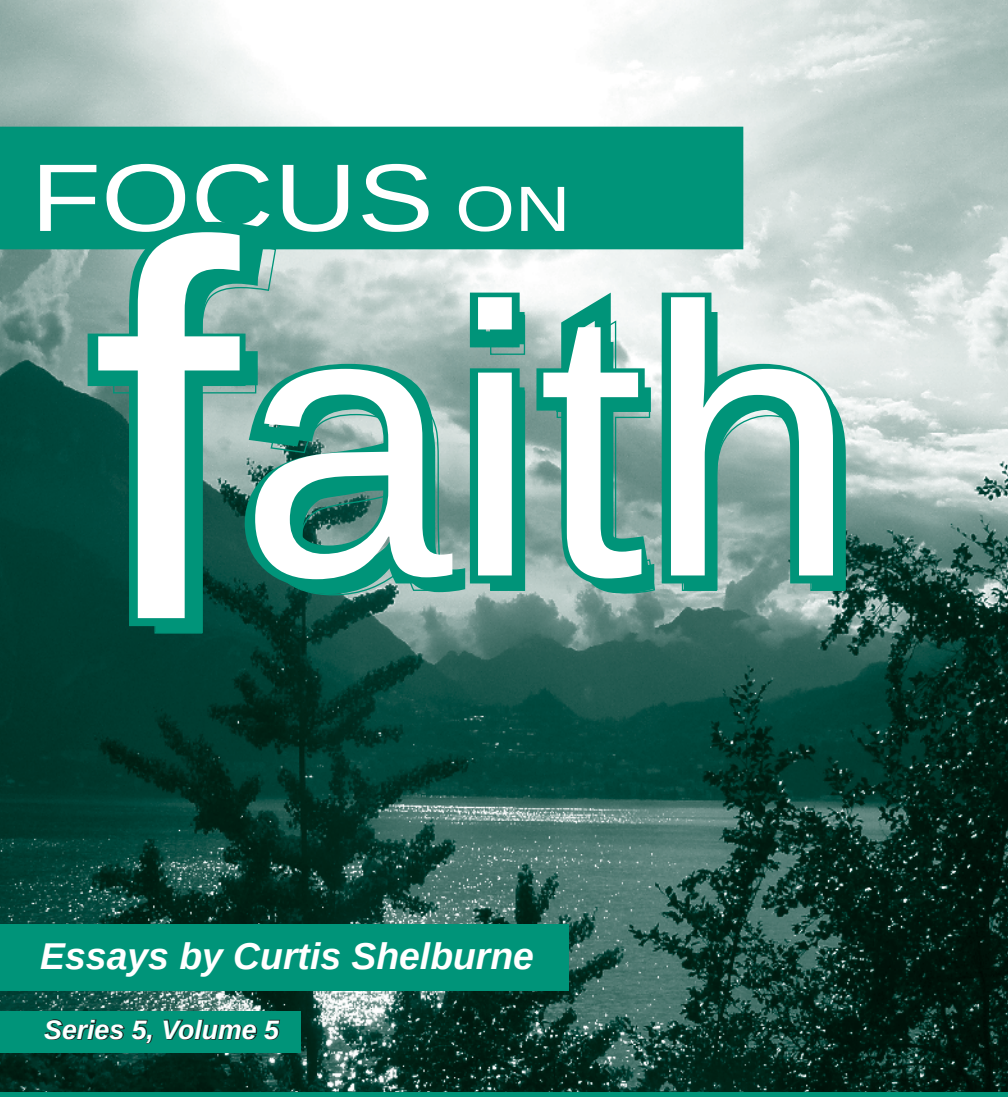

FOCUS ON faith

Essays by Curtis Shelburne

Series 5, Volume 5

THE CHRISTIAN Appeal

Preface

John Gulley

"So far as we know," writes John Ortberg, "there has only been one day in the last two thousand years when literally not one person in the world believed Jesus was alive." He observes that, bracketed by Good Friday and Easter Sunday, that Saturday lay between darkness and light. As Ortberg writes, we all know something of the perplexity of Saturday. God can use that difficult time of painful doubt to build strong faith. In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne encourages us to "Focus on Faith."

