



JONATHAN WILSON-HARTGROVE

REVOLUTION OF VALUES

**RECLAIMING PUBLIC FAITH
FOR THE COMMON GOOD**



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CHAPTER ONE

WADE IN THE WATER



In the West Texas borderlands of the Rio Grande Valley, El Paso, is one side of a city that straddles two nations, a river running through it. Annexed by the United States as a part of the Republic of Texas in 1845, El Paso was officially separated from Juárez, Mexico, in 1848, though the border remained fluid well into the mid-twentieth century. It is a river after all. During the Kennedy administration, in an effort to establish a dividing line more precise than the water's ebb and flow, the US government constructed large concrete embankments on each side of the Rio Grande between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, creating a manmade canyon that is spanned by three footbridges that connect the people of El Paso/Juárez to this day.

María lives and works on the El Paso side. A grandmother whose dark black hair is streaked with natural silver highlights, she has spent her adult life watching the distance grow between her and her family in Juárez, across the concrete canyon. Since 2002, she has not been able to visit with her children and grandchildren who live just across the border.

During a regular check-in with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) in 2016, María's husband was deported without notice, released on the Juárez side of the now heavily militarized border. Though able to reunite with family he had not seen in years, he is now separated from María. Their family, like the living waters of the Rio Grande, does not fit within the boundaries imposed upon them.

I met María on a Sunday morning in the fall of 2017, when the Border Network for Human Rights (BNHR), an advocacy group organized by dozens of women like María, invited a delegation of preachers to join them for a family reunion they called "Hugs Not Walls." After Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign popularized the idea of a wall between the United States and Mexico as a symbol of his proposed America First policy, Pope Francis exhorted the faithful around the world to "build bridges, not walls." But anything as permanent as a bridge would require permits that María and her colleagues with the BNHR cannot get. Still, they are not powerless. Where a bridge is impossible, a hug might still happen.

But hugs cannot happen without the help of Border Patrol. Before we can get to the concrete canyon from the El Paso side of the border, we have to travel through a no-man's land behind chainlink fences, under constant video-camera surveillance. Our escorts on this journey are community relations officers from the US Border Patrol. Some years ago, after the *El Paso Times* published an exposé on illegal home invasions and human rights abuses that had been chronicled by the BNHR, local Border Patrol officials asked BNHR for a meeting. "We learned that we have to turn our needs into

rights,” one of María’s colleagues told me. By honestly confronting the Border Patrol on its violations of the Fourth Amendment’s prohibition against “illegal searches and seizures,” BNHR began a sustained conversation about how Border Patrol can do its job while also respecting the dignity of the people they encounter.

Thus, some years later, while living apart from her family under an administration committed to extreme immigration enforcement, María is willing to get in a van with Border Patrol agents and lead our small delegation to the northern rim of El Paso’s concrete canyon. Descending by foot on ramps built into the cement embankment, we reach the water’s edge, where a makeshift set of iron stairs offers an entry point into the Rio Grande. Twenty yards across, on the river’s Mexican shore, María can see her husband, two sons, and son-in-law climbing backwards down another set of stairs. As she waves to them and smiles, I notice a quiver in her cheek. It is the first time they’ve all been this close to one another in sixteen years.

Families that are separated long to be together. The people of Border Patrol understand this as well as María does. They insist that their job is only to enforce the law, not to keep families apart. In the ongoing conversation between Border Patrol and the BNHR, someone asked an important question: In all the apparatus that has been built around the river over the past half a century, where precisely is the border? The official answer: in the middle of the Rio Grande.

Looking out across the river, I notice a small island—a sandbar, really—halfway between our set of stairs and the small gathering of people on the other side. This is our

destination—a place in the middle where we can straddle two nations. As we step down into the brown water, we hold hands and join our voices to sing,

*Wade in the water,
Wade in the water, children.
Wade in the water,
God's gonna trouble the water.*

The river isn't very deep here, but the surface beneath is unpredictable, swallowing our legs in mud as we search for a foothold with each step. With an absence of any clear path forward, we find our way together, pausing for anyone who loses their balance or needs a moment to catch up. By the time we climb onto the sandbar, María's husband is already there to pull her into his arms. As they embrace, their sons quickly form a circle around them. I watch tears stream down their cheeks and fall to the water that swirls around our ankles. They only have five minutes—ten, if we can stretch it—for this family reunion; then we'll each have to return to the side of the river we came from. We haven't built a bridge, just a tenuous way toward this temporary embrace.

"Hugs Not Walls," the BNHR calls it. For me, it is a second baptism.

