

NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2016

NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

SIX
*self-inflicting
wounds
of American
evangelicals*

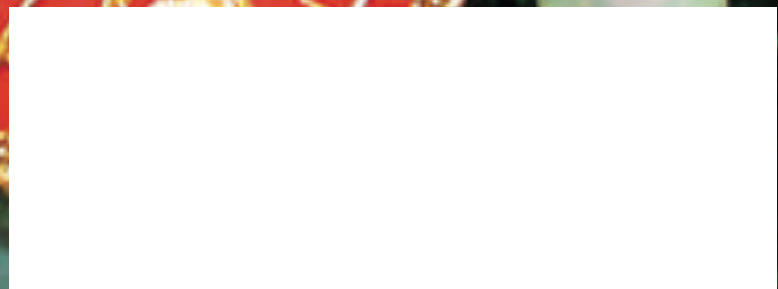
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Bionic Blessing

*Modern miracle
restores sight,
reveals faith*

WIDER DOORS

*Path to fuller inclusion
of LGBT Christians
challenges
church leaders*



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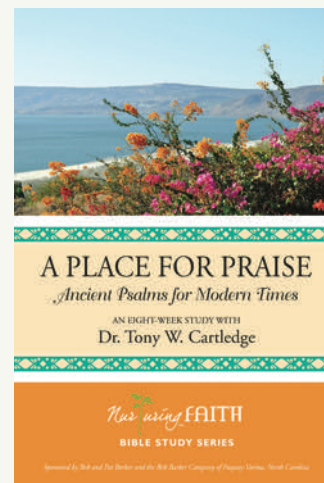
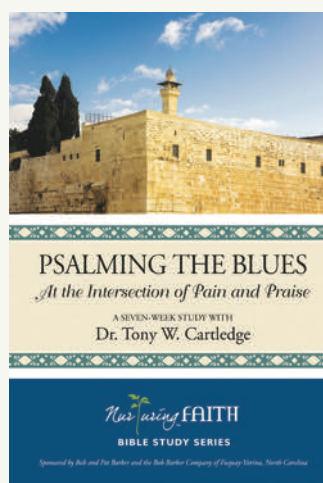
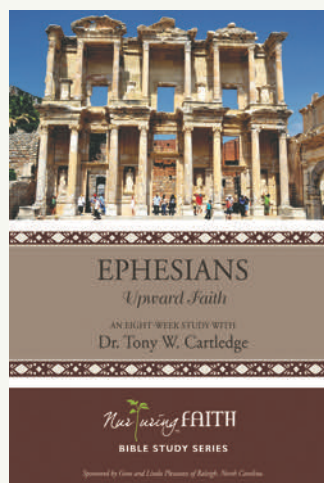
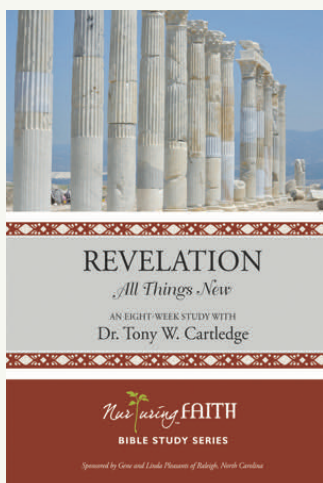


Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly, yet applicable, and conveniently placed in the center of this journal. Simply provide a copy of the journal to each class participant, and take advantage of the abundant online teaching materials at nurturingfaith.net. These include video overviews for teacher preparation or to be shown in class.

See page 21 for more information.

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THE MISSION of *Nurturing Faith Journal* is to provide relevant and trusted information, thoughtful analysis and inspiring features, rooted in the historic Baptist tradition of freedom of conscience, for reflective Christians seeking to live out a mature faith in a fast-changing culture.

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EXHAUSTED BUT EXHILARATED

By John D. Pierce
 Mercer professor gives heart, miles and years to serving Liberian church leaders

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COVER PHOTO by John Pierce. 'Tis the season when congregations prepare for the new church year and the celebrations of Advent and Christmas.

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NEW LIGHT. After turning on his new “bionic eye,” Larry Hester navigates the hallway at Duke Eye Center with his surgeon Dr. Paul Hahn in 2014. Hester was the seventh person in the U.S. to receive the visual-aid device known as the Argus II Retinal Prosthesis System. Photo by Shawn Rocco used with permission from Duke Health.

BIONIC BLESSING

Modern miracle restores sight, reveals faith

BY CAROL BOSEMAN TAYLOR

“I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them.” (Isa. 42:16)

RALEIGH, N.C. — Larry Hester attended Chowan College in Murfreesboro, N.C., where he was a football hero. There he captured the heart of Jerry Morris, a Baptist preacher’s daughter, and convinced her to become his wife.

Their story is a one of deep love and

faith, which has carried them through many challenging situations together.

THE CHALLENGE

My husband Chuck and I met Larry and Jerry Hester at Raleigh’s Forest Hills Baptist Church in 1983. The four of us, plus two other couples, formed a prayer group to pray for our church. During these holy times we also prayed for each other and for our families.

At one prayer gathering Larry and Jerry revealed some devastating news: he had been diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a genetic condition that could

lead to blindness. Larry was just 33 years old at the time.

For some, such news might lead to depression or to blaming God for being unfair or unkind. However, while Larry and Jerry were shocked at the news, their faith gave them the courage to face this challenge with love and compassion.

Our prayer group was there for them every step of the way — praying constantly through the years, as did many others who knew Larry and Jerry and their family. Larry’s condition deteriorated rapidly, and he quickly became totally blind.

Larry and his brother Reece owned a tire company. One might imagine that Larry would be unable to continue to work.

However, Larry memorized the office

area and the shop, and when customers came in to have a tire repaired it was likely they would not know he was blind unless someone else told them.

He carried on with his life, never complaining, always positive, with a smile on his face and always with a deep sense of faith and a love of his God. But still his wife and friends and family prayed for a miracle.

NEW VISION

Jerry read about a new procedure that was gaining approval from the FDA in early 2013 — called the Argus II Retinal Prosthesis System. She immediately began to inquire about this new device, and we prayed that Larry might be able to benefit from it.

Jerry's persistence paid off and at age 66, having been blind for half his life, Larry Hester became the seventh person in the U.S. to receive the bionic eye — designed by Second Sight Medical Products. Dr. Paul Hahn, then a retinal surgeon at Duke Eye Center in Durham, N.C., implanted the miraculous device.

A simple Google search of Larry's name and "bionic eye" leads to a Duke Medicine video of the moment when the device was activated and Larry could "see" again.

While it is truly a miracle, his sight is limited to distinguishing between light and dark. To Larry and Jerry, however, this has been life-changing.

He can see window and door openings. And more exciting, he can distinguish the shapes of his children and grandchildren.

TECHNOLOGY

In the *Duke Chronicle*, Dr. Hahn explained that the technology involves a special pair of glasses with a video camera right in the middle and a small, connected computer, worn on the belt or placed in a purse. The computer processes the video camera, which sends the signal back to the glasses. That is the external part of the device.

Once the signal gets back up to the glasses it communicates wirelessly to the part of the device that is surgically implanted: basically an antenna — called a coil — that goes around the eye to a microchip implanted on the surface of the retina.

The microchip stimulates the part of the retina undamaged by RP.

"The first thing I tell patients is that with the technology you're not going to be able to drive; you're not going to be able to read; you're not even going to be able to recognize faces," said Dr. Hahn in the *Chronicle*. "What this technology does give you is flashes of light that sort of correspond to things that are going on around you."

In the article he explained the 60-pixel implant in more detail, and then offered this hopeful bottom line: "The amount of information you can get is a little bit crude, but when you compare it to not having any vision, it's actually quite profound."

Patients, he said, are able to follow the straight lines of curbs and crosswalks and see persons who pass in front of them. They navigate their own surroundings much better.

"They can identify things like their toothbrush or even their place settings," he added.

CELEBRATIONS

One Christmas, Larry and Jerry visited their daughter's family for an evening. Their son-in-law asked them to not pull into the driveway. They were puzzled by that request, but parked on the street.

As they walked toward the garage, Jerry could see that white Christmas lights had been placed around the rim of a basketball goal.

When handed a basketball by his son-in-law, Larry proceeded to make seven straight goals. What joy! What a miracle was celebrated!

With his humble demeanor and Christian witness, Larry has traveled widely as an ambassador for the Argus II Retinal Prosthesis Device — often called simply his bionic eye — and for the faith that has sustained him. He has had much more than 15 minutes of fame allowing for his faithful witness.

Larry has rung the closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange and, with Jerry, appeared on the big screen in Times Square. They have been interviewed on ABC News and by other broadcasters worldwide.

Through it all, Larry's faith — which has been strong through the deep valleys and mountain highs — shines. Larry Hester is the Bionic Baptist! **NFJ**

—Carol Boseman Taylor is a member of Lakeside Baptist Church in Rocky Mount, N.C., and the author of *I Promise. Rejoice! A Daily Life Guide (2015, Nurturing Faith)*. She serves on the Board of Directors of *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith*.



Larry Hester and his wife Jerry celebrate the results from the new bionic eye device implanted at Duke Eye Center in October 2014. Hester became blind at age 33 from retinitis pigmentosa. While the device does not restore vision in the normal sense, it provides light-and-darkness differentiation. Photo by Shawn Rocco used with permission from Duke Health.

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Worth Repeating

“The lips that touch Welch’s are all that touch mine.”

—Early advertisement for Welch’s Grape Juice, created as a non-alcohol substitute for communion wine by dentist and United Methodist Thomas B. Welch, that gained popularity in churches during the temperance movement (United Methodist Communications)

“In the U.S. the issue is not access. The challenge is, what is the popular perspective of the scriptures?”

—Geof Morin, senior vice president for ministry mobilization of the 200-year-old American Bible Society, on efforts to counter growing negative perceptions of the Bible in the U.S. (RNS)

“Our members, Baylor students and faculty, and others all donate and help with this.”

—Curt Kruschwitz, associate pastor for college and community missions, on First Baptist Church of Waco’s ministry that loans furniture to graduate students (*Waco Tribune*)

“This is not a joke.”

—*Gridiron Now* reporting that Presbyterian College in Clinton, S.C., offers a fall semester, elective course on “The Religion of SEC Football”

“Yellow is neutral and is the color of the sun. It reflects on everyone.”

—Sheikh Yusuf Nasur Abuhamza, imam at Jeddah Mosque Kambi in Nairobi, Kenya, on joining with Holy Trinity Anglican Church to paint each other’s places of worship a bright yellow to symbolize the love they share (RNS)

“The pastoral vocation is to help people grow spiritually, resist their lowest impulses and adopt higher, more compassionate ways. But churchgoers increasingly want pastors to soothe and entertain them.”

—G. Jeffrey MacDonald, United Church of Christ minister and author (*New York Times*)

“She bowed down before those who were spent, left to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity. She made her voice heard before the powers of this world, so that they might recognize their guilt for the crime of poverty they created.”

—Pope Francis, during his homily that was part of the canonization Mass for Mother Teresa (CNN)

“Do we really want to strip Muslim women of their religious rights by making them remove their clothes on the beaches of France? Having walked the beaches in the south of France, I can assure you, a few women in burkinis are not what is distracting so many.”

—Ed Stetzer of Wheaton College raising religious liberty concerns about France’s forbidding of Muslim full-bodied swimwear (RNS)

“[M]any people view religious services as optional in a way they might not have in the past.”

—Senior associate editor Emma Green, writing in *The Atlantic* about findings in a Pew Research study

Signs of the times: messages matter

By John D. Pierce

As times change, so do the signs. Before Eisenhower brought the interstate expressway system to the U.S., traffic crisscrossed the country on more-narrow highways with traffic lights and cozy motels.

Vying for business, these roadside motels would tout their offerings on lighted signs: “Phones in rooms,” “Heated pool,” “Air conditioning,” “Color TV.”

These, of course, were accompanied by the changeable neon message of “Vacancy” or “No vacancy.”

Driving through some quaint tourist towns recently I noticed that some remaining off-the-interstate motels now proclaim different offerings — since travelers bring their own phones and all televisions are in living color.

“Free WiFi” appeared on the signs more than anything else — with “Free breakfast” coming in second. Some offered “Cable TV,” or more specifically, “Free HBO.”

Likewise, many church signs have evolved — though some still offer “sayings” that range from creative and catchy to downright goofy. And it’s interesting to note if the church signage promotes or obscures its denominational affiliation and if and how the minister is identified.

Slow traffic is required to read all that some churches put on their signs. I used to pass an independent Baptist church with multiple descriptors: “Bible-believing, premillennial, missionary...”

As a later addition, someone had painted “KJV only” in red to clarify which Bible is believed. Cheers to the church for making their exclusive identity well known.

Worship-style buffets that cater to the varied tastes of congregants can take up some signage such as: “Traditional 8:30, Contemporary 9:45, Blended 11:00, Taizé 6:00.”



Some churches send conflicting though surely unintentionally revealing messages.

Tony Vincent, a minister in Upstate South Carolina, once told of passing a small mountain church one December when Christmas landed on Sunday.

Approaching the church, he read: “Keep Christ in Christmas.” Looking back, he noticed on the other side: “No services Christmas Day.”

When consulting with a growing congregation about its communications I joked about how welcomed I felt by the church’s sign that read: “County maintenance ends here.” Sometimes fresh eyes (and ears) can help churches to see (and hear) the messages they don’t intend to send.

That same church had a visitor’s card that asked guests to indicate their marital status — including a check box for “divorced.” The church’s intentions were good; it had an excellent divorce recovery ministry. I suggested to the members, however, that they remove the “divorce” category from the card and promote the ministry program in other ways.

Also, churches convey messages by how open they are to community groups

— farmers markets, community choirs, disaster relief stations, blood drives, etc. Seeing such signs about programs beyond the congregation’s own initiatives suggests a ministry of hospitality and engagement over isolation.

Traffic patterns impact communication. A bypass around a United Methodist church had rerouted the daily commute from the front to the back of the church facilities. I suggested to church leaders that they “turn around” their communications as well.

The “what” message, however, is more important than “how.” It is wise to ask: “What messages do ministers and members convey when not gathered together in this place?”

Not everything gets communicated on roadside signage or in printed materials. Messages are conveyed and reinforced by word and deed.

Some speak of using changing technology to convey the timeless message of the gospel. But does that message — based on our changing understandings of the gospel — not change as well?

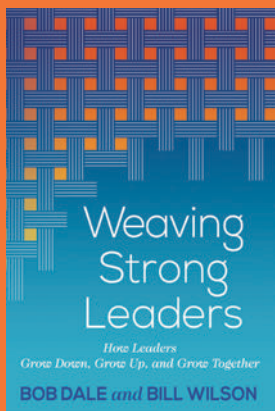
Jesus’ question to his first disciples — “Who do people say that I am?” (Mark 8:27) — is fitting for today’s disciples, too. And how much of that understanding of Jesus flows clearly from the messages we convey — intentionally and unintentionally?