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COVER & PAGE 2 PHOTO by John Gulley

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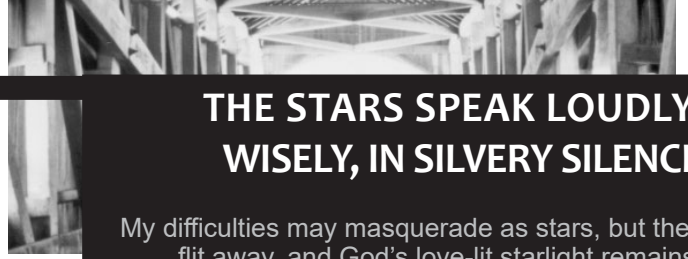
"The heavens
declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim
the work of his hands."

The Psalmist
Psalm 19

Dear Lord,
When we raise our eyes to the heavens, we see the beauty of your handiwork, and our hearts are filled with praise.

Amen

RRRRich B



THE STARS SPEAK LOUDLY, WISELY, IN SILVERY SILENCE

My difficulties may masquerade as stars, but they flit away, and God's love-lit starlight remains.

focus on faith

The yard mowing was finished. One more time. A personal best, by the way. Two hours. Mowing our 10,000 square foot yard usually requires almost three hours.

The last part of the job had pretty much been accomplished in Braille. It was a Wednesday evening. We'd gathered, as usual, with our church folks for a meal, etc., 6:00-7:00. (I am so very glad we meet that early.)

But Daylight Saving Time, a very mixed blessing, meant that I faced a decision at about 7:30. To mow or not to mow. That was the question. I did not want to. That was not in question. But this was the window I had for mowing for the next several days. If I waited, the yard would be, even this early in the season for us, a jungle.

So I mowed, figuring I'd get at least part of it done. I was amazed to finish the whole thing. (Only because I had trimmed pretty seriously on the previous mowing and got away with very little of that on Wednesday.) As I mentioned, darkness was coming on as I throttled down my mowing machine.

It really was a beautiful evening. So, once the rumble of the engine was silenced, I decided to sit out on the patio for a few minutes, partly to nurse my aching feet, and mostly to enjoy the quiet and the stillness.

The slivered moon was headed down behind my friend and neighbor's workshop. Optical illusion, I know, but it surely seemed to head down faster the closer it got to the horizon. A lunar voyeur, I spied on it, lest it sneakily rebel and head back upward with no one watching. In the space of ten long breaths (I was counting), it slipped away, down for the count.

And, of course, as the moon went under, the stars, always there but needing the darkness to make their shimmering silvery presence known, began their sparkling dance.

The canopy of two huge trees in the backyard obscures part of the sky (blessed shade in the heat of the day), but the Big Dipper was shining through brightly. A very elementary knowledge of astronomy will reveal that drawing a line from the "pointer stars" (Merak and Dubhe), five times the distance between them (about twenty degrees), will land your eye on Polaris, the North Star, the anchor of the northern sky and friend of long generations of sailors.

The second star from the Dipper's bowl is Mizar, and right beside it, if your eyes are good (this was an ancient eye test) you can make out Alcor.

The Big Dipper hasn't changed recently. In about 50,000 years, I'm told, a bit of a shape change may be apparent. But on Wednesday night, I noticed what looked like another bright star in the pattern. What?!

And then the "star" moved. Jet airplanes do that. And that's what it was. I had momentarily confused a few-years-old man-made object flying six miles high with God-made stars billions of years old, 51-123 light years away.

We should spend more time sitting in the darkness looking up at the stars. That night their silvery silence spoke loudly. My "airplane" difficulties may masquerade as stars, but they flit away, and God's love-lit starlight remains.

"THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN"

This truth seems to argue for knowing something about what has already happened "under the sun."

focus on faith

"There is nothing new under the sun," writes the wise man in Ecclesiastes (1:9). That seems to argue for knowing something about what has already taken place under this old sun. And that means learning, and learning means reading. Three cheers, for sure, for math, science, and technology, but, however proficient we are with them, if we're willfully ignorant of history, we're just technologically advanced (and very dangerous) fools.

You see, the same challenges keep cropping up in this old world. At their deepest level, the waters every generation must navigate have been traversed before. George Santayana long ago told the truth: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Along this line, I think I'd like to propose legislation that requires high level elected officials to spend at least an hour a day reading history. They can easily prune the time from what they'd normally spend fund-raising or generally blathering, and (this is scary) reading a book might be a new experience for many of them. Why would we ever trust anyone willfully ignorant of the past to try to plot a course for the future?