MORAL CRISIS IN OUR PUBLIC LIFE

Capitalizing on decades of Republican outreach to conservative Christian communities, Donald Trump won an unprecedented majority of white evangelicals' votes in the 2016 presidential election while at the same time alienating the vast majority

of black and brown people—and consistently receiving the disapproval of a majority of Americans. Embracing Steve Bannon, an avowed nationalist, as his chief counselor, President Trump appealed to the fear and anxiety of aggrieved white Americans, promising to “Make America Great Again.” When his administration acted in its first year to implement his America First policy by imposing a travel ban on several majority Muslim countries, enacting extreme immigration enforcement, rolling back civil rights protections for the LGBTQ community, publicly attacking NFL players who protested police brutality, and disregarding US allies in foreign affairs, both fans and detractors saw Trump’s rejection of norms as confirmation of their views. To crowds who had chanted “build that wall” at campaign rallies, Trump was keeping his promises. To the resistance that emerged in airport terminals and on the streets, Trump’s administration was a cruel Frankenstein, called to life by his extreme campaign rhetoric wreaking havoc in public life.

Among many white Christians, I noted a quiet anxiety. All my adult life, I’ve shared the message of Jesus with one foot in the white evangelical world that raised me and the other in the black Baptist church I now call home. I know the tensions within these different yet often overlapping church cultures. But something was different now. I was straddling a border that had become more rigid, feeling in my gut something of what María must feel, watching her family torn in two by powers beyond her control.

Black sisters and brothers in the church were aghast. How could white people who call themselves Christian endorse

outright bigotry? President Trump defended Nazis after Heather Heyer was run over by a white nationalist in Charlottesville, saying there were “very fine people on both sides.” At a rally in Alabama, he called black NFL players who knelt during the national anthem to protest the killing of unarmed black people “sons of bitches.”

Many white Christians I talked to cringed. They told me they felt torn and confused. Despite a faithful track record in the United Methodist Church, Hillary Clinton had been consistently demonized by conservative religious media outlets for three decades. Though people who considered “family values” a central issue in public life had been uncomfortable with a thrice-married reality TV star who publicly flaunted his promiscuity, many said they just couldn’t have voted for Clinton. In their moral imagination, she symbolized a liberal establishment that could never be trusted. “I had to hold my nose, but I voted for him,” one Presbyterian elder told me. “We’ll see. Maybe God can do something new through an unconventional president.”

However compromised their reasoning, white Christians I talked to were anxious, even cautious. They asked for prayers that America would “make it through this difficult time” and lamented growing partisanship. I spent much of the first year of Trump’s presidency both asking white Christians to rethink what they thought they knew, and praying with black folks who had no doubt that God opposed the nonsense we were all watching play out before us. In my preaching and teaching, I asked white Christians to lean into their uncertainties and listen to people whose experiences

taught them to question when, precisely, America had ever been great for them.

Meanwhile, the coalition of religious nationalists who'd rallied to support Trump's campaign offered a contrasting clarity of purpose. "When I think of you, President-elect Trump," the Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress preached on the morning of Trump's inauguration, "I am reminded of another great leader God chose thousands of years ago in Israel." Jeffress recalled how God called Nehemiah to rebuild Jerusalem's broken city walls after the exiles returned from Babylonian captivity, before declaring with triumphal delight: "You see, God is NOT against building walls!"

On the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and Fox News, Jeffress regularly joined Christian media mogul Pat Robertson, Pentecostal prosperity preacher Paula White, Jerry Falwell Jr. of Liberty University, and Franklin Graham, the son of evangelist Billy Graham, to defend Trump against his critics. After leading "nonpartisan" prayer rallies at all fifty state capitols during the 2016 campaign, Graham declared President Trump an answer to prayer and offered general amnesty for any past moral failings, regularly quoting verses on forgiveness. When Falwell invited President Trump to address the graduating class of 2017 at Liberty University, he called Trump evangelicals' "dream president."

Historian John Fea has dubbed this circle of Christian preachers who stood ready to defend Trump against all critics "court evangelicals," evoking the image of a king who ruled absolutely by divine right. At any rate, the loudest Christian voices in American public life were not exhorting the faithful

to dwell on their concerns about this president. They were using the Bible to defend him.

Observing the contrast between the spiritual struggle people were facing in their real lives as they grappled with the rupture of the Trump presidency and the manufactured certainty of these “court evangelicals,” I began to ask whether teachers in the church like myself had done enough to equip people for faithful citizenship. “God is not a Republican or a Democrat,” I’d often said in pulpits, challenging people to see through the either/or of a partisan imagination to a beloved community where God prepares a table before us, even in the presence of our political enemies. But María knew that political difference wasn’t just a difference of opinion. She and her family couldn’t sit down and enjoy God’s heavenly banquet with enemies who think the same God wants a wall to permanently separate them. To worship God, María had to reject the false teaching of enemies who were using the Bible against her.

