



FOCUS ON

faiith

Essays by Curtis Shelburne

Series 6, Volume 3

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



Jim Shelburne

If Christianity is true, then author Max Lucado is certainly right: “It’s time to let God’s love cover all things in your life. All secrets. All hurts. All hours of evil, minutes of worry.” If Christianity is true, it’s time to let God’s love lift us up after every stumble, guide us through every dark passage, fill us with power especially in our weakness. In this issue, Managing Editor Curtis Shelburne encourages us to “Focus on Faith” as we put our faith completely in God’s sacrificial love.

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“**G**od presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”

The Apostle Paul
Romans 3



“Dear Lord,
Astounded
by the depth
of your love,
in faith we
humbly and
joyfully accept
your precious gift.”

Amen



John Gulley



A WEEK WITH TWO SUNDAYS TWO DAYS IN A ROW

On that unusual week, God used two special days to remind us of what is always precious.

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We had two Sundays at our little church recently, two days in a row. Well, not really. But it seemed like it.

The first Sunday this week was Saturday as we held the funeral of a fine man and good friend, a well-loved and faith-filled member of our church. We sang and prayed and shared God's good news of hope. Sweet melodies and rich tones rose in that sanctuary and lifted our spirits, and God's Spirit comforted, and God's word was balm, and the hearts of God's people praising him were washed with tears of sorrow mingling with joy and laughter and hope.

When we returned later from the cemetery, we came back to that little church and filled our stomachs with wonderful food seasoned by love, and we filled our hearts again with hope in the presence of God's people.

And then came Sunday—the real one, albeit the second. And we sang and prayed and shared God's good news of hope. Sweet melodies and rich tones of hope rose in that sanctuary and lifted our spirits, and God's Spirit comforted, and God's word was balm, and his Table was open to all, and the hearts of God's people praising him and participating in his sacrifice of love were washed with tears of sorrow mingling with joy and laughter and hope.

Then following worship we went into the fellowship hall of that little church and filled our stomachs with wonderful food seasoned by love, and we filled our hearts again with hope in the presence of God's people.

Both days I arrived early and opened the doors.

Both days I scurried about getting things prepared.

Both days I stopped for a few moments to drink in the sweet

silence of that sweet place.

Both days I knelt between the front pews to lift up a prayer.

Both days I thanked God for his people here and for his people everywhere who kneel before him.

Both days I silently praised God for the opportunity to come together to praise God.

Both days, and with each breath, I thanked God for hope in Christ.

Both days it occurred to me again how much I love what happens in that little place, a little church large in love.

Ah, “church” is a big word. No one has to tell me that the real church is the people; it's not the building, it's Christ's Body.

But don't try to tell me that the little place I also unashamedly call the church is not a special and holy place (as, I pray, is yours). How near-sighted must we be if we can't see that “place” matters!

When I kneel here, I think of all the others who have knelt here, and who do, and who will. They are part of me and I of them.

I've worshiped and worked here, laughed and cried here, knelt in joy here, bowed in near-desperation here, proclaimed God's word here, received God's word here, celebrated Christ's life and death and resurrection here, and been filled with his life and hope here.

This place's two-by-fours and sheetrock and glass (even stained) are ordinary, but what happens here is more than ordinary. What happens here on Sundays (usually just one a week) is so holy that it lifts and sanctifies the remainder of even the most ordinary days of the most ordinary of weeks.

Maybe this week it took two Sundays to remind me that if we ever let the wine of the grace we receive in such a place turn back into water when we leave, well, that's not the fault of the wine-making Lord who bids us drink from his full cup. I love worshiping him here in this special place of grace.

May God sanctify and bless such a beautiful place in your life, too. Yes, and drink deeply!





CEMETERIES HELP KEEP LIFE IN PERSPECTIVE

Death is the starkest reminder of all that life here
will never be successfully controlled, but hope lives!

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I’m weird, and I know it. But I sort of enjoy spending some time in cemeteries. I’m talking, of course, about the times when I want to be there, not the times when I have to be. Big difference. There’s been way too much of the latter recently, it seems to me.

But I find cemeteries peaceful and interesting. Strolling among the tombstones (since I don’t have to mow around them, I much prefer the standing ones), I get the chance to play Sherlock Holmes and deduce all sorts of life stories from all sorts of inscriptions.

