



engage

faith that matters

Nathan Brown

“It’s far too easy to separate our theology from our practice in daily living. Nathan Brown relentlessly brings us back to the realistic implication of our beliefs about Jesus and our commitment to Scripture. His honest treatment of the issues that come up in our wider world, our church, and our personal lives will both provoke and inspire.”

—*Dr Lisa Clark Diller, Professor of History, Southern Adventist University*

“It is a rarity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church to find a writer who blends a love for the gospel with a deep prophetic call to justice. Nathan Brown is one such writer. His prose is as elevating as it is challenging. All who read him will be asked to don a Christianity covered in the ‘street cred’ of love for the least of these. May his tribe increase!”—*Dwain Esmond, Associate Director, The Ellen G White Estate*

“True peace, positive peace or just peace is the thriving of life and community; it is justice, harmony, wellbeing and the flourishing of all life. This thick peace is at the heart of Nathan Brown’s collected essays, and more importantly, it is the heart of our Creator God. Brown calls us to consider what God’s love, compassion and justice look like when Jesus—the One who came preaching peace—directs us to engage rather than avoid this beautiful but hurting world.”—*Jeff Boyd, Director, Adventist Peace Fellowship*

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| n church conversations, we have often talked about being “*in* the world, but not *of* it.” But, too often, we have found ourselves “*of* the world, but

not *in* it.” Our priorities, choices and everyday lives sometimes seem indistinguishable from those around us, at the same time as some of our smaller lifestyle quirks, our fear of those who believe differently and our assumptions about “the world out there” tend to isolate us from our neighbours, our communities and our world.

In His final prayer while on earth, Jesus acknowledged the tension that His disciples would have with the world around them. They would be people who accepted the call to be primarily citizens of a different kind of kingdom. But Jesus was not praying that they be taken out of this world or isolated within it; rather—He was addressing His Father—“Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world” (John 17:18).

Given this divine commission, we as His disciples should be the most engaged in our world and our communities. By virtue of being human, we are *of* this world—it was good enough for the incarnated Jesus, it must be enough for us. With Him, we reclaim this world as the loved creation of God and our God-given home. In a sense, we do not belong to this world as it is (see John 17:14). But, in a larger sense, this world rightfully belongs to God and to His people—and it will be our eternal home—so we care deeply about it and its people.

And Jesus also sends us to be *in* this world. Like Jesus, we are called to care, called to serve, called to sacrifice. We are called to engage.

Faith that matters begins and ends with Jesus—and is focused on Him everywhere in between. But engaging with Jesus will always send us back to our time and place, to our communities and our world, just as He was sent. This collection of essays wrestles with aspects of this faithful process, particularly as it calls us to engage with issues that hurt those who are most marginalised and vulnerable in our world.

A risk of talking about “faith that matters” is that, by implication, it might be seen as critical of other aspects and emphases of faith that also matter. In a sense, perhaps it is. But primarily only to the extent that this world-engaged kind of faith has been neglected, downplayed or dismissed.

Except for three, these essays were first published by *Adventist World* as monthly online columns between 2013 and 2017. As such, they reflect something of my limited perspective on the world and the church during that time, as well as the denominational setting in which they were

published. As is the nature of such a collection, there are many gaps, some duplication and degrees of datedness, only some of which I have tried to smooth over in putting this volume together.

But I hope that together these essays sound a call to engage more deeply with Jesus and, in turn, with His sending us into the world to love, to listen, to serve and to speak. It is a call to be faithfully *of* and *in* this world, as disciples of Jesus.

Read, share, enjoy, disagree, think, do, engage . . .

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How the story begins

Our story always begins with Jesus. Before our first word, He is the Word: “In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Only in discovering Jesus do we truly discover the rest of the story—or the rest of our faith.

Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart puts it like this: “That ours is a fallen world is not, of course, a truth demonstrable to those who do not believe: it is not a first principle of faith, but rather something revealed to us only by what we know of Christ, in the light cast back from His saving action in history upon the whole of time.”¹ That God would intervene so dramatically and enter so fully into the suffering and injustice of human history raises profound questions. These include why this was necessary, what human beings were saved from and for, how this intervention and sacrifice “works”, and what is the larger narrative into which God’s acts in Jesus might fit, including questions of the origin of evil and its eventual end or resolution.