By the way, pastors who know nothing about church history are every bit as frightening as the politicians I've just taken a swing at. The mountains Christians of all eras have made from molehills are the very same ones ancient Christians shoveled up to trip over.

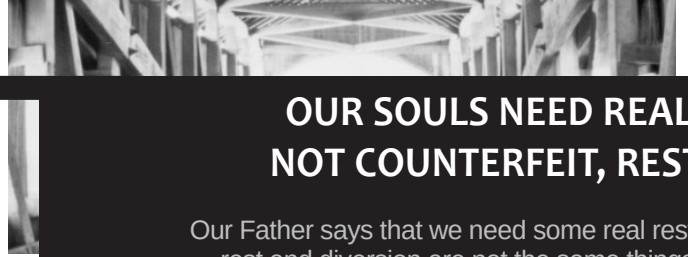
This morning I enjoyed another of James Kiefer's brief biographical sketches, this one on the life of Church of England Archbishop William Laud (born 1573).

Kiefer writes that in the late 1500s and early 1600s, some Christians in England (Puritans) objected to clergy and choir members wearing a garment called a surplice. Cassocks (a garment normally black and floor-length) were okay, but these folks strenuously objected to the wearing of the surplice, "a white, knee-length, fairly loose garment with loose sleeves" because it was not specifically mentioned in Scripture and because it had been a custom of Roman Catholics. (It's basically the same thinking, Kiefer notes, that caused Puritans and their many descendants to object to Christmas and a host of other practices.)

Archbishop Laud felt that the garment was nonetheless "seemly and dignified," but the Puritans persisted to protest religiously, stinkily, loudly, and even violently. One group of Puritans broke into an Oxford chapel one night, stole surplices, and stuffed them "into the dung-pit of a privy." This was just one issue, but Laud, increasingly unpopular, was eventually imprisoned and hanged as he prayed for peace and an end to bloodshed. (You can sing this story to the tune of "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Archbishops.")

Until I read that, I didn't know a surplice from a surplus. It was new to me, but the "rock" upon which those folks wrecked is no new danger to navigation. The Puritans were neither the first nor the last to try to twist the New Testament into a book of codified law. The Apostle Paul warned ages ago (read 2 Corinthians 3) that if we seek salvation through stone-cold law rather than through God's Spirit, we'll end up fussing, fighting, and wrecking our souls on tables of stone. That course, trusting in a code rather than a Savior, has never led to life and joy and peace; it can't, and it never will.

No, there really is nothing new under the sun. I doubt we could make any truly new mistakes even if we worked incredibly hard at it. But it would be nice, and a God-honoring move in the right direction, to try to avoid stumbling over so many old ones.



OUR SOULS NEED REAL, NOT COUNTERFEIT, REST

Our Father says that we need some real rest; rest and diversion are not the same things.

focus on faith

For many of us, one of the hardest things we ever do is doing nothing. Incredibly difficult, disciplining ourselves to find some regular time to do nothing is the best way to make the doings that we do, when the time is right for doing, worth something once the doing's done. When we never really rest, we just end up done in, and much of the doing becomes dry dust bereft of real meaning.

If you found it difficult to make your way out of that last first paragraph, it's because it's its own frenetic illustration of our lives, bouncing so rapidly from one "doing" to the next, and the next, and the next, that it almost never stops. The Brits call a "period" at the end of a sentence a "full stop." And an occasional full stop is exactly what we desperately need.

At least, our Creator seems to think so. He thought that a regular time to rest was important enough for the well-being of the humans he created in his image that he devoted one of the Ten Commandments to it. Even God rested on the seventh day of creation.

Dallas Willard once observed that "the command is 'Do No Work.'" What that means, he says, is as simple as it is difficult: "Just make space. Attend to what is around you. Learn that you don't have to *do* to *be*. Accept the grace of doing nothing." And, knowing us well, he says, "Stay with it until you stop jerking and squirming." (And texting!)

Oh, but we do jerk. We do squirm. And we have a very hard time just "making space" even for a few moments.

What is "urgent" crowds out the truly important. (How many texts do you get in a day that deserve to be mentioned in the same sentence as the word "important"?)

What is loud floods our ears continually and drowns out the silence that can fill our souls with meaning if we just stop long enough to let it in.

