

NEWS & OPINIONS

Recovering Pharisees: A Faith-Adjacent Ethnography

Gregory Stephens

This story grew from participant observation in a men's group at Highland Church of Christ in Abilene. I was an "insider-outsider" who was raised in this church, but had drifted, and called himself "post-Christian" to students.¹ Yet I wrote about how Bob Marley and Frederick Douglass used the Bible. I taught the Bible as Literature in the Caribbean. Disenchanted with scholarly abstractions I migrated into creative writing and ethnography. Scripture penetrated some of my literary prose. In late 2024 I left my academic position to father my teenaged daughter in Tucson. The world shuddered on its axis. I wanted to hear new voices.

In 2025 I began binging on podcasts. I noted a hunger for a "faith-adjacent language." Mostly this was voiced by the faithless, though church attendance among young men is rising. "Deep inside, they want to have faith in something," David Brooks wrote. Something is also stirring among some secular outsiders, as Briahna Joy Gray confessed to Chris Hedges.²

Is there a version of the language of faith intelligible to outsiders? Some people distrust dogma, but want to learn how being committed to a higher purpose can

help coalition building. But most left-leaning folk wouldn't be caught dead in a room full of Christians. Hence the wish for language *adjacent to faith*, but not tainted by religious moralizing.

The leftist "circular firing squad"³ had a certain kinship with Pharisees, it occurred to me. Dangerous demands for doctrinal purity. Here's an AI view of "Recovering Pharisees":

Pharisees were a Jewish sect known for "self-righteousness, legalism, and judgmental attitudes." In churches today, a *recovering Pharisee* seeks to overcome such tendencies, and to embrace instead "humility, grace, and genuine love."

Such a process requires "introspection and honesty about one's own faults." Neither left-liberals nor conservatives in U.S. politics are talking about *recovery from self-righteousness*. So I decided to listen to what one group had to say about recovery from their judgmental upbringing. This was a men's Bible Study group at Highland Church of Christ in Abilene Texas, which I attended in October 2025. I relied on participant observation, and the study of artefacts.⁴

¹ As a youth, I was perhaps a "disenchanted Christian." Charles Moore. 2002. "Word to the Reader," in Eberhard Arnold, *God's Revolution: Justice, Community, and the Coming Kingdom*. (Bruderhof Foundation, vi).

² David Brooks. "The Rise of Right-Wing Nihilism." *New York Times* (Aug. 22, 2025). Ruth Igielnik and Ruth Graham. "More Young Men say Religion is 'Very Important' to Them, Poll Finds." *New York Times* (April 16, 2026).

³ Gregory Stephens. 2023. "Postcolonialism as leftist firing squad and procrustean bed: a communicative take." *Journal for Cultural Research* 27(1): 38-51.

⁴ Audrey Alejandro. 2021. "Reflexive discourse analysis: A methodology for the practice of reflexivity." *European Journal of International Relations* 27(1): 150-74. [Author's ethnographic methods](#): Gregory Stephens. 2024. "[Decolonial Refusals](#): Ethnographic Writing from the post-Periphery." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*; 2020. "[Footnotes from the Margins](#): Outcomes-based literary nonfiction pedagogy in Puerto Rico." *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies* (Spring);

“Upside-Down Living: Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount,” a “men’s Bible Studies series,” ran Sept. 15-Dec. 8, 2025.⁵ I wanted to hear the take of a congregation that had evolved far from the doctrinaire stances that ruled during my youth (in the Church of Christ generally).

These 2025 Christians *heard* the anger that Jesus directed towards his era’s religious leaders. His radically inclusive *kingdom of heaven* was inseparable from rhetorical hit jobs on Pharisees. At the first Sermon on the Mount group I attended (October 6, 2025), leader Terry Cagle began by reading the lyrics to “Recovering Pharisee.” This lyric sparked ruminations that men’s group members would make about their unfinished progress as recovering Pharisees:

It’s the way of the human heart
To confess other people’s sin
Reluctant to admit my part
Or the deeper problem within

Is this lyric not both truthful, and far removed from what is audible in political discourse?

The men would go on to examine the self-righteous nature of some traditions in which they were raised, as well as how in-group/out-group walls continue to present challenges. I will later return to the testimonies of these men. But first:

*Where and How I Enter*⁶

Ethnographers must listen to our subjects, trying to understand their view of the cultural processes in which they participate. But the positionality of researchers determines what subjects are willing to say, and how formations of the researcher (class, gender, ethno-racial, economic, education, etc.) shape their interpretation, for better or worse.

There was no way to leave myself out of this project. The moment I walked in, the entire room—some 15-20 “white men” in their fifties and sixties—turned to stare at me.

“You’re looking at me like I’m a stranger!” I said, to cut the ice.

“No, you are welcome. Come, sit with us.”

“Many of you will know my sister Jayma.”

“Jayma Savage?!”

“Yes, my older sister.”

“Ah, she is a super woman,” one said. She had spoken from the stage that Sunday about her “prayer room.”⁷ Her spirit of service was seen by all who knew her as exemplary.

One man knew my father Farrell, AKA “Bo.” We had celebrated his 90th birthday at Highland, and Jayma was walking in his footsteps.