Whether on a church sign or from the lips of the preacher, or from congregational engagement in the community or the daily words and deeds of individual members, messages really do matter.

An effective Christian witness is neither harsh condemnation and self-righteous exclusion nor an unrecognizable gospel as watered down as the orange juice dispensed at a motel’s complimentary breakfast buffet.

NFJ





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“Growing our beliefs and cultivating our maturity are two of life’s unending processes.”

“My single disappointment with this book is that it wasn’t written 30 years ago... Bob Dale and Bill Wilson have issued a life preserver. Reading this book was for me a profoundly spiritual experience.”

*—Julie Pennington-Russell,
Pastor, First Baptist Church of the
City of Washington, D.C.*

“Rather than a ‘how-to’ book on practices, this is a ‘who-we-are’ book on the practitioners of leadership.”

*—Craig Sherouse,
Pastor, Second Baptist Church,
Richmond, Va.*

“There is something here for everyone, and at every stage of ministry.”

*—George Mason,
Pastor, Wilshire Baptist Church,
Dallas, Texas*

“I recommend this book as a tool to assess one’s progress as a leader and as an index of spiritual health.”

*—Molly T. Marshall,
President, Central Seminary*

Weaving Strong Leaders

*How Leaders
Grow Down, Grow Up, and Grow Together*

BY BOB DALE AND BILL WILSON



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BOARD LEADERSHIP

Directors tapped, recognized by independent publishing ministry

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — The Board of Directors of Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today, Inc. elected Jack Glasgow of Zebulon, N.C., as its new chair. He is the longtime pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church and a former national



moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Cathy Turner, a lay leader in the First Baptist Church of Clemson, S.C., was re-elected as vice chair. Edwin Boland, a lay leader in Johns Creek Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta, will serve another term as chair of the budget/finance committee.

Following “best practices” for non-profit organizations, directors of the independent Board of Directors

serve three-year terms, with one renewal option, and officers serve one-year renewal terms.

Don Brewer, lay leader in First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., was honored for three terms of excellent service as chair of the board. He will continue serving as a director.

Recognized for their service were directors whose terms ended following the September board meeting in historic Williamsburg: Janie Brown, Jack Causey, Toni Clevenger, Kathy Richardson, David Turner and Donna Wood.

Newly-elected directors are Bill McConnell of Knoxville, Tenn., Ron Perritt of Baton Rouge, La., Charles Schaible of Macon, Ga., Carol Boseman Taylor of Rocky Mount, N.C., Jim Thomason of Anderson, S.C., Monica Vaughan of Greensboro, N.C., and Laurie Weatherford of Winter Park, Fla. **NFJ**

Bridges building support for Nurturing Faith/Baptists Today

MACON, Ga. — John F. Bridges of Kings Mountain, N.C., is now serving as director of development for Nurturing Faith, the publishing ministry of Baptists Today, Inc. He is also pastor of Green Hill Baptist Church in Rutherfordton, N.C.

For 10 years he worked in development and church relations at Gardner-Webb University.

“Having someone of his caliber and experience in the role of financial development not only will bring in much-needed revenue but also will free our other staff members to focus more on enhancing our publication and our entire business operation,” said Don Brewer of Gainesville, Ga., who welcomed Bridges in September to “our already excellent team at Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith” on behalf of the Board of Directors.

Bridges is building support for the independent publishing ministry that produces the *Nurturing Faith Journal* & *Bible Studies* as well as books, resources and experiences for thoughtful, compassionate Christian living.

“I have been privileged to watch *Baptists Today*, now *Nurturing Faith Journal*, develop into the excellent translator of spiritual freedom in Baptist life and beyond,” said Bridges. “I am excited to serve as part of the Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith team and to advance its important mission.”

With roots going back to 1983, Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith has evolved through changing times and technology while retaining its commitments to freedom, high-quality publishing, and addressing issues of relevance, said executive editor John Pierce.

“It is good to have John Bridges helping us advance this unique publishing ministry,” said Pierce. “He understands and appreciates our mission, and conveys its importance in an honest and compelling way.”

Board chairman Jack Glasgow of Zebulon, N.C., said having someone working to encourage support for Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith is an important ministry, adding that Bridges “is a marvelous choice to do this work on our behalf.”

“John is excellent in building positive relationships with churches and individuals, and helping them to find ways to invest



in significant ministry that is important to the Kingdom of God,” said Glasgow. “I believe his work on our behalf will be fruitful. Relationships will be established and strengthened, and generated resources will undergird our important work.”

Nurturing Faith is the publishing ministry of Baptists Today, Inc., a 501(c)(3) charitable organization based in Macon, Ga., and guided by an independent Board of Directors. Bridges may be reached at jbbridges@nurturingfaith.net or (704) 616-1725. **NFJ**

Metaxas manipulates the past to serve his political agenda

A REVIEW BY JOHN FEA
Religion News Service

Since the release of his wildly popular biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eric Metaxas has been touted as one of conservative evangelicalism's leading spokespersons and public intellectuals. His latest book, *If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty*, gets its title from a popular story about Benjamin Franklin and the Constitutional Convention in the summer of 1787.

When Franklin walked out of the Pennsylvania State House at the end of the convention he was met by Elizabeth Powell, a prominent woman in Philadelphia. She asked Franklin what kind of government the members of the convention had forged. Franklin responded, "A republic ... if you can keep it."

Over the years Franklin's words have been a mantra for those concerned about the fate of the American Republic. His statement suggests that government by the people can be fragile, and unless they are diligent in preserving the republic, it will ultimately fail.

According to Metaxas, in order for the republic to survive, Americans must: defend religious freedom, cultivate virtue informed by religion, begin again to venerate the Founding Fathers, demand that their leaders have moral character and reclaim America as a "shining city on a hill."

If You Can Keep It raises important questions: What kind of republic did the founders want to create? How should we understand patriotism in a world that includes a growing number of critics disillusioned with the direction our country has taken? What did the founders believe about the relationship between religion and the republic, and are their views on this subject worth considering in the 21st century?

Unfortunately, Metaxas does a very



poor job of using American history to answer these questions. He manipulates the past to make it serve his political agenda. He searches for continuity between Colonial America and the present that, for the most part, doesn't exist.

First, Metaxas is concerned about religious freedom in the U.S. But to suggest that "since the Pilgrims came to our shores in 1620 religious freedom and religious tolerance have been the single most important principle of American life" is flat-out wrong.

While several colonies embraced the kind of religious freedom Metaxas preaches, others, including Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay, held very different views of religious freedom. As I sarcastically tell my students, people who came to these colonies were "free" to practice the religion of the Puritan settlers or else be removed from the colony, fined, imprisoned or, in a few cases, executed.

Second, Metaxas believes the U.S. is an exceptional nation because it has been given a divine mission to shine like a "city on a hill" in the sinful darkness of the rest of the world. He misinterprets the meaning of John Winthrop's famous phrase.

When Winthrop uttered these words to describe the Puritan colony of Massachusetts Bay he was not saying the colony had a special mission to the world. This is the incorrect interpretation of the phrase "city on a hill" made popular by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Rather, Winthrop was reminding his

followers that the eyes of England were upon them as they forged their settlement. If their efforts at building a Christian society in New England failed, their Old World enemies would mock them.

As historian Robert Tracy McKenzie has written, "Rather than puffing up the Puritans with claims of a divine mission, Winthrop intended his allusion to 'a city upon a hill' to send a chill down their spines."

Third, Metaxas believes the only way the American republic can be saved from its downward spiral is through a revival of evangelical Christianity. He thus draws his readers' attention back to the First Great Awakening, an 18th-century revival associated with, among others, the preacher George Whitefield.

Metaxas correctly calls attention to the popularity of Whitefield, but goes too far in trying to connect Whitefield's ministry to the American Revolution and the subsequent founding of the United States.

Metaxas buys into the idea, largely debunked by historians, that Whitefield's message of born-again Christianity unified the colonies, taught them the meaning of "equality" and ultimately led them to use this newfound evangelical identity to create a new nation. He goes as far as to describe Whitefield's conversion to Christianity as a student at Oxford University as "one of those things we may properly think of as a hinge in the history of the world — a point on which everything turns."

Metaxas cares deeply about his country. But sadly, *If You Can Keep It* will only appeal to conservative evangelicals looking for more ammunition in the ongoing culture wars. Because of its many historical errors, it will fail to persuade thoughtful people who are not already in his camp. **NFJ**

—John Fea teaches American history at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pa.

Converting Character

Columnist David Brooks calls for needed changes

A REVIEW BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Many have detected a change in the writings of David Brooks, conservative columnist for *The New York Times*. His book, *The Road to Character* (2015, Random House), reveals his conversion.

Brooks offers to readers a way of focusing less on success and more on goodness. He provides philosophical depth and inspiring examples rather than some cheesy multi-step program.

He calls for greater attention to “eulogy virtues” (that are talked about at one’s funeral) than to “résumé virtues” that contribute to external success.

Brooks confesses: “Most of us have clearer strategies for how to achieve career success than we do for how to develop a profound character.”

The book is written to a broader audience than those who subscribe to Brooks’ particular embrace of the Christian faith. And he draws from a wide range of resources — literature, history, religion and psychology — to build his case for a needed conversion of character.

But make no mistake: the biblical themes of goodness and grace permeate this important book.

Brooks turns to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, author of the 1965 book, *Lonely Man of Faith*, for some helpful distinctions. The rabbi, Brooks noted, used the two creation accounts in Genesis to name the opposing sides of human nature as “Adam I” and “Adam II.”

Brooks hangs onto those descriptive

handles throughout the book. “While Adam I wants to conquer the world,” Brooks writes, “Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world.”

Adam I turns everything into a game and judges people by their abilities rather than their human worth, Brooks notes. Adam II calls for cultivating strong character.

Brooks said he is not writing in the abstract for those who might need his wisdom. Rather, he confesses, “I wrote it, to be honest, to save my own soul.” The book reveals that kind of personal struggle for meaning and purpose throughout its pages.

Most of the book involves storytelling about a wide variety of imperfect

persons whose characters are reshaped by self-conquest, struggle, dignity, love and self-examination.

Brooks doesn’t just wax philosophically based on hunches. He looks at studies showing actual shifts that suggest the building of character is receiving less attention.

While noting no interest in returning to times of greater racism, sexism and other forms

of discrimination, Brooks laments a clear shift away from honest skepticism of one’s own desires — before exclamation points, vanity license plates, and car stickers touting every personal success.

The data he collected “suggest that we have seen a broad shift from a culture of humility to a culture of what you might call the Big Me ... that encouraged people to see themselves as the center of the universe.” For Brooks, a return to humility is the needed path.

“Humility is freedom from the need to prove you are superior all the time...” he

writes. “Humility is the awareness that there’s a lot you don’t know and that a lot of what you think you know is distorted or wrong.”

Self-centeredness, on the other hand, “leads in several unfortunate directions” — including using others for one’s own benefit as well as pride that causes the rationalization of one’s own imperfections and the inflation of one’s virtues.

The shift from self-centeredness and pride to honest humility, according to Brooks, is not “a solitary struggle.” He commends “redemptive assistance from outside — from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars, and, for believers, God.”

Pointedly, he adds: “We all need people to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do right, and to encourage, support, arouse, cooperate, and inspire us along the way.”

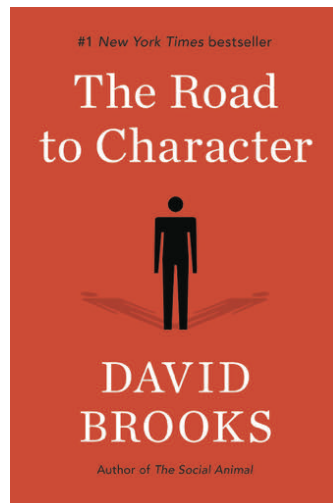
With equal insight he tackles self-respect, shame, vocation and sin — which he describes in terms of a “series of doors.” “Small moral compromises on Monday,” he notes, “make you more likely to commit other, bigger moral compromises on Tuesday.”

Sandwiched between the introductory chapters and the concluding chapter are stories that don’t emphasize typical heroics but reveal character in the ways Brooks has earlier described. As good as these stories are, the bread is even better. Here are a few favorite bites:

“If you think the world can fit neatly together, then you don’t need to be moderate... Moderation is based on the idea that things do not fit neatly together.”

“Suffering, like love, shatters the illusion of self-mastery.”

“The material world is beautiful and to be savored and enjoyed, but the pleasures of this world are most delicious when they are savored in the larger context of God’s transcendent love.” **NFJ**





WIDER DOORS

Path to fuller inclusion of LGBT Christians challenges church leaders

GREENVILLE, S.C. — Some churches and denominational groups have no confusion or conflict regarding persons with same-sex attraction or transgender identities. On one side or the other, the matter is settled.

“Welcoming and affirming” congregations and church organizations fully embrace gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons. Conversely, many churches and denominational groups that have long opposed homosexuality as being anything other than a chosen, sinful lifestyle have hunkered down.

Some of these more-conservative groups have geared up for the culture war they continue to lose by every measure.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruling last year that legalized same-sex marriage nationwide increased their alarm and led to a series of mixed results in getting state

governments to pass laws that restrict and punish those with sexual orientations or identities different from what these church leaders consider to be the God-given norm.

The cultural shift is apparent. Recent results of a Pew Research poll showed that 55 percent of Americans now support same-sex marriage, with 37 percent explicitly opposed. Those results show a complete reversal from polling in 2001.

White mainline Protestants favor same-sex marriage by 64 percent, but the numbers drop for black Protestants and white evangelicals. So it is not surprising that diverse congregations and conventions will not be of one mind concerning this issue — and that the minds of many have changed or are changing.

Exactly how this issue will continue to play out in many church circles is uncertain. However, continued disagreement and

even fracturing are expected as leaders in the broader middle of church life struggle to find common ground or at least peaceful accommodation for those within their fellowships who hold strong but differing opinions about homosexuality and gender identities.

Fracturing has already been the case within some Christian bodies.

TIMING

The potential for conflict and upheaval has led many church leaders to push the issue down the road as far as possible. Some congregations and fellowships have assumed a “don’t ask; don’t tell” position in which gay and lesbian persons are engaged without the church or organization taking a formal position on the issue.

A recent study by LifeWay Research showed that just 8 percent of Baptist pastors

— compared to 30 percent of Protestant pastors — say gay and lesbian persons can serve in any role open to church members. Also, 54 percent of these Baptist ministers indicated there were no positions in their churches where openly LGBT persons can serve.

Many church leaders recognize, however, that the issue is moving — or has moved — to the surface as public opinion in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons continues to sweep the nation.