Some cemeteries are quite beautiful with well-kept shrubs and trees and grass. They are quiet places; I like quiet places. And, if I may say so, the folks who populate cemeteries tend to be incredibly easy to get along with.

Since I’ve been a pastor in my community for over thirty-five years, more than a few of the names I see on the stones in our area cemeteries are connected with lives and stories that I know. I stood at the heads of more than a few of those graves and spoke words I hoped would point to the Author of Life just before the earth’s blanket was rolled over earthly remains that once were the temple of God’s Spirit.

When I think of my life and the life of our community, it’s hard for me to visualize life without many of the folks I’ve just mentioned. I no longer bump into them at worship or at the coffee shop or wave at them as we pass on the street. I miss that. I miss *them*.

But they are still very much a part of me. A part of us. And that’s especially true if they were part of the community of faith. They may or may not have been part of my congregation or my denomination, but Christ’s church is so much larger than the fences we build to try to keep God all tied up and tamed. Thank God indeed, our King won’t be shut up in anybody’s box, and he has never been willing to be successfully tamed.

Death is the harshest reminder of all that we’ll never get even this world tamed, much less its Creator. We may not look long upon those boxes that we bury, but they are nonetheless a constant reminder that life can’t be successfully controlled.

Cemeteries help put our lives in perspective. The “drop dead” late-filing date for filing federal taxes just passed, but folks who have passed away care not at all. And even if life’s cost is (almost certainly) increasing at a steadier clip than your paycheck, once your heart stops, that meter quits running, too. Perspective.

Cemeteries help us divide what really matters from what really does not. What matters most is who we choose to ultimately trust in this life—ourselves or our Creator. That’s a serious decision.

But once that decision’s made, cemeteries also remind us that life is far too precious to be taken too seriously. God is the God of all joy. Those who love him can dance in his presence both here and hereafter. They know better than to think that love and laughter and beauty cease on the other side of the tombstone.



If you enjoy these essays, you might also enjoy listening to some episodes of Curtis Shelburne’s new podcast. You can check it out at www.CurtisShelburne.com/podcast.



WHAT CAN WE LEARN IN THE MIDST OF A MESS?

We can learn a great deal indeed if we are willing
to humbly learn what God wants to teach us.

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Like most humans with a few years on them, I've had an occasion or a few (not too terribly many) to mention to the Lord that, in this distress or that difficulty, I have at least two requests. Jesus did, after all, teach us to ask, so I do.

First, I'd much prefer to avoid the mess altogether. What I have in mind is not "strength to get through" this or that tough thing. I'd prefer a nice pass to get around it; I really don't want "through" it.

Second, if I must go through the distress (did I mention that, with all respect, I'd very much rather not?), I desperately need my Father's help to trust his love and providence. And, if this blasted thing must be lived through, I need divine help to learn something worthwhile from it. As hard as it is to live through pain, it would be even worse to waste the opportunity to get something of value from it.

I'm not tempted to call my attitude one of great faith or exemplary courage. I'm a pretty run-of-the-mill human, and I can live with that.

So I wasn't too surprised to hear myself praying, in the midst of the present COVID-19 pestilence, for the Lord to please get us out of this wretched mess but, if it can't be over, say, yesterday, to please teach us some valuable lessons in the midst of it. I think he has. And, though it's still a wretched mess, I think most of us have already been surprised at some of the blessings that have come in the midst of the difficulty. It might do us a good bit of good to write a few of them down and thank God for them, even as we beseech (that's a

word pastors use for "ask") him to pull us through that which is truly painful and difficult and frightening.

I'll pause now for a moment so you can start your list. And you can add to it in the days ahead as well. [Please pause here.]

Among the items on my own list is one fine word: humility. I don't know about you, but I could certainly use a large dose of it.

We've been hearing a lot from experts. Pretty much every day. I've never been wise enough to need a lot of knowledge to adopt an opinion, but the folks I'm thinking about have done the work and the study and had the experience to have opinions that actually are worth something. (We're entitled to opinions, but only very foolish people think that all opinions are of equal value.)

I'm particularly appreciative of a few of this slew of experts who have candidly said that, though they have done their best to make educated estimates regarding many aspects of this pandemic, what they know and are learning each day is, well, new, and much must be re-evaluated.