Family relations granted me a sort of insider status. Yet if my own family manifested a tendency to hagiography, even aspirations to saintliness,⁸ I was something of a black sheep. In the earlier years of my trajectory, at least, a Prodigal Son of sorts.

My perspective is *faith-adjacent*, as an insider-outsider.⁹ After careers as a journalist, songwriter, and

2019. *Three Birds Sing a New Song: A Puerto Rican trilogy about Dystopia, Precarity, and Resistance*. Intermezzo.; 2016. “[Digital Liminality](#) and Cross-Cultural Re-integration in the Middle East.” (*CEA Forum*).

⁵ Strong Faith Family Church, “The Upside Down Kingdom,” Sermon on the Mount (Aug. 5, 2024); <https://www.strongfaithchurch.org/discovering-the-upside-down-kingdom-beatitudes/>. “Sermon on [The Mount Overview](#),” from series The Upside Down Kingdom (June 15, 2025).

⁶ Alludes to Paula Giddings. 1984. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (HarperCollins).

⁷ Jayma Savage. “Prayers of the People” testimony, “Instrumental Worship at Highland” (Oct. 2025) [7:23 to 10:43]; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=8cTYFrkacw0&t=644s>

⁸ J. Omar Palafox. 2025. *Art of Sainthood: Tradition and Innovation in Christian Spirituality*. (Abilene Christian: UP).

⁹ Guannan Zou. 2023. “Beyond ‘Insider’ and ‘Outsider’ in the Field,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* (Apr.): 1-11. Sowparnika Balaswaminathan. 2020. “The Outsider,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 45(1) (June): 92-99.

professor, this study represents a “return” or a “revisit.”¹⁰ Inevitably revisits are a *revisioning*—acquiring the necessary distance to see with new eyes. Despite my *adjacency*, long ago I decided that the scriptural traditions in which my parents raised me were pearls of great price. I came to that view by hearing scriptures “sung back to me” by different traditions—by abolitionists in Great Britain and the U.S., by the Civil Rights movement, by Bob Marley and the Rastas (and their worldwide diaspora), and by Mayans in Chiapas—who like the abolitionists and the Rastas, re-envisioned “Exodus” through their own cultural and political sensibilities.¹¹

I share skepticism towards organized religion.¹² Yet I embrace the power of scriptures which have a certain faith-adjacent reach and resonance. Beyond their archetypal power as *stories*, scriptures are repositories of ethical teaching with continuing value. The parables especially resist *us vs. them* interpretations. They function as *tools for living*,¹³ as in Buddhist practice, more than moralistic dogma. But speaking to and beyond communities of faith requires much caution, and translation.

Week One (Oct. 6, 2025)—Walls and Outsiders

Upside-Down Living: Fulfilling or Reframing the Law

Testimonies about what being in “recovery” meant for participants is my main focus here. The framework of the class and series refers to a refrain of Jesus, “the first shall be last, and the last, first.” The opening section of the Sermon on the Mountain repeats a sort of reversal of position at every turn: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5).

Group leader Terry Cagle employed a sort of literary analysis of the thematic structure. The Sermon starts in the third person, moves to second person (“You are the light of the world” [Matt. 5:14]), and then moves into first-person pronouncements: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matt. 5:17).

Cagle took this verse as the focal point of that night’s class. He described this fulfillment of Jewish scripture as, in practice, a *reframing*. And he introduced this discussion prompt: “Pharisees were great at law, but lousy at relationships.”

In what ways were these men trying to reframe the conventional teaching of the Church of Christ? It had always denied being a denomination, and saw itself as superior to or more righteous than *the denominations*. The C of C claimed to have “no creed but the Bible.”¹⁴

What did we remember of the Church of Christ of our youths? The answers came easily: No music. No dancing. No discussion of the Holy Spirit. No *mixed swimming*! One elder, an Abilene native, provided a memory which served as a framing metaphor:

I remember this pool that had a wood fence in the middle separating males and females. As teenagers, we would hold our breath to dive down to where there were knotholes in the wood, to try to catch a glimpse of the girls in their swimsuits.

Such explicit gender segregation had ended decades ago. Highland was an unusual Church of Christ, allowing instrument music (in one service), and featuring women on stage reading scripture, singing, baptizing, and even serving as elders.

A discussion ensued: walls were no longer visible, but they metaphorically still troubled, or put limits on,

¹⁰ Michael Burawoy. 2003. “Revisits: An outline of a theory of reflexive ethnography.” *American Sociological Review* 68(5): 645-79.

¹¹ Gregory Stephens. 1999. *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (Cambridge UP); 2019. *Poetics of Indigenismo in Zapatista discourse: The Mexican revolution revisioned through Mayan eyes* (Cambridge Scholars).

¹² G. Stephens. “Personal note on the study of religious expression,” in *On Racial Frontiers*.
https://www.academia.edu/29278663/Personal_note_on_the_study_of_religious_expression_pdf

¹³ Tools for living: alludes to Kenneth Burke. 2010. *Equipment for living: The literary reviews of Kenneth Burke* (Parlor Press).

¹⁴ Leonard Allen’s critique: 2021. *In the Great Stream: Imagining Churches of Christ in the Christian Tradition* (ACU Press).

relationships with outsiders. Members were both proud of how inclusive and welcoming Highland had become (which I can attest to), but at the same time, they worried that the exclusive nature of the Church of Christ in its roots might lead them to put up new walls. Such essentially Puritan boundary maintenance limited their ability to get through to the outsiders who were attracted to this congregation, but often could not come all the way inside.