Last year's U.S. Supreme Court decision calling for all states to recognize same-sex marriages pushed the issue closer to the forefront. Affirmation of LGBT persons and the defense of their equal rights are not going away — in and outside faith circles.

Many churches and denominational leaders are feeling the squeeze between members who are demanding equality for all persons regardless of sexual orientation or identity and those in opposition based on their biblical interpretations. And the latter often uses “religious liberty” in defense of their right to discriminate — even in the public sector.

For some this issue strikes a chord within their calling to stand up for those long oppressed. It is a matter of justice more than mere church policy. On the other side are those who see the issue as threatening the very institution of holy matrimony as given by God since creation.

In the head and hearts of many church leaders are the big questions of when and how to address this inevitable, controversial and likely divisive issue. And they are finding it hard to keep pushing the “when” question down the road.

SANCTUARIES

In an article last June, *USA Today* explored the challenge gay and lesbian persons experienced in finding spiritual sanctuary following the deadly shootings at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando.

The article referenced the 2015 Pew Research Center study showing that 48 percent of Americans who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual also identify as Christian.

Therefore, many persons with same-sex attraction seek a spiritual home for worship, fellowship, service and spiritual growth — as would any other Christian.

The mass shooting at Pulse in Orlando, some supporters noted, revealed much beyond the evil-induced carnage: Gay nightclubs are more than entertainment options; they are sanctuaries for LGBT persons who often cannot find such refuge in churches or other settings.

Many thoughtful and compassionate church leaders feel torn between their desire to affirm and include gay and lesbian Christians in the fullness of church life while not alienating devoted church members who consider homosexuality to be a sinful practice. And they wonder how to address the issue in a way that would be more constructive than reckless — while acknowledging that a price will be paid.

The question becomes one of “how much loss?” — and what can possibly be done to minimize the fracturing?

ONE CHURCH

First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C., made a big news splash — not by the congregation's design, though not by surprise either — after grappling with this issue of wider inclusion and reaching the conclusion that the congregation would not discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

Pastor Jim Dant noted that the church did not reach full agreement on how the Bible is to be interpreted regarding homosexuality. Rather the congregation chose to acknowledge those differences with respect — while not excluding LGBT persons from any aspect of church life.

The defining question, he said, became: “Can you worship and live with the LGBT community in the church?” Eventually, the church said, “yes” — with 12 members choosing to leave the congregation.

Dant warns other church leaders wading into these waters and seeking his advice to avoid the false assumption that some magic formula will lead to a smooth process and positive conclusion.

“The first step is figuring out where you are as a church,” said Dant, noting that

not every church starts the conversation at the same place.

Well before his coming as pastor in June 2014 and last year's Supreme Court ruling, the historic Greenville church was already addressing the issue.

Dant calls these developments — including the significant participation of gay and lesbian persons in various aspects of church life — the “unquantifiable part” of the congregation's journey toward non-discrimination.

BEYOND TASK

A year before his call to be pastor, the deacons appointed an LGBT task force to educate the congregation on the relevant issues and to make a proposal to the church on how to relate to the LGBT community.

“The process looked like a civil war in the making,” Dant surmised, fearing the approach was leading toward clear winners and losers — with a lot of loss for the congregation at large.

He asked the deacons to rename and refocus the task force into the LGBT discernment team without a timeline or specific goal other than hearing from one another and seeking a consensus.

“I laid out what that [process] would look like,” said Dant.

Roberts Rules of Order were put aside in favor of discernment. Plans called for small-group participation — in which everyone would speak — rather than town hall meetings easily dominated by a few, loud voices on each side of the issue.

Each of the four discernment sessions began with a 15-minute presentation on biblical background, pastoral care or another subject to help frame the conversations rather than be persuasive. Then the small-group conversations followed.

Broader questions than one's personal opinion about homosexuality were raised, said Dant, such as: “What is the truth of who we are as a church, and where is God in that?” “What would you talk with Jesus about regarding this issue?”

Dant said he and other church leaders underestimated the interest, setting up for 50 people for the first of the four Sunday nights sessions. “We had 250 show up the

first night and never had fewer than that.”

Pastorally, Dant urged the congregation to not group up with those in agreement or to carry their conversations into Sunday school classes or the parking lot.

BEING CHURCH

In the Sunday evening sessions, participants discussed whether or not they were comfortable being a “welcoming and affirming” congregation — or whether they didn’t know for sure.

Dant encouraged the congregation to continue asking and responding to the various questions until they honed a consensus with which they were comfortable.

It was clear, said Dant, that church members were not in agreement about homosexuality and gender identity, but could be comfortable with members of the LGBT community participating in all aspects of church life “as it is consistent with their faith.”

The big shift in the discernment process, he noted, was the move “from how they felt about LGBT issues to what it means to be a church, particularly a Baptist church.”

The church took a break from these discussions during Advent and Christmas, picking back up early last year. As the consensus statement emerged, Dant said he placed a lot of emphasis on the Baptist belief in soul competency — that each person is accountable to God.

This perspective, he said, allowed for disagreement yet respect for others. “Welcoming and affirming could not be said of our church; not everyone affirms homosexuality.”

The consensus statement was presented to the church on a Sunday morning.

“We didn’t vote,” said Dant. “We stood to agree that this is a fair statement of the church.”

All but 12 of the approximately 800 congregants in attendance stood on the first call. Then the congregation covenanted to not speak of the matter publicly for two months in order to prepare for what would follow when the news hit.

IRONIES

Church members honored their covenant, said Dant, giving him time to talk with them about how to respond to neighbors, friends and coworkers reacting to the church’s controversial affirmation. He focused on the “ironic aftermath” that church members could expect.

“You’ll be told that you’re not Christian and not Baptist,” Dant told the congregation. “The irony is you are Christian and are Baptist,” he said of the process they had followed to consensus.

The three sessions following the affirmation of the consensus statement were “probably the most valuable thing we did in the whole process,” he said.

One of the church’s many gay members shared how he and others simply wanted to be a part congregational life. One of the most conservative members, recalled Dant, said this process was “the proudest I’ve ever been of our church.”

Church leadership released the story — in a wide-open manner — to *The Greenville News*, then referred all other inquiries to the local newspaper.

The preparation done between the congregational affirmation and the public release of the document was well needed said Dant: “Our people got hit hard.”

National media picked up the news quickly, and fundamentalist Baptist leaders such as Al Mohler and Franklin Graham denounced the congregation. The language on talk radio in Upstate South Carolina became threatening to the point that the church added security.

“We were not trying to make a point nationally but be a church in Greenville, S.C.,” said Dant, noting that the public relations storm raged for about two and a half months. Facebook posts as well as phone calls and emails to the church reached the tens of thousands.

SAFE LANDING

Implementation took its own natural course, said Dant. About 100 persons joined the church in the following weeks. Most were not gay, just persons looking for a church that doesn’t discriminate based on

sexual orientation and gender identity.

The bottom line, said Dant, is that the church “treats LGBT persons no differently than any other member.”

“There are not just two choices,” he added, pointing to the opposing positions of excluding gay and lesbian persons or affirming homosexuality.

“If you have to be welcoming and affirming, then you’re not Baptist,” said Dant. “That’s not the only place to land.”

The Greenville church landed on a consensus statement that affirms, “We are a covenantal people, bound together, not by agreement on all issues, but by our desire to worship and serve together, and by our commitment to embody and embrace the spirit of Christ.”

Showing respect for those members who hold opposing views on homosexuality was critical to the church’s unity, said Dant. It allowed for the wider embrace of the affirmation that emerged from the unrushed process of discernment:

“In all facets of the life and ministry of our church, including but not limited to membership, baptism, ordination, marriage, teaching and committee/organizational leadership, First Baptist Greenville will not discriminate based on sexual orientation or gender identity.”

‘FOR US’

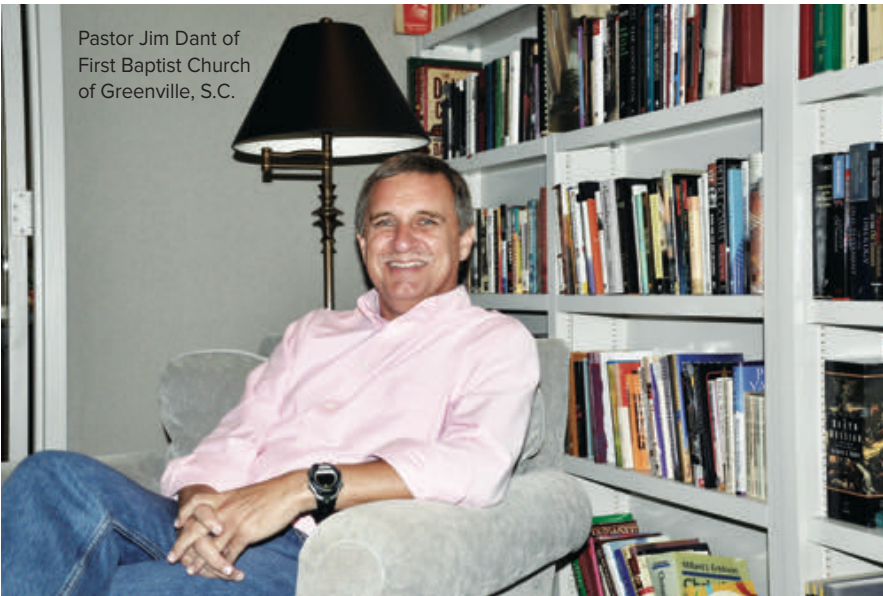
This process and its conclusion may not work in every setting, Dant acknowledged. “It’s worked for us.”

His role, he said, was just “a little piece” in what had already begun. “I’ve followed up on a lot of people’s work here.”

Having faithful members — who were gay and out before the discernment process — was a great advantage, he said. “It’s hard to discount that.”

Beyond the harsh outside condemnation of the church, often from anonymous sources, Dant received many calls from ministry friends seeking advice on how to deal with this hot topic in their congregations.

He is honest with them: “You may not be in a place where you can implement a process and get through it peacefully.” For those wanting to give it a try,



Pastor Jim Dant of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C.

Dant offers these suggestions:

First, know where you are relative to controversy and the LGBT community. Just because the pastor is ready to deal with this issue doesn't mean the congregation is ready.

The Greenville congregation was used to "cutting some paths" related to issues of justice and equality; that history helped, he said.

Second, learn about the discernment process and get wide buy-in from the congregation. The larger body must believe this process is the right course for dealing with the issue at hand and seeking a constructive outcome.

Third, be prepared for the aftermath. "It's hard," said Dant candidly.

Of the barrage of emails, Facebook posts and phone calls received by the church, he added, "the vast majority were brutal."

That's why it is important for the church to reach a consensus and to respect those who hold different views, he said.

For example, some members of the wedding guild choose to not work on gay weddings, he said. They are respected.

The implementation was not hard, he added, since it was simply to not discriminate based on sexual orientation or identity.

Throughout the discernment process, said Dant, he wanted the congregation's focus to be on the larger idea of being church rather than debating a particular issue.

"From June through October, I

preached through the book of Acts and never mentioned LGBT issues," he said, "but talked about the broadening of the church and what it means to be the church."

BAPTIST BODIES

Denominational groups reflect many of the same struggles seen in congregations with diverse perspectives. How these larger church bodies address the inclusion of LGBT persons depends on polity, diversity, theological orientation and commitments to unity.

Among Baptists, very conservative groups including the Southern Baptist Convention have cemented their opposition to homosexuality in resolutions and policies.

One position statement asserts: "Homosexuality is not a 'valid alternative lifestyle.' The Bible condemns it as sin. It is not, however, unforgivable sin." That "forgiveness" or conversion, however, requires a repudiation of one's sexual orientation.

Churches considered to be endorsing or affirming of homosexuality are dismissed from the convention ranks — as are those calling women to the pastorate.

Progressive groups such as the Alliance of Baptists and Welcoming and Affirming Baptists have fully embraced LGBT Christians for many years — attracting congregations that reflect their position.

Tension over the full inclusion of

LGBT persons has surfaced among other Baptist groups such as American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA) and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) where perspectives are wide-ranging and potentially divisive.

In 2005, members of the ABCUSA General Board amended their "We Are American Baptists" statement to affirm themselves as "Biblical people who submit to the teaching of Scripture ... and acknowledge that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Biblical teaching."

Over the past decade, however, that statement has not settled matters for American Baptists. Known for being inclusive in general, American Baptists have experienced most of their tension and even division related to LGBT issues at the regional level.

CBF, which does not pass formal resolutions on such issues, adopted a hiring and funding policy in 2000 that forbids the funding of partner organizations that affirm homosexuality or the hiring of knowingly homosexual persons. It was considered a compromise effort to keep congregations engaged that wanted some clarity about the Fellowship's position on homosexuality.

However, the policy has become contentious among Fellowship participants in recent years with a growing number of calls for it to be rescinded.

During their national assembly last June, CBF leaders announced a new initiative called the Illumination Project to identify intentional processes whereby the Fellowship can retain unity despite disagreements.

While the initiative is designed to address differing opinions on a variety of issues, all participants are keenly aware of what one issue remains at the forefront: the full inclusion of LGBT persons.

Whether in congregations or denominational groups — where opinions change and vary regarding the inclusion of all Christians regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity — there seems to be one point of agreement: this issue can only be pushed down the road so long.

Determining exactly when and how to address this matter, however, seems to bring as many and as strong opinions as the issue itself. **NFJ**

Nurturing Faith partners with Maranatha Baptist to provide journal to visitors

PLAINS, Ga. — Visitors by the thousands flock to Maranatha Baptist Church in this small southwest Georgia town to hear President Jimmy Carter teach a Sunday morning Bible lesson. For many, who come from near and far, it is the first time to visit a Baptist church and, for some, to attend Christian worship.

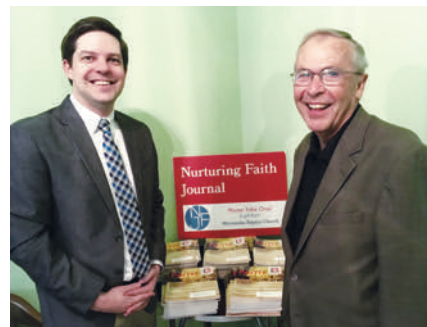
Previously they have left with only impressions, memories and cherished photos with the former U.S. president and his wife Rosalynn, a church deacon. Now they may take a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* & *Bible Studies* with them as well.

A foundation's anonymous gift made possible the launch of this collaborative effort between the publishing ministry and the Maranatha congregation. The journals are imprinted with an email address to

which visitors can share their experiences of Bible study and worship as well as from reading the journal that promotes thoughtful, compassionate Christian living.