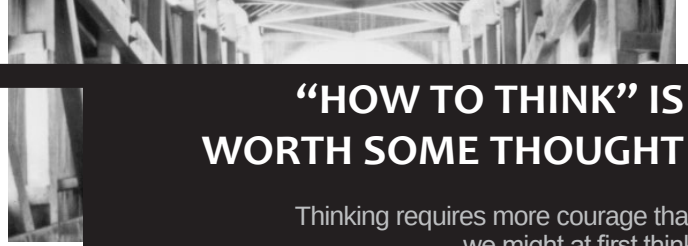
What is garish and glitzy blasts our eyes with counterfeit color and flash-blinds us to the real beauty and joy we could see all around us if we'd just be still long enough (and unglue our eyes from our screens long enough) to look around and see it. But most of the time we're moving so fast with our feet or our thumbs that life itself becomes a dreary blur.

I think it was Dallas Willard again who commented that rest and diversion are not the same things. We all enjoy some occasional diversion. A "run fast and play hard" vacation at times is fine, but don't be surprised when you come home more tired than when you left, and your soul is still hungering for some real rest.

Living life continually at high speeds is unsafe. Wrecks happen and people get hurt. Relationships suffer as we bump into each other and crash into solid objects like exhaustion and reality. We weren't made to run this fast, this continually.

And so our bodies, our minds, and the objects and people we bump into often end up forcing us to stop, whether we like it or not. I wonder how much depression, migraines, gut maladies—and on the list goes—are really our bodies/minds saying, "You won't stop on your own, fool? Pull over. I bet I can stop you for a while."

As always, our Creator is telling us the truth. Our souls desperately need some genuine rest.



"HOW TO THINK" IS WORTH SOME THOUGHT

Thinking requires more courage than we might at first think.

focus on faith

I've been enjoying reading a fine book by Alan Jacobs, a professor in the Honors Program at Baylor University. When I tell you the title of the book, you'll likely smile and tell me that, obviously, I read it none too soon. It's titled *How to Think*.

If you just peruse our social landscape very briefly, you'll certainly recognize the need for better thinking. Often any attempt at cogent thought at all in the midst of our culture's loud battles would be welcome. In a day when a deep fear of genuine freedom of speech is gripping many university campuses so tightly that they feel a need to establish "safe zones" for students apparently traumatized by the outcome of elections or diverse opinions, Professor Jacobs opts for teaching students (and others who will listen) to think more clearly rather than to run from facing reality at all.

I'm planning to read the whole not-very-long book, but, after reading the first chapter or two, I cheated and flipped over to the last one, "The Thinking Person's Checklist." Jacobs gives twelve great points there, ending with "Be brave." Thinking requires courage, mostly because the loudest folks around us don't do much of it. I'll just mention here a few of his other points.

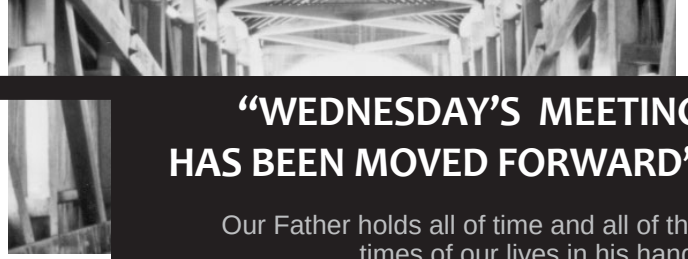
First, he says that "when faced with the provocation to respond to what someone has said, give it five minutes." He suggests taking a walk or pulling some weeds. I think he's recommending using that five minutes not to think much at all; better thinking will be more likely to occur after a break, and it will stand a better chance of being actual thinking, not just reacting.

Need I mention that this is particularly important with regard to social media? Off-the-cuff fly-off-the-handle flaming Facebook posts or middle of the night tweets or texts are rarely ever the fruit of much thought. If the tweeter talks like a twit, walks like a twit, and tweets like a twit, it's probably a twit, and a twit's lack of impulse control is rarely improved by sleep deprivation.

Along that same line, Jacobs also advises, "As best you can, online and off, avoid the people who fan flames." Yes, and don't *be* one! "Remember," Jacobs writes, "that you don't have to respond to what everyone else is responding to in order to signal your virtue and right-mindedness."

Might I suggest that, before firing of a fiery Facebook post or a bird-brained tweet, it might be good to run it by a mature 8-11 year old? Their hormones haven't kicked in yet and they usually have a pretty clear idea of what is fair, what is mean, and what is crazy. If you're particularly courageous, you might even give them the power to curtail your Facebook or Twitter privileges if they determine that you can't behave.