The Cross-Dresser at the Gates

The first story about outsiders who *tried* to find a home at Highland centered on a cross-dresser named Georgia. This tale was recounted by “Darrin,” an elder.

Some of y’all remember Georgia, said Darrin. He was married and had two children. But when he came to Highland, he was living as a cross-dresser. I’ll never forget, when Georgia applied to become a member at Highland, we told him about the two services Highland had begun to hold—the acapella service earlier for more traditional members, and the instrumental service. “Oh, I could never attend an instrumental service,” Georgia told me.

Several men chuckled at the memory of this open cross-dresser who however thought that playing instruments during worship was the work of the devil.

He kept asking about membership but we put it on the back burner. Then we heard that Georgia, who had chewed tobacco, had developed throat cancer. From a hospital in Dallas he sent word that he still wanted to complete formal admission to membership.

Finally we voted to approve his membership. Some elders went to the hospital in Dallas, and we had a little ceremony. Georgia was crying. But he seemed grateful. It was bittersweet for me. He had wasted away and died a week later. So although we facilitated a sort of “death-bed conversion,” I felt guilty that it had taken that long.

Darrin’s story set the tone for other testimonials. The world of the segregated swimming pool could not continue. But were young people always better off now that they could swim and dance together, while girls dressed much like young women across the U.S., and

young men, instead of looking through knotholes, now went “underwater” to peer at pornography?

Another angle on *upside-down living* was Terry Cagle relating his sense of regret about *Shaggy*, the addict who joined but couldn’t get clean

Shaggy came to us with a history of addiction issues. He wanted to do right, was good-spirited. But he never could quite get fully sober. Shaggy attached himself to me—sort of a father-son discipleship. I tried repeatedly to help him get clear. But somehow I couldn’t quite get through to him. His addictions were, in some way, beyond my reach.

Cagle’s repeated “I couldn’t quite reach him” suggested that this testimony was also about his own “Recovering Pharisee” syndrome. It was also a *Lost Sheep* story—or inversion. In Luke 15 a shepherd left 99 sheep in the field to search after one who had strayed. But Cagle’s story was about *the one who got away*. He could not bring this lost sheep back to the fold.

Shaggy’s story lacked closure. The addict wanted to be with the believers, and made all the right noises, yet his addictions in the end were his master.

I began to connect the dots broadly. Another Bible study group I participated in just prior to the pandemic, Ashland United Methodist in St. Joseph, Missouri, came to mind. For some reason I was shocked by how many in this couple’s group confessed that they had identified with the resentment of the older brother i.e., the Good Son who had stayed home, while the younger brother indulged himself. Why should riotous living be rewarded?

That some readers might not identify with the Prodigal Son, I had never considered. At Ashland they had been honor-the-father types. They expected to be seated at the front, to receive their just rewards. And didn’t the good sons and daughters tend to align with the Pharisees? They had followed the law.

But it was the ones who had strayed, sinners and social outsiders, who “were all gathered around to hear Jesus” (Luke 15:1). The Pharisees and the scholars did not like this. Yet the Nazarene insists: “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” Because “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Luke 15:7; 5:32).

Jesus had an affinity for rebels and backsliders, who pressed round to hear the teachings from the Galilean

borderlands. Some leaders in the Abilene men's group did not quite know how to connect with the black sheep—the good-spirited but incorrigible sinners. But the rank and file repeated what I heard as a through-line of the Highland congregation:

“We always err on the side of grace.”

Sexuality Issues

Final discussion centered on male sexuality, a recurrent concern. An elder I'll call “Rob” shared a memory about a talk with his father, who told him about “what is coming”—male desires that surge in early adolescence. The father had described this as localized in a boy's penis.

“Is it alright to use the word penis?!” Rob asked.

Several men chuckled nervously. “Yes, of course. We're here for each other.”

During time with this group, my skepticism about repression of male sexuality resurged. Confessions of having had problems with pornography seem to lead to an aim to extirpate male desire. But I'm reminded of testimonials from addicts who never seem to get fully free.

Finally we discussed what “fulfilling the law” meant. Cagle drew attention to the rhetorical *bombs* Jesus dropped on the Pharisees. He repeatedly used one word to characterize these bombs: “*boom*.” It sounded like a sort of awe that could not be fully expressed. These were the *good sons*, despite their human problems. Their painful recoveries cast shadows on how far the church had come from the doctrinaire positions in which we were raised. Many walls had been let go of, only to be erected in new ways—especially in sexuality's domain.

Are Metrics a Pharisees Model?

The preacher Shane Hughes, during my revisit, twice centered his lesson on a text that I was reading prior to the service. I experienced this as a sort of synchronicity.

Early Oct. 5 I reread Matt. 19-23, discussing with my son Samuel these *cosmic reversal* themes: “The stone that the builder refused shall be the head cornerstone”; “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” etc. The worship reading was Matthew 22: 1-10. A king sends servants to invite people to a wedding banquet. Some of his subjects mock the servants, but others kill them. Verse 8, “The wedding banquet is

ready, but those invited were not worthy,” seems to signal a shift from Jews to Gentiles. Shane's sermon, focused on going beyond the letter of the law, sketched Highland's pathway of membership, participation, and service.

