright.

Soul on Fire

10/10 • PG • Theaters

Based on the true story of motivational speaker John O'Leary, this movie tells the story of a young boy who relies on his family, his faith, and his community after suffering an accident.

Tron: Ares

10/10 • PG-13 • Theaters

Tron: Ares follows a highly sophisticated AI program, Ares, who is sent from the digital world into the real world on a dangerous mission, marking humankind's first encounter with AI beings.

DMV

10/13 • TV-PG • CBS

A workplace comedy set in the dreaded DMV office, following quirky minimum-wage employees who make the best of dealing with annoyed customers, finding solace in each other's company.

The Twits

10/17 • PG • Netflix

A musical comedy film based on Roald Dahl's 1980 children's novel. Two orphans join forces with a family of magical animals to save their city from the powerful Mr. and Mrs. Twit, the meanest, smelliest, nastiest people in the world.

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MOVIE

Light of the World

by BOB BROWN

Rated PG • Theaters



Can you tell the story of Jesus too many times? Not if you tell it right. While no dramatization of the life of Jesus can hold a candle to the Biblical record, the new animated film *Light of the World* delivers a beautifully crafted and largely faithful account of Jesus' earthly ministry.

The film storifies the impressions of teenage John, who's trying to sort through conflicting reports about the Messiah's identity and purpose, long before he wrote his eponymous Gospel. One upside to this angle is that the film's wide theatrical release will surely draw some teen viewers who likewise have heard different information about Jesus from the people around them. As the film shows, even Jesus' own disciples experienced doubts, difficulty understanding His message, and dismay at Calvary. (Spoiler alert: Jesus rises from the dead.)

Warm 2D animation and Alex McKenzie's vibrant score lift Jesus'

miracles, teachings, and interactions, and the film stays mostly true to Biblical doctrine and history. (See if you can catch the shot of Pontius Pilate holding a Greek scroll of John 1:1.) An unsatisfying storytelling choice to me, though, was the film skipping from the tomb to the Sea of Galilee gathering, bypassing eight-plus days' worth of post-resurrection encounters and wonderment. Visual depictions of God and dramatic deviations from the Scriptural record will disappoint some viewers, too. Still, the film gets Jesus' mission right, as He explains it to His youngest disciple.

"I didn't come just to fix a broken world, John. I came to fix your broken relationship with God."

The film ends with a six-line prayerful "Salvation Poem" that serves as an invitation to viewers to put their faith in Jesus.

Families will enjoy watching the film together, but they should make sure to have an *après*-popcorn discussion of the film's material around an open Bible.



MUSIC

More music from the man behind Joy Electric

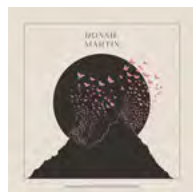
Ronnie Martin draws inspiration from Psalms

by ARSENIO ORTEZA



From 1994 to 2012, Ronnie Martin released 14 albums and 11 EPs under the name Joy Electric, claiming practically every inch of CCM's analogue-synthesizer turf in the process. It's a claim he continues to stake despite retiring the Joy Electric brand in 2021.

"I do a lot of writing now," Martin says, "and I write under my own name. So I thought, just to bring a greater sense of cohesion to all the work that I'm doing, maybe it's time to do it all under my own name."



**Consume Like a Moth
What Is Dear**
RONNIE MARTIN

The writing to which he's referring isn't songs but books with titles such as *Finding God in the Dark* (2013 with Ted Kluck), *Stop Your Complaining* (2015), and *The Unhurried Pastor* (2024 with Brian Croft). As a pastor and church planter with the Evangelical Free Church of America for nearly a decade, he's well suited to the task.

But he's still writing—and recording—songs. Consider the eight on his new album *Consume Like a Moth What Is Dear* (Velvet Blue). The follow-up to 2021's *From the Womb of the Morning, the Dew of Your Youth Will Be Yours*, it's the second in what he expects will be a three- or four-album series based on Old Testament wisdom literature (mainly Psalms). And, yes, its minor-key melodies, layered vocals, and swooshing, splooshing synthesizers sound a lot like classic Joy Electric.

"This album was kind of a throw-back," he says. "It was a recapturing of my original vision for making this kind of music, which was using just analog sequencers and synthesizers to produce and program every single sound that you hear."

Martin traces his love for synthesizers to Depeche Mode, New Order, and After the Fire, music that he was exposed to as an '80s teen. "There was something about the sounds and the nature of that music," he says. "On one hand, it was kind of beautiful, emotional, melancholy. On the other hand, it had a sort of machinelike quality. It wasn't sloppy. There was a perfection to it. And somehow all those interlocking sequences appealed to me."

"Beautiful," "melancholy," "machine-like," "not sloppy"—Martin may as well be describing his entire body of work.

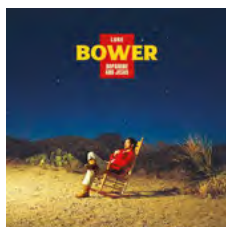
"I always envisioned, like, what if you were a band that never changed?" Martin says. "What if you were one of those artists that never ever went outside the parameters that you established for yourself? That was kind of the big idea behind these records that I've been doing for so many years.

"They're not for everybody," he says, "but if you like this one thing, you're gonna get a lot of it from me." ■

MUSIC

New and noteworthy

by ARSENIO ORTEZA

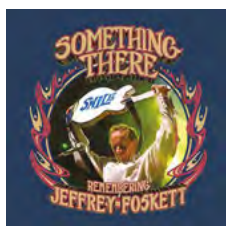


Dopamine and Jesus LUKE BOWER

A self-professed matriculant of the late Rich Mullins' school of transparency, this 23-year-old guitar-strumming Texan captures—at times with a frightening intensity—the struggles that any serious believer faces once he decides to confront his doubts honestly and head-on.

Throw in an emotionally turbulent past checkered with therapy and its attendant medications, Biblical conver-

sance, singing as if through clenched teeth, and a sonic palette that puts the “alt” in “alt-country” (bouzouki, anyone?), and you have everything necessary for the Christian music without guardrails of your dreams.

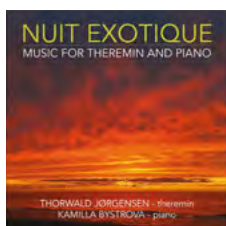


Something There: Remembering Jeffrey Foskett

JEFFREY FOSKETT

The Foskett album to own if you're going to own just one is the 2004 compilation *Stars in the Sand*. But if you're going to own two, consider this audio scrapbook. We get a cappella snippets, Foskett pre-Beach Boys, Brian Wilson duets, Foskett cameos (on songs by Christopher Cross, America, Los Straitjackets), and killer covers

(Foskett nailing Roy Orbison's “Crying,” Foskett's daughter nailing “I Can Hear Music”). Of the handful of previously anthologized solo cuts, “Cool and Gone” is the most valedictory.

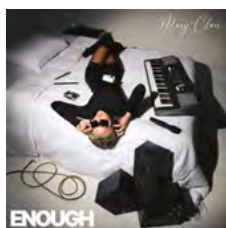


Nuit Exotique: Music for Theremin and Piano

THORWALD JØRGENSEN, KAMILLA BYSTROVA

I seriously doubt that a Zefir Records exec pulled Jørgensen and Bystrova aside after their last release, 2020's *Air Électrique*, and said, “Auerbach, Schillinger, Beluntsov, and Rostovskaya are nice, but how about some familiar composers?” I do note, however, that this album includes Messiaen, Debussy, and Ravel (twice)—and that

the eerie, otherworldly beauty of Jørgensen's theremin feels less like an end in itself as a result.



Enough MARY-CLAIR

This surprisingly confident and accomplished CCM debut owes some of its operational efficiency to the producers and co-writers—Mary-Clair herself has credited the album's most arresting line, “The weight of the world is as light as your heart is,” to Julia Ross. But Mary-Clair is the one giving voice to the senti-

ments, and because she inhabits them rather than putting them across, she comes across sincere. How else could she sound as comfortable introducing “Crying in the Chapel” to Gen Z as she does missing departed loved ones (“Heaven in the Way”) or pining for her Tennessee home (“Homesick”)?



ENCORE

In 1969, a reclusive, smoky-voiced English singer-songwriter named **Nick Drake** debuted with *Five Leaves Left*, a pastoral and quietly stunning album of what might now be called “chamber folk.” He would complete two more long players before dying—depressed and possibly suicidal—in 1974 at age 26. A commercial failure while alive, he has gone on to considerable posthumous acclaim, especially in England, where his initial output and three of his seven compilations have gone gold.

There's now an eighth, a four-disc box on Island Records called *The Making of Five Leaves Left*. Hampered somewhat by redundancy (Disc 4 is simply the original *Five Leaves Left* as remastered in 2000), the set nevertheless presents many stripped-down alternate takes and demos that sound as crisp and clear as those on any official album of acoustic introspection. Coming as it does after these, the fully produced final version, replete with woodwinds and strings, sounds fuller and more haunting than ever. —A.O.



MASTERWORKS

Depicting the inner person

Frida Kahlo's self-portraits

by WILLIAM COLLEN

→ Frida Kahlo has become one of the most recognizable painters of the 20th century. Her outward appearance is arguably more well-known than her paintings; her likeness is used as a symbol of Mexican cultural heritage and indigenous pride, and she is hailed as a feminist hero. But who was she, really? A few biographical details are known to many—her rocky relationship with her husband and fellow

painter Diego Riviera, her frail health compounded by the severe injuries she sustained in a bus accident at 18. Movies and books have portrayed her as a style icon and a symbol of marginalized people everywhere. Kahlo's mystique frequently obscures the facts. What is the truth about her inner life?

Her enigmatic, surrealistic self-portraits offer a partial answer to the question, yet they are steeped in a private

language of inscrutable symbolism. At various times, she painted herself as a deer punctured by numerous arrows, with a spine made of a marble column broken in pieces, wearing a prickly necklace reminiscent of Christ's crown of thorns, and with a monkey perched on her shoulder. What do these symbols mean? They cry out for interpretation, but interpretations are often not forthcoming.

Painted in 1939, *The Two Fridas* is perhaps her most recognizable work. It is a double self-portrait; in the picture, one Frida wears traditional Mexican clothing while the other is dressed in garments evocative of Victorian Europe. The hearts of both are visible, and a dangling artery connects them, twining around and behind the sitters. One of the Fridas is cutting the artery with

medical forceps; blood flows out, dripping down her otherwise immaculate white dress. The other Frida holds a small miniature portrait of Diego Riviera. Frida and he, married since 1929, had divorced only a few months prior to the painting. They would marry again the next year and remain together until Frida's death in 1954.

Kahlo's life was a record of painful troubles. Her broken body, her miscarriage, her stormy love affairs all added up to shape her into a difficult, irascible, complicated person. Through her many self-portraits she sought release from anguish and a better understanding of herself. Her oftentimes puzzling canvases seem to gesture toward the events in her life. (Is her heart broken by the loss of Diego? Do the dual portraits serve as a comment on her mixed European/Mexican heritage?) But they bump into interpretive limits: Some of her symbols are simply too private to be easily understood.

Other famous self-portraits—those of Rembrandt and Van Gogh come readily to mind—do not indulge so frequently in personal and idiosyncratic symbolism. Perhaps Kahlo's work is an example of art gone too far, too ingrown, and therefore unable to communicate clearly. It is indeed true that when artists look inside themselves for their subjects, what comes out can sometimes be so esoteric that it becomes unintelligible, a barrier to understanding.

However, Kahlo's self-portraits proclaim a profound Biblical truth: that what appears on the outside is not the

real truth about a person—that what is in the soul is more important than what appears on the surface. “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart,” says 1 Samuel 16:7.

In *The Weight of Glory*, C.S. Lewis says the people we see as we go about our everyday lives hold within themselves vast reservoirs of spiritual significance that cannot be perceived from their outward appearances. “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal,” he writes. Everyone we meet has an immortal soul, one either full of the bounty of the Holy Spirit or steeped in sin and corruption. This cannot be seen by looking at a

person's outward appearance, but it is, in fact, the true reality of who one is.

Perhaps it is only in the realm of art that we can have a glimpse of that deeper reality. By using a vocabulary of symbolism—publicly understood or private and personal—artists can reveal the hidden meanings of their own personalities and spiritual states. Kahlo's double self-portrait is an extreme example of this kind of art, but a powerfully memorable one nonetheless. ■

LEFT TO RIGHT: *The Two Fridas* (1939); a detail shows an artery flowing to the portrait of Diego Riviera; Diego and Frida, remarried, work in a studio circa 1945.





VOICES NICK EICHER

Gentle answers

From viral pickup truck videos to an instant bestseller, Jefferson Fisher shows how a pause can lower the heat

Jefferson Fisher is an internet sensation for all the wrong reasons—if by *wrong* you mean he got famous for calm, humility, and plain speech instead of outrage. And Fisher no more purposed to become that than the makers of Slack or Flickr set out to build billion-dollar online platforms.

Those two began as losing games—literally. Flickr spun out of *Game Neverending* and sold for millions; Slack was born from *Glitch* and grew into a company worth tens of billions. Fisher's story has the same twist. The small-town Texas attorney posted videos shot from his pickup in 2022 to drum up business for his law firm. The choice of venue was a necessity. He had just left a big law firm and didn't yet have an office. The raw, unfiltered look turned out to be part of the appeal.

One clip went viral, and the side project became the career. Fisher now has 10 million followers across social media, and he is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Next Conversation*.

At the heart of that book is a warning: "Winning an argument is a losing game." Just as the software startups found success by walking away from failed games, Fisher tells readers the real win comes not from beating an opponent, but from preserving trust and building connection.

His message cuts against the grain of social media, which pays in provocation. Fisher argues for a different currency: restraint, brevity, careful attention. "Listening is the loudest way to say you care," he writes. And when it comes time to speak, he adds a warning: "The more words it takes to tell the truth, the more it sounds like a lie."

Those are not new insights. But they are phrased in ways designed to help ordinary people recall them in moments of stress. Fisher draws on his courtroom skill of distilling complicated cases into sentences a jury would remember. His book is filled with lines that can be carried into everyday life. One of the most practical concerns awkward silences. Don't rush to fill them, he counsels. Instead: "Let your breath be the first word that you say." Fisher borrows from the military, noting that "tactical breathing"—the method Navy SEALs use to stay calm under fire—can be adapted into what he calls the "conversational breath," a steady pattern of inhaling, pausing, and exhaling to regain composure before speaking. If necessary, say simply, "I'm not ready for this conversation ... I need a break."

I first noticed Fisher not because of a *New York Times* spread or a bestseller list, but because three women I respect all follow him. One of them told me what drew her in: He gave her words to use in conversations where she might otherwise come up empty.

Yet, Fisher's advice does have its limits. Some conflicts can't be untangled with patience alone—especially when dealing with manipulators or abusers. He nods to that in a bonus chapter on narcissists and gaslighting, and he's already drafting a second book on more difficult people: micromanagers, narcissists, sarcastic personalities, and more. But true to form, he'll emphasize beginning by looking in the mirror—"starting with ourselves as the first difficult person."

Fisher's audience is far larger than most pastors, professors, or columnists. He speaks to a hunger for what contemporary American culture lacks: the ability to talk again amid increasing social isolation. In his interview with the *Times*, Fisher noted how daily life has become increasingly narrow—text messages instead of town squares, online shopping instead of malls, and groceries ordered via app instead of in-store visits. Less human contact means less practice in basic conversation. No wonder his lessons have resonated.

At his best, Fisher reminds us words carry moral weight. "Your words have a ripple effect," he warns. That ripple can erode or build trust, inflame or soothe.

This isn't classical rhetoric. It's a practical guide, written in the cadence of social media, for a culture where public conversations are marked by distrust and outrage. After months of trying for an interview, I finally caught up with Fisher in September. We'll air that conversation soon on our podcast. In it, I asked him about the nightly prayer of his father: "Dear God, give Jefferson wisdom and always be his friend." Fisher told me, "The Bible is full of teaching about wisdom and the power of the tongue. My prayer is that what I teach about communication aligns with those principles in a practical way."