Professor Jacobs would agree that St. James was thinking very well indeed when he counseled, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry" (1:19). Yes, but that will require more thought and more courage than we might at first think.



"WEDNESDAY'S MEETING HAS BEEN MOVED FORWARD"

Our Father holds all of time and all of the times of our lives in his hand.

focus on faith

Good morning.

Forgive me for even considering such, but I almost planted an exclamation point at the end of "morning." It is indeed morning as I write. I've eased into light, speech, and a little thought, but that I would even consider assailing your mental ears this early in the day with the kind of volume implied by that loudest of punctuation marks, well, I apologize for almost falling into such brutish behavior. Those two words followed by an exclamation point become a contradiction in terms.

So, settling for the more civil *ante meridiem* (as in a.m. for morning) greeting, we move on into the day, fire up, log in, open up the computer, delete a few dozen ads and several phishing attempts masquerading as legitimate emails, and peruse this real one: "Note to Committee on Committees Members: Wednesday's meeting regarding the creation of another committee to further complicate the lives and work of the many too many committees already created to complicate our lives has been moved forward by two days."

Here's the question: Is that Wednesday meeting, "moved forward by two days," now set for Monday or Friday?

Okay. Pause. Take your time. Don't lock in your vote and alter your calendar too quickly, but do take notice of your first reaction.

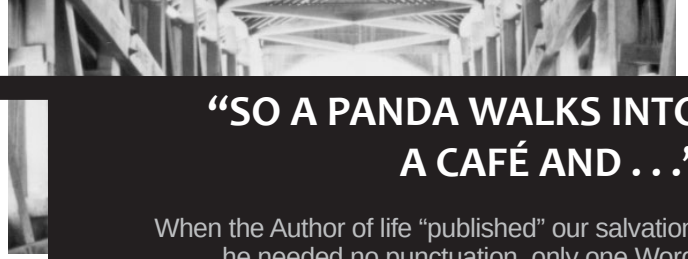
It's clear to me that the meeting is now set for Monday. But I also know, and so do you, that a significant number of other folks will be quite sure that the meeting is now set for Friday. If we're the ones wording the message, we know very well that we'd better spell out the day or confusion will reign. Two groups half the size of the whole will find themselves meeting on two different days four whole days apart. The confusion hinges on that simple word "forward."

According to author, psychology lecturer, and BBC broadcaster Cynthia Hammond in her book *Time Warped*, the little vignette above illustrates how very practically in our daily world the way we associate time and space and the way we feel about time "moving" separates us into two groups. Hammond says that those, like me, who now plan to head to the meeting on Monday, see time itself as moving "like a conveyor belt," the future coming toward us. Those who plan to meet now on Friday see themselves as moving in time toward the future.

As Hammond writes, "either you stay still while the future comes toward you or you move along towards the future. It's the difference between thinking that we're fast approaching Christmas or that Christmas is coming up fast." Either point of view is defensible; the point is that each of us defaults into one or the other.

I find this sort of thing fascinating. But far more important than whether the future is heading toward me or I'm heading toward the future is the fact that my Father holds all of time and all of the times of my life in his warm hand.

See ya Monday. But my vote is that we cancel and spare the world one more meeting and one more committee.



"SO A PANDA WALKS INTO A CAFÉ AND . . ."

When the Author of life "published" our salvation, he needed no punctuation, only one Word.

focus on faith

One of the most delightful ("filled with delight") books that I've ever been given (thank you, Betty Little!) is the "Runaway #1 British Bestseller" *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, by author and journalist Lynne Truss.

I find it interesting, surprising, and incredibly encouraging that, at least back in 2003 when this book was published, folks had the good sense to buy it and propel it to bestseller status.

You see, this is an incredibly humorous book about a subject crucial to the survival of the human race: punctuation. I'm not surprised to find me spending some time searching the Web to find pros and cons for whether "bestseller" is at its best when hyphenated, not hyphenated, or broken into two words. Working with words is a significant part of my work, but evidently a good many other folks care about such things, too. Wow!