This collaboration grew out of conversations between Maranatha pastor Jeremy Shoulta and *Nurturing Faith Journal* editor John Pierce. They concluded that providing the journal could help visitors better understand the congregation's Baptist identity and extend their Christian witness.

The congregation embraced the collab-



Nurturing Faith Journal is now available to the many visitors attending Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga. Don Brewer, representing the publishing ministry's Board of Directors, joins pastor Jeremy Shoulta to launch the new outreach ministry. Photo by John D. Pierce.

orative effort that began with the September/October issue being made available to guests — many who arrive early on Sunday morning to secure a seat in the church sanctuary. **NFJ**

Church shoppers look for strong preaching

BY LAUREN MARKOE
Religion News Service

Top-notch preaching most attracts people looking for a new place to pray. That's the conclusion of a new Pew Research Center study, released in August, which asked 5,000 people about their search for a new church or other house of worship.

“This is what people value in a congregation — a good message, a good homily that resonates with them and gives them guidance,” said Greg Smith, Pew's associate director for religion research.

More than 4 in 5 people (83 percent) put preaching at the top of their checklist. Preaching was followed by clergy and lay leaders who make them feel welcome

(79 percent) and an appealing style of service (74 percent).

For pastors, imams and rabbis wondering how a snazzy website factors into potential congregants' searches, the survey reveals that in-person encounters carry much more weight.

“This may be because some of the factors people say they value the most in choosing a congregation — the quality of sermons, the style of services and a welcoming leadership — are difficult to assess over the phone or on a website,” the researchers concluded.

Why do people look for a new house of worship?

The most common reason given (34 percent) is because a congregant has moved. Far less frequently did respondents cite a theological reason or dissatisfaction with the house of worship they used to attend, or the clergy who led it.

About half of those searching for a new congregation (48 percent) consid-

ered switching denominations. But for two groups in particular — Catholics and members of historically black churches — switching is uncommon, with only a third reporting such a change as a consideration.

The survey also found that:

- Half of American adults (51 percent) say they attend religious services regularly — at least once or twice a month.

- Seven in 10 people who have looked for a new congregation say finding one was easy, while 27 percent say finding a new house of worship was difficult.

- Of those who attend regularly, nearly half (23 percent of all U.S. adults) say they have always attended religious services at least as regularly as they do now, but slightly more (27 percent) say they now attend religious services more often than they did at some other time in their adult lives.

The overall margin of error for the survey, which was conducted in spring 2015, was plus or minus 2 percentage points. **NFJ**

Pastors rarely asked to wed same-sex couples

BY ADELLE M. BANKS
Religion News Service

After the long debate before gay marriage was made legal in 2015, a survey shows that since then Protestant pastors have rarely been asked to officiate same-sex weddings.

More than 100,000 such weddings have occurred since the Supreme Court ruling. But only 11 percent of church pastors, both mainline and evangel-

ical, report having been asked to perform such a rite, according to a poll by LifeWay Research.

Mainline Protestant clergy were three times as likely as evangelical pastors to have been asked. Presbyterian or Reformed clergy are most likely — 26 percent — to have received a request to marry a same-sex couple, while Baptist pastors, at 1 percent, are the least likely.

Pastors 55 and older were twice as likely as their younger counterparts to be

asked to perform a same-sex ceremony.

“Most couples, if they want a church wedding, will ask a pastor they know or who they think will support them,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. “For same-sex couples, this appears to be an older Presbyterian pastor.”

The findings, based on a phone survey of 1,000 Protestant pastors from March 9-24, 2016, had an overall margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points. **NFJ**

Georgetown University faces its slavery history

BY ADELLE M. BANKS
Religion News Service

Georgetown University has decided to create a new institute to study slavery and will rename two of its buildings as it develops ways to address its past connections to the slave trade.

The Roman Catholic school, which was founded by the Jesuit order in 1789, announced the plans after its president, John J. DeGioia, received a 104-page report from a working group he convened a year ago.

The report outlines how the school was involved in the 1838 sale of 272 slaves who worked on Jesuit plantations in southern Maryland. The sale benefited

that state's Jesuits and paid off debts at a precarious moment for the nation's oldest Catholic university.

Following the report's recommendations, which were announced in September, the school will name one building Isaac Hall, in honor of a slave with that name who was mentioned in documents of the 1838 sale.

A second building will be named Anne Marie Becraft Hall, in honor of a free African-American woman who founded a school for black girls in the Georgetown neighborhood and later joined the Oblate Sisters of Providence, the oldest group of Roman Catholic nuns started by women of African descent.

The two buildings were previously

named for former university presidents who were priests and supporters of the slave trade.

DeGioia said other plans include holding a “Mass of Reconciliation” with the Jesuits and the Archdiocese of Washington, creating a memorial to slaves from whom the university benefited, and giving descendants of the slaves “the same consideration we give members of the Georgetown community in the admissions process.”

DeGioia told *The New York Times* that an apology could take place through an upcoming special Mass.

“We know we've got work to do, and we're going to take those steps to do so,” he said. **NFJ**

Ethics group premieres documentary on Nigerian genocide

A new documentary from ethicsdaily.com, *The Disturbances*, tells the untold story from 1966 of Christian missionaries saving lives amid genocide in Nigeria.

Robert Parham, head of the Nashville-based organization that produced the film, said research began with his own experiences in the seventh grade at a nondenominational mission school in Nigeria.

“We had some family correspondence from the year,” said Parham, who was raised in a Baptist missionary family. “We had my mother's memory.”

“We didn't have much else, mostly because very little had been written about what happened,” he added. “Missionaries

simply didn't talk publicly about it. Some mission agencies even downplayed the events.”

The story unfolded, however, said Parham, through 15 months of research that included 24 video interviews with missionaries, missionary children and Nigerians, and the amassing of period photographs, film footage and written documents such as meeting minutes and correspondence.

Emerging from the depths of research is a feature-length film about the thousands of people killed in a matter of days in 1966 and how Christian missionaries took action to save others from certain death. Information on the film's release is available at ethicsdaily.com. **NFJ**

That all of them may be one

By John R. Franke

As the calendar moves into November and we come to the end of an especially contentious election season and begin to face its aftermath, it seems like a particularly important time to remember the witness of the New Testament concerning the unity of the church.

Perhaps the most significant text is found in John 17. After praying that his disciples would be sanctified in truth and that he had sent them into the world as he had been sent, Jesus turns his attention not only to their unity but also for the unity of all who would believe through their word — the church.

In John 17:20-23 (NIV) we read: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one — I in them and you in me — so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

It is worth noting here the close connection that is made between truth, the sending of the church, and the unity of the church.

The sending of Jesus into the world is to proclaim the truth, to be the light of the world, in order that the world might believe. The church is entrusted by Jesus with the continuance of that mission as those sent by Jesus into the world to proclaim this reality that Jesus had been sent by the Father for

the purpose of reconciling the world to God.

The unity for which Jesus prays is to be a prime indicator of this truth. Hence it is to be a visible unity and not simply an invisible one.

It can be seen by the world and is a visible testimony to the reconciling love of God in Jesus Christ. This indicates that the unity of the church is vitally connected with its life and witness and as such is a central aspect of its vocation in the world.

This concern for unity is prominent in other parts of the New Testament. For instance, in the letter to the Ephesians the church is called upon to adopt attitudes and practices that will promote peace in the church and urged to maintain the unity of the Spirit:

“Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:2-6, NIV).

Unity is not simply an invisible reality but also a calling that is to be manifested in visible ways through the cultivation of the disciplines of humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance with others.

The letter to the Philippians connects these qualities to the life of Jesus, who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but instead humbled himself, taking the form of a servant and urging that the church follow this example (Phil. 2:1-11).

The letter to the Galatians speaks of the qualities of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control as the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-26). This way of the Spirit is essential for the unity of the church.

These texts point to the importance of the visible unity of the church as a testimony to our neighbors of the truth of the gospel. The mission of the church is vitally connected with an appropriate and visible manifestation of its unity in the midst of its diversity, and failure to maintain this unity will significantly compromise its witness to the world.

In the midst of the deep divisions currently shaping our culture, the followers of Jesus would do well to remember his prayer that we might all be one.

This doesn't mean we will all come to agreement on the social and political issues of the day. It does mean that the unity we share in Christ transcends our differences and calls on us to love each other in spite of them.

This is a way of life that our world needs to see. **NFJ**

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis and general coordinator for the *Gospel and Our Culture Network*.



The unity for which Jesus prays is to be a prime indicator of this truth.

When it's time to go home

By Colleen Walker Burroughs

We had just arrived at the Disney resort and my husband David had taken our young twins to the pool. I was listening to CNN while unpacking our bags.

Cyclical drought in Malawi was threatening the lives of 500,000 people.

The words stopped me in my tracks and brought me to my knees. It was the moment when a 30-second news story literally changed my life.

When I opened the hotel door to my dripping-wet, blue-lipped children, David saw my tears and asked, "Who died?"

By then I had already made two phone calls. One was to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the other to the U.S. ambassador to Malawi, but no one had answered, of course. It was a Friday night.

Over the next few weeks I had conversations with other relief agencies that Passport has worked with over the years. No one seemed to be aware of the situation in Southern Africa in the country I had called home as a girl.

Hurricane Katrina had just drowned New Orleans, and a massive Tsunami had hit Banda Aceh. The world was busy responding to overwhelming global need.

So, I turned to the only resource I felt was available to me: Passport teenagers. We didn't ask them for money. We asked them to raise the awareness that 500,000 Malawians were at risk of hunger, disease and starvation.

When people, especially teenagers, are offered a way to make a difference in the world, they will respond. That's why it is critical for leadership to be careful with how we engage people in mission.

Determining how to respond requires a lot more than a willing heart. It requires prayer, preparation and, I believe, a long-term commitment to sustainable solutions.



If you are looking to engage others in a new mission opportunity, consider the following:

Listen for the invitation, first from the Spirit of God and from your context.

What makes sense for you? What skill or resource is really needed, and can you provide that?

Look for others who are already doing this work and consider joining them in thoughtful, financial and prayerful ways.

It is a much better stewardship of resources, and others have probably already learned things you might not need to repeat.

Critically consider the motive behind a response and the long-term outcome of interaction.

Is this actually helpful, or does it just scratch a personal itch to *do* something?

Be open to shifting priorities of long-term engagement.

I thought accessing safe water was as simple as drilling wells, but it is much more complicated. Sanitation is the critical other side of the coin.

Build in accountability.

Have an oversight board for prioritization and accountability as a system for checks and balances related to reporting outcomes.

Identify what the end goal might look like.

Think through to the end of the work.

What will it look like once you've worked yourself out of a job? At what point can this work succeed when the funding or personnel are no longer there? Avoid systems of dependency.

The invitation to respond to Malawi was startling but obvious. I wasn't really looking for something else to do with my time. A dramatic need presented itself, and a very specific set of windows opened up to allow for thoughtful response.

The sheer lack of water partners on the ground at the time was further indication that this was a surprising void, but moving from crisis response to long-term solutions is critical. For Watering Malawi this means that the next time there is a drought, perhaps fewer people will be as dramatically impacted.

Ten years later, broad-scale water initiatives are finding a foothold in Malawi. Smaller and more stable non-government organizations have been birthed along the way. This delicate infrastructure informs Watering Malawi's long-term mission.

Is what we are doing still helpful? Sure, but if one of mission's strategies is to work ourselves out of a job, then at some point Watering Malawi has to be willing to step aside and allow for the work on the ground to continue without us.

Determining an exit plan is not failure; it is part of a healthy process.

U.S. students and their communities will continue to raise awareness and funds while learning about global water poverty. Ultimately the Malawian men and women administrating the work to access safe water are sharing Living Water with their neighbors. **NFJ**

—Colleen Walker Burroughs is vice president of Passport, Inc., and founder of Watering Malawi.

Me and Captain Morgan

By Brett Younger

In *The Perfect Storm*, George Clooney dies when the ship sinks. In *Titanic*, Leonardo DiCaprio dies when the ship sinks. When the ship sinks in *All Is Lost* — Spoiler alert! — Robert Redford makes it, but just barely.

When I get on a boat I think about these movies, because I cannot swim. I have come to believe that water — more than any other place — is where people drown. I understand why “seasick” is a word and “landsick” is not. I do not even go to Old Navy.

I have biblical support for my attitude. In the Psalms, the Leviathan is lurking beneath the boat just like Jaws. No thinking parent would tell the stories of Noah or Jonah at bedtime. Egyptian children have bad dreams about crossing the Red Sea.

I have historical support for my attitude — the *Bismarck*, the *Lusitania*, the *Poseidon*, the *Voyage of the Damned*, and the *Sloop John B*, as well as pirates with hooks for hands and pegs for legs.

Carol and I are, nonetheless, delighted when our friends, Peter and Lee Scott, take us on the *S.S. Alabama* for a “three-hour tour” — just like Gilligan’s. This is another chance to learn to love the ocean.

I count the people on board — 30 — and the seats on the lifeboat — 12. These are not the odds for which you hope. A guy from Michigan — not me — asks about life jackets. The life preservers are in the bottom of the boat. If the boat starts to sink, the crew expects me to run downstairs. I am humming “The Wreck of



the Edmund Fitzgerald.”

The barefoot crew of the *S.S. Alabama* is made up of teenagers. The captain’s name — I am not making this up — is Morgan. This does not inspire confidence. Captain Morgan warns us to watch out for the boom, as it could kill us.

After 30 minutes, I stop staring at the boom. We eat ham sandwiches and mint fudge. (I prefer regular fudge, but sea life is hard.) I start saying things like, “That’s a good-looking flying jib.” I tell Carol, “I’m getting sunburned on my starboard side.”

Lee — who seems to be running for Miss Alabama — makes friends with everybody on board. She gets Maureen’s email address, so she can send her recipe for spinach pie.

After two hours, I am scanning the horizon while I steer the mighty vessel. I am looking for boats with bad names — *Ahoy Vey*, *Yacht Sea*, *Gravyboat*, *She Got the House*, *Buoys in the Hood*. Then again — I wish I

was the first one to say this — if it doesn’t come when you call it, why name it?

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is sleeping on a boat when a storm shows up. He did not doze off in the bow where the spray would get him and the whitecaps would hit; he climbed back into the stern. Jesus must be out like a light because the storm does not stir him, not even when the waves get so high they start washing in over the sides.

The frightened disciples wake him up. When he has gotten his eyes open, Jesus speaks first to the wind rather than the disciples: “Cut that out!” He is gentler with the sea: “Take it easy. Quiet down.” As Mary Oliver writes, “The sea lays down, silky and sorry.”

Jesus asks the disciples: “Why did you panic? What kind of faith do you call that?”

They are so impressed that the wind has stopped blowing and the sea has flattened out that they never get around to answering him. The disciples are embarrassed.

Some storms are not as bad as we fear. Sometimes when we are upset we need to back up and discover that things are not as frightening as we first imagined.