In a conversational style, Shane used Jesus' critique of the Pharisees to push back on members who acted like students, asking the teacher what they must do to get an “A.”

Some say—just give me the bottom line. It sounds like they're asking, what's the lowest common denominator of participation at Highland that I can get away with?

Hughes acknowledged that “there *are* some metrics that we want you to engage.” But:

Metrics around spirituality and faith are at best risky. At worst, they're dangerous. People who specialize in hitting metrics around faith, *Jesus has opinions about them. They look a lot like Pharisees.* Pharisees looked like they were doing everything right. But it's easy to look the part, yet your inside is empty.

Highland's anti-model was: *we don't want to look like the Pharisees.* Following form was not enough to enact the kingdom of heaven. Hence the undertones of Shane Hughes' punchline: “It's really easy to ape the rituals,” like just showing up. But “attendance isn't the goal. The goal is wonder. Here's the rub. We can manufacture adrenaline, . . . but we can't engineer theophany. [awe] The pathway puts you in the posture, and trains your eyes and ears so that when God does show up, you know how to dance.”

Hughes closed with his view of a *good metric*: “pursue unlikely friendships.” I wondered: as my family's globe-trotting black sheep, was I a prospective *unlikely friendship* at Highland?

I thought about some other tough love in Matthew 19-23. The Pharisees tried to get Jesus to endorse easy divorce, but he gave this rather Pauline explanation to his disciplines:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and [those] who have been made eunuchs by men, and [others] who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it. (Matt 19: 11-12)

Few will be fertile soil for this message. Eunuchs cannot “be fruitful and multiply.” In any case, the message is certainly not anti-sexual. Sparring with the “chief priests and elders” who tried to corner him in the temple, Jesus spun out several parables. This one is show-stopping:

The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of you. For John [the Baptist] came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. (Matt 21:31-32).

Boom, indeed! Locals had much to say about recovering from the Pharisee model, sexuality especially. But Shane Hughes focused on smaller metrics. “Be kinder to family and more patient with the people around you, more forgiving of the little wrongs.” Which seems to be the stance Jesus took towards consensual sexual transgressions.

Re-imagining the Samaritan Woman at the Well

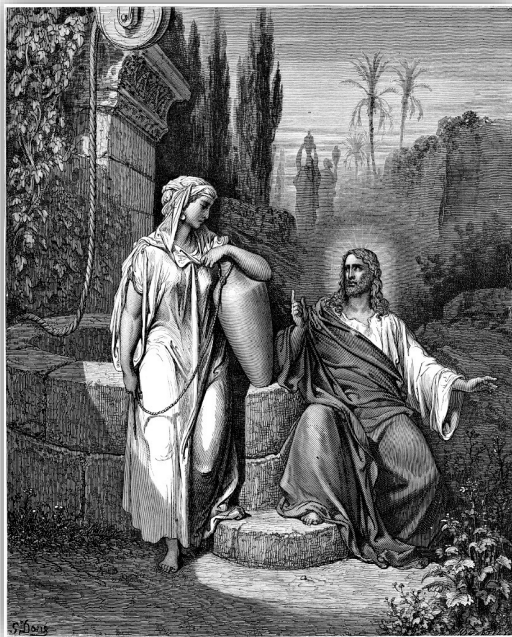


Photo 2
Woman at Well.

During the October men’s group, I commuted from a small ranch near Dyess Air Force Base to Abilene Christian. For quiet corners, I gravitated to the Gaines Stanley Theological Reading Room. On the left corner of the entrance was a glass representation of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. This image led my thoughts in unexpected directions. I began studying the Samaritans, because my attention had been arrested by this piece of glass art at ACU. John Quartley, working with engraver Gustave Dore, portrayed the Samaritan woman as a hottie. She guards the entrance to the Churches of Christ flagship institution’s theology room. Put plainly, her nipples show. The artist has also accentuated the shapely form of her thighs.

Artistic depictions of the Samaritan woman are part of the visual unconscious of Christian communities. Compared to other versions of the encounter, *this* Jesus looks like a flesh and blood man. He sits in a manly position, thighs open. He’s sharing his wisdom, but his finger points straight up.

After five husbands, this woman now lived with a lover. The artist gave visual form to the reality that men found her attractive. This is rare in church art, but some artists visualized her in full womanhood. In brief, I want to show how visual representations of sexuality are often hidden in plain sight. This image would be familiar to some members of the men’s group, and the congregation, many of whom studied at Abilene Christian.

Representations of Jesus and the Samaritan woman often show the disciples approaching. Jesus had been alone with the woman. “Celibacy was extremely rare in first-century Palestine,” Reza Azlan notes.¹⁵ The myth of Jesus as asexual is implausible, like Mary as lifelong virgin. This son of a carpenter enjoyed the company of women, the Gospels make clear. He defended their presence, their honor, and even acts of intimacy, such as the woman who was criticized for putting perfume on his head (Mark 14) or feet (Luke 7). And always, he listened to women.