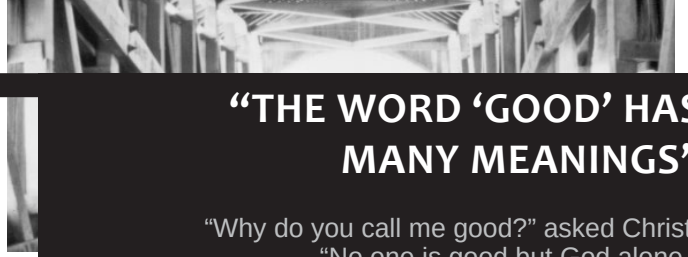
The title of this book (I just said "this book" so as not to have to decide between "Truss' book" and "Truss's book) comes from the great word-nerd joke about the panda who goes into a café and orders a sandwich. After the meal, he proceeds to pull out a gun and shoot twice into the air. When the astonished waiter asks why, the panda, on his way out, tosses a "badly punctuated wildlife manual" toward him and says, "I'm a panda; look it up." The waiter does: "Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves."

The joke, you see, is humorously pointing out the importance of the "serial comma." It's also known as the "Oxford comma" (since Oxford University Press style required it). A good article in Wikipedia defines the serial comma as "a comma placed immediately before a coordinating conjunction (usually *and* or *or*) in a series of three or more terms."

Style manuals—even the major ones—vary in their rule on this. It's the difference between "eats, shoots and leaves" and "eats, shoots, and leaves." Word people have serious opinions about this. As Truss says, it would be a serious mistake to sit in a bar between two copy editors who hold different opinions on this issue and might at the moment be short of inhibitions. I myself am fairly passionate about the serial comma. Use it! Why risk plunging headlong into chaos?

Speaking of chaos, I'm working with a friend right now to decide the style rule for the ellipses (that's two or more of the little three-dot doohickeys) that show up in his novel. Style guides vary widely (... or . . .). Truss is right: "The ellipsis is the black hole of the punctuation universe, surely, into which no right-minded person would willingly be sucked." I wish the major style manuals would get their act together on this one. Alas, no. Not even close.

Sometimes a copy editor just needs to take a hike and breathe some fresh air unpolluted by misplaced apostrophes and confused uses of en and em dashes. It's good for me to remember that when the Author of life published our salvation, he needed no punctuation at all. Only one Word (John 1:1-14).



“THE WORD ‘GOOD’ HAS MANY MEANINGS”

“Why do you call me good?” asked Christ. “No one is good but God alone.”

focus on faith

“The word ‘good’ has many meanings,” writes G. K. Chesterton. “For example,” he continues, “if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.”

Certainly a true observation, as far as it goes. I, for one, would like to know more about the character of the fellow’s grandmother before rushing to judgment.

Nobody before or after Chesterton has done a better job of lining up words delightfully. Of course, were he to fire a good shot with the words above in today’s politically correct society, he’d bump into all sorts of problems, and not just with The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Grandmothers.

He transgresses immediately by using the term “man.” Though one would think that anyone passing third grade successfully would know that “man” in such a construction is more generic suffix than sexist offense, an “enlightened” editor today would undoubtedly want Chesterton to change “man” to “human” or “person,” lest the quote offend delicate ears. Never mind that such surgery would immediately render a pithy quote punch-less.

But let’s play with this. Please work with me a bit on putting away just for the moment any very appropriate concerns against grandmother abuse.

“Human” as a choice in this sentence is so atrocious as to be no choice at all. “If a human were to shoot his grandmother” not only, of necessity, brings in the always ungainly “his or her,” it brings up unhelpful questions about whether or not most Martians treat their grandmothers better than most humans do.

“Person” is better than “human” but still brings up the “his or her” thing along with difficulties related to the subjunctive mood and choices regarding “was” or “were.” Pretty soon, “their” will try to barge in, as it always does in today’s attempts at neutered writing, even as it wantonly wreaks subject-verb agreement havoc by pretending to be what it will never be: singular.

Sorry, but I’m thinking that if you surgically change “man” in this great quote to anything else, the patient (meaning the quotation) will not survive the operation. And, the grandmother’s character aside, we’ve not yet dealt at all with the modern debate over whether or not the guy is really nasty and messed up and mostly to be blamed or if the real culprit is his wicked gun.

It’s a tough situation. Reflecting on this great quotation moves me to sympathy not just for grandmothers but for all writers who increasingly face the choice between political correctness and writing that hasn’t had the life and even the grandma—I mean, the grammar—throttled out of it.

The crux of the quote, though, ain’t grammar; it’s goodness. And it’s not good at all that political correctness can so obfuscate a good point. For a good springboard to some very good discussion about what it means to be truly good, I refer you to Christ’s words (Luke 18:19): “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

A good shot with good words.

