“My Search for a Very Good Gospel” by Lisa Sharon Harper

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Epiphany

[Lisa Sharon Harper spoke without a text, but she has graciously offered the following blog post as a way of highlighting her major themes.]

More than ten years ago, I took a pilgrimage that changed my life.

At its conclusion, I found myself with one haunting question: If I were to share my understanding of the gospel to my ancestors who walked the Cherokee Trail of Tears (according to family oral tradition) and slaved in South Carolina and Virginia (according to Census Slave Schedules), would they receive my simple understanding of Jesus’ “good news” as good news? Would they jump for joy to find out “God has a wonderful plan for their lives, but they are sinful and therefore separated from God, but Jesus died for their sin, so if they pray a simple prayer they get to go to heaven?”

If this news would not lead my oppressed ancestors to shout with joy, then maybe it's not good news at all – or at least it's not good enough.

This sent me on a 13-year journey deep into the opening chapters of Genesis where the biblical concept of shalom is revealed. I explored its implications throughout scripture, in our lives, and in society and found something I had never heard before: Shalom is the very goodness of the gospel.

About five years ago, pastors and faith leaders began to approach me after speaking events. With desperation in their voices they would ask: "Where can I go to get all of what you said about shalom in one book?" I couldn't point them anywhere. I would have to give them a list. After one particular event when the pastors were frustrated, I realized: It's time to write it down.

Take this sneak peek at The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right and consider for yourself. How would you articulate the gospel to my ancestors?

(And check out these reflections on the book from Dr. Terry McGonigal (Whitworth University), Dr. Mimi Haddad (Christians for Biblical Equality), and Jimmy McGee (The Impact Movement). They share how they can imagine using this new resource to thicken the faith of everyday people to make a better world.)

> *There must be more to the gospel, I thought.*
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> *The gospel. Those words are weighed down with images of Bible-thumping television preachers, white robes, tambourines, street evangelists damning passersby to hell, and lace-collared door-knockers intent on spreading what they call the gospel. The Greek word translated as "gospel" in the Bible is euangelion, meaning "good message." Today we commonly translate it as "good news."*
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> *When we think of good news, we usually think about something*

that excites folks. News that makes people want to celebrate. I think of a Facebook post from a good friend who announced that she just got a job. Or the good news that a grant was approved. Or the good news that a nephew was accepted to all three of his top-pick colleges. Woo-hoo! It makes us want to shout, to celebrate. Someone pop the bubbly and turn up the music!

Christians are taught to think of the good news of Jesus Christ in this way:

God loves us, but we're sinful. As a result, we're separated from God. Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins. All we have to do is believe that his death was enough and we get to go to heaven.

That's some good news. Seriously, who wants to languish in hell forever?

But on this particular day, as I walked away from the King Center in Atlanta, one thought haunted me: The good news of my gospel doesn't feel good enough.

It was the last stop on a pilgrimage taken by select staff from a national college ministry. At the time, I served as the ministry's director of racial reconciliation in Greater Los Angeles. Over four weeks, the pilgrimage took this diverse group of twenty-five key staff leaders and family members through ten states. We investigated two of the most brutal realities of US history: the Cherokee Trail of Tears and the experiences of Africans on American soil, from antebellum slavery to the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

I had been to the King Center just a few months before, so when we arrived on the last day of the pilgrimage, I planned to just mill around while the other group members got their fill. I wandered into the main hall. It all looked like it had when I'd seen it previously until I caught a glimpse of something unfamiliar. Paintings lined the walls. Between each

painting a dollar bill was mounted. I was intrigued, so I moved closer. Here was a painting of enslaved people, and in the art they were happy.

What?

I found a plaque on the wall that offered instructions for how to move through the exhibit. It asked the viewer to examine the painting, then try to find that same picture on the dollar bill displayed next to it. I looked closely at the next painting. It was a different scene showing a different enslaved person. This man was carrying a beautiful basket full of cotton, and he was happy. And he had shoes. How strange. Most slaves didn't have shoes.