That prayer still shapes his work. And in an age noisy with provocation, Fisher's reminder endures: Use words not to win, but to serve and build trust. ■



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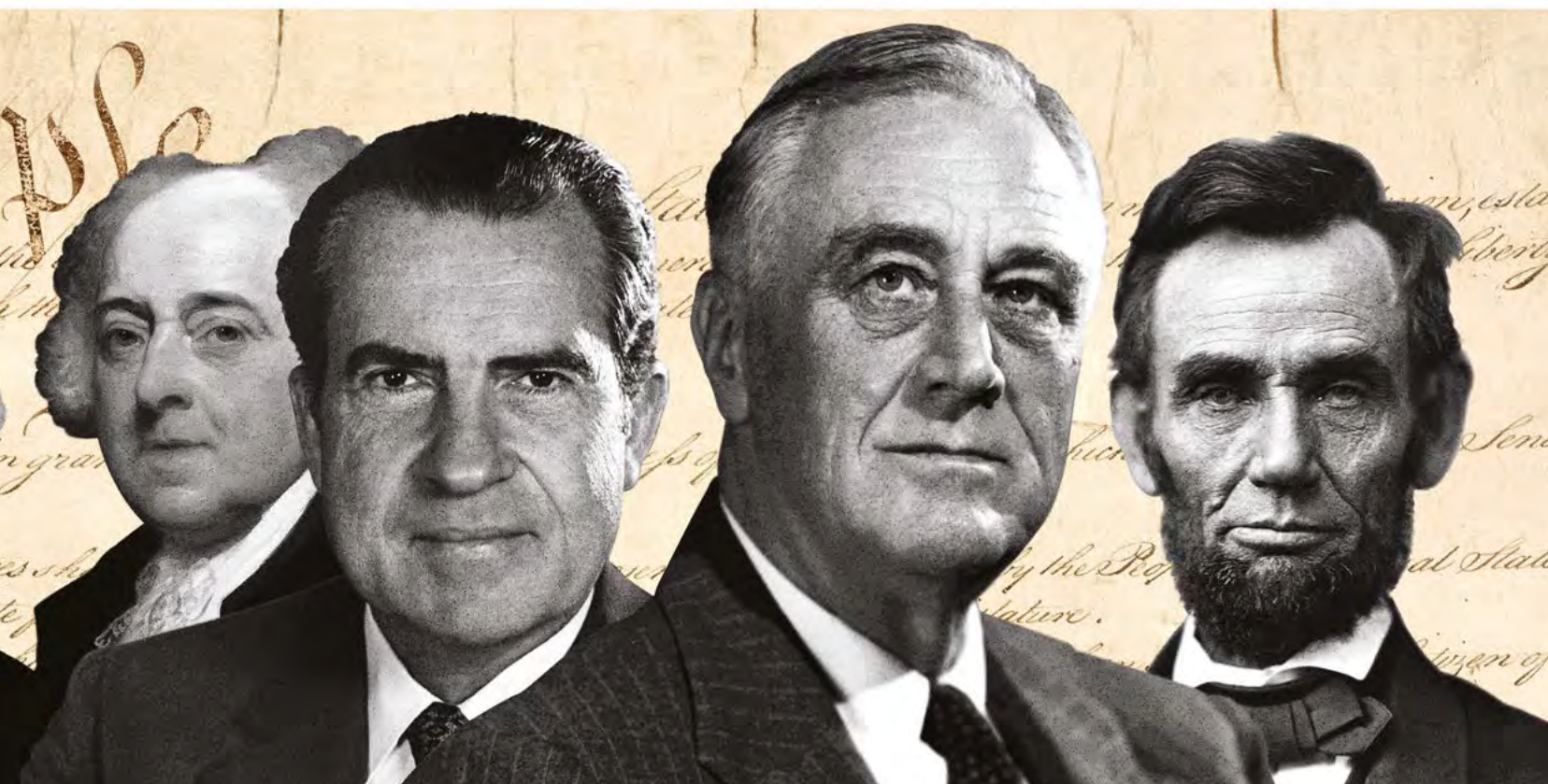
THE
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Conflict between the judicial and executive branches is a feature of the U.S. political system—not a bug

BY EMMA FREIRE

photo illustration by
KRIEG BARRIE







EACH YEAR, ON THE FIRST MONDAY IN OCTOBER AT 10 A.M. SHARP, A HUSH SETTLES OVER THE AUDIENCE AT THE SUPREME COURT.

Everyone rises as the nine justices in their black robes file in and take their seats. The marshal strikes a gavel and announces their entrance with the traditional cry: “The honorable, the chief justice and the associate justices of the Supreme Court of the United States. Oyez! Oyez! Oyez!”

All this stateliness and ceremony belies the bare-knuckled political brawl going on behind the scenes. The start of each new term signals a renewal of the long-standing tug-of-war between the judicial and executive branches of government. Since President Donald Trump took office in January, the battle has intensified to the point that some have declared a “constitutional crisis.”

Depending on who’s offering the analysis, the president currently has the upper hand. On June 27, the very last day of its previous term, the court handed Trump what he called a “giant win.” Many court watchers viewed the case, *Trump v. CASA*, as significant. The ruling put an end to national injunctions, a tactic liberal judges have used to block many Trump administration policies.

The president celebrated his victory on social media. It was a rare note of harmony between the White House and the Supreme Court. In the weeks and months prior to the ruling, Trump and his supporters frequently vented anger at the



Supreme Court justices sit for a group photo in 2022.
Bottom row (from left): Sonia Sotomayor, Clarence Thomas, John Roberts, Samuel Alito, and Elena Kagan.
Top row (from left): Amy Coney Barrett, Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Ketanji Brown Jackson.

justices for ruling against him. As recently as May, Trump blasted the justices for “not allowing me to do what I was elected to do.”

Trump has directed even more fire at lower court judges who get in his way. In March, he and his supporters called for the impeachment of James Boasberg, the chief U.S. district judge in Washington, D.C., who ordered the Trump administration to turn around flights deporting alleged Venezuelan gang members. In response, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer branded Trump a “lawless, angry man.” Even Chief Justice John Roberts issued a rare public statement. “Impeachment is not an appropriate response to disagreement concerning a judicial decision,” he wrote. In April, a national poll found that 67 percent of Americans were concerned about a potential constitutional crisis arising from conflicts between the executive and judicial branches.

As the Supreme Court’s new term gets underway, the president will likely continue to veer between jubilation and outrage in response to rulings. Those angry broadsides at judges who get

in his way are unsettling to many Americans, acknowledged Lael Weinberger, an assistant professor of law at George Mason University Antonin Scalia Law School and former law clerk to Justice Neil Gorsuch. “This is always dangerous territory,” he said.

But it’s hardly new. Or, as Weinberger puts it, “the Constitution was designed to have a certain amount of conflict.”

American history is rife with examples of presidents who clashed with the courts—sometimes vehemently. While those battles may have stretched our system of government, our constitutional order never broke.

AS SOON AS HE TOOK OFFICE for his second term, Trump began unleashing a flurry of executive orders. “Trump loves the shock and awe approach,” Weinberger noted. For their part, Trump’s opponents soon realized that Congress was “not a productive place to engage in resistance.” Instead, they turned to the courts—both the Supreme Court and various lower courts—to try to block Trump policies, mobilizing “hundreds of lawyers, hundreds of firms, bringing hundreds of cases.” The sheer scale of the litigation means the Department of Justice is “going to get a bit bogged down,” Weinberger said.

When those efforts succeed, Trump lashes out. On April 21, he complained on social media that he was doing what voters elected him to do: “remove criminals from our country.” But Trump said he was “being stymied at every turn by even the U.S. Supreme Court, which I have such great respect for, but which seemingly doesn’t want me to send violent criminals and terrorists back to Venezuela, or any other country, for that matter.”

Whether he realizes it or not, Trump is following a template set by many other presidents who have clashed with the courts. His complaint that unelected judges should not block an elected president from fulfilling his mandate has a long history.

The tug-of-war between the executive and judicial branches dates back to the earliest days of American history. Thomas Jefferson, America’s third president and the primary author of the Declaration of Independence, clashed with the Supreme Court in the landmark case *Marbury v. Madison*. Just before leaving office, President John Adams, a member of the Federalist Party, and his allies in Congress created new judgeships and quickly filled them with Federalists. They hoped the judiciary would counter Jefferson’s incoming Republican Party administration. One appointee, William Marbury, did not receive his commission before Jefferson took office. Jefferson’s secretary of state, James Madison, then refused to deliver it. Marbury sued, asking the Supreme Court to compel delivery. Chief Justice John Marshall, a staunch Federalist who had a bad relationship with Jefferson even though they were related, faced a delicate situation.

A direct challenge to Jefferson risked a constitutional crisis. Instead, Marshall crafted a decision that carefully avoided a head-on confrontation with the president, defusing the tension.

More than a decade after he left office, Jefferson expressed his concerns about judicial power: “To consider the judges as the ultimate arbiters of all constitutional questions is a very dangerous doctrine indeed, and one which would place us under the despotism of an oligarchy.”

IN 1861, ABRAHAM LINCOLN was sworn into office outside an unfinished Capitol, with a large crane looming overhead. Tensions were running high because several states had seceded a few weeks prior. Lincoln rode by carriage down Pennsylvania Avenue. But due to fears of an assassination attempt, the soldiers guarding him were so thick it was hard for spectators to see the president-elect. In his inaugural address, Lincoln called for unity and famously appealed to “the better angels of our nature.” But he directed some strong words at the Supreme Court: “If the policy of the government upon vital questions ... is to be irrevocably fixed by decisions of the Supreme Court ... the people will have ceased to be their own rulers.” Lincoln was deeply offended by the Supreme Court’s infamous *Dred Scott* decision in 1857, which said people of African descent were not American citizens.

Soon after the inauguration, as the Civil War got underway, Lincoln suspended the writ of habeas corpus. That allowed him to throw potential secessionists in jail. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney issued a ruling that only Congress could suspend habeas corpus. But Taney was writing in his capacity as a circuit judge, a dual role high court justices once held but no longer do. Lincoln ignored Taney and continued suspending habeas corpus. Congress formally authorized the move in 1863, but some historians point to this as an example of a president outright defying a court.

Paul Moreno, a professor of history and the dean of social sciences at Hillsdale College, doesn’t believe Lincoln’s actions reached that level. He believes the ruling was merely “Taney’s view about who had the power to suspend the writ of habeas corpus, and Lincoln disagreed with him about that.”

PERHAPS THE BEST-KNOWN presidential-court clash came in the 20th century, during the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration. After he was elected in 1932, President Roosevelt forged ahead with his New Deal policies. Since he also had majority support in Congress, the Supreme Court was the only obstacle in his way.

Four Supreme Court justices in particular were very conservative and regularly struck down New Deal legislation. The media nicknamed them “the Four Horsemen,” a reference to the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse from the Book of Revelation.

In 1935, Roosevelt was so worried the justices would rule against him in a series of cases known as the Gold Clause Cases that he prepared to defy them. The cases centered on his administration’s devaluation of the dollar relative to gold. Roosevelt drafted a speech—a copy of which is preserved in his



“The Supreme Court Under Pressure”: a 1937 cartoon showing FDR exerting pressure on “the old men of the Supreme Court” to get in step and support his New Deal legislative agenda.

presidential library—announcing that he would disregard the ruling. He planned to invoke Lincoln’s first inaugural address as justification. In the end, the justices upheld the government’s position, so Roosevelt didn’t need his speech.

But after winning reelection by a landslide in 1936, Roosevelt decided he had a popular mandate to remake the Supreme Court to ensure the New Deal was never under threat. He announced court-packing legislation that would let him appoint a new justice for each one over the age of 70 who didn’t retire. That meant he could appoint six new justices immediately.

During a “fireside chat,” one of his famous radio addresses to the American people, he described the three branches of government as “a three-horse team.”

“Two of the horses are pulling in unison today; the third is not,” he said, in reference to the Supreme Court. He argued for the necessity of court-packing to fulfill the people’s will. “It is the American people themselves who expect the third horse to pull in unison with the other two.”

Public discourse in FDR’s era was more polite and formal than today. But Weinberger speculates, “If Franklin D. Roosevelt had a Twitter account that he used regularly and

was comparably unfiltered and just giving his personal views,” his tone could have been similar to Trump’s.

THE CONSTITUTION DOES NOT FIX the number of justices, and Congress is allowed to change it. The first Supreme Court in 1789 had six justices, and the number has been at seven and 10 at different times. But the American public balked at FDR’s plan, and his proposed legislation landed with a thud in Congress. “Even his own party turned against him on it, and he had to withdraw the plan. It was perceived as a blatant attack on judicial independence,” said Thomas Berg, the James L. Oberstar Professor of Law and Public Policy at the University of St. Thomas School of Law.

The issue soon became moot. The justices began voting to uphold New Deal legislation, though historians disagree as to whether fear of court-packing motivated the switch. Also, older justices soon began retiring. Roosevelt ultimately appointed eight associate justices and elevated one to chief justice.

The court-packing scheme is generally regarded as a stain on FDR’s legacy. Weinberger thinks its spectacular failure “inoculated” the court against serious restructuring by future presidents. But that hasn’t stopped them from trying.

A few decades after FDR, President Richard Nixon used an indirect approach to court-packing by forcing a justice to resign. Back then, crime was a major concern with voters. Nixon accused the Supreme Court of giving a “green light” to criminals, with rulings like *Miranda v. Arizona* in 1966. It gave us the Miranda rights.

The Nixon administration investigated Justice Abe Fortas over questionable financial arrangements, and Fortas resigned. He is the only Supreme Court justice ever to resign under an ethical cloud. Nixon next tried to force the resignation of Justice William O. Douglas for similar allegations, but Douglas managed to hold on to his seat.

President Joe Biden, near the end of his term, also made a half-hearted attempt at court-packing by proposing legislation that would do away with lifetime appointments. Presidents would appoint a new justice every two years, who would then serve for 18 years. Hillsdale’s Moreno said some progressive members of the Democratic Party pushed for the changes out of anger at the Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. “But nothing came of it,” Moreno said.

WHILE TRUMP IS CONTINUING the tradition of clashing with the courts, tensions are higher now due to congressional gridlock. The Founders anticipated a delicate balance of power between three branches of government, with two pushing back if one became too powerful. Today, Congress has largely abdicated this role. Political scientists offer differing explanations for this state of affairs, including increasing polarization and the fact that two-thirds of the federal budget is now nondiscretionary. But the end result is a harder clash between the executive and judicial branches.

Trump’s situation is also unusual because he sometimes criticizes judges or justices he appointed himself in his first

term. Presidents typically criticize others’ appointees. In May, a three-judge panel of the U.S. Court of International Trade—including one Trump appointee—struck down tariffs Trump wanted to impose on dozens of countries. The panel’s ruling was quickly overturned. But Trump used social media to blame the Federalist Society for giving him bad recommendations for appointees: “I am very proud of many of our picks, but very disappointed in others.” Founded in 1982, the Federalist Society is a legal organization that played a crucial role in moving the national judiciary in a more conservative direction. In frustration, Trump called the society’s former leader, Leonard Leo, a “sleazebag” who “probably hates America.”

Berg finds these types of posts deeply troubling. “He says stuff on social media that is divorced from reality, and his followers go along with it,” Berg said. Some Trump supporters recently zeroed in on Justice Amy Coney Barrett, a Trump appointee, even calling her “Amy Commie Barrett.” But when asked about this, Trump distanced himself from such comments. “She’s a very good woman. She’s very smart, and I don’t know about people attacking her,” he told reporters.

TRUMP’S CLASH WITH THE COURTS stems partly from new tactics employed by judges who rule against the president’s politics. Since taking office, the Trump administration has often been stymied by nationwide injunctions, also called universal injunctions. Federal district judges use these not only to give relief to people who are parties to a case but to block a policy from being enforced across the entire country. Federal district judges have issued dozens of nationwide injunctions since Trump took office, compared with 14 in Biden’s entire term. The Supreme Court’s ruling in *Trump v. CASA* almost totally bans them. However, within days of the ruling, judges were finding workarounds to continue blocking policies on a national level.