The Preacher’s Take: Reorientating Worship

Shane Hughes had a different take on John 4, connected to his “Pathways” refresh. “We want you to be in a posture that is open to experiencing awe,” he said. What is that *posture*? Mere politricks or

¹⁵ Reza Azlan. 2013. *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. (Random House, 37).

entertainment cannot satisfy our “hunger for the infinite.” Nestled within the human spirit is a longing to serve, to praise, something greater than ourselves, said Hughes.

After discussing the *revaluation* inherent in the Old English roots of *worship*, as *Worth-Ship*, Hughes brought this back to a latent hunger in the Samaritan woman. This only became apparent to me when I went back and watched the sermon online, taking notes.

In John 4, the author is giving us a sense of how to orient *ourselves towards proper worship*. It's unusual that this deeply theological conversation is with a woman and a non-Jew. Jesus considers her theological claims and he responds to her.

Then Hughes took this woman's perspective. “She asks a question to the one Jewish male who will talk to her. Which mountain are we supposed to worship on?” *True worship* could only be in Jerusalem, Judeans claimed. Samaritans, Northern Israelites, worshipped at Mt. Gerizim. They claimed to be the Israelites who most accurately followed Mosaic teachings. So the woman asks: should we worship on Gerizim, as my people believe, or in Jerusalem, as your people believe?

In “fulfillment mode,” Jesus sidesteps geography: “God is a spirit, and those that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.” This is one of many instances in the Gospels when a woman seems to pull a larger truth out of Jesus. He began this conversation, as with the Syro-Phoenician woman, claiming that Jews were superior, or a higher priority. But the women he interacted with had a broader view of worship, of faith, and of justice, than did the Pharisees.

Important things happen at wells, Hughes concluded: “John is saying something about the marriage that's going to happen between Jews and Gentiles.” Indeed, this is a subtext of the Good Samaritan parable. Learning to love neighbors as ourselves—especially when they are fundamentally different—is a metric at the root of “all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22: 40).

Shane called the Samaritan woman “broken.” To heal, she needed to know what it means to worship in spirit and in truth. True. But from a faith-adjacent perspective, I wonder about the temptation to call *broken* women who have “been around.” Remember

how prostitutes are better positioned than virtue-signaling Pharisees to enter the kingdom of heaven?

The sexually experienced Samaritan woman, doing deep theology with a prophet claiming to be the “son of man,” sets up the men's group discussion about lust in Week 2.

Week Two (Oct. 13, 2025)—Murder Management And Leer Pressure

Cagle split this week's study into two parts: “Murder Management,” about anger, and “Dealing with Leer Pressure,” about lust. My focus is mostly on the deeply personal way in which the men responded to the issue of lust. But I want to first touch on the opening theme of how “anger begets murder” in both literal and metaphorical ways.

The reading for Part One was Matthew 5: 21-26. Jesus demonstrates that his “fulfillment” of the law is a radical reframing. Hebraic law had specified: “You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgement.’ But I say unto you that whoever is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgement” (v. 21-22). The reframing still applies to our insult-dominated social media environment and national political discourse.

“We live in an angry, murderous world,” Cagle intoned. Some readers may carry stereotypes of Christians wanting to sing praise songs for all eternity. But we all have to deal with road rage, or bad behavior in stores and airports. Many of us wrestle with images of the annihilation of Gaza. Rhetorical, environmental, and bodily carnage surrounds us.

Here in this segment were proofs that, whether in Pauline Christianity, or in the “historical Jesus,” controlling anger is seen as a higher priority than prayer, or legal process. Towards the end of the Sermon on the Mountain passage cited above, Jesus does another reframing: if you are making a spiritual offering, and at that moment if you “remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift [and] first go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift (Matt. 5: 23-24, NIV).

This is a common New Testament theme: “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger” (Ephesians 4:26); “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). The slow to

anger theme also runs through Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.¹⁶

I wondered, didn't Jesus let the sun go down on his wrath towards the Pharisees?

Transitioning, Cagle said provocatively: "That was the 'easy' part of Matthew 5. But now we're all going to *squirm*" (Matt. 5:27-30). The old law was, "You shall not commit adultery." But, "I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (v. 28). And then: "it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell" (v. 29).

In Cagle's translation, "the eyes and the heart are sexual organs." As he shared statistics, such as, "30% of internet usage is porn," I heard echoes of the Church of Christ in my youth. Paul distrusted the body. He wanted to "nail the flesh to the cross." One still hears that refrain today, even among young and beautiful Christians.

The men were hunched over, faces down. *Squirming*, indeed. Confessions followed: "It's tough on guys," said Rob, whose Dad had warned about the wayward penis. "Pornography is breaking up marriages," said Dale, a bald-headed man who had worn a "Mountaineers" T-shirt. And a white-haired elder with a dignified bearing chimed in: "the church is ignoring the problem that our young men have with pornography." This provoked a chorus of affirmations. "We all need a brother to talk to," repeated Rob. "I know that pornography made me ashamed, and I did not want to reach out. We need to be able to share these struggles with our brothers."

A different sort of narrative broke in, semi-comically. Terry's beeper kept going off, warning about his low blood sugar. Cagle's wife called two elders there: was he responding to this warning? They did an intervention. Terry gave one of them the keys to his red Toyota, to fetch a Dr. Pepper, or sweet tea. Terry slurped on this, while discussing "lust in the heart."