I could hear the line from an old spiritual born from the misery of plantation life. It declares, "All o' God's chillun got shoes."

For an enslaved person, the differences between being a slave and being a white person were obvious. Whites had freedom of movement and thought, a declaration of their independence, and a Constitution that affirmed their equality. And in addition to all of that, white folk had shoes. Owning shoes represented human dignity. The saying "All o' God's chillun got shoes" seemed harmless to outsiders, but it was a statement of resistance. Having shoes served as a reminder to each member of the enslaved community that you are a child of God. Though the slave master and society do not recognize it, you were born with human dignity. There is a place in God's Kingdom where you have shoes!

So this painting of a happy slave carrying a beautiful basket of cotton while wearing neatly tied shoes struck me as odd. I followed the instructions of the exhibit and found the painting represented on the dollar bill mounted next to it. I moved to the next painting and viewed a scene of an idyllic countryside bursting with cotton. A straight-backed slave

family – mother, father, and two children – picked cotton together. They were fully garbed with aprons to protect their clothing, and they all wore shoes.

I examined the dollar bill next to this painting. There was the same happy slave family in the lower-right corner of a ten-dollar note from Charleston, South Carolina. I searched for more information about the exhibit and found a plaque reading "Confederate Currency: The Color of Money."

Dozens of these paintings lined the walls, and displayed between the paintings was actual currency used by the Confederacy. The Confederate States of America put pictures of happy, fully clothed slaves wearing shoes on their money because they knew that the currency traveled around the world. It was southern propaganda in the era before television, tweets, and Facebook.

The King Center also displayed copies of the secession ordinances. The state of Mississippi spelled out its reasons for seceding from the Union: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery – the greatest material interest of the world. . . . A blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization." This helps explain why member states of the Confederacy put slaves on the money they printed. For them, enslaved people equaled money. To lose the people was to lose money – too much to still be able to maintain their way of life.

As I stared at the secession ordinances, I remembered our first stop on the pilgrimage: Dahlonega, Georgia, the site of the first American gold rush. It was Cherokee land and had been for nearly thirteen thousand years. The Cherokee Nation signed a dozen treaties with the United States between 1795 and 1819 in attempts to protect the land and the people. The 1820s were a time of great promise for the Cherokee Nation.In that decade the Nation developed its own written syllabary, drafted its own constitution, and established its capital

city: New Echota, in Georgia.

But in 1828, a little Cherokee boy found gold. The same year, Georgia began passing laws stripping the Cherokees of their lands and rights. Within years, miners moved in and – without permission – set up camps on Cherokee territory. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, which gave him power to negotiate removal treaties with tribes living east of the Mississippi River. At the same time, the state of Georgia divided the Cherokee Nation's land into lots for the miners.

In 1831, the Nation asked the US Supreme Court to grant an injunction against Georgia's punitive laws. The court ruled that it lacked the proper jurisdiction to take the case. A group of missionaries, including Samuel Austin Worcester, later exercised civil disobedience by refusing to obtain a state license to occupy Cherokee lands. In essence, they thumbed their nose at the state's right to rule over Cherokee land. The missionaries were jailed. Cherokee Chief John Ross took their case to the US Supreme Court and won. In Worcester v. Georgia, the court ruled that the Cherokee Nation was a sovereign nation. As such, the state of Georgia did not have the right to impose regulations on the Nation; only the federal government had that authority.

Still, by the end of 1838 and in defiance of the US Supreme Court, President Jackson's coerced treaties had resulted in the removal of nearly forty-six thousand Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole men, women, and children. The illegal deportation cleared twenty-five million acres of land for white settlement, mining, and ultimately slavery. The US Branch Mint at Dahlonega opened for business and produced its first gold coins the same year.

As I reflected on Dahlonega while standing in front of the Confederate currency exhibit in the King Center, a thought hit me. This is the Bible Belt. These things happened at the

hands of people who claimed to believe in Jesus and the power of the Cross for salvation. How could they believe the gospel and do this?1