And the larger issue raised by the case remains unaddressed: Does the president have the right to end birthright citizenship? It may take a year or longer before that question reaches the Supreme Court via the normal path, called a writ of certiorari.

While *Trump v. CASA* means Trump’s executive order can go into effect, that is no guarantee the Supreme Court will ultimately let it stand or more broadly that the justices are favorably disposed toward Trump administration policies. “I don’t think this necessarily means that the executive branch is getting deference,” Weinberger said.

On those occasions when the Supreme Court rules against Trump, Berg expects the justices will proceed with caution: “They’re going to be attuned to making those judgments enforceable and nuanced in a way that doesn’t aggressively restrict the president too much.” Whether Trump will appreciate their nuance remains to be seen.

Berg thinks Trump would do well to heed the lessons of FDR’s failed assault on the court. Apart from being wrong, attacking the Supreme Court is bad politics, Berg argues. “When presidents defy the court directly or attack the court aggressively, they often get in trouble for it.” ■



JUDICIAL POLITICS

Polarization has infected the U.S. court system—from top to bottom

BY ILYA SHAPIRO

THE LATEST GALLUP POLL shows that public approval for the Supreme Court has dropped to 39%, the lowest since the polling organization started asking about the high court 25 years ago. That sounds bad, but it's not statistically different than the low-40s ratings the court has consistently received since 2021, or several times in the mid-2010s, or indeed in 2005. What is significant, however, is the partisan gap. Only 11% of Democrats approve of the job the Supreme Court is doing, while 75% of Republicans do. That 64-point differential exceeds the 61-point gap after the *Dobbs* decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, as well as the 58-point gap (in Democrats' favor) after the 2015 *Obergefell* ruling that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide. It's emblematic of polarized opinions about nearly every institution at a time of overall low societal trust.

And it's not just the nation's highest court. A December 2024 poll found Americans' trust in the judicial system as a whole has hit a record-low 35%, with another large gap between those who supported and opposed the outgoing Biden administration.

The partisan divergence in public attitudes toward the judiciary reflects the perception that judges rule in a partisan or ideological way. After all, nearly

all the judges who have ruled against President Donald Trump in the slew of challenges to his executive orders and other administration actions were appointed by Democratic presidents, just as nearly all the judges who ruled against President Joe Biden's initiatives were appointed by Republican ones. That's in turn partly a function of forum selection: Trump's opponents sue in Boston, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C., where federal courts skew left, while Biden's opponents sued in Texas and Florida. But it also represents the culmination of several trends. We've reached a point where divergent interpretive theories of constitutional law and statutory interpretation track partisan preference at a time when the parties haven't been so ideologically distinct since at least the Civil War.

That's why, even as most cases are nonideological and the Supreme Court rules unanimously nearly half the time, the politically salient cases tend to break down along partisan judicial lines. That dynamic understandably drives political trends on judicial confirmations, which are becoming only more polarized.

FEW SENATORS VOTE anymore for judicial nominees from the other party. For example, Trump's 234 first-term

judicial appointees received about half of all "no" votes in U.S. history to that point, an average of about 22 per judge—compared with just over 6 per judge under Obama, 2 under George W. Bush, 1.3 under Bill Clinton, and fewer than 1 under earlier presidents. In 2019 alone, when the Senate confirmed 102 judges, the second-highest ever for one year, those judges received 88% more "no" votes than all 2,680 judges confirmed in the 20th century.

Moreover, the average Democrat voted against nearly half of all Trump nominees, while the average Republican voted against fewer than 10% of Obama's. That sounds stark, until you learn that Biden's 235 judges received more than 9,000 "no" votes, about 39 per nominee. That means that the average Republican senator voted against most Biden nominees. And there was no real difference between district and circuit judges. All were essentially party-line votes, with fewer than 20% of nominees gaining more than 60 votes.

By traditional standards, that's crazy: Senators aren't differentiating between higher- and lower-quality nominees, let alone deferring to presidential prerogative. It's all about politics. But again, we've gotten here because of the culmination of a long trend whereby



Demonstrators gather in front of the Supreme Court.

different legal theories map onto ideologically sorted parties.

And that's reflected in the confirmation process, not just final vote tallies. More than 90% of Biden's judicial nominees and nearly 80% of Trump's faced cloture votes—motions to proceed to a final vote that essentially become filibusters if they fail—including many of those confirmed by comfortable margins. In comparison, about 3% of Obama's nominees faced cloture votes and fewer than 2% did in the preceding five presidencies.

And indeed, Trump's second-term judicial nominees have picked up where Trump 1.0 left off. All five confirmed through August were on explicit party-line votes, with an average of more than

46 “no” votes at a time when Democrats have 47 senators. Whether they come from conventional backgrounds in the offices of state attorneys general and the like, or were considered “controversial” like Emil Bove—a pedigreed Justice Department official who had been on Trump's criminal-defense team—judicial nominees are now seen as radioactive by members of the opposing party.

Federal judges are a big deal, so it's understandable that senators try to advance or block as many as possible. For them—and for citizens too!—it's absolutely appropriate to question judicial philosophy. Judicial nominations are now properly an election issue, so it's heartening that voters are paying attention.

But the judicial wars we're seeing now, even less than those we've seen the last few decades, are not about the nominees themselves. They're about broader

constitutional “vibes.” The left in particular needs its social and regulatory agendas, as pushed by the executive branch, to get through the judiciary. Then you have an overlay of attitudes toward President Trump himself, and away we go.

THE ONLY LASTING SOLUTION to what ails our body politic is to return to the Founders' Constitution by rebalancing and devolving power, so federal courts aren't making so many big decisions for the whole country. Depoliticizing the judiciary is a laudable goal, but that'll happen only when judges stay in their lanes rather than either ratifying the constitutional abuses of the other branches or joining the #Resistance.

Ultimately, judicial power helps enforce the strictures of a founding document intended both to curtail the excesses of democracy and empower its exercise. In a country ruled by law, and not men, the proper response to an unpopular legal decision is to win power and change the law. Any other method leads to judicial abdication and the loss of those very rights and liberties that can only be vindicated through the judicial process—or to government by black-robed philosopher-kings. And as the late Justice Antonin Scalia liked to say, why would we choose lawyers for that job?

The reason we have these heated court battles is that the federal government is simply making too many decisions at a national level for such a large, diverse, and pluralistic country. Let federal legislators make the hard calls about truly national issues like defense or (actual) interstate commerce—make Congress great again!—but let states and localities make most of the decisions that affect our daily lives.

That's the only way we're going to defuse polarization, from the lower courts all the way to the marble palace at One First Street in Washington. ■

—Ilya Shapiro is director of constitutional studies at the Manhattan Institute and author of *Supreme Disorder: Judicial Nominations and the Politics of America's Highest Court*. He also writes the Shapiro's Gavel newsletter.

THINGS

CHRISTIANS ARE RENEWING
THEIR INTEREST IN
THE SPIRITUAL REALM ...
AND ALSO BIGFOOT

by Mary Jackson

illustration by HUGH SYME

U N S E E N



Nate Henry had a yearslong fascination with Bigfoot. But for perhaps obvious reasons, he noticed people in his Christian circles didn't seem too interested in listening to him talk about it. So, of course, he started a podcast.

During the 2020 pandemic lockdowns, the former rock musician set up a small studio in his musty basement and recorded the first few episodes of *Blurry Creatures*, a podcast aimed at exploring paranormal and supernatural topics through a Biblical lens. The podcast's name refers to the tendency for blurry or inconclusive evidence surrounding documented encounters with mysterious creatures or phenomena, including Bigfoot.

Henry, 45, thought *Blurry Creatures* might appeal to a few thousand Christian kids who shared his interest. Co-host and fellow Bigfoot fan Luke Rodgers, 43, a former sports podcaster, was less optimistic. "I always thought, no one's really gonna listen," he said. "Maybe my mom and dad, my brothers, my family, some friends, because they're loyal."

Rodgers was wrong. Very wrong. Thirty episodes in, they realized lots of people shared their interest. Rodgers recalls their shock: "We're like, Oh, this could really be something. Maybe we should get a website."

Since then, the show frequently lands on Top 10 lists of science podcasts on Apple and Spotify. It averages about 75,000 listeners per episode and 700,000 monthly downloads, Henry said. *Blurry Creatures* now hosts an annual conference, operates out of a live studio in Franklin, Tenn., and enjoys a partnership with the Robertson family of the American reality television show *Duck Dynasty*.

Henry and Rodgers begin most episodes asking guests for their thoughts on Bigfoot. Henry says Bigfoot is a "gateway drug" into discussing other strange, paranormal, and supernatural topics—from fallen angels and Biblical giants to aliens, unidentified flying objects, and transhumanism.


Blurry Creatures' appeal has something to do with a cultural moment of spiritual openness, one in which paradigms about what is real are shifting. More people are acknowledging transcendent reality, and paranormal and supernatural topics that were once considered fringe have invaded mainstream discourse.

In recent years, the federal government has contributed to the buzz amid congressional hearings on reported UFO sightings, alleged cover-ups, and public pressure for more transparency from the Pentagon on its knowledge about extraterrestrial activity. The Pentagon established an office in 2022 to vet reports of "unidentified anomalous phenomena." So far, it has found "no evidence of extraterrestrial beings, activity, or technology," according to its November 2024 report.

Still, the report acknowledged hundreds of cases that remain unexplained. Its authors claim that's due to a lack of information. But it's only fueled public interest and speculation on the possibility of extraterrestrial life and other strange phenomena.

Meanwhile, top-tier podcasters such as Joe Rogan, Shawn Ryan, and Tucker Carlson regularly host guests discussing topics such as UFO and demonic encounters, ghost lore, and theories about ancient mysteries. The shows garner hundreds of thousands of views.

Rodgers told me believers in Christ are especially interested: "I think for a lot of Christians, or for people who are searching, they're like, I need a better answer to this, because if this is real, does this disqualify my faith?"

 Nearly 80% of Americans believe there is something spiritual beyond the natural world, even if it's something they cannot see or touch, according to the Pew Research Center's Religious Landscape Study, released earlier this year. But that belief is largely "untethered from Christian orthodoxy," said author Michael Horton, founder of the multimedia company Sola Media and J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California.

After years of decline, the number of Americans who identify as Christian has leveled off to 6 in 10, while the share of those who attend church monthly has hovered at 30% since 2020. A growing number of U.S. adults, about 3 in 10, now identify as "religiously unaffiliated," with young adults assuming the label "spiritual but not religious" at even higher rates than their older counterparts.

"It's given rise to a more self-defined spirituality," Horton told me. Many are adopting beliefs and practices associated with spiritualism and the occult. "It's no longer a God outside of us who creates and judges and redeems, but

one who is just part of me and a part of nature and a force behind all things,” he said.

Nearly 2 in 5 non-Christians in the U.S. were reportedly raised Christian, according to a new survey from Barna Group and Gloom. “The winner of the lottery for disaffected Christians is superstition,” Horton told me.

Some, like Rodgers, believe the shifting religious landscape presents an opportunity to woo disaffected Christians and the spiritually curious to a faith rooted in Scripture and the supernatural.

“Maybe we are returning to the supernatural roots of our faith,” he said.

Haunted Cosmos, a paranormal podcast led by Reformed Baptist pastors Ben Garrett and Brian Sauvé of Ogden, Utah, claims to help listeners weigh paranormal phenomena within the context of Christian thought and an unseen

spiritual reality. The podcast’s tagline: “High strangeness from a Biblical lens.” One episode that aired in July delves into extrasensory perception. Another recent segment examined anecdotal evidence surrounding “dogman,” a cryptid half-human, half-canine creature that has persisted in paranormal lore for decades. A three-part series examined the lore surrounding Skinwalker Ranch, a 512-acre Utah property reputed to be the site of paranormal activity such as UFO sightings and cattle mutilations and vanishing.

Human fascination with paranormal phenomena has waxed and waned dating back to the ancient Greek philosophers. Some early church fathers were receptive to the idea that God could have created life elsewhere. Today, lots of Christians dismiss this as nonsense. But some believe aliens and other mysterious creatures and occurrences could be spiritual or interdimensional entities linked to fallen angels referred to in the Old Testament. They view UFOs and other mysterious phenomena as part of a long-term demonic plot to deceive humanity.

Old Testament scholar and author Michael Heiser, who died two years ago, argued in his bestselling 2015 book *The Unseen Realm* that modern Western Christians tend to overlook or ignore the Bible’s supernatural elements, including a real, active spiritual world. Ten years later, a new expanded version of *The Unseen Realm* is being released in October. The book reignited interest in a long-standing debate surrounding Genesis 6 and the Nephilim. Many hold the Sethite interpretation of Genesis 6:1-4,

Nate Henry (right) and Luke Rodgers at the 2024 BlurryCon conference in Franklin, Tenn.



believing the “sons of God” referred to were descendants of Seth who had children with women from the line of Cain. These children, called Nephilim, were known for their great stature and extreme wickedness.

Heiser argued for a different theological interpretation. He believed God flooded the world in part because angelic beings, “sons of God,” had children by human women. The Nephilim referred to in Scripture were half-breeds, mighty men destroyed in the flood. But their kind reappeared afterward. Drawing from the Second Temple Jewish literature such as the Book of Enoch, Heiser asserted New Testament demons, referred to as unclean spirits, represent disembodied spirits of Nephilim that continue to corrupt humanity today.

Heiser has had an outsized influence on *Blurry Creatures*’ Henry and Rodgers, among others. They frequently bring him up during podcast interviews. In 2024, together with researcher and author Timothy Alberino, Henry and Rodgers published an edition of the Book of Enoch, a third-century Jewish text said to be written by the great-grandfather of Noah and discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Joel Muddamalle, a frequent *Blurry Creatures* guest and speaker, dedicated his forthcoming book, *The Unseen Battle*, to Heiser. Muddamalle is an author, co-host of the *Therapy and Theology* podcast, and director of theology and research at Proverbs 31 Ministries. About 15 years ago, as a young “punk” seminarian, Muddamalle would pop into Heiser’s office at Logos Bible Software, where they both worked. He recalled a sign hanging on the wall that read, “parking reserved for Hebrew semitic scholars.” Muddamalle credits Heiser with gently challenging his theological assumptions. Heiser especially shaped Muddamalle’s belief in the idea that God exercises authority over a council of divine beings called *elohim*. According to Heiser, the so-called Divine Council belief provides a framework for the supernatural rebellions in the Old Testament that set the stage for a long cosmic conflict between good and evil that still rages today.

Critics argue Heiser’s interpretations lean too heavily on speculation. Some of his ideas, particularly about the Divine Council, are gaining popularity among evangelicals, according to Charlie Trimm, associate professor and chair of Old Testament at Biola University’s Talbot School of Theology. Trimm believes Heiser’s views are within Biblical orthodoxy. But he has reservations: “[Heiser] takes possible readings of various Biblical texts and ... makes them appear certain.” Trimm also expressed concern over Heiser’s “overreliance on extra-Biblical literature, especially the Book of Enoch.”

Others are more critical. “Heiser excels at fabricating lucid interpretations of Scriptural topics that are not given any substantial data to accurately define,” Bruce Wood, an apologetics specialist on staff at the Institute for Creation Research, told me in an email. He labeled Heiser’s identification of Nephilim “very nebulous work, fraught with many definite-maybe theories and quasi-factual statements.”

Part of Heiser’s appeal, according to Trimm, was his willingness to talk about supernatural topics that are often overlooked in evangelical churches.



Muddamalle sees the growing acknowledgment of the supernatural world today in a positive light, part of a “cosmic inbreaking ... whether it’s being described as aliens, UFOs, Bigfoot sightings ... you’ve got podcasts on exorcism and demon possession.”

“Christians have the very best coherent answer for all these questions,” he added.

On a recent episode of *Blurry Creatures*, Henry and Rodgers featured Christian apologist and author Lee Strobel. He was there to discuss his newest book, *Seeing the Supernatural: Investigating Angels, Demons, Mystical Dreams, Near-Death Encounters, and Other Mysteries of the Unseen World*.