I appreciate that, and I bet you do, too. Just give us your best shot, Dr. Expert. Give us your educated opinion based on the knowledge and experience you've amassed in the past and the facts you have today. If that needs to change tomorrow, just tell us. This kind of honest humility we appreciate. It makes listening to you and trying to follow your best advice in a difficult situation a lot easier. And it makes it easier for me to try to show a little humility myself and some real appreciation for you who are trying to help us get through this serious threat to our health and economy.

Yes, we've all been dealing with a lot of uncertainty. I am certain, though, that as much as we'd all rather not be going through this, our Father has much to teach us in the midst of it. May God give us the strength and humility to learn.





WATERING WEEDS IS FOOL'S WORK

If we spend our lives cultivating weeds, we'll
end up with souls choked to death by them.

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I spent some time this summer diligently watering a weed. “Big deal,” you say, “most folks in your neighborhood, mortals whose lawns are not perfect, water weeds every time they water. What makes you special?”

No, you don’t understand. For a few weeks in the summer, I singled this weed out and watered it. It had popped up in a planter among some pretty little flowering plants of another variety. But it looked to me a little like some plants I’d ensconced there in a previous season, or, I thought, it might be a type of purslane. So I watered it along with its neighbors.

One day I came home to find that plant rudely plucked and tossed out into the yard by my wife, left to dry up and die and be sucked up into a mower run by a mower. (English is interesting, isn’t it? The operator of a mower is both running the mower and is the mower.)

I picked the poor thing up, potted it, placed it in the back yard among other pots of plants, including a pot of purslane, and watered it.

“You are watering a weed,” my wife said.

“I don’t think it’s a weed,” I said.

“It’s a weed,” my wise wife said.

“I think it’s a type of purslane,” I said.

“It’s a weed,” she said.

Not convinced, I continued watering it. For two or three weeks, maybe a month, I watered it. And it grew. It prospered. But, increasingly, and soon obviously, it began to grow in a gangly, ugly, and—I’m afraid this might be truly said—malignant fashion. Even

then, it looked like it might eventually flower, but, before sporting any flowers, it began to develop some hairy, spiny, prickly-looking extrusions along its tendrils (not a purslane sort of thing to do). One might mistake a strikingly beautiful lady for a former Miss America, but if she begins to sprout hairy growths on her snout, one’s opinion might need to be altered to align with reality.

It was a weed.

I hate it when my wife’s right. Which is the vast majority of the time.

So I hereby confess to late-learning a valuable lesson: watering weeds is a fool’s errand.

True, but I’m not lacking in foolish company.

When we continue making slight variations of the same dumb mistake, we’re watering weeds.

When we leap before we look and jump into a hole we’ve jumped into before, that’s watering a weed.

When we choose to be our own victims, bludgeoning ourselves with the same bad choices we’ve mangled ourselves with before, we’re watering a weed.

When we go to the same places (geographically or mentally), poison ourselves with the same toxins (substances or bad attitudes), continue to surround ourselves with pseudo-friends as rudderless as we are (maybe even not that bad but not interested in being better or encouraging anyone around them to be better), we’re watering weeds.

The result is completely predictable. If we water enough weeds long enough, we’ll end up with a yard or, worse, a life, full of them, all of the good plants choked out. And weeds grow more quickly than we’d think.

From sad experience, I urge you to water only what you really want to grow. Ask for God’s help to know the difference between grassburs and flowers and to pull up what’s worse than worthless. At the very least, don’t water weeds.





A PASTOR'S JOB DESCRIPTION: TO POINT OUT WHAT GOD IS DOING

It's good to have someone particularly ordinary
to help us focus on God's extraordinary work.

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All honorable work is God's work, a calling, and anyone serious about doing a good job in his/her work derives priceless benefit from the example of respected mentors. Surely teachers and doctors, business folks and farmers, all need mentors to encourage them to "soldier on."

One of my most influential mentors passed away almost a year ago, and I never met him. One day, I will. Eugene Peterson, best-known for his amazing paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, never wrote anything poorly, but his books written particularly for pastors have blessed me immensely.