WHEN DUST RETURNS TO DUST, WHAT KIND OF WEALTH MATTERS?

In God's economy, we can all possess wealth that lasts beyond the grave.

focus on faith

Wealth. How varied and strange are the uses of that word.

More often than not, when we use the word "wealth," we're talking about money, a necessary commodity, for sure. But measuring wealth is not as easy as it might seem. A boatload of financial wealth, if allowed to possess us, may amount to less than a nanoparticle of the wealth that matters, the sort that frees us. (Oh, and this is tricky. A grasping, greedy soul can be throttled by much or by little.)

Surely you don't have to think long to call to mind some folks the world labels "successful" simply and only because they have money but who are utterly pathetic and appalling by any other standard. Wealthy, are they? Well.

If you have more dollars or dinars, more pesos or pounds, more shekels or shillings, more francs or marks or rupees or yen, than anyone else in the world, you will most certainly be called wealthy. Your life will be quite different from that of the poorest person on the planet—right up until one millisecond after both hearts stop and both souls are launched toward the only accounting that really matters.

But back in this world, some other accounting may actually continue for a bit.

The first spreadsheet will be a short one. "Amount of money dead filthy rich guy (or gal) or dead pitifully poor guy (or gal) takes to the grave" will be zero. Naught. Zilch. Nada. May I press that truth home? The zero for deep pockets guy will look exactly the same as the zero for no pockets guy.

The heirs of our hypothetical not-breathing folks may be arranging for their bodily passage to putrefaction to be first class or coach, but it won't matter a worm's eyelash to the honoree whether he's boxed in hand-waxed cedar (cushioned in comfort) or Amazon-recycled cardboard (stowed in a bag amidst those white packing—forgive me, please—"ghost farts"). Eventually, dust is dust is dust and pretty much just dust. Beautiful cemetery or pauper's field, million-dollar mausoleum or a fish's belly in the bottom of the sea, the location will matter not in the least to the deceased.

But another inventory and another sort of spreadsheet will be left behind in hearts that remain beating. Perhaps this inventory will be counted by tears of gratitude. By warm memories. By smiles. By a life well-lived. By a large soul that valued relationships far more than things and planted seeds of joy and love, mercy and trust, in all the good hearts it touched, seeds that will bear sweet fruit for generations to come.

In God's economy, rich folks and poor folks and all the many more folks in between can all possess the wealth that truly matters and lasts beyond the grave. "Treasures in heaven" begin to be accumulated when we treasure what truly matters right here. If we've not given ourselves away to our Creator and to those we love before we leave, what we leave behind will only be dust.

It will matter not whether kings and queens attend our send-off. The sweet tear of a grandchild we taught to love the One who will bring us together again forever, and the "well done" of the Author of life who walked with us all of our life and receives us now, will be worth immeasurably more. Wealth indeed.

TRAVEL TO A PLACE WHERE
GOD SEEMS TO WHISPER
IN OUR EARS AND TUG
AT OUR HEARTS.

Released by
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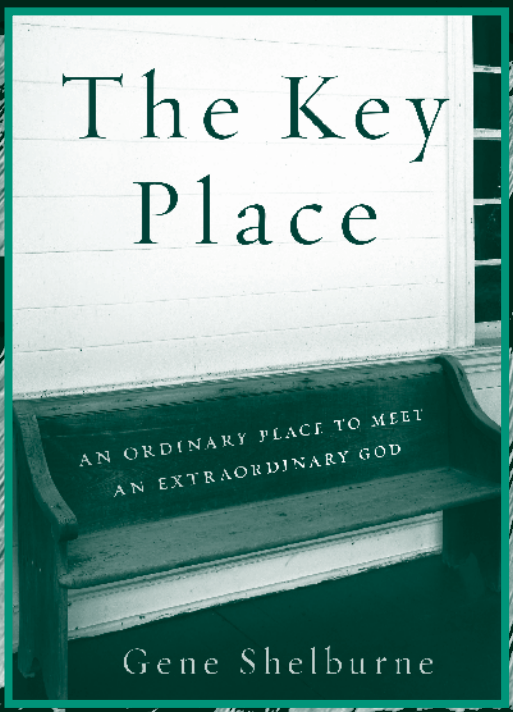
GENE SHELBURNE'S DELIGHTFUL NEW BOOK



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