When evaluating paranormal or supernatural phenomena, Strobel, a former atheist and investigative journalist who wrote *The Case for Christ*, emphasized the need to avoid sensationalism and look for objective and quantifiable evidence.

Strobel’s book includes accounts of spiritual encounters and scientifically inexplicable miracles he argues were corroborated and undeniable.

Strobel told Henry and Rodgers he approached the topic as a skeptic with the hope of reaching the spiritually curious.

As usual, Henry kicked off the 106-minute interview with the question, “What are your thoughts on Bigfoot?”

Strobel began listing the differences between the Sasquatch, or Bigfoot, a reportedly dark-brown-haired cryptid hiding in the mountains and woods of Western U.S. and Canada, and the Yeti, a white-furred “bear-like” creature said to live in the Himalayas. “What they share is the question of, are they real? Or is someone just mistaking a bear on their hind legs?” Strobel asks. “We don’t know ... I don’t know. But I’m open. If they catch one, I’d like to see.”

■ For those who delve into the once-niche Christian subset of paranormal and supernatural discourse, it includes plenty of intriguing characters and troves of content.

One *Blurry Creatures* guest, L.A. Marzulli, is an author and documentarian popular in fringe Christian supernatural circles whom critics dismiss as promoting pseudoscience and sensational conspiracy theories. During my Zoom call with him, Marzulli reached for props midsentence with such ease it was clear he’s been at it for a while. He zipped around a makeshift metal disc resembling a flying saucer. Then, he glided a remote control up and down his arm to depict an ultrasound wand he says detected an alien implant—a small piece of metal embedded in a man’s knee “with no entry wound.”

At one point, Marzulli held up an elongated skull, a replica of those he says have been discovered in Peru, with eye sockets “about 25% larger than a normal human being.” He pointed to the foramen magnum, the opening to the skull. It should be in the middle, but it’s in the back. According to Marzulli, the elongated skull solidifies the non-Sethian view of hybrid-human Nephilim that roamed the earth before and after the Biblical flood. The same “seed,” tied to the fallen angels, is being spread today through alien abductions and hybridization, part of a wide-scale “Great Deception” and end times prophecy, according to Marzulli.

Whoever or whatever the Nephilim were, however, the Peruvian skulls don’t prove anything about them, according to prevailing academic consensus. Scientists say Peruvian elongated skulls are a result of ancient cranial deformation, a cultural practice involving binding or flattening a child’s skull using wood or cloth, and not evidence of a separate species.

But Marzulli seems unfazed by his critics. And he’s emboldened by the federal government’s measures to take UFO reports more seriously. “Here we are in the halls of Congress for the first time in history arguing that UFOs are real,” he told me. “We’ve got too many whistleblowers ... so, you know, the scoffers will always scoff.”

Marzulli’s detractors would likely agree with him on one point, perhaps to their chagrin: Today there’s less societal stigma attached to paranormal and supernatural topics that were once regarded as sci-fi tropes or conspiracy theories.

Alberino, the researcher who teamed up with Henry and Rodgers to publish *The Book of Enoch*, says when his 2020 book *Birthright* came out, the interest was confined to Christian circles. But lately, sales have shot up, and he claims it’s getting more mainstream attention. *Birthright* argues humanity was originally created to rule the earth and the cosmos as sons and daughters of God. But rebellious spiritual beings—cue the fallen angels in Genesis 6—thwarted that birthright. Alberino interweaves Biblical interpretation with ancient texts, fringe theories, and speculation

about aliens, Nephilim, transhumanism, and coming eschatological events.

“Interest in these topics is only going to rise in the next decade,” Alberino told me.

“These aren’t fads. They’re going to become increasingly more important as we move into the future.”

Reviews of *Birthright* on Goodreads range from “scales fell from my eyes,” to “a confusing manifesto” and “whole sections of the book can be lifted straight from conspiracy sites.”

Alberino is often referred to as a modern-day Indiana Jones. He sports neutral-colored clothes, fedoras, aviator glasses, and leather boots. His hair slicked back, he often puffs a cigar during interviews. In recent months, Alberino has appeared on a series of popular podcasts, including Daily Wire’s *The Michael Knowles Show*, the *Shawn Ryan Show*, and *The Culture War Podcast* with Tim Pool.

For many, wading through these protracted discussions may raise more questions than answers.

That doesn’t seem to bother Henry of *Blurry Creatures*. For him, the fact that debate is taking place among believers and the wider world is a good thing. “Why can’t we ask questions? Why can’t we explore?” he says. “The conversation never really ends. In some ways, that’s a good thing, and in other ways, it’s frustrating.”

But critics of *Blurry Creatures* say they mislead listeners at times by not interjecting when guests venture into what could be speculative ideas or myths—or even false teaching, such as the Apostle Paul warned the early church against.

Another concern: Curiosity about the supernatural could easily turn into an all-consuming obsession.

Even those in this space recognize it’s a temptation. “The more you seek after these things, the more consumed you can get ... where you’re seeing a spiritual enemy around every corner,” Muddamalle told me. He cautions believers against becoming so enamored that they lose sight of their own sanctification—and even more importantly, the resurrected Savior.

“All of it ought to be understood within the context of Christ’s victory over these dark powers, His pronouncement of judgment over these supernatural beings,” Muddamalle said.

Trimm, the Old Testament scholar at Biola, has seen some students lose sight of that: “It becomes a problem if you dive into these topics and ignore clear principles about who God is and what He wants us to do in the world.” ■

END **ABORTION** NOW.COM

**YOUR BABY
HAS A NAME**



"Before I formed you in
the womb I knew you..."
Jeremiah 1:5



A photograph of a Planned Parenthood building with a sign in the foreground. The sign is blue and white with the text "Planned Parenthood" and "Care. No matter what." The building is made of brick and has a modern design. There are green trees in the background.

by *LEAH SAVAS*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
Darrell Goemaat/Genesis

Calling in the wilderness

Gospel preachers
outside abortion centers
stir up debate
over what pro-lifers
should prioritize:
earthly lives or
eternal ones



bearded man in a green beanie stands in front of the Planned Parenthood in Grand Rapids, Mich., a headset microphone on his face and a portable speaker hanging from his shoulder by a black strap. Notebook in hand, he kneels down on the sidewalk and prays silently. Then, he rises.

“Well, good morning,” he says through the speaker, facing the grassy lawn in front of the dark brown brick of the Planned Parenthood facility. “My name is Jordan. I’m a street missionary—street preacher—here in Grand Rapids, and I’m here today to bring the gospel, the good news, the glorious news of Jesus Christ to you.” Nearby in the grass, a few signs bend in the wind. One says, “BABIES ARE MURDERED HERE.” Another calls on passersby to “BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS, & YOU WILL BE SAVED.”

For the last five years, 30-year-old Jordan Sweezer has been a fixture outside local abortion facilities. He started with Heritage Clinic for Women, half a mile away on busy Fulton Street. Starting in 2022, he stood outside 15 to 20 hours a week—until the facility’s abortionist, Thomas Gordon, died from heart disease in August 2023. That facility closed, so Sweezer moved his signs and his preaching to the Planned Parenthood on Cherry Street, a normally quieter location with a pro-life pregnancy center on the other side of its driveway.

While people coming to the Heritage Clinic always sought abortions, people arriving at Planned Parenthood

could be there for several reasons—abortions, STI testing, birth control, or hormonal therapy. Sweezer has learned to tailor his message accordingly.

“Whether you’re here today to kill your child, whether you’re here today for birth control, whether you’re here today to change your gender, I plead with you with this good news,” Sweezer calls out with urgency in his voice. “Come to Jesus Christ today, by faith alone. Repent, which means turn away from your sins. Turn to the loving arms of Jesus Christ as Savior.”

Sweezer preaches for about 20 minutes before resuming what he had been doing before the sermon: offering tracts to drivers pulling into the parking lot, talking with passersby, and calling out to people walking from their cars to the building.

Instead of going in, one college-aged girl with a nose ring who arrives for STI testing walks over to talk with Sweezer. Later, a short woman missing her front teeth stops by on her way out. She was with her teenage daughter who is struggling with puberty. Sweezer tells them about sin, Christ’s sacrifice, and other local clinics that could help them, without ties to abortion.

Sweezer is one of an increasing number of Christians nationwide who are going to abortion facility sidewalks with a specifically gospel-first approach—sparking one-on-one conversations while also preaching about sin and the hope of salvation found in Jesus Christ. That strategy puts them at odds with other pro-life sidewalk counselors who say leading with evangelism is ineffective—even detrimental—to the main cause: saving babies. It’s a debate at the heart of the pro-life movement. What place should spiritual conversations have in the efforts to save unborn children and their moms?

In more ways than one, abortion facility evangelists like Sweezer represent fringe techniques and views controversial in the mainstream pro-life movement. I talked to nine other men currently or formerly involved in ministry similar to Sweezer’s. Some use a form of voice amplification. Some display pictures of bloody aborted babies. Most preach, sometimes quoting Proverbs 6:16-17, which says “the LORD hates ... hands that shed innocent blood.” Most tell their listeners that abortion is murder. And all support abortion abolitionist bills, which would classify abortion as homicide and allow women to face severe penalties for aborting their babies.

Many also have direct or indirect ties to the pro-life rescue movement—another strategy that causes division among pro-lifers. In the 1980s, groups like Operation Rescue organized blockades and sit-ins involving hundreds of pro-lifers at abortion facilities across the country. When the 1994 Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) Act introduced federal penalties for participating in that



Street preacher Jordan Sweezer sings with friends and family members outside Planned Parenthood on Cherry Street in Grand Rapids, Mich.

kind of civil disobedience, the movement lost momentum. But that decade, under new leadership, Operation Rescue morphed into Operation Save America, an organization current director Jason Storms said focuses largely on equipping churches to have “a presence and a voice” at local abortion facilities through preaching and sidewalk counseling. Today, the group has a loose network of abortion facility missionaries across the country.

The parking lot of the Planned Parenthood in Grand Rapids hides behind the brick building, but Sweezer has a few seconds to call out to people as they walk around the corner to the side entrance. It’s maybe 70 feet away, so he yells to be heard, but in a tone of pleading—not of anger. His pronouncements that “God says abortion is killing, it’s murder,” come with requests for them to come talk with him. “There’s help up here. We care about you,” he says.

And he does. Sweezer has helped arrange baby showers for women he met at the abortion facility who decided against abortion. He’s provided furniture and gas cards to women trying to start over. He hosts Bible studies for them and invites their families to spend time with his wife and five children. And he wants to make sure they don’t leave without hearing the hope of Jesus’ sacrifice for sin.

Sweezer can recall three times in the past three years that he’s had to pull aside angry pro-lifers to tell them he’s not on board with their approach. “What sets them apart is they’re not here to win their neighbor. They’re not here to save babies,” Sweezer says. “They’re here because they want to be the one to cast a judgment ... to just spit and scream and lose their mind.”

For Sweezer and other like-minded activists in this loose network of sidewalk evangelists, the accountability of their local church is key to ensuring they don’t become like that. Sweezer worked as a pastoral intern at his local church until recently and is sent out as a sidewalk missionary by One Life for Life, a ministry of One Life Church in Flint, Mich.

James Adamson is a deacon at his church and a local missionary to the Orlando Women's Center in Florida. As a representative of his local church, he wants to be above-board in everything. "I think that the leadership of the churches would truly change the trajectory of this type of work," he said. "If we don't have a presence, the vacuum that's going to be created is going to fill in with a bunch of people who are there for the wrong reasons."

Other groups that try to reach women outside abortion centers say the evangelists are the ones causing problems.

"When that type of an approach comes in, you see that ... the opportunities for peaceful and calm conversation really is inhibited," said Melissa Yeomans, a Grand Rapids program leader with the national organization Sidewalk Advocates for Life. It has had a presence at Grand Rapids abortion facilities for almost a decade. Yeomans described the group's model as relational—prioritizing the women and trying to discover the needs leading them to consider abortion. Sidewalk Advocates doesn't rule out gospel conversations, Yeomans said, but that's also not the priority in their brief interactions with women. They hope to engage women so that later they can connect with someone who can help them spiritually.

Yeomans said the extra noise of the preaching sometimes made it hard for her and other sidewalk advocates to hear the women who stopped to talk. It also riled up the once-quiet Cherry Street neighborhood. For the first several months after Yeomans' group and the evangelists moved from the shuttered Heritage Clinic to Planned Parenthood, tensions ran high on the sidewalk. Some locals screamed vulgarities from across the street. Residents threw eggs at pro-lifers and blasted loud music from their cars to drown them out. Sweezer said he and his family received death threats, and people sustained injuries in tussles—stories common to sidewalk evangelists. Sometimes, people with Sidewalk Advocates got caught in the crossfire.

Through the street preachers' arrival and the increased safety concerns at the Planned Parenthood location, Yeomans said, Sidewalk Advocates lost maybe a third of its volunteers. "We have a certain model of outreach, and the model is loving, peaceful," Yeomans said. "It can be really frustrating if there's something totally different that makes what you're seeing in the training and what you think you're coming out for really challenging."

Despite their offers of help and hope, Yeomans still considers the street preachers' tone to be judgmental. And research, she said, has proven that "shame-based, condemning messages are not effective. They don't reach that woman in her moment of considering abortion."

But Sweezer's method has reached some women. He said he has seen 122 women decide against abortion since



he started. Shadae Roberts, a single mom of six in her early 30s, credits Sweezer's persistence with saving her life and the life of her youngest child. She made obscene gestures and yelled at him when she came to Planned Parenthood in spring 2024, seeking an abortion. Hearing him talk about sin and quote Scripture made her angry—but she said he never seemed angry. His sense of urgency won Roberts over, and she said the speaker ensured she could hear him. "Jordan actually put in the effort to, like, literally hunt me down. That's what made a difference," she told me during a Zoom call from her car. The baby she would have aborted was sleeping on her shoulder. "I feel like if you're going to be out there, you really need to try to stop me."

Brandon Hamman knew what he was signing up for when he accepted a job offer from Coalition Life. The pro-life sidewalk organization has staffers assigned to work outside abortion facilities in Missouri, Illinois, and Kansas and hired him to work full time in



***“WE HAVE A
CERTAIN MODEL
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Melissa Yeomans and her Sidewalk Advocates for Life team use a different approach at the Cherry Street Planned Parenthood.

Carbondale, Ill. The group’s approach to pregnant women relies on methods it says are tested and proven effective. “They were very clear in the interview process that I was not going to be evangelizing,” Hamman said. “Their focus is on getting the women to resources.”

According to Coalition Life founder and executive director Brian Westbrook, staff may only bring up spiritual topics if the woman initiates it. “We go out as Christians to serve them, but not to convert them,” Westbrook said. He described that approach as coming from “an engineering and a sales and marketing perspective.” Techniques such as waving with the left hand, wearing an orange vest, and not using any signage, he said, get more women to stop and talk. “We tweak our conversations to really, most importantly, meet those clients exactly where they are—meet their needs,” Westbrook said.

Hamman started on staff in June 2023. He handed out pamphlets with information about a baby’s development in the womb and studies about the effects of abortion on mothers. He encouraged women to get ultrasounds at nearby pro-life pregnancy centers, where they could find other resources. But he estimates about half the women who left would come back to the abortion facility. “There is at least a good hour to an hour and a half of just anxiousness, hoping you didn’t see that car come back around the corner,” Hamman said.

Around February 2024, Hamman started feeling convicted for not sharing the gospel with people coming for abortions. While letting them see their babies or giving them resources was great, too often he saw that wasn’t what the mothers needed. One of the last days he worked for Coalition Life, Hamman talked to a couple who went to a nearby pregnancy center then came back, carrying the brand-new ultrasound photos of their baby. Hamman saw the dad taking a picture of the ultrasound image on his phone. Then they headed inside for the abortion.

Hamman saw that the issue was a heart problem. “The way we change hearts is by sharing the gospel and letting God work through the proclamation of the gospel to change people.” He said he watched too many people leave the abortion facility after aborting their babies without hearing about the hope of forgiveness for sins—including the sin of abortion—in Jesus Christ.