Some examples the men provided seemed archaic—like Dallas Cowboys legend Roger Staubach bragging about his monogamous sexuality. Phyllis George had asked how he felt compared to Joe

Namath, with "a different woman on his arm every time we see him?"

"I'm sure I'm just as sexually active as Joe. The difference is that all of mine is with one woman." Men's reactions seemed like another form of virtue signaling: "Roger hit the end zone with that comeback. Real men don't commit adultery. A real man sticks with one woman."¹⁷

Some "heretical" questions kept popping in my head. We are not genetically wired for monogamy, some argue. I wondered: why was David, a murderer and adulterer, an ex-mercenary for the Philistines—beloved by the Lord? I am all for commitment and the horizon of life-long partnership. But why was Jesus so lenient to the promiscuous women who crowded around him?

Discussion returned to anger. Dale, the bald "Mountaineer," wanted to explore the notion of justifiable righteous anger. "Is Jesus the only one who gets to turn over tables?" he asked.

"How did his righteous anger turn out?" I asked.

There was a brief pause. "They killed him," said Dale softly.

Boom. In summer 2024, I had picked up a strategically abandoned New Testament at ACU. Struck by the anger of Jesus in Luke, I began thinking about a counter-narrative: "The Anger of the Prince of Peace." That would surely be a fit topic for "Upside-Down Living."

Week Three (Oct. 20, 2025)—Divorce And Oath-Breaking

Believers might want scriptures like the Sermon on the Mount to be untouched by local, cultural, or temporal dynamics. But in human affairs context is everything. Take the situational ethics some men in my study group applied to Matt. 5:33—"Do not break your oath."

All morals are somewhat situational, experience had taught these men. "When my wife was dying, she made me promise something," Rob recalled, his face still clouded. "I won't get into specifics—some of you know about this. But after she passed, I talked with

¹⁶ "Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath" (Psalms 37:8); "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1); "Be not quick in your spirit to become angry, for anger lodges in the heart of fools" (Ecclesiastes 7:9).

¹⁷ "Real Men Don't Commit Adultery." *Preaching Today* (May 1997); <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/1997/may/4522.html>

family and friends. It became clear: keeping the promise would have been worse than breaking it.”

The men had faced such hard truths. How much “slack” do we give promises made under pressure—the exigencies of, say, torture, or the relative coercion applied by a dying loved one? Are our obligations to the dead equal to what we owe the living? Can an individual *see ahead*, sufficiently to understand the impact that fulfilling or breaking an oath would have on family, community, and congregation (or nation)?

At times Cagle adopted a curmudgeonly tone, perhaps partly performative. Other times he folded in references to popular culture, or literature. This time he quoted Margaret Atwood: “divorce is like an amputation: you survive, but there is less of you.”

Jesus rejected any reason for divorcing a wife “except for sexual immorality” (Matt. 5:31). Nowadays even conservative Bible readers pay attention to scriptural context. “In Jesus’ day, men held all the cards,” Cagle began. “When Pharisees wanted someone more ‘pleasing,’ they sought justification for their trade-in” (Matt. 19: 3-10). “They wanted divorce for any reason. Jesus’ reaction is rooted in how unjust divorce was to women in the ancient world. In Biblical culture, divorce marginalized women.” I found myself nodding along.

Jesus’ empathy for women went beyond Mediterranean or Hebrew norms. That empathy has roots. At the end of the Old Testament, we can read: “I hate divorce,” says the God of Israel. “And I hate it when men clothe themselves with justice” (Malachi 2:16).

“Proclamations against divorce have been weaponized,” Cagle observed. I remembered my father saying “God hates divorce” when my first marriage faltered. I experienced his claim to speak for God as weaponized. Comparing then and now, experience teaches that if divorce historically marginalized women, in contemporary courts divorce often marginalizes fathers.

Cagle mixed in church humor. A couple who wanted a divorce went to see their pastor. First, the pastor told them that they should follow the biblical model about love as “one flesh.”

“No, that’s impossible,” they said immediately.

“Well then, love your neighbor as yourself. Can you do that?”

“Nope.”

“Then your only other option is to love your enemies. Start there.”

I had an epiphany sparked by a Sermon on the Mount reversal. “Give to the one who asks you” we are told (Matt. 5:42). If someone asks for your coat; give them your shirt as well. If they ask you to go with them one mile, go the second mile. I married Janice in Jamaica in 2008. She initiated separation in 2023, saying she would file for divorce. Two years later, there were still no papers. Meanwhile she made it hard for me to see my daughter. *Running out the clock*. I saw Matt. 5:42 through new eyes: I should “give to the one who asks you” and go the extra mile.

I thought about the relevance for these men of my decision: I could not obey the rule against divorce, if I wanted to be a present father. At the end of the class, I raised my hand.

“I feel called to speak. ‘Weaponizing’ scriptures about divorce struck a chord. I just got word: I have to fly to Tucson Thursday for a court hearing about a divorce and custody process.”

I had everyone’s full attention. But I saw them gathering things, thinking ahead.

“As a teacher when students start gathering things right before class ends, I know I can’t tell them anything new.” Several men chuckled knowingly.

“In short, I’ve realized that I have to seek divorce in order to be a father. If I’m to have regular time with my daughter during her last two years of high school, I must pursue divorce.”