Sometimes it makes sense to feel nervous. At other times we just need to be still. We cannot always decide how afraid or hopeful we will be, but we get to choose which way we will lean. We get to decide if we will share our fears with God.

We may still feel nervous, but we can know that we are not alone. We can eat a sandwich and try some fudge. **NFJ**

—Brett Younger is the senior minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, New York.

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Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*


Nov. 6, 2016

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21


Justice Always Counts

Christians gather for worship on Sundays and at other times. Songs of praise and prayers of thanksgiving are typical elements of worship – but some people participate more than others.

Have you noticed this? While many of us remain rather staid in our worship, other believers embrace the community's praise with their whole heart. They may sing with eyes closed or face lifted upward, and with arms that are raised toward heaven or moving with the music. Their verbal and non-verbal language offers openhearted gratitude to God.

The author of Psalm 145 was one of these people. He or she held nothing back in expressing full-bodied praise to the God of justice, love, and mercy. In today's study we consider the first five and last five verses of the psalm. 

Praise and meditation (vv. 1-5)

Psalm 145 is an individual psalm of thanksgiving, designated in its superscription as *ledawid*, which could be translated as “of David,” “to David,” or “for David.”  The author put a lot of effort into its composition: like seven other psalms (9-10, 25, 34, 47,

Psalm 145:17

“The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.”

111, 112, and 119), it is written as an acrostic. Each verse begins with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet (or *alefbet*), from *alef* to *tau*.

The author's purpose in this rather artificial construction was not to be pretentious, but probably to provide a memory key for those who might wish to memorize the psalm for use in worship or their own devotional lives.

Some have suggested a more symbolic purpose: though one could not use every word to praise God, constructing an acrostic guaranteed that one had used all the letters – out of which all the words could be made!

Careful readers will note that the author speaks in the first person (“I”), but alternates between addressing God as “you” (second person) before switching to third person (“he”) when praising God's attributes.

The psalmist begins by declaring his intention to praise God: “I will extol you, my God and King” (v. 1a), he says, then moves to a special interest in praising or blessing God's name (vv. 1b-2), which amounts to exalting or acclaiming God before others (see “The Hardest Question” online for more). The Hebrews spelled God's revealed name as *yhwh*, which was probably pronounced as “Yahweh,” and is rendered in English translations by the name LORD in all capital letters.

“Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever,”

the psalmist said (v. 2). Still, he faced the same problem confronting a tourist in Glacier National Park who tries to put into words the majesty of a towering mountain above a glittering glacial lake surrounded by verdant greenery: words fail. Fortunately, the acrostic form called for the verse to begin with a *gimel*, so he chose the word *gadōl*, usually translated as “great.” “Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable” (v. 3).

Lacking sufficient vocabulary to describe the magnitude of God's reality, the singer turned to a declaration that God's praise would be perpetual: “One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (v. 4).

As humans who are unable to see God with our eyes, we perceive the divine presence indirectly, in God's “works” and “mighty acts,” from the wonder of creation to Israel's deliverance from Egypt and God's care in the wilderness. The psalmist calls on his hearers to pass the knowledge of God's extraordinary deeds on to the next generation, establishing a chain of faithful witnesses so God's redeeming work would not be forgotten.

Old Testament narratives speak of various persons who believed they had seen God appearing in human form. Genesis 3-4 draws an image of God walking in the garden and talking with Adam and Eve. Hagar believed God appeared to her as she languished in the desert (Gen. 16:13). Abraham and Sarah entertained three strangers, who turned out to be a manifestation of God and two angels (Genesis 17).

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



Jacob wrestled with “a man” through the night, but concluded his opponent was Yahweh and claimed “I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (Gen. 32:30). Moses famously asked to see God’s glory and was granted a vision of the divine afterglow (Exod. 33:19-33). In other texts, Moses is said to have spoken with God “face to face” (Exod. 33:1; Num. 12:8; Deut. 5:4, 34:10).

These were rare exceptions until the coming of Christ, when those who witnessed his life and ministry could later come to believe they had seen God in the flesh. For most people, including us, the best we can hope for on this earth is to see God’s wonder reflected in God’s works, and in the love of God’s people. Thus, the psalmist continued: “On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate” (v. 5). He builds on the same theme in vv. 6-7.

The wonders of nature speak to many of us: standing by the seemingly limitless ocean or in the midst of tall mountain peaks reminds us of God’s power. Feeling the spray from a towering waterfall or watching bighorn sheep in a rocky canyon speak of God’s beauty. Enjoying the companionship of loved ones, holding babies, and watching little ones grow shout of God’s care and offer of relationship.

In what settings have you sensed the divine presence most keenly?

Justice and love (vv. 17-21)

The central section of Psalm 145, like Psalm 11, recalls the classic description of Yahweh’s self-revealed character as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (v. 8, reciting the confession of Exod. 34:6). The following verses build on that, celebrating God’s

goodness and compassion (vv. 9-10), God’s power and kingdom rule (vv. 11-13a), and God’s faithfulness to those who struggle and fall but look to God for deliverance and daily sustenance (vv. 13b-16).

The closing verses assigned for this study add to the theme by praising God’s justice and care for the faithful: “The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings” (v. 17). Thoughts of divine justice often raise the unpleasant image of judgment, but God’s justice is tempered by God’s kindness: the word translated as “kind” is *hasid*, the adjectival form of the noun *hesed*, commonly used to describe God’s faithful loving-kindness or “steadfast love.” The word became so associated with God’s character that when the adjective was applied to a person, it could be translated as “godly” or “pious.”

Verses 18-20 introduce a string of affirmations about God’s care and those to whom such care is directed. Note the connections: God is near, not to everyone, but “to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (v. 18). Likewise, God “fulfills the desire,” not of all people, but “of all who fear him” – God “hears their cry, and saves them” (v. 19). Finally, Yahweh keeps a shepherd-like watch, not for all, but “over all who love him” (v. 20a). In contrast, “the wicked he will destroy” (v. 20b).

While the psalmist’s praise connects God’s loving care to those who “call on him in truth,” “fear him,” and “love him,” the promises are surprisingly universal: though he writes as a Hebrew and quotes from God’s self-description to Moses, he makes no explicit mention of Israel. The promise of deliverance and care is not limited to Israel, but to all

people who love and trust Yahweh.

Craig C. Broyles has astutely noted: “While this psalm opens the door of salvation to all, it may close it for some. Their favor with God rests not on their ethnicity but on their sincerity. The line is not drawn between Israel and the nations but between all who love him and all the wicked” (*Psalms, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012], p. 508).

It is common for thanksgiving psalms to both begin and end with words of praise, and this one is no exception. The psalmist began with a pledge to bless and praise God’s name forever and ever in vv. 1-2, and closed with a promise that “My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever” (v. 21).

Note again the universality of praise: it is not enough for the psalmist alone to praise God, or even for the past and future people of Israel to offer their benison: he sees a day when “all flesh” will join in a celebration of God’s “holy name” that will last “forever and ever.”

Think again about your favorite way to offer praise and thanksgiving to God. Consider worship music: Do you get into praise songs that tend to evoke a more emotional or physical response, or do you prefer traditional hymns? Apart from public worship: Do you prefer quiet meditation on the wonders of God’s handiwork, or does it feel more right to voice your praise?

Words alone may be inadequate to express our praise to God, but in public settings, words remain the best things we have. Consider writing a short psalm of your own. Try starting as the psalmist did: “I will extol you, my God and King ...” Where would you go from there? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 13, 2016

Psalm 98

A New Song for a Lasting Love

Do you know anyone who doesn't enjoy at least some type of music? Music "soothes the savage beast," so the saying goes, but can also comfort us in melancholy times or lift us from the ordinary to the sublime. We enjoy familiar songs, but there's something special about hearing a new song that rings our bell. We may need to hear or sing it more than once, but soon the catchy melody or compelling words have us adding the new song to our playlist of favorites.

What are some occasions that might call for a new song? Periodic spectacles such as the summer or winter Olympics traditionally come with new theme music. New movies, Broadway shows, or albums by musical artists call for new songs. Social campaigns such as the Civil Rights movement often birth new songs. In a church context, the dedication of a new building or the retirement of a long-time staff member sometimes leads to the commissioning of a new song.

Can you name one or two new songs that you first heard in the last 10 years? What makes them memorable to you?

Psalm 98:1

"O sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things ..."

A new song (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 98, which is similar in many ways to Psalm 96, would have been used in Israel's formal worship, whether at the temple or in festival settings. It is one of several psalms (24, 47, 93, and 95-100) that are typically called "Enthronement Psalms" because they celebrate Yahweh as king over all things.


The poet's summons to "sing to the LORD a new song" (v. 1a) may suggest that the psalm was written for a special occasion, perhaps to celebrate a military victory or the crowning of a new king. It could also have been sung at an annual festival celebrating Yahweh as king, when the Ark of the Covenant might have been brought out for public admiration, then marched at the head of a joyous procession as it was returned to its honored place in the Holy of Holies, an earthly analogue to the heavenly throne room.

The psalm falls naturally into three sections: an initial call to praise with reasons for why such praise is appropriate (vv. 1-3), a further and more detailed summons for people to give joyful praise to Yahweh as king (vv. 4-6), and a closing call for creation itself to celebrate the coming of Yahweh as a righteous judge (vv. 7-9).

Why was divine praise so timely and essential? Because God "has done marvelous things," the psalmist said.

But what marvelous things did he have in mind? The psalmist does not give specifics. Verses 1b-2 suggest that the new song may have been composed on the heels of a military victory in which Yahweh was thought to have played a crucial role. "His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory," the author sang. "The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations." (See "The Hardest Question" online for more on the significance of God's right hand.)

The term translated as "victory" three times in vv. 1-3 (NRSV) is derived from the Hebrew verb *yāsh'a*, and is more commonly translated as "deliverance" (NET11) or "salvation" (NET). Israel's historical memory often centered on military victories, so the translation is not inapt.


The Israelites believed that Yahweh had ordained certain battles to be fought, and that Yahweh would fight for them when they were faithful, assuring victory against any odds. 

We cannot know whether the psalmist had in mind a particular victory, perhaps a recent one, or if he was celebrating Yahweh's ongoing role in creating and delivering Israel as a people, then empowering leaders such as David and Solomon to expand the kingdom through military means. The generic terminology and lack of any particular enemy's name suggests that his psalm celebrates the ongoing heritage of God's mighty acts rather than a particular victory. And, we should note that the psalmist's concept of divine deliverance went beyond success in battle: salvation comes in many forms.

Additional information at
nurturingfaith.net



The psalm appears to have come from a time of strength for the Hebrew people, for the psalmist claims that God’s righteousness (NRSV vindication) has been revealed “in the sight of the nations” (v. 2b) and “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God” (v. 3b), presumably through the ascendance of Israel on the international stage.

The psalmist credits this to God having “remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel” (v. 3a). This affirmation of Yahweh’s character, drawn from Exod. 34:6 and often recalled (2 Sam. 2:6, 15:20; Ps. 25:10; 61:7, 86:15, 89:14), was a reminder of the special covenant between God and Israel, one in which Yahweh promised to show steadfast love and faithfulness to Israel, expecting loyalty in return. There was no question in the psalmist’s mind that Yahweh was living up to the divine end of the arrangement. 


A joyful noise (vv. 4-6)

A faithful and loving God is worthy of praise, and the psalmist calls for a jubilant response. He addresses “all the earth” in v. 4, focusing on the earth’s people in vv. 4-6 and the forces of nature in vv. 7-9.

Note the author’s use of repetition as a connective device: worshipers are to “. . . break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody.”


Modern translations sometimes mask the ebullience of this text. “Make a joyful noise” is much tamer than the text’s imperative “Shout!” – the “joyful” aspect has to be drawn from the context. “Break forth into joyous song” translates “Break out with a ringing cry!” Since the shouting and loud cries are associated with the last verb, “sing praises,” we assume that

the shouting and ringing cries would be exuberant counterpoints amid a congregation of people singing joyfully at the tops of their voices.


The ancients had no pipe organ to amplify the sound of singing, but trumpets and horns joined the chorus, according to v. 6. The word for “trumpet” indicates a narrow instrument made from hammered silver rolled into a tube (Num. 10:2).  The “horns” were ram’s horns, which are largely hollow, with a tiny mouth-piece cut into the pointed end. Called a *shōfar*, the ram’s horn can still be heard accompanying bar mitzvahs or weddings in some Jewish circles. Though hard to blow, the *shōfar* produces a high, piercing wail.

One can only imagine how the combination of loud singing, stringed instruments, and untuned horns and trumpets must have resulted in a raucous tribute to God. The “joyful noise” associated with temple worship must have rivaled that of soccer matches in South Africa, where excited fans punctuate their cheers with long plastic horns called vuvuzelas. Can you imagine the reaction if such uninhibited praise should erupt during Sunday worship in your church?

A coming judge (vv. 7-9)

Caught up in a frenzy of adulation, the psalmist imagined the natural order joining the chorus of people singing praise to God: “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who live in it. Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy at the presence of the LORD . . .” (vv. 7-9a). 

The NRSV, perhaps overly influenced by the familiar KJV translation, underplays the psalmist’s intent. The word translated as “floods” – which might connote an occasional

rainstorm spawning happy puddles – is the standard word for “rivers,” and the term rendered as “hills” typically means “mountains.” The psalmist’s image was not of pastoral hills and rills, but of majestic mountains and mighty rivers rising up to pour out praise for the God who both creates and continues to act in the world. 

And why should all the world’s people and even the earth itself reverberate with praise to God? Because “. . . he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (v. 9b). This confession acknowledges that life before God has three tenses: God’s creative and saving work of the past has significance for the present and extends into the future, when God will one day come in judgment to set all things right – not only with the peoples of the earth, but with the earth itself.

The psalmist intuitively understood that the earth and its people are interconnected: God’s people have a responsibility to care for both. If we wreck the environment through careless exploitation, we make life hard for the people who depend on clean water, fresh air, and fertile soil – including ourselves. If we act in socially unjust or prejudicial ways against others, we diminish opportunities, disregard human rights, and run roughshod over the spirits of people who were created in God’s image.

The psalmist imagined a day when God would “judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.” That is a glorious thought, and one deserving of boisterous praise. In the meantime, however, the psalm reminds us that those who live in this world have a responsibility to treat the earth rightly and to act justly toward others – divinely inspired actions that are likewise worthy of praise. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 20, 2016

Psalm 46

When All Else Fails

The season we call “Thanksgiving” is appropriate for many reasons, most notably because it prompts us to stop and think – to be reminded of many blessings that should inspire gratitude.

Some of us have far more material goods or money in the bank than others, but you may have observed that some of the poorest people are the richest in thanks. Perhaps it is because, when one has so little, every blessing is appreciated more. Or, perhaps those who are not distracted by bank accounts, big houses, and expensive toys find it easier to stay in touch with the daily blessings of food, health, and life itself.