In September, with the support of his church, Hamman started his own organization, Gospel for Life, and began relying primarily on sharing the gospel message. He still prefers to stop people in their cars and talk one-on-one before they pull into the abortion center parking lot. But if



the number of cars slows and patients are waiting in the parking lot, he calls out and tells them the story of creation, the fall of Adam and Eve, and Christ's death on the cross. "The way I look at this ... is roughly 10,000 babies are going to be murdered in Carbondale this year," he said, basing his estimate on a post from one of the city's three abortion facilities. "And then if you think on top of that, there's 10,000 mothers that need to hear the gospel, that are coming there to take the life of their child."

Sweezer in Grand Rapids prioritizes gospel conversations for similar reasons. He tries to be "just always gospel centered, always rushing to the cross because it's the power of salvation. You can save a baby, but they can both go to hell if they don't know Jesus."

While evangelists and more traditional pro-life sidewalk counselors battle for the attention of women outside abortion centers, pregnancy centers have to navigate how to relate to these groups without attracting pushback. Rusty Thomas, the former Operation Save America director, said several pregnancy centers in his area refuse to talk to him or the women he

*"I THINK
SOMETIMES
THERE COULD BE
MORE IN COMMON
THAN WHAT
WE THINK."*



brings to them because they don't want to be associated with his work.

Vicky Mathews, executive director at the pro-life Choices Women's Clinic in Orlando, can attest to that sense of aversion. When she first started as the center's director more than a decade ago, people encouraged her to visit the nearby abortion center to meet the evangelist who was largely responsible for the high rate of abortion-minded women coming to the pregnancy center.

Historically, she saw the pro-lifers on abortion facility sidewalks as offensive. But she visited—and kept going back. John Barros' ministry captivated Mathews. She saw him preach the gospel, share Scripture, and pray with people. Sometimes, the things he said made her uncomfortable. But she learned to respect what he did.

"When you are at the true gate of hell and you are right there at the final hour, it takes something different than what it takes for us," Mathews said, comparing sidewalk ministry to pregnancy center ministry. "I felt like [John's] approach was solid. ... It was so easy to see the humility and the care and the passion, not just for that unborn child, but for that mom and dad. I saw that it was effective."

FAR LEFT: Sweezer hugs a friend following a sidewalk prayer service outside Planned Parenthood. LEFT: Yeomans talks with Sidewalk Advocates for Life volunteers.

Mathews said she and Barros were like brother and sister in their pro-life ministries until his death in 2024. People like herself in pregnancy center work, she said, "owe it to ourselves to build a relationship" with people like Barros. "I think sometimes there could be more in common than what we think."

Back in Grand Rapids, that's what staff at the pregnancy center next door to the Planned Parenthood on Cherry Street have tried to do. But they've also set boundaries to distance themselves from all sidewalk groups, even those not using amplification. When the sidewalk groups moved next door, the pregnancy center's CEO sent an email to the leaders at the Planned Parenthood facility to explain that the pro-lifers on the sidewalk acted independently. The pregnancy center also asked the sidewalk groups not to use their parking lot or bathrooms. "Because everyone has cameras," said Becky Buick, chief operations officer of PRC Grand Rapids. "So we have to be very clear ... that they're separate groups. And if they would come back and forth from our building ... the optics would look as if we're paying [them]."

But while the center maintains its distance, Buick said she has grown to love Sweezer and the other street preachers who come to the sidewalk. She said she and another PRC staff member met with some of the evangelists to talk through misunderstandings and hear the heart behind their work. They've come to recognize that these men sense a clear calling. "I'm so thankful for their spirit and that the Lord created men like that, that are willing to be that bold," Buick said.

Buick remembers the early days after the street preachers' arrival on Cherry Street, when a feeling of disgust would come over her any time she heard them preaching through their speakers. She attributes her "prejudice" at the time to a belief that their approach to women in crisis pregnancies was wrong and insensitive "because their method wasn't my method," Buick said. But she's tried to look at their ministry with an open heart. She's heard their stories of how Scripture has influenced women to decide against abortion and of how they've met the practical needs of mothers. She now sees how the Holy Spirit can use their work.

"As Christians, it's really easy to throw a stone at someone who's preaching on the corner and to have prejudice about them," Buick said. The evangelists remind her of Old Testament prophets. "For goodness' sake, they certainly weren't liked, and ... some of the things they said are horrible. So are we not thinking that still can happen, or that God still calls people to call out rough stuff that we don't want to hear?" ■

THE OZEMPIC

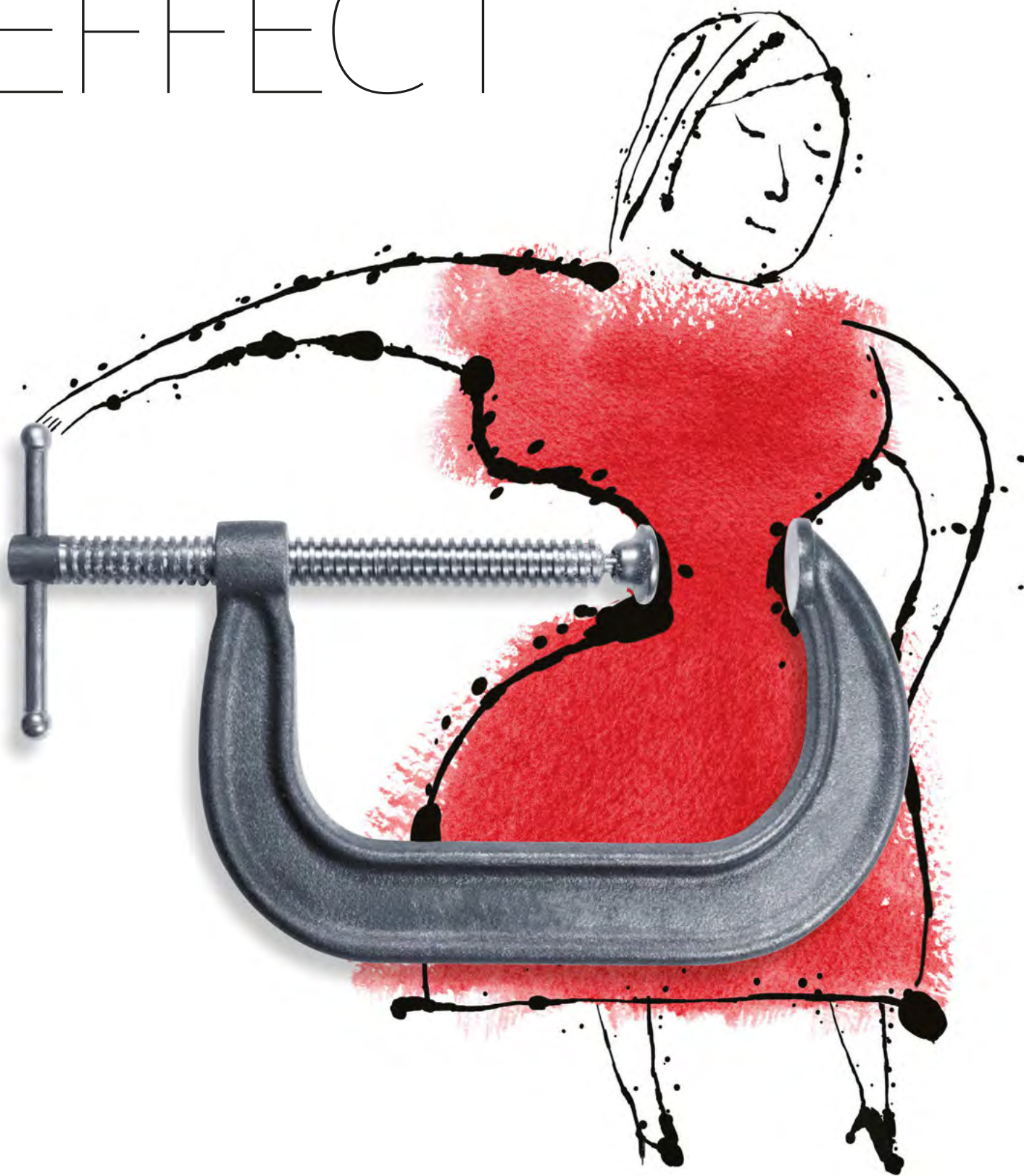
What the GLP-1 craze says about a culture—and Christians—wrapped up in weight

by KIM HENDERSON

illustration by Miguel Davilla

Jill Lynn built a YouTube following by doling out beauty advice. She does it in the glow of a ring light, her face leaned close to a screen as she tries out new lip liners and lace-front wigs. It's the sort of thing that's delighted her fans for nearly a decade, but in recent months Jill Lynn has moved on from hair toppers. Her target audience—menopausal women with middle-age spread—has a new preoccupation. They want the lowdown on her latest weight loss experiment, the injectable drug tirzepatide. They're after numbers, straight from her scale, down to the decimal point. And she provides them. ■ "I was 152.9, so almost 3 pounds this week," the licensed cosmetologist announces, then moves on to her current dosing predicament. Another 5 milligrams, or up to 6? ■ "I'm still on the fence," she says with a shrug. But before the video concludes, she acknowledges a new side effect, dry mouth. No worries, though. She's upping her water intake. ■ Like so many on YouTube and Instagram, Jill Lynn is part of the growing phenomenon surrounding GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1) drugs, the class of injectable weight loss wonders that includes Ozempic and Wegovy. Influencers spike interest by documenting their own weight loss journeys. Some even offer codes to get discounts on compounded, lower-priced versions of GLP-1s. The latest development in the craze, one of particular interest to the needle-averse? An oral GLP-1 option—a pill that's just as effective as the injectables—is primed for full-scale release next year. ■ America has welcomed the new drugs with open arms and open pocketbooks. It's not surprising, with more than 70% of the population considered either obese or overweight. But is it really in our best interest to take an expensive drug with common side effects—nausea, diarrhea, fatigue—to lose weight? What if it's just 20 "vanity" pounds? Is it OK to take a drug to fit a certain size of jeans? ■ America's infatuation with all things Ozempic is rife with issues a jab just can't cure. The new pills may mean even bigger problems for a culture—and Christians—wrapped up in weight.

EFFECT



Room 23 at Ochsner Medical Center in Monroe, La., is pragmatic by design. Vinyl covers the exam table, and rubber baseboards outline a floor made of square, commercial-grade tiles. There are no windows, no special lighting. Just the bare essentials, plus family physician Amy Givler and her 11 o'clock appointment, 66-year-old Charles Norman Jr.

Norman, a new patient, has diabetes. He's been fighting the chronic disease since 1995, when he first noticed his vision clouding. For decades, his all-important A1C level hovered between a risky 8 and 9. These days he posts an admirable 5.7, making him a poster boy for the diabetes drug Mounjaro.

"You're not on insulin at all," Givler remarks, glancing at his chart.

Norman shakes his head.

"That's really good," the doctor says, marveling at Mounjaro's powers. Givler, a trim woman with a kind smile, took her time warming up to the medication. She waited to see the studies, and now she's convinced of its benefits. She pre-

scribes GLP-1s for many of her patients, most of them on Medicaid. She says it's impossible to get Medicaid to pay for a drug like Mounjaro or Ozempic unless you have diabetes. "The cost is absurd. Very, very high. We're talking \$1,100 a month."

Mounjaro is the brand name form of tirzepatide. It's the same drug that Jill Lynn talks about on her YouTube channel. While it works to produce more insulin for a patient like Charles Norman, it also helps users like Jill Lynn lose weight. It does this by mimicking a hormone in the body that controls the rate food gets processed. Slowing this process reduces appetite and helps people eat less.

Even though doctors noticed the dual outcomes as early as 20 years ago, the first GLP-1 drug aimed at weight loss didn't hit the market until 2014. It took time for GLP-1s to get into the hands of the masses, but once they did, the floodgates opened. Last year's data show 1 in 8 adults in the United States has taken a GLP-1 drug. That's more than 33 million people.

Hazel Sanders is part of that crowd. She's on staff at the clinic where Amy

Givler practices. But even with 40 years of nursing under her belt, and all the medical knowledge that goes with it, Sanders couldn't control her weight. It was a lifelong battle, and whenever she neared 290 on the scales, she knew she was in trouble. "The alarms went off. My body started to shut down. Shortness of breath, heart palpitations, couldn't move, high blood pressure."

Although Sanders would lose the pounds necessary to get her breathing back to normal, she wouldn't lose enough to toss her three blood pressure prescriptions. Her blood sugar levels remained dangerously high, too. Sanders describes her desperation in terms of physical exhaustion rather than dress sizes. "Carrying that weight. It's hard, carrying the weight."

Last year, Givler put Sanders on Mounjaro to manage her diabetes and her weight. She lost about 50 pounds. Studies show that losing just 10% of excess body weight can make a major difference. It can lower the risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes. It can reduce symptoms of depression, arthritis, and sleep apnea. Givler says it can even quiet the internal chatter known as "food noise."

"That message constantly playing in your head that says you need to eat, and your brain saying, 'No, no, no.' That is a hard thing to fight."

Success like Sanders' has led Givler to believe medicine, in many cases, is the right choice for treating obesity. She wishes a GLP-1 drug had been in her toolbox years ago when one of her patients, a young mother, suffocated under her own weight.

"There are many instances where we help people who are struggling with a personal failure, a bad habit, a besetting





Dr. Amy Givler talks with new patient Charles Norman Jr. about his diabetes.

sin,” Givler contends. “I have patients who love Jesus yet are on antidepressants. We live in a fallen world.”

Like many, Givler places much of the blame for America’s obesity problems on the environment, with its “proliferation of fast food and cheap food.” She watched that diet wreak havoc in Kenya, too.

Givler and her physician husband, along with their three children, spent most of 2003 at a mission hospital in Kijabe. “We hardly saw high blood pressure then. Very few people were overweight, let alone obese. Very little diabetes,” she remembers. But on subsequent trips to Kenya, the Givlers noticed

a change. Junk food had flooded the country, bringing obesity and its laundry list of chronic diseases along with it. Instead of focusing Kenya’s limited medical resources on injuries and infections, doctors now had to train people to take daily medications for high blood pressure and diabetes.

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the world, even in Singapore, where he spoke just two days before our interview.

etabolic scientist Ben Bikman is known as the “Guru of Insulin Resistance” by audiences across

Bikman agrees with Givler’s point: Processed food is a big part of the problem. He calls it one of the “plagues of prosperity.” But he’s concerned about the use of GLP-1 drugs to combat the consequences of a poor diet. Ozempic and its counterparts are linked to muscle and bone mass loss, which can lead to physical frailty, a particular risk for middle-aged or older women. Bikman thinks that can’t be ignored: “In the likely event they want to get off the drugs—and 70% of users do get off at two years because they’re sick of feeling sick—the fat mass will come right back, but the lean mass may never come back.”

Bikman also believes an increased risk of what he calls “mental fragility”



A diabetic woman injects Ozempic.

is a possibility. That's because GLP-1 drugs act on the brain by affecting dopamine regulation. Not only do they dull cravings for food, but also the desire for other pleasures like sex, personal accomplishment, and drive for life.

As a professor at Brigham Young University, Bikman says he can easily identify an Ozempic user among his students: "It's the gaunt gal who's falling asleep in class and asking for deadline extensions. That's the trifecta." He goes as far as describing instances of lean, healthy people taking Ozempic as drug abuse and proof of eating disorders. He's certain students aren't getting GLP-1s on their own. "There's a parent who's helping, there's an enabler. I get extraordinarily incensed about the whole thing."

Incensed but not totally against. Bikman is for flipping the script on how GLP-1s are administered—a change to

microdosing and cycling. He says the key is learning how to control carbohydrate consumption. "Start at the lowest possible dose for a couple of months. Are you learning to eat differently? Cycle off the drug now. If you can still manage your cravings, you're done. If not, cycle back, get habits in place, and start weaning off again."

That approach leaves the onus on patients, many of whom could be mired in emotional and compulsive eating disorders. But is *disorder* even the right word?

In his book *Seven Daily Sins*, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Jared Wilson cites gluttony as "the big fat elephant in the room of the evangelical church." He maintains gluttony is idolatry. By orienting our behavior, thinking, and affections around food, Wilson says, we seek to find in food what can only be found in God. In other words, food shouldn't be a substitute for intimacy with God. Or a pleasure beyond its design.