I'm especially inspired by Peterson's memoir, *The Pastor*. I think it should be required reading for would-be pastors, and I think "veteran" pastors probably should read it once every year. Reflecting on fifty years of ministry, Peterson reminds those still on that journey that God does not call us to be religious CEOs but to love his sheep. Our calling is not to be little gods who think we can make the sun rise but simply to walk with our people through life each new day, reminding them, and being reminded, that God is the One who bids it rise.

The job has never been easy, and it certainly is not now. The statistics are dismal and, as Peterson notes, pastoral "defections and dismissals have reached epidemic proportions in every branch and form of church." (I doubt the present COVID-19 pandemic has helped.)

The pressure comes from all directions. Some groups, saying very truly that "every Christian is a minister," draw conclusions that are simply silly and demeaning and make as much practical sense as saying that everyone who has ever cut up a pork chop is a butcher. Of course, every Christian is called to the service of God, but our roles, functions, training, and gifts are, thank the Lord, all as different as they are all valuable and needed.

Our culture itself, and especially our "religious" culture, is toxic to real ministry; it devalues and diminishes it. "The vocation of pastor," writes Peterson, "has been replaced by the strategies of religious entrepreneurs with business plans." God is treated as a consumer "product to be marketed," and the marketers scramble to find the right "model for success" which is then "religiously" measured in our culture's terms rather than Christ's: if it's big, if it's quantifiable, if it's impressive, it's called success. Never mind that measured by such standards, Christ was remarkably unsuccessful as he loved the weak and little children, the powerless and the "foolish" of this world; he chose the cross instead of "success."

Desperate for the latest program to "revitalize the church," pastors often fall to the very temptations Satan offered in the wilderness and Christ steadfastly resisted. When we do, we act as if the fruit we push the church to produce (and measure) is the only thing that validates its existence. Buying that lie, we devalue worship and prayer and become blind to the real fruit (much that is visible but much more that is unseen) that God produces. We proceed by displaying a profound disrespect and denial of God's presence in the "ordinary."

It's good to have someone particularly ordinary particularly charged with pointing out what God is doing every day through his presence, forgiveness, and grace in our seemingly ordinary lives. It's work worth doing.





A SHORTAGE CAN MAKE A BAD SITUATION WORSE

But we serve a God whose love, mercy, grace,
and power are in plentiful supply.

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Did you see the COVID-19 news conference the other day featuring a particularly noted, well-published, and often-quoted professor of epidemiology?

Dr. Angus Jones-Brown has been studying virus transmission for decades, and the data accumulated over those many years seems to rather clearly indicate, against all previous thought, that most of these viruses proliferate not by passing into our airways via our noses or by traveling through other mucous membranes. In fact, the professor says that, as odd as this may sound, many viruses, actually much weaker than you might think, seem to be inhibited by the blue to blue-violet light wavelength range (492-425 nanometers) of the spectrum.

Dr. Jones-Brown's further research indicates that a soft cloth of a blue color, supplemented by common copper (Element Cu, Group 11, Atomic Number 29) and passed over a person's feet when those feet are higher than that individual's head (a position known as hyperpedisquelaltudia), provides almost complete immunity to most viruses, including all coronaviruses and COVID-19 in particular.

I won't bore you with all of the scientific details, chemical equations, and medical jargon that the erudite professor shared in the article; it gets pretty deep. I hope you'll note that the reason his research caught my eye specifically was because his test subjects were taken from the exact demographic group into which I fit. Please understand that his research and conclusion may not be applicable to individuals in other cohorts at all.

But I quote here from what I consider to be the most important note in the "Conclusions" section of his article abstract. It reads: "Based upon the absence of other comorbidities and aberrant prognosticological criteria, gray-haired

males in late middle age, healthy blood pressure, marriages of over forty years, and who drink prodigious amounts of coffee are well-advised to put on blue suede shoes, stand on their heads, and stack copper BBs up their noses as a probable, though not absolutely conclusive, antiviral barrier against Covid-19."

And there you have it! I'm not sure what. But you have it.

I admit that no one who is not a doctor or a hypochondriac should read as many PubMed articles as I do. (My doctor will agree.) What I'm quoting above is completely out of my head.

I really don't mean to poke fun at a terribly serious situation, but I do indeed mean to poke fun at the way some of us—me included—react during said situation. Some gullible reactions have made a bad situation worse in ways that we could easily have avoided with just a little common sense. Two words, and I rest my case: toilet paper.