When you stop to think about thanksgiving, what comes first to your mind?

A refuge (vv. 1-3)

The poet behind Psalm 46 thought first of security: those who are at home with God can face even cataclysmic events without fear. The psalm expresses profound confidence and inner security: something the wealthiest of people can lack. It’s no wonder, then, that Psalm 46 has become a favorite “go to” text for those who face troubling days when

Psalm 46:10

“Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth.”

life experience seems to be preaching a contrary message.

The superscription of the psalm is interesting but not overly helpful. It is one of 11 psalms attributed to the “Korahites” or “sons of Korah,” who served various functions in the temple, from gate-keeping to “the work of the service” (1 Chron. 9:17-19). Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, and 87-88 are all attributed to the “sons of Korah.”

The superscription, an ancient notation not considered to be part of the psalm, includes instructions for the musical director, perhaps related to the tune or style of the music. Unfortunately, “according to Alamoṯh, a song” is too cryptic to be informative. The word *alamōth* means “young women,” but whether that describes a tune, a style, or that young women are preferred singers is unclear.

What is clear is that the psalmist is supremely confident in God’s care, no matter what comes: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (v. 1). That introduction is followed by a celebration of God as a refuge against natural disasters (vv. 2-3), a section that honors God’s protection against other nations (vv. 4-7), and a closing meditation that brings the two together (vv. 8-11). The image of God as a refuge begins the first section and concludes the other two (vv. 1, 7, and 11).

The Jordan Rift Valley, which runs between Israel and the Palestin-

ian West Bank to the west and Jordan to the east, marks a fault line that runs from the Jordan River’s genesis in the Hula Valley through the Sea of Galilee, the Dead Sea, and on through the Arabah to the Gulf of Aqaba.

It is a deep rift: land around the Dead Sea is the lowest point below sea level on earth (about 1,300 feet), and the deepest part of the Dead Sea is another 1,000 feet below. The fault remains seismically active, and earthquakes have been occurred since ancient times. Strong temblors in 1837 and 1927 reportedly killed about 4,000 and 300 people, respectively. Newspapers in Israel and Jordan regularly report minor quakes felt throughout the area.

The New Testament speaks of an earthquake powerful enough to split rocks and open tombs when Jesus was crucified (Matt. 27:50-53). Notably, the prophet Amos dated the beginning of his ministry to “two years before the earthquake,” a memorable temblor that probably occurred around 760 BCE.

We cannot know if the psalmist had experienced this earthquake or another one, or if he knew of them only from stories passed down, but vv. 2-3 clearly refer to the possibility of a major upheaval. The psalmist felt no trepidation, however. Trusting God as a refuge and help in times of trouble, he insisted: “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.”¹

The psalmist draws a picture of a major quake that changes the landscape and sends mountainous

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landslides tumbling into the sea, resulting in massive tidal waves that crash back against the shore and threaten to wash away coastal residents who weren't already buried beneath the rubble. 📌

The poet's words should not be read as confidence that God would never allow the faithful to be harmed by natural disasters, but as an assertion that God has control over the forces of chaos, typically symbolized by the churning sea, which no human can conquer. 📌 As an obedient worshiper, the psalmist does not fear whatever God may choose to bring.

A river (vv. 4-7)

The psalmist believed that God's power over the forces of nature extends to dominion over human nations, as well, and this is the subject of vv. 4-7. Having spoken of waters and mountains in the previous verses, the poet skillfully transitions to the next section by shifting to another mountain, a river, and "the city of God."

The imagery of the verse is captivating: "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (v. 4). The meaning of the verse, however, is a bit confusing.

On the one hand, we may assume that the city is Jerusalem, where the Hebrews believed God's presence, in some fashion, dwelt above the cherubim in the Holy of Holies. There is, however, no river in Jerusalem. It is possible that the psalmist is speaking metaphorically, for though Jerusalem sits atop a steep hill and has no river, at the base of the hill is the strong Gihon Spring, which gushes clear water from the earth and provides the city with adequate water. In Hezekiah's time, a deep tunnel was cut through

bedrock, bringing the spring's water into the city, where it fed the pool of Siloam. That dependable stream surely brought gladness to the city. 📌

Imagery from both Canaanite mythology and early traditions about Melchizedek may also have influenced the picture. The Canaanites believed that the high god El sat enthroned at the head of two streams on lofty Mount Zaphon, a mythical mountain in the north, sometimes identified with Mount Hermon, which is often snow-capped and gives rise to the Jordan River. In v. 4, "the city of God" uses the title *Elohim* for God, while "holy habitation of the Most High" refers to God by the title *Elyon*. 📌

The story of Abraham and Melchizedek (Genesis 14) describes "King Melchizedek of Salem" as the "priest of God Most High." The term "Salem" almost certainly refers to Jerusalem, and "God Most High" translates *El Elyon*. The Hebrews came to believe that *El Elyon* of "Salem" and Yahweh of Hosts, the God of Jacob (v. 7), must be the same God.

As far as our text is concerned, the poet's point is that because God dwells in the city (probably Jerusalem), "it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns" (v. 5) 📌 The temple was in Jerusalem, and it is most likely that the psalmist was, too. He did not fear attacks from other nations, because he did not believe God would allow the city to be conquered. 📌 The psalmist must have been confident that the people in his day were living up to their covenant obligations, because God's promises of victory were conditioned on Israel's obedience.

The psalmist again flashes poetic skill by using some of the same words to describe the nations that he had previously used for the earthquake-stricken mountains and sea. The city

of God does not "totter" (better "slip" or "slide"), as the tottering mountains slid into the sea, but "the kingdoms totter" and fall. As the seas "roared," so "the nations are in an uproar" (using a different form of the same verb). When God "utters his voice" – a reference to the sound of thunder – "the earth melts," as do God's enemies.

The section concludes with a confession that "The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge" (v. 7). The same confession, which echoes v. 1, will be repeated at the end of the psalm, in v. 11.

A reminder (vv. 8-11)

The psalmist closes by bringing together God's rule over both the earth and its people. God has brought desolations on the earth (v. 8) while bringing wars to an end, presumably in Israel's favor. In language reminiscent of the "swords into plowshares" prophecies of Micah and Isaiah (Mic. 4:1-4, Isa. 2:2-4), the psalmist speaks of Yahweh breaking and burning the weapons of war to bring peace to the earth (v. 9).

This brings us to v. 10, a much-loved and often-quoted, but generally misunderstood verse. "Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted in the earth." We usually read the verse as an invitation to pause in our busy days and meditate on the goodness of God, but in context – whether addressed to Israel or the defeated nations – it calls for humans to cease their striving ("Quit it!"), recognize that God is king, and let God be about God's work of ruling the earth and bringing peace.

This does not diminish the importance of being still and pondering our place in God's world – its main purpose is to remind us of our place: God is king; we are not. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Nov. 27, 2017

Psalm 122

Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem

If you had the power to bring peace to any one city in the world, what city would it be? One might think of American cities torn by racial strife, European cities stricken by terrorist attacks, or Middle Eastern and South Asian cities that are ravaged by war. Any of those cities would welcome the sense of safety and hopeful optimism that comes with peace.

Of all the world's cities, however, none is more crucial to world peace than the city of Jerusalem. Modern visitors to the Old City of Jerusalem find it divided into Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Armenian quarters. The Old City is only a small part of Jerusalem, however. The more significant divide is between West Jerusalem, controlled by the Israeli government, and East Jerusalem, historically populated by Palestinians.

Since 1949, Israelis have occupied East Jerusalem, ignoring earlier peace agreements while building Jewish settlements on Palestinian land, erecting "separation barriers," and forcefully annexing portions of East Jerusalem. This has contributed greatly to ongoing strife, not only in Israel and the West Bank, but throughout the world: anger over perceived

Psalm 122:6

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
May they prosper who love you."

wrongs against Palestinians fuels much of the rage behind jihadists who bring terror to other cities.

If we should pray for the peace of any city in this hopeful Advent season, we should pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

A happy pilgrim (vv. 1-2)

Psalm 122 is one of 15 "Songs of Ascents," generally associated with pilgrims from the surrounding countryside who would travel to Jerusalem for one of the annual festivals. Persons living at some distance could visit Jerusalem only rarely, and each pilgrimage was a special occasion to be marked by singing and celebration.

The first verse of Psalm 122 has long been a favorite memory verse used in Sunday School or children's sermons: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"

Modern readers typically associate the verse with church attendance, but the original context pictures a time when town or village leaders would have organized periodic trips to Jerusalem, recruiting pilgrims like a modern minister organizing a trip to the Holy Land. Making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem involved long journeys by foot or donkey, camping out along the way. It could be a dangerous undertaking, best done in groups for protection against bandits who preyed

on lone travelers.

One such pilgrim, traveling in the company of others, is the likely author of this psalm. He speaks as an individual (vv. 1, 8-9), but also references "our feet" (v. 2) and addresses his companions (v. 6). He was glad to be invited to join the communal pilgrimage, and even happier to find himself "standing within your gates, O Jerusalem" (v. 2).

To this day, pilgrims to Israel and the West Bank often weep at their first sight of Jerusalem. It is hard for a believer to visit Jerusalem and emerge unmoved.

A mighty city (vv. 3-5)

The psalmist, standing inside of the city's impressive gates, gives voice to unadulterated joy, reciting three reasons for his love of Jerusalem. First, it is structurally impressive: "built as a city that is bound firmly together" (v. 3). The psalm likely dates to a period in the seventh or eighth century, when Jerusalem's strong walls had been expanded and fortified by defensive towers at crucial points. The city had become prosperous as the center of government and faith, culture and commerce; the economic engine of the surrounding area.

Keep in mind that the psalmist may have hailed from a village or small town, unaccustomed to urban life. If so, the city would have seemed even more splendid to him or her, a breathtaking amalgam of broad avenues, monumental buildings, and crowded markets. Sensing a connection between the majestic city and its powerful God, the author would

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have resonated with the poet behind Psalm 48:12-14: “Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.”

Secondly, the psalmist – so glad to be in Jerusalem – celebrated its role as the one location to which all “the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD” (v. 4).^U

Early in Israel’s history, the Israelites offered worship and sacrifice in a variety of places. After the temple was built in Jerusalem, however, Hebrew theologians came to believe that the people should bring their sacrifices, celebrate their festivals, and offer their worship in Jerusalem alone. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on this.)

This elevated the status of Jerusalem even more, making it a pilgrim site that all faithful Hebrews should visit as often as possible, especially during one or more of the three annual festivals.^U

Within its walls, Solomon’s temple was an impressive sight, built of skillfully cut stones and columns, gilded with gold at strategic points and gleaming in the sun from atop the temple mount. Public worship took place in the large courtyards surrounding the temple, for only priests could enter the sanctuary itself.

Jerusalem was not only an architectural marvel and host to the sacred temple, but it was also the seat of justice for the Hebrews: “there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David” (v. 5). The use of the plural for “thrones” refers to the respective thrones used by David, Solomon, and their descendants.

David was known for administer-

ing justice (2 Sam. 8:15), including a case related to his son Absalom (2 Samuel 14). Absalom, in turn, planned a coup and campaigned against his father, falsely accusing him of failing to render justice (2 Sam. 15:1-6). Solomon was famed for his wisdom pronounced in judgment (1 Kgs. 3:16-28).

Prophets such as Isaiah grew livid when they perceived that justice was not done (Isa. 1:21-26, 10:1-2, among others). Isaiah spoke hopefully of a future ruler who would “not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isa. 11:3b-4, see also Isa. 16:5).

Those who love a righteous God, by definition, also love justice. It’s no surprise that the psalmist celebrated Jerusalem as the center of both spiritual worship and the place where justice could be dispensed.

A prayer for peace (vv. 6-9)

Upon entering a home or city, Middle Easterners typically offered greetings of peace. Before David became king, while appealing to a landowner named Nabal for aid, he instructed his messengers to greet him by saying “Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have” (1 Sam. 25:6). Many years later, as Jesus sent his disciples on mission, he instructed them to find lodging with locally worthy folk. “As you enter the house,” he said, “greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you” (Matt. 10:12-13).

Filled with love for Jerusalem, the psalmist calls his companions to “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers’”

(vv. 6-7). The plea, in essence, is a prayer for the city to live out the meaning of its name: in Hebrew, *yerushalayim* means something like “foundation of peace.” The last part of the word is from *shalōm*, which means “peace,” “health,” or “wholeness.”

Having invited others to pray, the psalmist added his own entreaty and promise. While some believe he was fulfilling a promise to pray in behalf of friends and neighbors who could not make the journey, it is probable that his purpose is much broader: “For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good” (vv. 8-9).

The NRSV gives a wider nuance to the phrase “relatives and friends,” which literally means “brothers and neighbors.” This is appropriate, however, for the psalmist recognized the importance of Jerusalem to the entire community of faith – not just to his relatives and friends back home, but to all who looked toward “the house of the LORD our God.”

The psalmist understood that when Jerusalem experienced peace, the entire country was likely to enjoy security and rest. When the rulers practiced justice and the people sought righteousness, peace would not only prevail in Jerusalem, but pervade the towns and villages of the nation. To pray for the peace of Jerusalem was to pray for the welfare of all, but the psalmist promised to do more than pray: “I will seek your good,” he pledged.

Though much has changed since these words were written more than 2500 years ago, the central truth has not changed: indeed, it has broadened. To pray for the peace of Jerusalem – and to work for it – is not just a wish for the welfare of Israel, but a prayer for the world. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 4, 2016

Matthew 3:1-12

Starving for Hope

What does it take to get your attention during worship? Imagine that one Sunday morning, as the choir concluded the anthem, a bushy-haired wild man dressed in a burlap bag should come dancing down the aisle shouting “Good news! Repent! Good news! Repent! Good news! Repent!”

He would get your attention. He might even get attention from the police if an overzealous member should dial 911. It’s unlikely that anyone would sleep through *that* service.

No one went to sleep when John the Baptist preached, and he did not have to invade the quiet synagogues of Judah to get an audience. John went out into the wilderness near the Jordan River, started shouting, and people came out in droves to hear him.

Why?

John the prophet (vv. 1-5)

Jesus’ cousin was no ordinary character. He would probably have attracted an audience no matter what he said, for it was evident to any good Hebrew that he looked like a reincarnation of Elijah the prophet, and they had been hoping for Elijah’s return. ↓

The Jewish people of Jesus’ day

Matthew 3:2

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

were anxiously awaiting a Messiah to come and rescue them from Roman domination. They wanted God to put the promise back in the Promised Land. Rabbis reminded them that the great prophet Isaiah had spoken of a messenger who would appear in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Lord’s coming (Isa. 40:3).