The wonder-working power of GLP-1 drugs is their ability to mitigate the desire for food. But are those desires merely hormonal triggers, or is something more at play? The Christian life is characterized by learning to direct desires, even squelching them when necessary. Appetites, then, are as much moral as they are biological.

And they're a gift, according to Christian body image coach Heather Creekmore.

Creekmore, 50, spent most of her life trying to make the world's current take on correct eating habits her own. Sitting in her home in Austin, Texas, she sums up decades of diet science as fads, an "eggs are good, eggs are bad, fat is bad, fat is good" thing. And don't get her started on bread. "We've demonized bread, and Jesus calls Himself the bread of life," Creekmore quips. "Why have we bought into this?"

She brackets her question with smiles, but the pastor's wife and mother of four is serious. For the last 10 years, Creekmore has counseled hundreds of women through body image and comparison struggles. She knows many have been looking for a miracle cure their whole lives, and Ozempic appears to have cracked the code. Creekmore has her doubts.

"I have great compassion for people who are in a really hard spot and need an answer," she explains. "But we've actually convinced ourselves that the healthiest thing is to not eat, even though God designed us to eat."

She believes Christians are adopting beliefs about food that aren't Biblical. She points to the huge banquet awaiting believers in heaven. "We won't be eating because food is fuel. We're not going to need food as fuel then."

Creekmore can speak the language of diet culture. As a child, she attended Weight Watchers meetings and drank SlimFast. In college, she subsisted on plain bagels. She spent 20 years as a certified fitness instructor, trying to exercise her way to that "perfect look."

Then, in her mid-30s, Creekmore realized she'd made her body an idol. She says her heart was worshipping a body image she had yet to attain. "I believed if I looked a certain way, I would never be rejected. Everyone would love me. My husband would love me more. Doors would just open for me."

Ridiculous, Creekmore admits, but she believes it's the very message that has women grabbing Ozempic to lose 20 pounds. And the endgame isn't pretty. "A woman will see a number on the scale that she was sure would make her happy, but it doesn't. So she says to herself, 'It must mean I just need to lose five more

pounds.' I hear this story over and over again."

For Creekmore's clients, the challenge is understanding their issue isn't just physical, it's spiritual. She wants them to know they were made for a purpose, and it's more than chasing a number on the scale. "I've lived that way for too many decades, and now what's important for me to do is to get after what Jesus has called me to do, and that's not to transform my body."

***"I believed
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more. Doors
would just
open for me."***

Back in Louisiana, it's lunchtime. Amy Givler has left her white coat behind at the clinic and is studying the menu at JAC's Craft Smokehouse, a popular barbecue spot on the Ouachita River. She asks for a brisket plate with water, no sides. It's a hard choice in a place with sweet tea on tap, but Givler has been making hard choices for eight years. That's when she got serious about her weight and a body mass index that put her in the clinically obese range. After Givler found success on a keto diet, she never looked back. "It was like my body said, 'Oh, thank you,' because I felt so much better. Not only did I lose 70 pounds, I just felt better."

What if years ago, back when she was yo-yo dieting, Ozempic had been around? Would she have gone that route?

"Yes," Givler answers, even as she dutifully eats her brisket. "One hundred percent."

But there has to be a reason for users to get the drugs, Givler insists, a "clear indication," as she calls it. And that's whether they're injected or they're swallowed, as soon will be the case. Prescribing a GLP-1 for a patient who wants to be thin for the sake of appearance, well, Givler can't imagine doing that. "It's just not responsible medicine." ■



VOICES PETER BILES

Screwtape starts a podcast

How edgy, heterodox new media distracted me from the real battle

I have wondered recently if Uncle Screwtape got my number, dialed it, and pretended to be an edgy podcaster promising cultural renaissance.

Lately I've started to consume a lot of "new media," content that isn't overtly Christian but is friendly toward the faith. It's the kind of thing I can imagine C.S. Lewis' Screwtape advising Wormwood to do: "Be sure your patient fills his leisure time constantly listening to podcasts and reading stimulating think pieces, which prattle on about culture, politics, and religion, all the while blunting his appetite for the Enemy's real presence and ongoing work in the world." These articles and podcasts might best be described as "heterodox." It's not *bad* material, but neither is it rooted in God's Word.

I realize now that I was looking for something. The last decade of political and cultural life has bewildered a lot of people. I'm no exception. Donald Trump shocked the world by winning the 2016 election. I'm a white guy, basically apolitical, who didn't like Trump but eventually grew annoyed by the rage of the never-Trumpers. A few years ago in the bottom of Wheaton College's library, I found myself holding a glossy new book called *12 Rules for Life*. I later discovered Jordan Peterson's library of YouTube recordings.

In short, like many men my age, I found resources on how to be a man in the modern world. The only problem? Peterson was a secular prophet, intentionally dodgy on the question of God. He, and others in his wake, were culturally Christian but avoided the reality of the risen Christ.

Fast-forward to 2024 and it seemed like more Americans were describing themselves as "politically homeless." I sup-

posed that fit the bill for me, too. I didn't know where to put myself ideologically. And clearly, millions of others floated in the same boat, including a new army of independent media pundits and online entrepreneurs.

Many people in this brave new world are sharp, accomplished, media savvy, and establishment-skeptical if not totally anti-establishment. The age of globalism and democratic optimism didn't deliver, they say. The end of the Cold War didn't usher in universal peace and prosperity. The old way of doing government and politics, among both Republicans and Democrats, has failed. Enter Trump, Washington's swamp drainer. Enter Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson. Enter creative figures like Matt Taibbi, Megyn Kelly, and Walter Kirn, heralding an optimistic new age.

Every big political movement explains itself in theological terms. There's an enemy (the globalists, the elites, the technocrats) and a cosmic victim (the everyday man, the working class, "ordinary people"). When we supplant the elites, when the government hypocrites either self-destruct or the strong man calls their bluff and beats them, the golden age will blossom. We will be saved.

Screwtape would have approved that message. He chalks up the human appetite for a grand story to a deeper, spiritual longing: "So inveterate is their appetite for Heaven that our best method, at this stage, of attaching them to earth is to make them believe that earth can be turned into Heaven."

Over the last year, I've felt myself adopting this kind of framework, as if the ultimate enemy is a global syndicate of thought police and technocratic freedom haters. Such a syndicate seems plausible these days, of course, and what happens with the global order *does* matter. But this attitude of suspicion and dissent, of believing that the hunt for cosmic evil ends in the D.C. swamp, misses something crucial. It forgets that humans aren't our ultimate enemies. We all have one common enemy, and in the words of Gandalf, "He does not share power."

For me, supplanting Christian orthodoxy with edgy heterodoxy entailed drifting from my faith and distracted me from the deeper spiritual disease that infects us all. I do have an enemy, but governments or worldly powers are not the ultimate foe. They can be co-opted for evil, but they are symptoms, not causes. As Paul wrote, our real battle is against "the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places."

At one point, Uncle Screwtape advises his nefarious nephew to downplay the existence of the demonic. Better that modern bipeds forget about those pesky demons who are always trying to tempt, befuddle, and vex them. I've realized that my change in media diet distracted me from the real battle. I let heterodoxy hedge out orthodoxy, and my devotion to Jesus took a blow as a result. Screwtape would be proud. But I'm onto him now. ■

—Peter Biles is a novelist and culture writer from Oklahoma and a graduate of the World Journalism Institute

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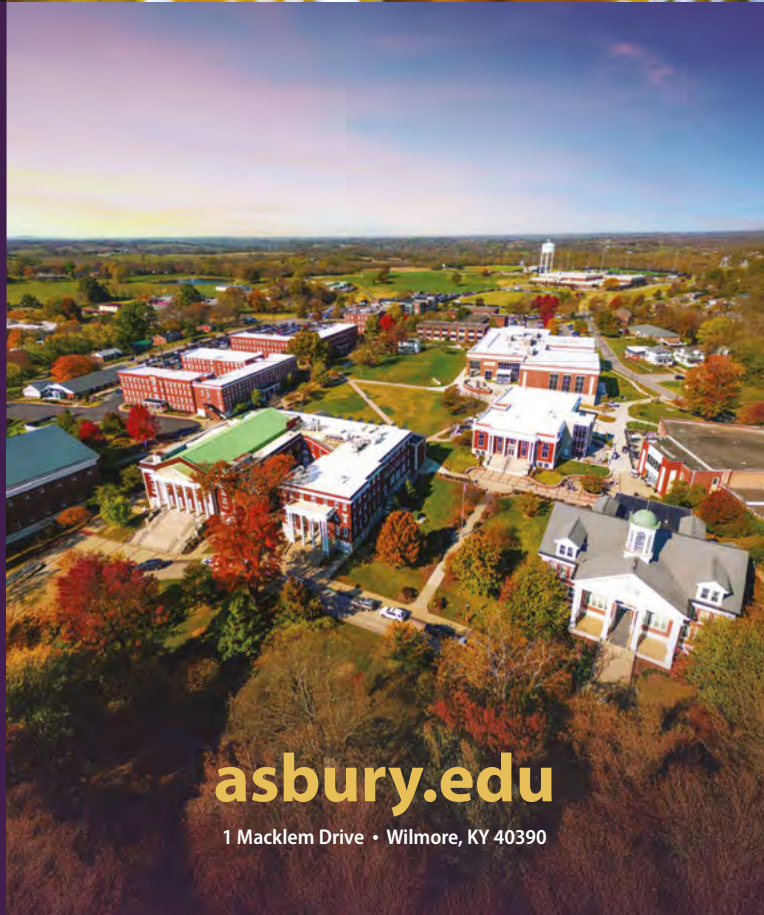


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NOTEBOOK



TECHNOLOGY

Only the essentials

The teens and young adults curbing their smartphone addiction

by BEKAH MCCALLUM

Bridget Bogan stared at her empty home screen, just to have something to look at.

It was 2024, and the strawberry-blond college student at Ave Maria University in Florida had removed all the apps from her iPhone's home screen. If she wanted to send a text, for example, she had to swipe down and search for the Messages app.

Bogan, who got her first iPhone halfway through high school, knew that she spent too much time scrolling on social media. Her average screen time was four to five hours per day. In college, she decided to do something about it: She tried grayscaling (setting her display to monochromatic tones) and powering off 30 minutes before bedtime.

Still, her social media addiction continued and started to damage her in-person friendships. "I stopped being my true, authentic self," says Bogan. "And I started trying to make myself more like the images that I saw on my screen."

That's when she simply deleted all of the apps from her home screen, including Instagram. "And I survived," she jokes.

Excessive smartphone use has taken a toll on people like Bogan. Evidence of smartphone addiction has mounted since the 2007 introduction of the iPhone. According to Priori Data, the average American spends nearly five hours daily on smartphones alone.

Screen time overload seems to correlate with a widespread collapse of mental health. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt reported that rates of anxiety and depression among U.S. undergraduates increased by 134% and 106% respectively in the decade following 2010, around the time when what Haidt calls "phone-based childhoods" began to emerge. According to Common Sense Media, the average age to receive a first smartphone is 11.

Realizing how their phones are affecting them has led some teenagers and young adults to cut back on screen time voluntarily. They do it either on their own or in low-tech communities.

After minimizing dependence on her smartphone, Bogan noticed improvements in her ability to concentrate on tasks and to enjoy the people she was with. That's why she decided to serve during her senior year as the founding president of the Humanity club at her school.

Humanity, a nonprofit with clubs on a half-dozen college campuses, helps students to coordinate low-tech communities or "villages." The organization also recently began facilitating villages for friends, family members, and high schoolers. Some village members delete social media, and others purchase devices like the Light Phone or Wisephone, minimalistic smartphone alternatives loaded with only essential apps. Members are encouraged to eat meals phone-free, set digital bedtimes, and spend in-person time with friends. →





Students hang out in real life at Ohio's Franciscan University of Steubenville.

"The whole idea is, how do we get back to our local environment and live more humanly while using technology for good and putting it back in its proper place?" says Andrew Laubacher, the organization's executive director.

Humanity began as a scholarship program in 2022 at Ohio's Franciscan University of Steubenville. The Catholic university offered \$5,000 in tuition assistance for students who agreed to give up their smartphones during their undergraduate years. Only 30 students received the scholarship, but an additional 50 participated in the smartphone-free challenge anyway.

It isn't the only such club. At the Offline Club, with chapters in eight countries, leaders organize ticketed, screen-free hangouts like reading parties and picnics. The group's events often attract young adults, but some middle-aged participants attend as well.

Clubs such as these help to alleviate one of the pain points of minimizing screen time: missing out. "When you're

"The whole idea is, how do we get back to our local environment and live more humanly while using technology for good and putting it back in its proper place?"

doing it with a group of 30 other students who also aren't on their smartphones ... it makes it a lot easier to have people to hang out with in real life," says Clare Morell, a Humanity board member, Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow, and author of *The Tech Exit*.

Some groups aim at even younger students. The Luddite Club, active in several U.S. states, British Columbia, and Brazil, is a nonprofit led by self-proclaimed "former screenagers." Many of its chapters are based at high schools. The group encourages members to limit phone use, publishes a print newsletter, and facilitates pen pal connections.

For children unable or unwilling to curb phone use, some support groups aim to motivate their parents. More than 120,000 parents have taken the Wait Until 8th pledge, promising to delay giving their children smartphones until at least the eighth grade. In the U.K., parents of over 150,000 children signed a similar pledge through a group called Smartphone Free Childhood.

Outside of support groups, some phone addicts have embarked on solo, low-tech journeys. T.J. Miller, a student at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Ga., swapped his iPhone for a Light Phone in 2022. "I'm able to just sit, be very present, not worry about anything I see on my screen at all, and just enjoy what I have around me," says Miller. He still has an iPhone for the occasional hot spot, but he keeps the device in his desk drawer. Miller now collects CDs, wears a wristwatch, and checks emails on his laptop.

Bridget Bogan still has an iPhone too—with select items like Spotify and airline apps on the home screen—but it's "very dumbed down," without email or web browsers. "People learned that if they wanted to get in contact with me, they had to either give me a call or just wait for me to respond to the emails," says Bogan.

She'd like to unplug even more. If she didn't need it to navigate, she'd get rid of Google Maps. And she'd delete Spotify if she didn't love music so much: "I probably should just delete my subscription. ... It still has that hold on me." ■

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Closing a loophole

Texas blocks cities from aiding out-of-state abortions

by LAUREN CANTERBERRY



Cities in Texas are no longer allowed to help women travel out of state for abortion, under a bill that took effect Sept. 1. The legislation, which Gov. Greg Abbott ceremonially signed in August, bars local municipalities and counties from paying for hotels, food, plane tickets, and other travel expenses for women who leave the state to kill their unborn babies.

The bill was the latest salvo in a battle between pro-life state leaders and left-leaning city officials. Ever since

2022's *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* returned the abortion issue to the states, abortion advocates—including city council members—have looked for ways to skirt state laws in places like Texas, which protects unborn babies in nearly all circumstances.

Lawmakers in the Texas Legislature passed the so-called Stop Tax-Funded

A mobile billboard advertises abortion travel assistance in Atlanta.

Abortion Travel Act in May. The move came after abortion-backing efforts by city council members in both San Antonio and Austin.

Austin in August 2024 passed a resolution to allocate \$400,000 for city residents to travel out of state for abortions. Former City Council Member Don Zimmerman and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton both sued the city over the move, saying it violated state laws.

Meanwhile, San Antonio officials last November approved the \$500,000 Reproductive Justice Fund. While part of the fund was expected to pay for public education, contraceptive access, and sexually transmitted disease testing, lawmakers also planned to pay for abortion travel for residents. The city in April voted to allocate money from the fund for abortion-related expenses. Paxton also sued San Antonio, and a state appeals court sided with him in June, ruling the city must stop implementing the program as the lawsuit continued through the courts. The city is still fighting the ruling.

Abortion funds and providers across the country have offered to finance women's trips out of pro-life states to have abortions. In 2022, the city of Atlanta approved a plan to donate \$300,000 to an abortion travel fund called Access Reproductive Care Southeast. Georgia protects unborn babies after their heartbeats are detected on an ultrasound, usually around six weeks of pregnancy.