Our salvation story—or any other evangelistic endeavour—rings painfully hollow if it does not begin, end and find its centre in Jesus. Too often, we seem to have the idea that we must preach bad news before we share good news. We begin with fallenness—“You are a sinner . . . Repent!”—which either further condemns the person who already feels their brokenness or does not engage with the one who sees themselves as “doing OK.” Neither person benefits from our first-up attempts to illicit an acknowledgment of an individual guilt somehow inherited from something that happened a long time ago. Rather, both need to see Jesus, whose gracious and abounding mercy simultaneously lifts up the broken and breaks down the self-sufficient.

When we begin with the story of Jesus, we begin with something

historically, personally and intrinsically remarkable. His is a story that is attractive and engaging in itself, even without explanation or embellishment. He is a Person who will draw all people in some way, if and when He is lifted up (see John 12:32). And then, from this incredible true story, questions inevitably arise as to why Jesus did what He did and what it means for who we are and what we are “saved” from.

And, when we tell, share and live the story in this way, these same questions come back to us—as people who have known the story. We are reminded of our place in the story, the grace that has been offered to us, the big story of our world and our call to worship Him who creates, loves and redeems (see Revelation 14:6, 7).

This also has practical significance. In telling and living out the story in this way—always beginning with and centred in Jesus, always starting at the Cross—we never encounter sin, except that we have already encountered its forgiveness.² We never address brokenness—which we must—except that we have already known its redemption. We never confront death, except that we have already seen resurrection. We never experience pain, except that we have been offered its healing. We never face darkness, except that we have recognised the Light. We never work against injustice, except that we have already seen its exposure and overthrow. We never endure oppression, except that we have already seen our liberation. We never talk about disappointment, sorrow or tragedy, except that we have already been offered hope.

Our story always begins with Jesus. This does not mean that brokenness, fallenness, sin and death are not real. In the experience of Jesus, we see and acknowledge how horrifically real they are. They are not yet diminished—but they are now defeated. Which gets us back to Hart’s argument, that it is primarily the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice that illuminates our desperate fallenness, how Creation has gone wrong and how God is working to redeem, restore and re-create. As the “visible image of the invisible God,” it remains His creation and “He holds all creation together” (Colossians 1:15, 17). We are invited to be part of this story within this creation, so let’s ensure that our stories—those that we tell and those that we live—always begin with Him.

My favourite description of Jesus

Of the descriptions of Jesus found in the gospels and beyond, my favourite—out of so many profound, beautiful and challenging descriptions—is probably one of the least quoted, most skipped over of the Jesus pictures. It’s found in Matthew 12:17–21:

This fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah concerning him: “Look at my Servant, whom I have chosen. He is my Beloved, who pleases me. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not fight or shout or raise his voice in public. He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle. Finally he will cause justice to be victorious. And his name will be the hope of all the world.”

[Feel free to pause and read it again, slowly and meditatively. Let the words echo in your heart and mind. Have you spent much time with this description in the past? How does this description fit with the Jesus you know? Does it change any of your imaginings of Jesus and His ministry?]

If you checked it out in your Bible, you would likely have noticed the cross-reference to Isaiah 42:1–4 that Matthew was quoting to try to explain Jesus’ healing miracles—and the variations between these two quotes.

These verses are a significant point in the prophecies of Isaiah. We are more familiar with Isaiah’s description of the “suffering Servant” in Isaiah 53—for example, “He was despised and rejected . . .” (verse 3) and “He was led like a lamb to the slaughter” (verse 7)—and readily identify them as prophecies of the coming Messiah and His death for our salvation. But these few verses in Isaiah 42 are the first description of this “Servant” and explain the mission of this Saviour in much broader terms than in the

following chapters.

These verses are also significant in Matthew's gospel narrative. They accompany Matthew's first reference to the plotted death of Jesus (see Matthew 12:14), linking these words to the culmination of Jesus' ministry in His death and resurrection. This is an important turning point. A sense of foreboding begins to grow, at the same time as we are reminded of Jesus' ministry for justice and hope for all nations.

Yet, as important as the narrative placement of these verses is to their respective stories, it is the description itself that touches my heart and catches my imagination. In a world with so much injustice—both in Jesus' world and in our world today—to find this proclamation at the core of Jesus' mission reminds us of the present and the ultimate purposes of the kingdom Jesus came to inaugurate.