I remembered a letter I’d come across while researching slaveholder religion in which the Reverend Robert Dabney, a Presbyterian minister in mid-nineteenth-century Virginia, explained to one of his colleagues why using the Bible to defend slavery was so important. “Here is our policy then: to push the Bible argument continually, drive abolitionism to the wall, and compel it to assume an anti-Christian position. By doing so we compel the whole Christianity of the North to array itself to our side.” I realized, whether they know it or not, this is what the court evangelicals are doing. Recognizing the moral force of the resistance to Trump, the court evangelicals were pushing the Bible argument continually. They

knew they would never change the minds of people in the streets who were protesting family separation and the subversion of democratic norms. But if they could frame that resistance as anti-Christian—if they could undermine the moral force of its argument—then they could, at the very least, persuade the hesitant and concerned Christians to stay out of their way. This was not new. It was the pattern of slaveholder religion playing out all over again.

THE DANGER OF FALSE TEACHING

The moral crisis of the Trump administration has revealed the danger of false teachers who misuse the Bible and twist its words to whitewash injustice. Since the mid-2000s, when George W. Bush was reelected by an overwhelming majority of white evangelicals, political strategists like Kevin Phillips have warned of an “American theocracy,” and good journalists like Michelle Goldberg, Chris Hedges, and Sarah Posner have chronicled the networks of corporately funded religious right programs and media networks that have used the Bible to simultaneously promote a “Christian worldview” and pro-corporate ideologies. Many have endeavored to expose the false teachers of extremism, but most teachers in the church have ignored them.

At the same time, polling and reporting for at least a decade have suggested that millennial evangelicals reject many of the political assumptions of the religious right. While small government and family values were considered sacred by our parents’ generation, many evangelicals under forty have experienced care for creation, justice for the poor, and radical

welcome of marginalized neighbors as central to their experience of Jesus. When I visited the studios of Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) outside of Nashville during the Obama years, it felt like a relic from the past. The gold spray paint was chipping off the angelic statues, exposing the cheap concrete underneath. I thought anyone could see that the emperor had no clothes.

But on the set of *The Apprentice*, Donald Trump had learned what the folks at TBN always knew—that people don't believe the emperor's lies because they are convincing or well-framed. We believe them—or go along with them, at least—because no one does what only the child in the fable was able to do: stand in the middle of the street and point out the obvious. Outside the mainstream in most of our faith traditions, religious nationalists seemed like fringe fanatics. To take them on, we reasoned, would only legitimize them. Meanwhile, powerful political and corporate interests were more than happy to take them seriously. They laid the foundation for the resurgence of Christian nationalism we all witnessed in the Trump administration.

For María, the lie of Christian nationalism is obvious. When I took her hand and followed her into the middle of the Rio Grande, I saw how America First and family values cannot coexist. But the experience was more than a political education. It was a challenge to reclaim the Bible from the religious right.

“Before the coming of this faith,” Paul says, “we were held in custody under the law, locked up” (Galatians 3:23). That bondage was visceral as I stood in the middle of the river with

a family divided by my nation's laws. My country's broken history and immigration system had separated this family, and Robert Jeffress's claim that God blesses walls was keeping them apart. Yet here was a mother who had learned to put faith into action—to link up with others and build a temporary bridge of bodies, where no permits were available, by turning needs into rights. Here was an embodiment of another way of reading the Bible.

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” Paul explained to the Galatians in his meditation on baptism, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:27, 28). To go down into the waters with Christ is to die to our old ways of seeing the world. To come out of the waters of baptism is to see the whole world anew. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ,” Paul writes elsewhere, “the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul, the religious terrorist turned apostle for Christ, knew better than most how Scripture can be used to prop up laws that condemn, separate people, and reinforce harmful ways of seeing the world. But after Jesus knocked him off his horse, stood in the middle of the road, and pointed out the obvious—“Why do you persecute me?”—Paul apprenticed himself to Ananias and the apostles and learned to read the Bible anew (Acts 9).

It's not enough to say that the court evangelicals and their religious media apparatus have hijacked the Bible. We must understand how these false teachers twist Scripture, what corporate interests have supported their work, and how

many in American public life have been willing to go along with their demonization of others as long as it didn't impact them. While this critical assessment of false teaching is part of the work a book aims to do, critical work alone is not enough. For anyone who wants to follow the way of Jesus, our essential task is to learn a better way of reading the Bible in public life. We who are uncomfortable with Christian nationalism cannot retreat to a private faith; if policy violence is being implemented in the name of Jesus, we have a particular obligation to show up, resist, and demonstrate a better way.

The good news is that people like María know how to read the Bible as a story of freedom for those who have been oppressed and as a vision for justice in public life. In the story of the God who raised Israel out of Egypt before raising Jesus from the dead, poor and marginalized people in America know the good news that both offers hope to people suffering injustice and equips us to stand up and fight in the power of the Spirit. It's not enough to read the scholars and journalists who can explain how the Bible was taken captive by corporate and political powers. We must also apprentice ourselves to sisters like María in order to learn how the Bible comes to life when we are baptized in the waters of resistance.