SOUTH CAROLINA VS. ABORTION GIANT

Planned Parenthood South Atlantic is still fighting South Carolina in federal court in an effort to keep its Medicaid funding. The abortion provider on Aug. 21 filed an amended complaint challenging Republican Gov. Henry McMaster's 2018 executive order blocking Medicaid reimbursements to organizations that provide abortions. In its new filing, Planned Parenthood argues the executive order violates the 14th Amendment because it unfairly targets the organization.

The legal action comes after the U.S. Supreme Court this summer upheld the state's authority to remove Planned Parenthood from its list of Medicaid providers. McMaster spokesman Brandon Charochak called the amended lawsuit a "desperate, last-gasp attempt to relitigate an issue that has already been decided." —L.C.





The Valero refinery northeast of San Francisco may close by April 2026.

BUSINESS

Oil exodus

California refinery losses may lead to gasoline price hikes

by TODD VICIAN

➔ The Phillips 66 refinery south of Los Angeles processes 139,000 barrels of crude oil into gasoline, diesel, jet fuel, and fuel-grade coke for boilers and furnaces each day. But it's ending its century-long operation this fall, citing market dynamics and the uncertainty of operating in California.

Another plant, a Valero refinery northeast of San Francisco that processes 145,000 barrels per day, may close by April 2026. Although Phillips 66 said it will import gasoline, diesel, and jet fuel to satisfy demand, industry analysts still expect the closures—representing nearly a fifth of California's refining capacity—to raise pump prices in California and elsewhere in the United States.

The Golden State was once a global leader in drilling and production. Now it gets less than a quarter of its petroleum supply locally, despite having some of the largest untapped sources of oil underground and offshore.

"California is an oil-rich state," said Caleb Jasso with the Institute for Energy Research. "It just severely limits how much they actually allow people to utilize their in-state domestic resources."

California's oil extraction has declined 66% since 1985. State-specific fuel blends that reduce emissions have provided much-needed cleaner air but also reduced demand for fuel. The California Energy Commission projected a production decline of 2% to 3% a year to match increases in fuel efficiency and the growth of electric cars, but the rate of decline has been about 15% recently, according to Catherine Reheis-Boyd, president and CEO of the Western States Petroleum Association. The state hasn't issued a new drilling permit for more than two years. Analysts at Turner, Mason & Co. estimate at least half of California's refineries, and possibly all but one in a worst-case scenario, could close by 2045.

"Anything that anyone does in California seems to be more expensive,"

Reheis-Boyd said. "And then you have all the policies that the state has put into place. ... Many organizations, not even just oil and gas, they're really making some tough choices whether to stay in the state."

Estimates of how much prices will likely increase at the pump in California next year range from \$1 to more than \$4 a gallon (double the current price). Patrick De Haan, head of petroleum analysis at GasBuddy, predicts price spikes of more than \$1 a gallon outside the state if unexpected outages occur. California's reduced refining capacity is likely to lead to higher prices for air travel, manufacturing, and agriculture products as well.

In 2020, Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom signed an executive order aiming to end new gasoline-powered car sales in the state by 2035. That effectively discouraged continued refinery operations and long-term investments in the state. Newsom has also accused oil companies of price gouging. Faced with a long-term supply shortage, in April, he directed the California Energy Commission to work with refineries to prevent expected supply shortages.

"They're floating the idea of trying to find somebody to buy one of these refineries, if not have the state itself take over it," Jasso said. "They're doing everything except taking accountability for a bad decision."

It seems at least some regulators are grasping the reality of market dynamics. After reviewing supply and demand projections, the California Energy Commission on Aug. 29 postponed for five years imposing penalties on refiners who exceed state price caps on the amount above costs they're allowed to charge for California-blend gasoline.

Meanwhile, Jasso said, "If you're watching from outside of California, you're seeing in real time what happens when the government picks and chooses the winners and the losers." ■



POLITICS

Homeland vision

An Israeli grassroots movement seeks common ground in the face of adversity

by *ESTHER ARNUSCH*

➔ Israeli activist Matan Yaffe, 40, isn't afraid of a fight. In 2013, when Bedouin in the Negev tried to steal his motorcycle, he pointed a gun to chase them off—but later started Desert Stars, a leadership training program for local Bedouin youth. As a Harvard Kennedy School student in 2023, he refused a professor's request that he stop describing Israel as a "liberal and Jewish democracy." When the professor threatened consequences, Yaffe sued the school for anti-Semitism.

So it was perhaps natural that, in January 2023, when Israeli lawmakers proposed judicial reform to curb the power of Israel's highest court, Yaffe was

among the thousands who took to the streets to protest the measure. In joining the bitter political demonstrations, Yaffe's goal was to defend the checks and balances of Israeli democracy.

Then came the brutal Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack. Amid the resulting war in Gaza and impending threat of a similar invasion of Hezbollah's forces from Lebanon, Yaffe was deployed as a reservist to Israel's northern border. As they served together, he and fellow soldiers began to dialogue, finding

common ground despite their politically differing views.

Today, he is one of the leaders of El HaDegel ("To the Flag"), an aspiring new political party that emphasizes a return to Israel's ideological roots as a democratic Jewish state. He and fellow reservists who founded the party believe that the political hostility of the judicial reform protests was a mistake: "We tore each other and the nation apart."

Traditionally, the left and right in Israel were defined by their support for or rejection of the Oslo peace process and its land-for-peace approach to settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More recently, political alignments have

Israeli soldiers mourn the death of a reservist who was injured in Lebanon in 2024.

been defined by support or opposition to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government. For many Israelis, the Oct. 7 invasion shattered any vision of a two-state solution. Now, new political leaders like Yaffe—and some longtime ones—are seeking to leave behind the old lines of division and unite behind a common goal: a safe and prosperous Jewish homeland.

The socialist Labor Party dominated politics in Israel until 1977, when Likud rose to power, rejecting socialist ideology and promoting a free market. Netanyahu of the Likud party is in his sixth term and heads the most right-wing government in Israel's history. After a cycle of five elections between 2019 and 2022, Israel's political climate became increasingly polarized and populist. In planning its attack, Hamas took advantage of Israel's internal strife.

Fighting side by side on the front lines, reservists from across Israeli society had opportunity to talk, listen, and better understand one another, according to Yaffe. Instead of pointing fingers, he says, they wondered, "What did I do to contribute to the polarization? ... We felt ashamed. Now that the illusion of safety was shattered, the enmity and polarization seemed so stupid."

Yaffe says when he returned from his first round of reserve duty, he discovered to his dismay that the old enmity had already returned to civil society and to public discourse. He called his commander and said he wanted to focus his energies on restoring Israel to its ideological roots. With his commander's blessing, Yaffe started El HaDegel. The group has not yet officially registered as a party but plans to once a date is set for the next Knesset election.

Zionism—prioritizing the existence of the state of Israel over other values—is at the heart of El HaDegel's discourse. The party's policy focuses on security, the economy, education, and law. As a grassroots movement, El HaDegel holds meetings in small group settings—including one recent meeting at a Jerusalem pub.

Following the Oct. 7 invasion, Israelis across the board are no longer

As they served together, he and fellow soldiers began to dialogue, finding common ground despite their politically differing views.

open to the possibility of a hostile neighboring Palestinian state. According to the Israel Democracy Institute, 70% of Israelis supported a Palestinian state in 2007. Today that support has flipped—polls this year show up to 81% now oppose establishing such a state.

Stronger views on Israeli sovereignty and security are also reflected in mainstream politics. In a July 2024 vote, the Knesset overwhelmingly rejected the idea of a future Palestinian state on Israel's borders. In July 2025, lawmakers passed a symbolic, bipartisan vote to extend sovereignty over Judea and Samaria, regions of the West Bank. And in August, finance minister Bezalel Smotrich approved the construction of 3,401 Israeli housing units in a key

region between Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim. This creates a protective ring around Jerusalem and is intended to prevent the formation of a Palestinian state, cutting the West Bank into two halves.

Daniel Pomerantz, CEO of the research group RealityCheck, said that before Oct. 7 most Israelis believed that terrorism was caused by Palestinian hardship. "We believed that by giving them material wealth and kindness they could be won over to our point of view."

Israelis' views have since shifted, but it's not to say they no longer have major political disagreements. The judicial reform controversy will need to be resolved, and Netanyahu still has many critics, some of whom oppose the ground invasion of Gaza City and demand a compromise deal with Hamas to bring home the hostages.

Another point of conflict involves mandatory military service for Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jews. Although Israel's Supreme Court last year ruled Haredim must serve in the military, the politically influential group is pushing hard to reinstate its traditional exemption. The controversy over Haredi draft evasion has the potential to topple the current coalition government.

El HaDegel proposes a new basic law stating that every Israeli citizen—Jew, Arab, secular, or ultra-Orthodox—must serve the state, either in the military or in civil service. The law guarantees a place for the religious lifestyle of every soldier and includes the preservation of Torah study as a fundamental Zionist value.

According to a recent *Maariv* poll, El HaDegel's popularity is growing: If elections were held today, a party of its description would place third with 13 seats in Israel's parliamentary system, where more than a dozen parties are currently represented in the Knesset.

Yaffe, a father of five sons, said the party aims to center the political conversation on existential topics, like the draft law, rather than around loyalty to a certain leader.

"We fought a real enemy, side by side as brothers," Yaffe says. "Now, we must never again be enemies of each other." ■



DIANA E. MURPHY
UNITED STATES COURTHOUSE

RELIGION

Earning their credit

Judge upholds dual enrollment for religious colleges

by BEKAH McCALLUM

➔ Minnesota high schoolers will be able to earn college credit from Christian and other religious universities thanks to a federal judge's ruling on Aug. 22. The ruling was the latest in a series of recent court judgments protecting schools' religious liberties.

For 40 years, a Minnesota program provided funding for high school students to earn credit from public or private colleges in the state. But a 2023 amendment to the program mandated that colleges offering dual enrollment could not require students to sign a statement of faith.

A group of parents and two Christian schools, the University of Northwestern—St. Paul and Crown College, sued over the restrictions in

2023. In her ruling, U.S. District Judge Nancy Brasel relied on Supreme Court precedents which held that the government cannot discriminate against schools just because they're religious. Brasel decided that Minnesota's new restrictions on religious schools were unconstitutional and ordered the 2023 amendment "stricken in its entirety."

"Minnesota tried to cut off educational opportunities to thousands of high schoolers simply for their faith," said Becket attorney Diana Thomson in a statement following the decision. "That's not just unlawful—it's shameful."

The Loe and Erickson families, plaintiffs in the case, wanted their children to be able to attend Northwestern and Crown College.

A SPACE FOR CHRISTIAN EXPRESSION

On Aug. 20, the legal organization First Liberty announced that Grand Island High School in New York will allow a student to decorate her parking space with Bible verses, reversing a previous policy. The school, which allows seniors "to beautify the campus" by personalizing their own parking space for \$50, wouldn't permit Sabrina Steffans to use designs with Christian themes.

Steffans, a high school senior who leads the Bible club at the high school, submitted three artwork designs for her parking space: Two included crosses and Bible verses from John 14:6 and Jeremiah 29:11. School officials approved the third, nonreligious submission but reportedly told Steffans the other designs weren't allowed.

After Steffans sought counsel from First Liberty, the legal group sent a demand letter to Grand Island Central School District. The district ultimately reversed course, permitting Steffans to decorate her parking space with a religious theme. —B.M.

CHURCH BUILDING BOOM

U.S. spending for religious construction was almost 17% higher in June compared with one year prior, despite an overall slump in construction during that period, according to a Census Bureau report. The recent increase may be partly attributable to building upgrades: Many churches now position themselves as community centers with coffee shops and child care programs. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, spending on religious construction is far below its 2001 peak of \$8.8 billion but is projected to hit \$4.6 billion this year, a 15-year high. —B.M.



MINNESOTA: BECKET; CONSTRUCTION: FERTING/GETTY IMAGES



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SPORTS

Gridiron girls

High schools across the country kick off flag football

by RAY HACKE



High school football isn't just for boys anymore. States across the country now offer flag football to girls. According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS), 16 states have sanctioned the sport—meaning schools can compete for state championships—for the 2025-26 school year. Twenty-two more states have independent associations or pilot girls' flag football programs with an eye toward becoming sanctioned.

NFHS figures indicate the sport's growth has been explosive, with nearly 69,000 high school girls playing flag football during the 2024-25 school year—more than three times as many as in 2022-23. The sport owes its surging popularity largely to the fact that despite loving football as much as boys, girls have had far fewer opportunities to play competitively.

Flag football derives its name from the two long, colored strips attached Velcro-style to a belt around each player's waist. Instead of tackles, play typically stops when a defender rips a ball carrier's flag from its mooring. While this makes flag football

safer than tackle football, violent collisions still do occur.

Whereas tackle football normally involves two teams of 11 players, high school flag football is typically seven-on-seven. Field lengths in flag football vary from 50 yards to the traditional 100. And because flag football is usually played without goalposts, there are no field goals or point-after kicks—"tries," or points after touchdowns, are determined via runs or passes.

One way in which girls' football mirrors the boys' game is that participants can compete in college. NCAA Division II boasts two conferences, and NCAA Division III and the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics each have three. Florida and Alabama each have conferences for community colleges.

Women's flag football will soon get an even bigger stage: The sport will debut in the Olympics at the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

Teams compete at the NFL High School Girls Flag Football Showcase as a lead-up to the 2025 Pro Bowl in Orlando.

LONE STAR SOLIDARITY

College football teams across Texas are honoring those who lost their lives this past summer in a deadly flash flood.

Adorning the helmets of virtually every high-profile program in the Lone Star State—both public and private—this season will be a decal featuring a dark green ribbon tied around a map of Texas that incorporates the state's flag. The decal honors the more than 130 people killed when the Guadalupe River flooded in the Texas Hill Country on July 4, including 27 campers and counselors at a Christian girls' camp.

Eric George, Rice University's deputy athletic director, had the original idea for the logo. "I reached out to friends at different schools, and everyone was on board," he said in a school press release. "The company that made the stickers even donated them for a lot of schools, which was really cool."

The universities also collectively released a video showing equipment managers affixing the special decal to their schools' helmets.

It's fairly common for sports teams to honor victims of regional tragedies with helmet decals or uniform patches. But not since 9/11, it seems, have so many teams paid homage to those who died in the same destructive event. —R.H.





LAW

Speech or conduct?

U.S. Supreme Court examines Colorado counseling ban

by STEVE WEST

➔ Licensed professional counselor **Kaley Chiles** wants to help young people who struggle with unwanted sexual feelings and seek out her help. But while a Colorado state law allows her to support kids' same-sex attraction or gender transition, it bans counseling that supports a Biblical understanding of sex. Penalties for breaking the law are severe—a \$5,000 fine for each violation, and even loss of her license.

On Oct. 7, the U.S. Supreme Court will hear Chiles' lawsuit challenging the law. At issue in the closely watched case is a deceptively simple question—is counseling “speech” or “conduct”? Thus far, a federal district court and the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals have sided with Colorado, which calls talk therapy “conduct” subject to state regulation.

Chiles, who works in Colorado Springs, only talks with her clients. She

does not engage in discredited practices like aversion therapy or shock therapy that once defined “conversion therapy.”

Chiles ultimately just wants to help kids who voluntarily seek help and don't want to be pushed to accept their same-sex attraction or discomfort with their bodies. “I know what it costs them to be so vulnerable,” she wrote in a December 2024 Colorado Springs *Gazette* editorial. “And I know what it means to them to have someone with whom they can truly dialogue to explore the full spectrum of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs and actions.”

Jonathan Scruggs, an Alliance Defending Freedom attorney representing Chiles, compares her case to *NAACP v. Button*, a 1963 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that struck down a Virginia law limiting the solicitation of legal services. Virginia had used the law to block the NAACP from providing legal assistance

to African Americans who faced racial discrimination, claiming the state was regulating conduct. But the Supreme Court ruled that the NAACP's legal activities were “modes of expression and association protected by the First and Fourteenth Amendments.”