But this kingdom impulse for justice comes in unexpected ways. It comes with a gentle compassion that we can be tempted to think of as weakness. The mission of Jesus has a particular regard for the weakest and most vulnerable, gently tending the bruised reed and those who can only just maintain a smoulder. It is a kingdom of the "least of these," bringing good news for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, food for the hungry and healing for the broken (compare Luke 4:18, 19, also quoting from Isaiah).

Somehow, counter-intuitively, this preference for the least and the weakest has the power to change the world, to bring justice victorious to all the nations—something, we are told, Jesus would not stop until this mission is complete. These words might sound sentimental, pretentious or even fanciful, until we remember this is about Jesus. The resurrected Jesus. "This same Jesus . . ." (see Acts 1:11).

So this isn't only a poetic and beautiful description of Jesus. We are called to live with the transformative weakness of Jesus, with the gentleness of the Servant, with the compassion and justice of the One whose "name will be the hope of all the world." And in doing so, we play a part in the ongoing mission prophesied and identified by Isaiah and Matthew—and in again lifting up His name as that ultimate hope. Working for justice, seeking justice, doing justice, is a practical proclamation of Jesus, His mission and the hope we claim.

Luke's picture and Mary's song

A couple of years ago, I was privileged to spend an afternoon in one of the world's great art museums and stumbled across a temporary exhibition of religious art and iconography. Among the ideas and discoveries sparked that afternoon was the tradition in Christian history that the gospel writer Luke might also have been an artist, who could well have painted portraits of the characters in the gospel story. Like so many traditions, this idea grew out of proportion and, at the height of medieval Christianity, churches across the Christian world claimed hundreds of paintings credited to "St Luke."

Despite no evidence for this in the Bible itself, this possibility caught my imagination. Imagine if there were original paintings of Jesus, His disciples and other characters in the story. Imagine if "The Gospel According to Luke" was originally an illustrated biography.

Prompted by these imaginings, I recently re-read Luke's gospel story with an eye to his descriptions and portrayal of scenes, people and stories. And there are some powerful pictures, one of which particularly caught my attention in the context of our annual re-telling of the Christmas story.

At the beginning of this story of Jesus—a scene unique to Luke's history—two women met to compare notes on the strange things happening to them (see Luke 1:39–45). One, Elizabeth, had found herself pregnant at an age beyond the usual years of childbearing but with a promise that hers was to be a special child. But in welcoming her much-younger cousin, she also recognised something world-changing going on.

Sparked by this interaction, Mary broke into a song that for its poetry

could have readily fitted into the Book of Psalms and for its intent stands firmly in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. She acknowledged the blessing of God and the incredible nature of what was happening to them. And she recognised the goodness and power of God that was working to bring change to the world, announcing a new upside-down kind of kingdom that was about to be realised in our world: “He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He has sent away empty” (Luke 1:52–53).

It is a beautiful song of revolution (see Luke 1:46–55). Except that it is absurd.

Two peasant women—one old, tired, perennially disappointed and pregnant; the other an unmarried teenage girl, inexplicably and scandalously pregnant—in a small village in the hills of Judea singing about how their “miracle” boys were going to change the world, begin to undo all the injustices in the world, to challenge the empires and kings of the day, to begin to set the world right. On almost any reading of this story and its expected outcomes, it is ridiculous. That both their sons would lose their lives in the process underlines the farce.

Which is why it’s also a demonstration of faith and a challenge to our understanding of Jesus.

That their song is recorded, that we know their names today is remarkable enough. But that this actually was a step toward changing the world has been borne out in the history of our world since. That their song and this story continues to resonate and bring change in lives and in places of injustice today is something worth believing.

It’s quite a scene painted by Luke with words, with poetry, with storytelling. Imagine him painting it with colours and shades and shapes. Imagine him writing notes and making quick sketches as Mary might have described her memories of that day to him, perhaps some years after Jesus had returned to heaven. And imagine us as observers of this scene and even as participants, similarly awed and inspired by what God did in Jesus in our world.

We are heirs of this prophetic and faithful tradition, re-telling these stories, rehearsing these songs, re-enacting these scenes—and responding

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