“You’ll be first on the agenda next week.”

The men circled around two members for prayer. First, a man whose wife divorced him after a car wreck left him disabled, almost mute. Then, *laid hands on* me. The heart of the prayer was a petition for a “miracle” so that I could give my daughter what she needs.

Away from the men’s group, I listened to podcasts from “former sinners” who were still able to speak the language of those still indulging in drugs, promiscuity, etc. In the “Girls Gone Bible” podcast, two glam white gals, ex-Hollywood actresses, now talked about walking the straight and narrow—reading scripture, yet intent on looking good while doing so.

Their “Go and Sin No More” episode (Oct. 24, 2025) focused on Jesus’ empathy for an accused adulteress. They saw the passage about Jesus writing silently in the sand as a way to avoid further

embarrassing a woman whose life was at risk because of sexual transgression.¹⁸

In “Deny Yourself Pleasure” (Jan. 17, 2025), they read Ecclesiastes Chapter Two on the “futility of pleasure.” Ariel and Angela followed an anti-body Pauline script which had helped drive me away from church in my youth. “The flesh is inherently sinful,” said Angela. Betraying the zeal of the recent convert, she professed that she wanted to “*nail my flesh to the cross.*”

What Christians were saying about recovery might resonate with the faith-adjacent: recovery was big business in American culture and politics.

Recovery

I sought to use local artefacts as much as possible. Ordering Starbucks in the ACU library, I would skim recent publications. One day I read a reference to “America’s rising recovery movement,” from the sleeve of *Fentanyl Nation* by Ryan Hampton.¹⁹

On the national stage, *recovery* is indeed fetishized, made into a cash cow. American recovery has religious roots. I read Leonard Allen, whose life-long *mission* was to build bridges between the Church of Christ and the Christian “mainland.” Moving between a historically fundamentalist home base, and the Christian mainland, he helped develop a sort of connecting land mass—a peninsula of sorts.

A book Leonard co-authored with Richard Hughes—*Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875*—shows the contemporary recovery movement as saturated with typically American beliefs which are rooted in religious movements. Our political modality is suffused by a millennialism which cannot be separated from religion. Religious scholars of millennialism mostly “have failed to recognize” that implicit in the rhetoric of newness, in its millennial form, “was the fundamental theme of recovery” (Hughes and Allen, *Illusions of Innocence*, p. 2). Here is their through-line: “*Recovery of primal norms has been a fundamental preoccupation of the American people.* This legacy survives . . . in a myriad of forms” (p. 3, my emphasis).

¹⁸ Camilla Klein. “[What Did Jesus Write in the Sand? Discover the Mystery Behind His Actions.](#)” *Christian Educators Academy* (1-27-25); Vincent. “What did Jesus write in the dirt in John 8:1-11? [Big Name Theologians](#) weigh in.” *Classic Theology* (3-16-22). “Go & Sin No More.” *Girls Gone Bible* (10-24-2025); https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_oFPG7xAYs.

¹⁹ “rising recovery movement.” Ryan Hampton. 2024. *Fentanyl Nation* (St. Martin’s) [sleeve].

Hughes and Leonard repeat three keywords for going back to primal norms: *recovery*, *reformation*, and *restoration*. The goal is recovery *of* the primal, not *from* a primitive state, they emphasize. The Church of Christ has roots in the Protestant reformation, but the C of C’s focus has always been to *restore the good works* of the early Christians, by recovering something of their scriptural purity. But as the “Sermon on the Mount” men’s group shows, there is no way to read the *end-times modality* of the early church, or the *new times* of the early Republic, without letting our experience shape how we read those would-be universalizing movements, and their sacred texts.

Week Four (Oct. 27, 2025)



Photo 2
Foot Washing

Back at Highland, the Men’s Group had been cancelled for a presentation by Soren Samuelson, a Swedish missionary whose work in Myanmar Highland supported. I took this photo of the elders washing the feet of Samuelson and his son Israel. Their presentation was a sort of “faith-adjacent practice,” though clearly faith-driven.

I had rehearsed comments about my *fatherhood over marriage* crucible. Now this church’s cultural

practices could be visualized, instead. This community of faith was focused on *restoration*, more than individual salvation, as in most Protestant churches.

Samuelson felt called to Myanmar from China. He listed Myanmar's [apocalyptic problems](#). Since a February 2021 coup, Myanmar has faced civil war, massive human rights violations, and economic collapse. Their scam centers have been in global news.²⁰ These crime syndicates used 100,000 quasi-slaves to run online scams. Victims from China, Southeast Asia, and Africa are offered high-paying jobs in sectors like digital marketing, customer support, or cryptocurrency trading. On arrival they are forced to labor under constant surveillance by armed guards.

In such circumstances, a focus on individual salvation is of little use. Samuelson created small cells in private houses, rather than a central house of worship. Using photos and video interviews, he described a dozen cells, including cells for fish thieves, for wife-beaters, and for mothers who had sexually trafficked their daughters because of family debts. This audio-visual presentation illustrated Highland's willingness to put their money where their mouth is.

At the end, an elder introduced the foot-washing ritual, saying "we don't do this often." Samuelson's devotion was inspiring. No "holier than thou" vibes; no talk about conversion, or an afterlife. Just a committed Christian being a servant to people living in apocalyptic conditions.