Circuit courts are divided on the speech versus conduct issue. The 3rd and 11th Circuits have both struck down counseling bans as unconstitutional infringements on free speech. But the 9th Circuit in 2022 upheld a Washington law similar to Colorado's. While the Supreme Court did not review that ruling, Justice Clarence Thomas wrote at the time that Washington's law “strikes at the heart of the First Amendment.”

In Chiles' case, 10th Circuit Judge Harris Hartz wrote a dissent criticizing fellow judges for playing a “labeling game” rather than looking at what the regulation took aim at—“the expressive content of what is said.”

A ruling in Chiles' case will reach professions beyond counseling. A friend-of-the-court brief filed by the Christian Legal Society addresses the spillover effect on bar rules in some states that attempt to discipline attorneys not only for conduct but also for speech that the licensing entities believe is harassing or discriminatory. That could include a view that same-sex marriage is immoral.

Scruggs rejected Colorado's claims that merely talking to kids about their feelings regarding their biological sex is harmful. “They're not really looking at diving deep into the science, and they're over their skis on what the science says,” he said. “If you dig deep, they admit that there's no proof of actual harm here.”

In the end, Scruggs says government officials shouldn't be cutting off open dialogue with kids. “The government's ... saying that we know better than counselors and kids about what views they should adopt and what ideas they should hear,” he said. “And that's really a global threat to the First Amendment right.” ■

C R O S S W O R D

Corporal constituents

by DON MCCRORY

Across

- 1** Word before shop or armor (and, with 63-A, a hint to the circled letters)
5 Kitchen appliance
10 "That ____ good one!"
14 Saboteur
16 *Arabian Nights* dervish whose name anagrams to Gabi
17 Cancer-detecting device
18 Catches some rays
19 Hibernating rodents
20 Therefore
21 Stories from ages past
24 Big marble
25 Earlier in time or order
26 Batter's no.
27 Mil. branch
28 Smokey's kin?
30 Petty officer
32 Hangs in there
33 Where you might find sheet music
36 Worthless words, in bygone days
39 Sarah's son
43 Like Cornelius Vanderbilt
44 *The Price Is Right* network
46 ER experts
47 Candidates for rehab?
48 First state in some lists (abbr.)
49 Launched a watermelon seed
50 Precedes warfare
51 Gift sold in pieces
54 Reliable choice
55 Oscar the Grouch's signature song
59 Evangelist Palau
60 Liable to spoil or decay
61 Coup d' ____
62 "... with ____ of thousands!" (movie ad boast)
63 Actor's aspiration

Down

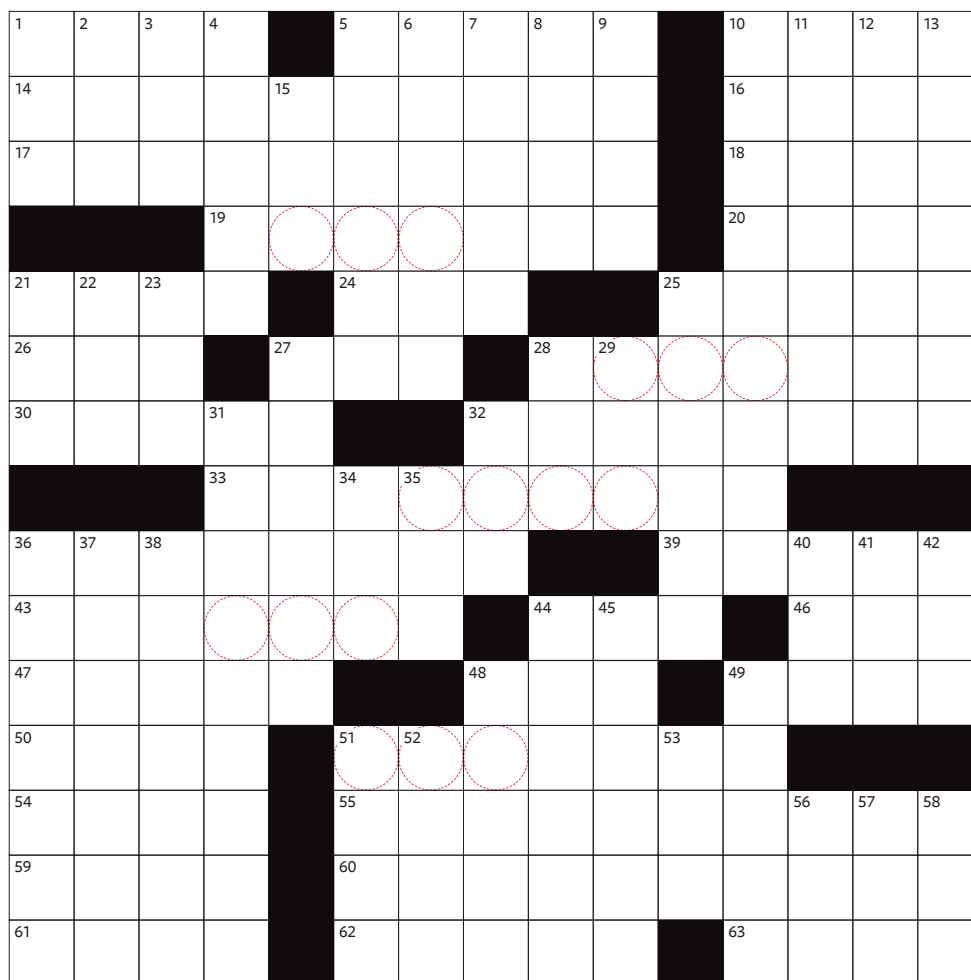
- 1** Tampa NFLer
2 Words with mission or whim
3 Banned insecticide
4 Indignant reply to "Who, you?!"

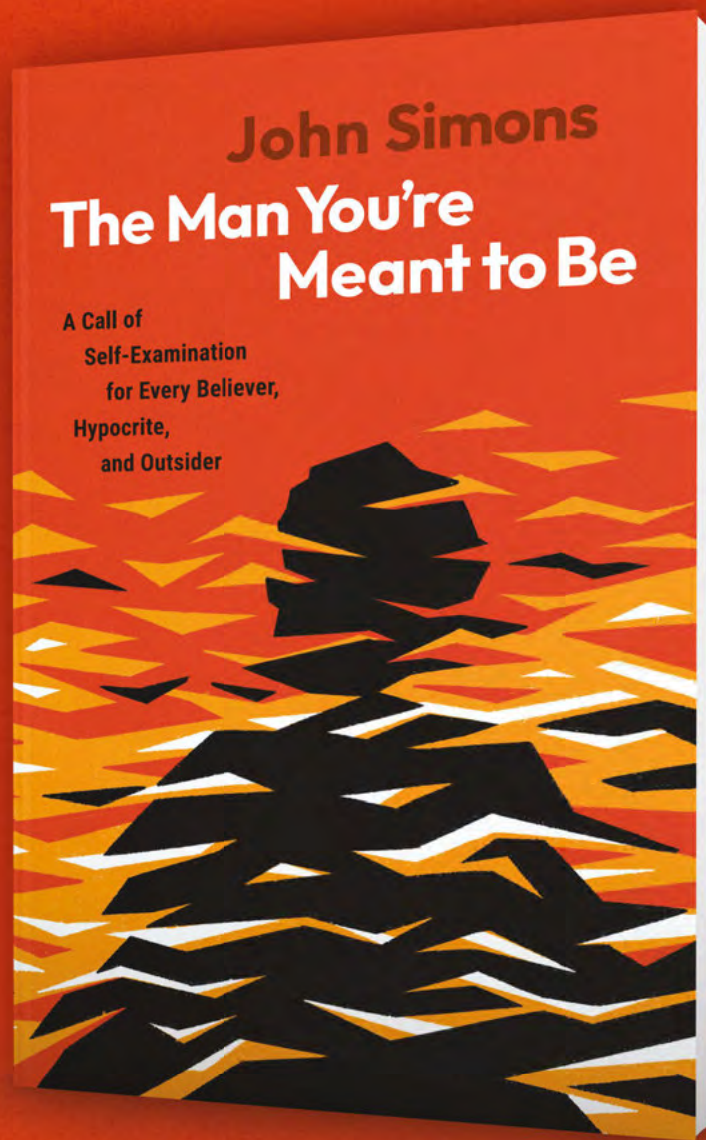
- 5** Intelligence, informally
6 Scarecrow's buddy
7 Currently airing
8 Nair alternative
9 Goofs (up)
10 Marsh rodents
11 Often-edible mushrooms
12 Choir director's direction
13 Soaks up
15 Color TV pioneer
21 May follow chocolate or chemistry
22 Eggy prefix
23 Certain QB protectors
25 Versailles, among others

- 27** Global business technology company
28 Clear tables
29 Strasbourg summer
31 Higher than high
32 Alley ____ in the comics
34 Ginger ____
35 Silent approval
36 Disregard local customs?
37 Get the short end of the stick
38 Sluggishness
40 Noisy device (abbr.)
41 Amway's hometown
42 Winter hrs. in Wichita

- 44** New Mexico city noted for archaeological finds
45 Least noble
48 Greek marketplace
49 Backpack essential
51 2019 Best New Artist Grammy winner Dua ____
52 Certain util.
53 KJV verb suffix
56 Old hoop gp.
57 Fancy snapper, for short?
58 ____ up (overly excited)

Bonus clues and puzzle solution on page 110





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me above are correct and complete.

—KEVIN MARTIN, publisher

Does our crossword
have you puzzled?
Before checking the
answers, try these
additional clues:

Across

- 18** Makes some leather
- 19** Woodchucks
- 24** Nay Pyi ____ (Burma's administrative capital)
- 43** Wealthy
- 44** Competitor of NBC and ABC
- 49** Petty quarrel
- 51** Kit with bricks

Down

- 6** Wizard of Oz character
- 21** Where scientists work
- 36** Sneak something across the border





VOICES ANDRÉE SEU PETERSON

Funny, right?

The world's wisest often pass over the best explanations

The most hilarious commercial ever was the JCPenney doghouse ad. A man gives his wife a vacuum cleaner as an anniversary present and ends up in an underground cave folding laundry with other men from all walks of life who have given their wives thoughtless gifts. The clueless new arrival asks a recidivist named Donny if anyone has ever gotten out. Donny replies, "Only one man ever got out—Arnold."

The old-timer brings the newbie to a remote place where he carefully dislodges a fake rock from the low curved ceiling to reveal behind it the photo of a man and his happy wife posing romantically. The two inmates study the picture in bafflement, the camera slowly fixing on a diamond gracing the woman's neck. Donny finally says, "Nobody knows how he did it."

Clueless, right? This is what it's like to watch overeducated men on highly monetized podcasts discuss the great vexing issues of life. Every explanation under the sun is seriously considered—every explanation, that is, except the spiritual one that is staring them in the face.

Take, for example, the beating of your heart. The average person's heart will beat 2.5 billion times, without interruption. That's kind of amazing! I asked a biology professor from the University of Pennsylvania what keeps the heart pumping. She said the electrical system. OK, I thought, I'll just back up my question one step: What keeps the heart's electrical system going? She gave me a puzzled look, as if I were in remedial science 101: "Well, nothing. It's spontaneous." End of conversation.

The one possibility that will not be countenanced is that God keeps the heart beating. That "in him we live and move

and have our being" (Acts 17:28). That "when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust" (Psalm 104:29; Job 34:14-15). And yet this accounting for the data is a darned sight better than, "Well nothing. It's spontaneous."

Or take the question of Israel. Why is a country the size of New Jersey and half the size of Estonia always in the news? Always a cultural wedge in continents nowhere near the Middle East? Intensely loved or intensely hated by the whole world? The country most legislated against in the United Nations? If American national elections were torn asunder over Estonia year after year, would no one be curious enough to get to the bottom of the mystery?

The one possibility that will not be countenanced is the spiritual one that Israel is unique among the nations because God chose it as His vehicle for His salvation plan. "At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD" (Jeremiah 3:17). No wonder Satan keeps kicking up dust about it. It would be puzzling to me if Israel were not the most controversial nation in the world.

Or, take the question of how it is that the conditions of planet Earth are uniquely suited to life. Our intellectual elites outdo themselves here, going as far as to posit the desperate (and unscientific) straw-grasping "multiverse" theory. If they really subscribed to Occam's razor and believed that the least convoluted explanation is the best one, they would say that the same Intelligent Designer who made plants and animals sensibly made their Earthly home to conform to their life requirements. God calls it obvious (Romans 1:20).

Or, take the age-old question of where evil comes from. We are lectured about evil stemming from environmental causes, or poorly administered justice or resources. Or that evil is the natural consequence of competitiveness. Or is a psychological state resulting from a deprived childhood. Or represents the underdeveloped evolution of human consciousness. Or is merely the absence of good. Or is nothing but a social construct.

None of these fits the data better than the Bible's Edenic origin story for evil: "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes" (Ecclesiastes 7:29). And that when tares appear in a beautiful field of wheat, "an Enemy has done this" (Matthew 13:28). Anyone who has ever done evil, or been the recipient of evil (which is all of us), knows in his bones that it is a thing too dark to be explained sociologically.

Today I was reading about how Canadian evangelist Charles Templeton parted ways with Billy Graham in their crusades. He ended up an atheist after he enrolled in a university to get a higher education and lost his faith there.

Be not greatly impressed with the pontifications of the celebrity pundits. "Where is the wisdom of the wise?" God laughs at it. Just like I always have a good laugh over the JCPenney doghouse commercial. ■



Even stranger things

Down the rabbit hole of Christian paranormal podcasts

by LEIGH JONES



When your boss asks for volunteers for an unusual assignment involving Bigfoot, alien abductions, and spiritual warfare, the best strategy is not to make eye contact. But Mary Jackson is no stranger to tough assignments, so she cautiously raised her hand. She started out as a Christian paranormal skeptic, and ended up realizing at least some of the topics had pretty strong connections to the spiritual realm we read about in the Bible. Even so, she still describes this as the strangest story she's ever written.

You can read it on p. 74 and judge for yourself.

Researching this story turned into a “down the rabbit hole” experience for you. What was that like? I started out with very little knowledge but quickly found myself listening to endless hours of podcasts. My kids would overhear discussions about Bigfoot and make fun of me. They got a little worried that I was losing my marbles. But it turned into conversations over dinner with friends and church members,

and I realized more people than I thought were into this stuff. Each person I talked to would give me five more people to talk to, or three more podcasts to listen to. It definitely turned into a bit of an all-consuming interest for a while.

When did you realize this was not quite as fringe as you thought? These people that I thought were pretty fringe in Christian paranormal circles have pretty big followings and a large presence on social media. I didn't realize so many guys in my church listen to the podcast *Blurry Creatures* and know these people who are actively exploring issues related to the paranormal. So I thought, if this is true in my small church, it's got to be that way in other churches across the country.

What is the strangest thing you heard while reporting this story? One source told me about a woman who alleges that she has been impregnated by nonhuman aliens—demonic entities—three times. She claims she was then abducted and the children mysteriously disappeared with no trace of her ever having been pregnant. My source told me this abduction phenomenon is happening around the world as part of a demonic plot to corrupt humanity.

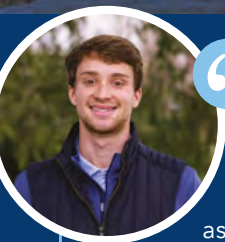
Do you think this interest in transcendence can point people to God? Some of the people I talked to were raised in the church but rarely heard the spiritual realm discussed, rarely heard about angels and demons or any kind of supernatural phenomenon, let alone paranormal phenomena. And they have questions. When there is that dearth in the local church, people are going online, and they're finding all kinds of content. Some of it is rooted in Scripture. Some of it goes down too far into the conspiracy theory arena and speculation. So I think it's helpful when pastors and local churches are willing to engage these topics and look at them from a Biblical standpoint. ■



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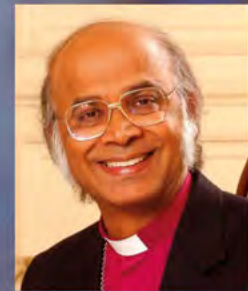
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