And, one of the last prophets of the Old Testament period had predicted that just before the Messiah came to usher in the world-changing “Day of the Lord,” Elijah the prophet would reappear on the earth to get people ready. A tradition recorded in 2 Kings 2 held that Elijah did not die a normal death, but was transported from the earth by a whirlwind that was escorted by a fiery chariot. Five hundred years later, the prophet Malachi was inspired by a vision and made a promise:

“See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes, He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse” (Mal. 4:5-6).

If you were hoping to see Elijah one day, how would you recognize him? Anyone who studied the scriptures or listened to the rabbis knew that Elijah had lived in the wilderness, eating what the land provided and wearing nothing more than a piece of rough cloth woven from animal hair about his waist, cinched up with a piece of leather (2 Kgs. 1:8).

Elijah’s appearance was so distinctive that no one who had seen him would fail to recognize him again. King Ahaziah of Israel once fell through the lattice of his upstairs porch in Samaria and injured himself. He sent messengers to inquire of the god Baal-Zebub in his behalf, but Elijah intercepted the messengers. He said, “Go tell that worthless king: ‘Is there no god in Israel, so that you have to consult Baal-Zebub? You’re a dead man.’”

When Ahaziah heard this, he asked the messenger, “What did this man look like who told you this?” The messenger replied, “All he had on was a waistcloth made from hair and leather belt to hold it up.” The king said, “*That’s Elijah!*” (2 Kgs. 1:1-8).

Nine hundred years later, John showed up looking like a wild man. He dressed in camel’s hair, lived in the desert, and offended just about everybody he met. He lived off the land, getting his protein from dried locusts and his carbohydrates from wild honey (v. 4). When people looked at him, they thought “*That’s Elijah!*” ↓


John the preacher (vv. 2, 7-10)

John not only *looked* like Elijah; he *sounded* like him. Elijah had called for the leaders of Israel to repent of their idolatry and return to the Lord before it was too late. When John started preaching to anyone in shouting distance, this was his message: “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near” (v. 2). ↓


The word “repent,” in biblical language, means to turn around. It means to change our minds and change our ways. It means to turn away from

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selfishness and idolatry so we can turn toward God and experience forgiveness and right living. We demonstrate the reality of repentance through the positive changes in the way we live and relate to others, what Jesus meant by the challenge to “bring forth fruit worthy of repentance” (v. 8). 

John’s fervent message was compelled by his belief that the kingdom of heaven had come near, that God was close by and doing something new. When the gospel writers talked about the “kingdom of heaven” or the “kingdom of God,” they were referring to the rule or reign of God. They were certain that God rules whether we like it or not, whether we believe it or not. They also believed people can choose whether to live obediently and trustfully as God’s subjects.

John’s preaching took on a special urgency because the Messiah was coming, and would soon be revealed. “I baptize you with water for repentance,” he said, “but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (v. 11). 

Through Jesus Christ, God was about to show the world just what the kingdom was all about – what it truly meant to know God and to be known, to love God and to experience God’s love. The coming of Christ would also set in motion a process of judgment. To those who accepted him, Jesus would become a stepping-stone to the kingdom. To those who rejected him, Jesus would become a stumbling block they couldn’t get past.

Unlike much of today’s feel-good preaching, John majored on judgment, with language that was as shocking and colorful as his appearance. He used strong words and striking images to declare the coming danger, directing

his harshest criticism toward those who considered themselves to be the most religious. John called the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers” and urged them to repent. He warned of approaching destruction if they did not produce some proof of repentance (vv. 7-12).

Note John’s graphic imagery: he pictured the most “righteous” people around as a den of snakes, squirming away from imminent danger. He spoke of God raising up faithful children from river rocks. He pictured a whistling ax slicing into the roots of impressive but unfruitful trees, clearing them out so truly repentant persons might take their place. He called to mind a farmer’s winnowing fork throwing threshed grain into the air to separate it from useless chaff.

Why would people from Hebron to Nazareth come trotting out into the desert to hear a sermon like that? Because they were curious? Because they were afraid? Or because they knew it was time for a change?

The ax and the winnowing fork in particular were images of change: of clearing out the old and bringing in the new. They were also images of danger and of hope. While they threatened destruction to those who rejected the message, they also promised the possibility of grace and a future to those who were ready for it.

John called for people to repent, and that’s essentially what “repent” means: it means to change, to turn away from the crooked road that leads to destruction, and turn toward the path of life.


Some people don’t like change. Herod Antipas didn’t like change, and his wife Herodias liked it even less, and so they took John’s head off and served it up on a platter (Matthew 14). They were happy with the *status quo*. They did not want anyone threatening

their security or their self-image. But multitudes of others came out to hear John preach because they were looking for change, and John dared to speak of what change requires.

Many people resist change: the prospect of changing jobs, houses, schools, or churches can cause all sorts of alarms to go off in our heads – and the hardest change to make is precisely the one that takes place right there – in our heads. The hardest change to make is a change in our self-image, a change in the way we think, a change in our personal behavior, a change in our lifestyle. Any good psychologist can tell you that change is hard.

People cannot begin to change unless they first believe in the possibility of change. This was John’s message. Everything about John, from his strange appearance to his shocking sermons, was different. That difference in John symbolized the truth that we can also be different.

John the Baptist (v. 6)

John had a very special way of demonstrating that change to people: he baptized them. John’s baptism was no quiet ceremony in an elevated sanctum where quiet organ music played in the background. It had little resemblance to the carefully orchestrated lustrations by which Jewish proselytes or Essene devotees baptized themselves. 

This was something radical, something with an edge. This was Weird John standing waist-deep in the Jordan River, taking repentant sinners by the scruff of the neck and dousing them in the muddy water as an unforgettable reminder that, through repentance, their lives had changed forever.

Could your life benefit from some changes? What changes do you need most? **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 11, 2016

Matthew 11:2-11

The Real McCoy

Did you ever think you had someone figured out, only to be surprised when they went off on an entirely different tack than you ever expected?

Perhaps you've made a new friend at some point, enjoying the many things you had in common. Later, though, you learn things about your friend that are surprising or puzzling. You wonder whether you have been deceived, or if you simply misunderstood – or if you still don't fully understand where the friend is coming from. Such was the case with John the Baptist and Jesus.

When John baptized his cousin, he felt led of God to declare that Jesus was “the coming one,” the Messiah of God who had been at the heart of Jewish hopes for many years. John expressed this confidence in terms of common messianic expectations that Jesus would bring judgment to the wicked and vindication to the righteous.

“The axe is laid to the root of the trees,” he had said, so that all who failed to bear good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire (Mat. 3:10). “His winnowing fork is in his hand,” John went on, so he could gather in the harvest of good seed while separating the chaff (Matt. 3:12).

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Matthew 11:2-3

“When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”

John's own testimony suggests that he, like Jesus' own disciples and many others of his day, expected Jesus to position himself as a powerful messiah who would dispense with the Romans, judge the wicked, and make all things right with the world. Instead, Jesus went around healing people and preaching a gospel that called for repentance but majored on love. In Matthew 5-10, the gospel writer portrays Jesus as a conundrum within his world. No one knew just what to make of him.

A question and an answer (vv. 2-6)

Maybe this is why Matthew chose to insert a question from John the Baptist at this point. Jesus' response speaks to the issue of his identity and his unexpected behavior, pointing to often-overlooked prophecies that spoke of a Messiah who was more servant than soldier. 📖

Matthew had reported in 4:12 that John had been imprisoned, though he does not relate the story of John's arrest until chapter 14. 📖 There we learn that John had been jailed after daring to publicly castigate Herod Antipas, who ruled over Judea and Samaria, for his immoral lifestyle.

The story has all the makings of a soap opera. Herod's brother Philip,

who ruled the outlying territories of Galilee and Perea, had married a woman named Herodias, who reportedly lusted for power. Though Philip may have been the most able ruler of the three brothers, he seemed content to rule his quiet provinces. This did not satisfy Herodias, who violated Jewish custom by taking the initiative to divorce Philip, and then married his brother Antipas, who had greater political aspirations. Ultimately, her prodding led Antipas to pressure Rome for the title of king. The gambit backfired: Antipas was deposed in 39 CE, after which he and Herodias were banished to Gaul.

It was this ill-gotten marriage that John had dared to criticize, and it was this Herodias who later demanded John's head, though Antipas himself was less than excited about the execution (Matt. 14:1-12). Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, suggested that John's arrest resulted from the paranoid Antipas' fear of John's popularity.

Antipas had tried to silence John by holding him in a rustic wilderness fortress at Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea and as far from everyone else as he could get him. Despite the remote location of his prison, John heard rumors of Jesus' activities from disciples who came to bring provisions and comfort. John was confused by what he heard, and sent messengers to ask Jesus if he had been mistaken about his identity. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more on John's confusion.)

Take note that John never suggested any doubt of Jesus' integrity, for he addressed the question directly to him and anticipated a truthful

answer: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (v. 3). The word translated “another” means “another of a different kind,” suggesting that Jesus’ ministry was not what John had expected. Had John been mistaken about who the Messiah was, or what kind of Messiah he was to be? 🇺🇸

Jesus did not answer the question directly, but responded by pointing to “what you hear and see,” events that Matthew had previously recorded in chapters 5-7 (Jesus’ teachings) and chapters 8-9 (Jesus’ miracles). Jesus’ words and his works had fulfilled popular messianic prophecies such as Isaiah 29:18-19, 35:5-6, and 61:1-2.

The blind were seeing, the lame walking, and the poor hearing good news of the kingdom. Jesus’ added comment that lepers were healed and the dead raised goes beyond even the prophetic hopes (vv. 4-5). Jesus left it to John to make the necessary connections and conclude that he had no need to look for another: the one foreseen by the prophets had arrived already.

John’s problem was not with Jesus or his actions, but with his perception of Jesus’ mission. Jesus had fulfilled many prophecies, but not in the way many people expected. In his response, Jesus pronounced a blessing to those who took no offense but accepted him as the kind of Messiah he intended to be (v. 6). John was not offended so much as confused: he had failed to understand how the various prophecies complemented each other. 🇺🇸

While Jesus included the various miracles he had done as witness of his work, at the forefront was his proclamation of hope and joy to the poor and downtrodden. Eduard Schweizer noted that miracles were indeed signs of authority, but for Jesus, “miracles were not the point; what is most important in his ministry is what is

least pretentious – his message of love and hope” (*The Good News According to Matthew* [John Knox Press, 1975], p. 256).

A word of praise (vv. 7-11)

The dialogue between John and Jesus, carried on by messengers, would have been a public matter. Not wanting those who had overheard to have an incorrect perception of John, Jesus turned to the surrounding crowds and addressed the identity and role of John the Baptist.

Prophets, by definition, thrive on certainty. Some, perhaps, may have thought that John’s evident confusion about Jesus’ actions meant the onestewart prophet had become weak and wavering. Lest they lose respect for John because of his uncertainty, Jesus made it clear that John was not like the windblown reeds that lined the Jordan River, where John baptized. Nor was he some wimpy royal courtesan lounging in silk pajamas, such as those who populated the Herod brothers’ palaces (vv. 7-8).

The stern and ascetic John was no softie. Clad in his trademark camel hair and leather, he was nothing less than a prophet, Jesus insisted, and deserving of respect. Indeed, John was more than a prophet (v. 9): he was the culminating representative of all prophets who had come before. John did not just predict the Messiah, but *introduced* him.

It was impressive enough that Jesus called John a prophet, for many Jews believed that the age of prophecy had come to an end. Popular expectation, however, looked for a return of prophecy as a prelude to the Messiah’s advent. Some traditions such as Mal. 3:1 anticipated that a special messenger would come to announce the Messiah’s arrival: Malachi named

the coming prophet as none other than the great Elijah himself (Mal. 4:5-6).

Jesus endorsed John’s identity as this very person. He quoted Malachi’s prophecy (v. 10), and insisted that “among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (v. 11a). As the late Malcolm Tolbert once put it, “In terms of his character, his commitment to God, and the courage of his ministry, no greater man than John had ever been born” (*Good News from Matthew* [Nashville, Broadman Press, 1975], p. 101).

Yet, there was a paradox in John’s identity: though he was the greatest of all men, Jesus said, “yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (v. 11b). This statement has occasioned much discussion. What does Jesus mean?

Some argue that Jesus’ reference to the “least in the kingdom” was a reference to himself and thus a claim to being greater than John, but there is little to commend this view. It is more likely that Jesus’ statement is to be understood not in the context of John’s personal character, but of his position at the juncture of two ages. The old age of the law was passing, and with Jesus the new age of the kingdom was beginning. John, though greater than all who lived in the old age, would be martyred before Jesus fulfilled his kingdom-inducing ministry.

John was the forerunner of the kingdom, which so exceeded the old age that even the greatest of its heroes would be considered less blessed than the least of those in the new kingdom: all who choose to become Christ’s disciples enter a different plane of relationship with God. This is our great opportunity, marked this Advent season by the constant reminder of Christ’s arrival in our world. It’s an opportunity we don’t want to miss. **NFJ**

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 18, 2016


Matthew 1:18-25

The Invisible Man

Today's text is a story we have heard many times over, but without getting to know the main character very well. Joseph is the quintessential background player. He's the guy leading the donkey on Christmas cards, or the tall kid in the striped bathrobe who gets no lines in the Christmas pageant.

Is there more we can learn about this man who played such an important role in Jesus' early life, but who disappeared from the story before Jesus preached his first sermon?

Joseph's dilemma (vv. 18-19)

Mixed families are far more common now than in the first century. A surprising number of children in America – just over 40 percent in 2014 – are born to unmarried mothers. Fewer than half (46 percent) of U.S. children live in “traditional families” with two parents who are both heterosexual and in their first marriage.  Children living in “yours, mine, and ours” families may have multiple father figures, while others have no father in sight.



Life was different in the first century, at least within Jewish culture. There, marriage was the norm, divorce was rare, and single mothers were

Matthew 1:20b-21

“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

usually widows. This is not to suggest that the situation was ideal: marriages were typically arranged by parents, and children were often married by their mid-teens. In our time, when adolescence sometimes stretches into the late 20s, this may sound strange – but that was the world into which Jesus was born.

Stories in both Matthew and Luke insist that God brought about Mary's miraculous pregnancy while she remained a virgin. Joseph, then, was not Jesus' biological father – but he was his legal father.

This is why, perhaps, Matthew traces Jesus' bloodline through Joseph, even though Jesus had none of his blood. The genealogy (1:1-17) is clearly stylized and somewhat artificial. It begins with Abraham and goes forward to Jesus, marking 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 more from David to the exile, and another 14 from the exile to the birth of Jesus. On close examination, the numbers don't all add up and several kings known to be in the line are omitted, but Matthew's purpose is clear.  