After María and I climbed out of the Rio Grande on that Sunday morning in the fall of 2017, I sat down on the concrete embankment, wiped the mud off my legs, and put the shoes back on that I'd removed before going down into the water. Then I climbed the embankment on the El Paso side, thinking about what it meant to carry María's story with me. I looked across the river to the Juárez side. There on the

mountain, in large white stones, someone had written, “La Biblia es la verdad. Léela.” (The Bible is the truth. Read it.)

People of faith must take up the Bible and read it again if we are to name the forces that hold its message captive and discover its power to give hope and vision despite that manipulation. Most of Scripture was written by and about imprisoned, exiled, and occupied people who knew their God was powerful, even if evil forces controlled the seats of power. An incredible amount of money has been invested to tame that subversive message. Even still, it speaks to us, offering a way out of no way for those who will receive it.

Half a century ago, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said we needed a “revolution of values” if we were to become the nation we have never yet been. King was able to name our moral crisis because he had learned the Bible’s revolutionary vision of a whole new world among the poor and disposed. If we are willing, we can join him and María and millions with them in the freedom church of the poor. But first we must rediscover the revolutionary movement that has outlasted every worldly regime.

Dr. King believed that a revolution of values would necessarily be led by America’s poor, coming together across dividing lines that have been used to pit us against one another. He based this belief on a reading of American history that understood how every stride toward a more perfect union in US history—from abolition to ending child labor to women’s suffrage to civil rights—happened because people who were impacted by injustice came together to challenge those in power. But King, the preacher, also based this vision on a

reading of the Bible. “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Psalm 118:22). For anyone ready to hear its good news, King taught the Bible’s vision of God working through the poor and rejected to introduce a whole new world. “God chose the lowly things of this world,” Paul wrote, “and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are” (1 Corinthians 1:28). Like all the prophets before him, King knew that a Poor People’s Campaign must not only tear down but also build up. Deconstruction is prelude to the work of reconstruction.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of this prophetic vision in American public life, twenty-five thousand people gathered on the National Mall in June of 2018 to recommit themselves to the Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. My family and I boarded a bus in Durham, North Carolina, at 3:00 a.m. that Saturday and arrived in Washington, DC, as the sun was rising, meeting dozens of other buses at a Metro station where black, white, and brown people were singing freedom songs on the platform, awaiting the next train. As we boarded the train, traveled to the Smithsonian station, and ascended the escalator to the National Mall, we joined a sea of people carrying signs that said, “Everybody Has a Right to Live” and “Healthcare Is a Moral Issue.” One after another, women and men like María, who’ve experienced the violence of immoral policies, testified about why America needs a revolution of values. In response to these cries, the Poor People’s Campaign was born again in the summer of 2018.

Co-led by the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II and the Reverend Dr. Liz Theoharis, this Poor People’s Campaign: A

National Call for Moral Revival is a network of state-based coalitions made up of thousands of member organizations, from the Border Network for Human Rights in Texas to labor unions, native tribal councils, environmental activists, civil rights organizations, service workers, healthcare advocates, formerly incarcerated activists, and homeless encampments in forty states. Rooted in local communities, we have pledged to build a movement that stands together for a moral economy in which everyone can thrive and a public life where our deepest moral and constitutional values guide policy decisions.

Standing among those thousands of founders of this new Poor People's Campaign on a hot summer day in DC, I thought about my second baptism in the Rio Grande. I knew there was room in this movement for everyone—even for me. But I also knew I had found my way into this movement for a revolution of values because people like María showed me the way. Whether black, white, or brown; documented or undocumented; Republican, Democrat, or unaffiliated, these too-often-neglected neighbors bear witness to why we need a revolution to save us from Christian nationalism's subversion of democracy. We have not simply failed to hear our neighbors' cry for justice. We have been taught to ignore them as a matter of religious duty.

Rather than argue against systemic justice issues, the religious right has driven the Bible argument continually to insist that the primary "moral" issues in America are abortion, gay marriage, and transgender rights. This is intentional. Just as racial identity was written into law during the birth of the plantation economy in order to prevent poor black and poor

white people from uniting in common cause against elite plantation owners, so also have political operatives used the pro-life/pro-choice debate and the politicization of sexuality to keep Americans from building broad coalitions that can challenge extreme inequality and injustice today. We need a revolution of values that makes clear how equal protection under the law and religious liberty are not incompatible but instead are essential to a shared common life where gay and straight, conservative and liberal neighbors can flourish.

Before we talk about “voting our values,” we must let people who’ve been systemically devalued by faith communities help us read the Bible again. Only then can we understand what the Bible really values. Only then can we reclaim the distorted public moral narrative that has turned faith against itself in American public life.

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