Who was the second idiot who heard the first idiot say, "I dunno, Harv, we might run outta toilet paper during this virus mess. I think . . ." Better that he'd have said, "I dunno, Harv, let's just jump off a cliff and do it before anybody else can." I wonder if really determined folks with a TP-hoarder mindset would've just lined up for the flight? Maybe we'd have been spared the non-shortage shortage.

Or maybe he should have just told his buddy, "Well, I read somewhere that ya won't catch this if you put on blue suede shoes, stand on your head, and stack copper BBs up your nose." It'd have made as much sense as stashing toilet paper.

I'm gonna go out on a limb and say that it's always best not to make a bad situation worse by making insane choices. For. No. Reason.

In any case, a word of heartfelt thanks to all of the many, many folks, working in so many ways, obvious or not, but brave and steadfast nonetheless, who keep working at real risk. And my prayers also for all whose businesses and livelihood have been genuinely damaged.

One more word for us all: faith. Just ask your Father for it. His strength is available when ours isn't. No shortage. Real or imagined. No shortage at all.





“DO EVERYTHING RIGHT, AND YOU MIGHT LIVE TO BE 100”

But do you really think you can do the first part,
and do you really want to do the second?

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A good many folks believe that, if you do everything right, you might live to be well over 100.

Two glaring presuppositions shine forth from this belief. One is that you actually might want to live to be “well over 100.” Not me, thanks.

The other most obvious problem is actually two falsehoods for the price of one—that it’s possible to “do everything right,” and that you will.

Under “doing everything right,” well, there’s a lot to check off. Most folks will tell you to spend a lot of time in physically demanding gerbil activity. (Careful, though, the sleep experts will tell you that if you short your sleep to make excellent time going nowhere on, say, a treadmill, you’re likely hurting yourself more than helping yourself.)

And you can probably forget about drinking any milk that a cow would actually recognize or claim. And definitely forget cheesecake or ribeyes.

Ironically, you may have to spend more time thinking about food—carefully cataloging what you can’t eat—than the average glutton who just eats everything in sight. (I’m not arguing for either extreme.) Some folks will consider a particularly persnickety approach trendy or cool; probably more of your friends and family will just be driven crazy by it and find trying to eat with you more trouble than it’s worth.

And the lengthy “doing everything right” list goes on.

I readily admit that following a balanced approach to exercise and nutrition is a good thing. Do it, and you’ll likely live longer and better. Get crazy about it and you’ll drive yourself and everyone around you

nuts (but this is sure: all concerned will live lives that certainly seem a lot longer, even if they’re not).

Here’s the problem, though. Even if it were possible to “do everything right,” one microbe that didn’t get the memo, one weak blood vessel, one errant gene first passed on by your great-great-grandfather, can quickly mess up your plan.

Ah, and what about folks who are sure that they can “do everything right” morally? I think I worry about them even more.

This example is extreme, but I laughed when I read this in Dave Shiflett’s *Wall Street Journal* review of Mark Stein’s book *The Presidential Fringe*: “Leonard Jones, standard-bearer for the High Moral Party from 1848 to 1868, promised voters that they would never die if they would live a faithful and fully moral life. He was apparently a good man, but when his time came he croaked like a toad.” That must have been embarrassing.

I vote for living a moral life. Defy any of the Ten Commandments often enough, and you’ll end up in pain with lots of bruises far more serious than even the ones people get by trying to defy the law of gravity. You’ll bless yourself and many others by heeding the words of our Creator. But if you think you follow them perfectly, you’ll bless the rest of us best by staying far away.

Some of the best wisdom God gave us came through the Apostle Paul in this straight truth about how crooked we all are: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3). And so, because we all need saving, and nobody gets life right, the apostle goes on to say, God sent his Son, our Savior.

Focusing on ourselves is a treadmill approach to life. (It’s actually idolatry.) Focusing on him means finding genuine freedom and joy, finding our best selves by getting out of ourselves.





REALITY IS HARD, BUT DENYING REALITY ENDS UP BEING HARDER

A person who believes that two plus two equals five is unlikely to live long and happily in this universe.