Foot washing "was a recognized act of welcome long before Israel entered Canaan."²¹ Imagine the historical context: "Travel in the ancient Near East was on unpaved roads shared by animals." Long walks in open sandals left the feet caked with dust, sweat, and animal feces.

The sense that strangers washing one's feet was degrading was experienced by ancient Mediterranean elites. Rabbinic rulings specified that washing a rabbi's feet was "too degrading" for disciples. So "*Jesus' action shattered convention*."²² It erased social distance and hierarchy.

In the photo, Terry Cagle stands at right, his hand on Samuelson's back. The missionary lifts his face, eyes closed in a state of apparent rapture. How might the non-faithful or faith-adjacent react to this scenario? It might strike them as cult-like, uncomfortable. On screen, they would cancel it. But as an outsider-insider, it struck me both as an exercise in radical humility, and a way to honor "suffering servants" who have gone far beyond the call of duty.

Primary instances of foot-washing in the New Testament involve women. There was a "sinful" woman (Luke 7:36–50) who heard that Jesus was dining with Simon the Pharisee, and crashed the party. She washed Jesus's feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, then poured on an alabaster jar of perfume. "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner," said the host.

In John 12: 1-8, Judas Iscariot complains: "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" Indeed, the ritual *shatters convention*. There is an eroticism involved—repressed in the Christian tradition, but male characters were aware of this. Why was a spiritual teacher, a prophet, letting a prostitute engage in such intimate acts with his bare feet?

Jesus' view that prostitutes would enter the kingdom of heaven more easily than religious leaders is still hard to assimilate, within a tradition that insists on the virginity of Jesus' mother. After the weeping prostitute comes a parable about levels of forgiveness. Those who have sinned most, feel most grateful. The Highland elders evoke some of this perspective while engaged in foot-washing with a missionary who had attended to sinners in Myanmar.

November 2, 2025—The Restoration of All Things

The prior section emphasized *restoration rather than salvation* at Highland. For my last Sunday visit, let us examine a "restoration of all things" ideal which is both utopian, and pragmatic. Here, Hughes introduced an overview of the next three years, "2029

²⁰ Rebecca Ratcliffe. 2025. "Revealed: the huge growth of Myanmar scam centres that may hold 100,000 trafficked people." *The Guardian* (Sept. 7).

²¹ "What is the significance of foot washing in biblical times?" *Bible Hub* (N.D.). https://biblehub.com/q/Foot_washing_s_biblical_significance_2.htm

²² Megidido and "shattered convention." Ibid; Amy Frykholm. 2020. "The strange, humbling ritual of foot washing." *The Christian Century* (March 25).

Vision.” This lesson bookended my sketch of a pragmatic ethic of service, rather a performative faith.

Hughes used two mini-parables from Matthew 13 to frame his vision of faith-as-service. Jesus preaches from a boat, seeking a safe distance from a massive throng on shore. Jesus “told them many things in parables.” The most famous is the *Parable of the Sower*, which inspired a speculative fiction by Octavia Butler. Jesus plays to the vanity of the disciples, saying that the masses could not understand “the secrets of the kingdom of heaven,” other than via parables. But the (notoriously dense) twelve can be given a higher knowledge—an explanation.

What Hughes chose to focus on were three verses that present a “from small things” view of the Kingdom of Heaven. In one, a tiny mustard seed becomes a tree so immense that “the birds come and perch in its branches.” Then there is this one-verse gem:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough” (Matt 13: 33). “It was all leavened,” Hughes said—a metaphor for how small beginnings of Highland could function. Now I saw from a new angle one of the church’s mission statements: “to partner with God in the restoration of all things.”

This was “potentially a Copernican revolution,” Hughes said. Protestants usually focused on saving the individual. Post-Copernicus, faith is a powerful yeast that can raise up humanity, beyond individual salvation: “It was never Jesus’ goal to whisk you off to heaven.”

Instead, the goal is *self-emptying service*: “Reclaiming and renewing of all creation, rather than destroying it.” Hughes shared this orienting horizon: “We are a church that seeks God’s horizon, and not our own. We invest in ministries that bear fruit that we will never see.”

The *big fish* was deeper than the performative, as in “how many people got wet each year” (baptisms). Returning to the mustard seed vision of communal life, he told congregants: “you can live in our branches, raise your family. This is a place where you can thrive.”

This is one version of what a faith-adjacent pragmatics of faith might look like.

Post-Script (May 2026)

At a November Temporary Orders hearing in Tucson, I was granted joint custody of my daughter. This cantankerous judge listened intently when I read a statement about what I, as her father, could provide as Safiya approached adulthood—including spiritual values.

In April 2026, divorce and shared custody were finalized. “The restoration of some things” for this father. In a social world full of contempt for men, Safiya has a chance to observe how good men operate. And I learn by seeing the world through her eyes.

This is not the “old time religion” in which my parents raised me. I questioned my father, and now my children question me. The greatest gift I can give them is *to listen. Saber dialogar*.²³ This is what it means to me, to have recovered from the moral hectoring of the Pharisees.

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²³ While in Mexico with my children, two young Mexicanas said “*saber dialogar*” was their “special gift.” Gregory Stephens. 2020. “[Going South](#).” *Barely South*.