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Dealing with reality can be hard, but it's better than the alternative which looks easy and turns out to be much harder.

In Jesus' famous parable of "The Two Builders," he talks about two gents who both did the hard work of building houses. Yes, but only one, the "wise builder," did the harder work of building his on the right foundation, one of rock; the "foolish builder" built on sand. Both houses looked fine—until "the rain came down, the streams came up, and the winds blew and beat against" those houses. The house built on rock stood the test; the house built on sand fell with a great crash. The moral of the story: don't build a house in California anywhere near mud, fire, or flood!

No. The moral of the story, Jesus tells us, is that a life built on the truth of his words (he's just finishing his "Sermon on the Mount," Matthew 5-7) will be a strong life that will stand, even in the midst of great trial.

Storms assail us all. When they come, we discover the truth about our foundations. Was laying the foundation quick, cheap, and easy? Okay. Until the storm comes, and what we built falls quickly. The collapse is expensive and maybe fatal. Not easy.

If only we'd listened! If only we'd invested in reality, built on truth, trusted the One who built this universe and tells us the truth about living in it. Reality is hard. But denying it is ultimately much harder.

I once spent a little time a fathom or a few under a Grade 5 rapid called "Silverback" in the Nile River, near Jinja, Uganda. Among several problems one encounters after having parted company with a perfectly good raft and being cast into the depths is, literally, not knowing which way is up. The Nile neither knows

nor cares about how you feel about that stark question, but this much is sure: not all answers are equally correct. Only one squares with reality. In this situation, the very sensible rule is that you not to try to swim toward the surface. Instead, you relax and trust the reality of two of this world's unbreakable laws: the laws of gravity and of buoyancy. They are real and strong, and your life jacket, obeying them, will invariably propel you upward if you'll be still. Underwater in the Nile is not at all a good place to try to beat or deny the reality of the laws of physics.

It's no skin off the "nose" of the law of gravity if we choose to ignore its reality, but it may be more than a little skin off of ours. Beliefs have consequences.

I once asked a class of smart kids this question: Does everyone have a right to his/her own beliefs? Of course, they answered, "Yes!" resoundingly.

Then I asked a follow-up question: "Is every belief of equal value?"

That's when the class got interesting. No matter how undemocratic or unpopular it might be, the obvious answer is "no." Every person in this world is of immense value to our Creator, no matter his/her belief. But beliefs that are based on what squares with reality are, by their very nature, worth more than beliefs that fly in the face of reality.

C. S. Lewis once opined that we'd raised a generation too "mentally modest" to believe the multiplication tables. And a few generations later, we've raised some folks who find even the reality of their own chromosomes, which no amount of surgery can truly alter, too confining.

You and I can discuss the merits of preferring dark over milk chocolate or a blue pickup over a maroon one. But truth and reality are deeper than tastes or trends. A person who sincerely wants two plus two to equal five is going to need either remedial math or a different universe; he's not likely to be very happy in this one.

If we want to live in a place where people who murder, lie, steal, covet, break faith, etc., find fulfillment and joy, well, wherever that place is, it's not *this* world.

When our Creator tells us "Thou shalt" or "Thou shalt not," he's telling us the real truth about successful living in this very real world. He's pointing us toward foundations that can stand up to reality.



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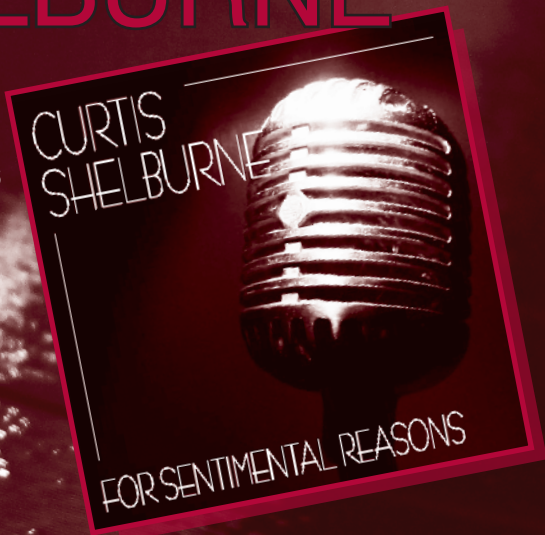
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