Matthew's intent was to identify Jesus as both a son of Abraham and “son of David” (1:1), a title that Matthew frequently uses. God had promised David that his descendants

would rule after him (2 Sam. 7:12). After the kingdom of Judah was destroyed and Davidic scions no longer ruled in Jerusalem, the Jews began to interpret the passage as a prophecy of a Davidic descendant who would arise as a Messiah and set up a new kingdom.

But let's return our attention to Joseph, the honest carpenter who was engaged to Mary when “she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (v. 18). Can you imagine how Joseph must have felt when Mary broke the news to him? Joseph did not have two millennia of Christian tradition to dull his senses to the shocking news that his betrothed wife-to-be was pregnant. Did he take the news calmly, or go to his shop and start breaking things? We may guess that Mary told him about her earlier encounter with an angel and the promise that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, but would Joseph have believed such a story?

Maybe not. But still, “being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace,” Joseph resolved to end their arranged marriage quietly (v. 19). Early Jewish writings suggest that parents often arranged marriages while their children were still in their early to mid teens. A ceremony before witnesses marked the betrothal as a binding agreement, with the wedding usually occurring about a year later.

During the betrothal period, the two were expected to get to know each other, but not allowed to have sexual relations. Even though a wedding had not taken place, the terminology of “husband” and “wife” could be used, as in v. 19. To break the engagement, one had to initiate formal divorce proceedings. Though Joseph planned to

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keep the divorce low-key, his desire to terminate the relationship suggests that he was not fully on board with Mary's explanation of the pregnancy. Would you have been?

The angel's revelation (vv. 20-21)

Amid Joseph's questioning turmoil, "an angel of the Lord" appeared to him in a dream, saying "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (v. 20).

We note with some surprise that the angel addressed Joseph as "son of David," the only time in Matthew's gospel where that refers to anyone other than Jesus. This continues to serve Matthew's purpose of identifying Jesus as a descendant of David.

The angel's speech drips with theological significance. It affirms that Jesus' conception is "from the Holy Spirit." Unlike Greek, Roman, or ancient Near Eastern myths in which lustful gods have sexual relations with human women or men, Matthew's account emphasizes God's creative power to generate a new life within Mary by spiritual means. 

Expectant couples in our day typically look forward to the first sonogram, hoping to learn the gender of their child months before its actual birth. Joseph did not gain that information from a gynecologist, but from the angel, who said "she will bear a son." More significant than gender, however, is the name to be given: "you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21).

The English name "Jesus" transliterates the Greek *Iēsous*, which is derived from the Hebrew name *Yehōshua* or the Aramaic *Yeshua*, typically translated as "Joshua." In the ancient world, names had greater significance than in modern

times, and generally indicated parental hopes for the character and destiny of the child. The Hebrew version of Jesus' name means "Yahweh is salvation."

The Jews of Jesus' day had long expected a messianic son of David to arise and deliver them from the power of the Romans who occupied the land, restoring Israel to its former glory as an independent nation. The angel's words, then, come as a surprise: the Messiah's purpose would be to "save his people from their sins" – not from Roman rule, but from their own human failures.


When Jesus began his ministry, he demonstrated such miraculous powers that many believed he could have led Israel to defeat the Romans, and activists were deeply disappointed to learn that Jesus was more concerned with sin than with soldiers. Yet, his mission to save people from their sins was far more profound and far-reaching than any military victory. While "his people" may initially lead us to think of the Jews only, and Jesus spoke of his ministry as beginning with the Jews, the gospel makes it clear that Jesus' ministry was to all nations (Matt. 28:19).

Matthew's explanation (vv. 22-25)

The angel's speech concludes with v. 21, so we understand vv. 22-25 as Matthew's commentary: he believed Jesus' birth fulfilled the prophecy of Isa. 7:14, which he quotes from the Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.


The text he quotes comes from a particular historical context in the neighborhood of 735 BCE. King Ahaz of Judah, who had come to the throne at age 20, was being pressured to join an alliance with Syria and Egypt in an effort to hold off military advances of the Assyrian king Tiglath Pileser. Isaiah cautioned Ahaz to stay out of the


coalition and trust Yahweh to defend the nation.

As a sign of God's faithfulness, Isaiah announced: "Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." The obvious purpose of the sign was to assure Ahaz of God's present power by predicting that a young woman – probably Ahaz's wife or possibly Isaiah's – would give birth to a son and call him "Immanuel," a Hebrew phrase meaning "God with us." 

Isaiah described the mother-to-be as an *'almah*, a Hebrew word used to describe a young woman of marriageable age. The word does not necessarily imply virginity, but the Septuagint translators used the Greek word *parthenos*, which specifically means "virgin."

The child Isaiah mentioned would have been born shortly afterward, but later Jewish interpreters began to read this verse as a messianic prediction of a child who would bring God's delivering power to bear in Israel's behalf. The translation "virgin" rather than "young woman" added to the belief that the coming child would be born under miraculous circumstances.

Joseph was sufficiently impressed by the dream to do as the angel had instructed. He did not divorce Mary, but went through with the formal marriage ceremony, taking her as his wife (v. 24). Even though they lived together, Matthew is careful to point out that they had no sexual relations until after Mary had given birth to a son, whom they obediently named Jesus (v. 25). 

We could profit from remembering that Joseph, who lived mainly in the background, was a crucial member of the Christmas cast: his obedience protected Mary's reputation and gave Jesus a stable home. May we express gratitude to Joseph, the invisible but essential man.  NFJ

Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

Dec. 25, 2016

Titus 3:3-8a

Why Christmas Matters

When Sunday falls on Christmas Day, it creates a conundrum for church leaders. On the one hand, we'd like to go full force with every service, thinking "What better day than Sunday to celebrate Christmas?" On the other hand, we are aware that Christmas in America has strong cultural as well as religious dimensions. Church leaders know that many parishioners will be traveling or hosting family celebrations at home, and church attendance is likely to be skimpy at best.

Would it be more charitable to take the pressure off of families and have an abbreviated service, or focus on a Christmas Eve service and cancel Sunday worship altogether? It can be a tough and sometimes unpopular call, but most churches will take the approach that if there are people who want to worship on Christmas, they should have the opportunity. 📖

Even churches that choose to hold worship services may forgo the Sunday School hour, which raises the likelihood that far fewer people than usual will be reading this lesson – but that's no good reason not to provide it.

While one might expect a lesson designated for Christmas Day to follow one of the Gospels' infancy narra-

Titus 3:5

"He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."

tives, we've chosen the lectionary option from the epistles. 📖 Why? The text we're considering doesn't tell the Christmas story, but it tells why the Christmas story matters.

A sinful people (v. 3)

In our text, Paul writes words of advice and encouragement to a colleague and "child in the faith we share" named Titus (1:4). Paul indicates that he had left Titus on the island of Crete to bring order to the churches and appoint elders to guide them (1:5). This is curious, since Luke's description of Paul's journeys in Acts does not include a sojourn in Crete other than a port call as he was being shipped to Rome as a prisoner. 📖

Paul cited a self-ascribed reputation of Cretans for lying, violence, and gluttony (1:12). Even today, "Cretan," like "Philistine," is sometimes used as a pejorative term. As a result, Paul wanted Titus to be especially careful in teaching sound doctrine while vetting and choosing good leaders for the churches.

After an extended self-introduction in which Paul stressed various aspects of his identity as an apostle (1:1-5), he gets quickly down to business. Paul begins with a list of requirements that Titus should follow in selecting church leaders (1:6-9), then offers advice for

older men and women (2:1-5), for younger men (2:6-8) and for slaves (2:9-10). He encourages all believers to be obedient to God, respectful of governing authorities, and courteous to one another, avoiding the evil behaviors they had once practiced (2:11-3:3).

This is where we begin, with a reminder that none of us are free from sin. All of us know what it is to hold misguided beliefs and to make bad choices. "For we ourselves were once foolish," Paul wrote, "disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another" (v. 3).

That's quite a depressing portrait. The catalog of sins seems to follow an intentional progression from disobedience to deception to desires so dishonorable that they cause alienation from others. When we become sufficiently disconnected from others, we begin to operate from a position of malice and even hate. Some of us may feel that we never went all the way down that path, but we all have spent time on the road to ruin.

The word "foolish" means exactly that, but in this context it may also suggest ignorance with regard to the gospel. "Disobedience" points to those who have heard the message and know what is right, but choose not to follow, "led astray" by faulty teachings or enslaved by their own "various passions and pleasures." Such self-focus can lead to a life dominated by evil (a better translation than "malice") and envy, which might make one seem "despicable" to others. People who feel despised have a tendency to hate in return.

Additional information at
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A loving God (vv. 4-5)

Such a sorry state to be in! But Paul rejoiced that God had other, better plans for us. He expressed this good news through a succinct recital of the what, how, and why of the gospel.

Verses 4-7, though broken up in English translations, constitute one long sentence in the Greek text. Critical editions of the Greek New Testament typically set the text in verse, as poetry. There is a certain rhythm to it when read in Greek, leading some scholars to propose that it might have been an early hymn. Whether sung as a hymn or not, the text's dense doctrinal content suggests that it was almost certainly recited in worship as an early creed or statement of basic beliefs.

Though the human condition is uniformly sinful (v. 3), God desired a better outcome for us, so “when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (vv. 4-5). This is the “what” of salvation.

Paul speaks of God's character in terms familiar to the Hebrews, who thought of Yahweh as “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6, reflected in Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15, 103:8, 108:4; Jonah 4:2). Paul speaks of God's “goodness and loving kindness” that led to the appearing of Christ as Savior, one whose saving grace is not dependent on our works or worthiness, but on God's merciful love alone. 📖

In v. 6, the creed turns to the “how” of salvation. We experience God's mercy “through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy

Spirit,” Paul said. This expression has given rise to multiple interpretations. The word translated as “water” (*loutron*) more typically refers to the act or place of washing (as in NET, NIV11, and KJV), usually for ceremonial purposes. Some readers see this as a reference to baptism, though Paul may have simply used “washing” as a metaphor for the work of the Holy Spirit, who God “poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (v. 6).

Some interpreters see “rebirth” and “renewal” as two different aspects of our salvation experience, with baptism marking our rebirth into a new relationship with God the Spirit bringing renewal through the change in our lives. Others argue that the two terms should be read as synonyms, with “renewal” added to clarify the meaning of rebirth (or “regeneration”), rather than to suggest a separate stage of experience. A different angle sees washing as the negative removal of sin, and rebirth/renewal as the positive influx of the Holy Spirit. (For more on this, see “The Hardest Question” online.)

A blessed hope (vv. 6-7)

However one wishes to parse the terms of relationship in v. 5, the obvious agent of change is the Holy Spirit, “poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.” God is not stingy with grace: the word translated “richly” could also be rendered “generously” (NIV11) or “in full measure” (NET). The Holy Spirit is available – fully available – to all who repent and trust in Christ for salvation.

Note the Trinitarian feel of v. 6. A clear doctrine of the Trinity did not develop until well beyond the New Testament period, but Paul's language here speaks of God in three ways: *God*

poured out the *Holy Spirit* through *Jesus Christ*. Texts such as this led to the later development of the belief that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exist in a triune reality as one God.

The rebirth and renewal we receive through God's grace working in Christ and empowering us with the Spirit has a purpose that includes our transformed lives on this earth, but also extends beyond it. Here is the “why” of salvation: “so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (v. 7). The presence of the Spirit, as Paul told the Ephesians, is the present guarantee of our future life with God (Eph. 1:13-14).

To be “justified” is to be made right with God. W. Hulitt Gloer describes it as being “right-wised,” taking lives that sin had turned upside down and turning them right side up: “... in Christ we have caught a glimpse of what right-side up really looks like and, reborn and continually being renewed by the Spirit, we can begin to live ‘right-wised’ lives” (*1&2 Timothy, Titus*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentaries [Smyth & Helwys, 2010], pp. 84-85).

Those who have become right with God become “heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Here Paul speaks of an inheritance that is not just “pie in the sky by and by,” for it has both present and future dimensions. We experience the comforting and inspiring presence of God in our lives now, empowering us to live different and “renewed” lives. We also live with the assurance of a coming day when we will know God's amazing grace even more fully, and for eternity.

“The saying is sure,” Paul concluded (v. 8a). 📖 You can believe it.

And that's why Christmas matters. NFJ

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RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

Rick Bennett is the field coordinator for Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, coming from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Elkin, N.C.

J. Harwood Cochrane of Richmond, Va., died July 26 at age 103. He was the founder of Overnite Transportation Co., a major trucking business. A longtime member of Richmond's Tabernacle Baptist Church, he strongly supported community and Christian causes, including Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

Jason Coker joined the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as field coordinator for Mississippi and director of Together for Hope, CBF's rural poverty initiative. The Mississippi native previously served as pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in Wilton, Conn.

Lauren Efrid is pastor of Greenwood Forest Baptist Church in Cary, N.C., where she was associate pastor for five years.

Mike Gregg is pastor of Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, coming from Northside Drive Baptist Church in Atlanta where he served as associate pastor.

Desmond Hoffmeister died Aug. 20 in Granada Hills, Calif., at age 56. He was former executive minister for American Baptist Churches of the Rocky Mountains.

A native of South Africa, he was known as an outspoken leader for justice and reconciliation.

Bob Phillips died Aug. 28 in Chapel Hill, N.C., at age 76. A longtime advocate for justice, he served for many years as Baptist campus minister at the University of North Carolina and was a member of Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill.

Kenna "Lucky" Ray of South Charleston, W.Va., is executive director of American Baptist Men USA (ABMen USA).

Paul Rollet has been appointed as an associate missionary by American Baptist International Ministries to serve in the Philippines with Companion with the Poor in metro Manila.

Charles Z. Smith died Aug. 28 in Seattle at age 89. He was an active member of First Baptist Church of Seattle and served as president of American Baptist Churches USA in 1976-77. He was the first African-American state Supreme Court justice in Washington.

Fred Witty Jr. of Johnson City, Tenn., died Aug. 12 at age 93. He was a member of Central Baptist Church there. He served as Baptist campus minister at the University of Louisville and then at East Tennessee State University until his retirement in 1993.

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Myth and reality

Mormon narrative of persecution, religious liberty facing new light

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

Public schools allow release time for students to attend classes of religious indoctrination. The legislature is dominated by one religion.

Lawmakers consult with religious authorities systematically for direction on legislative agendas. Alcohol and other laws concerning public morality are determined by religious authorities of a majoritarian faith that owns or retains a stake in the largest newspapers — and many of the largest corporations and universities.

“Where?” you ask. “Colonial America?” “Somewhere in the Middle East?” Guess again.

Today’s Utah is the legacy of the early 19th-century vision of Mormon founder Joseph Smith to establish upon earth a theocratic Kingdom of God.

MAJORITY

Majoritarian religions have long been a part of the American landscape. Establishment Congregationalists and Anglicans benefited from church-state unions in the colonial era. Many states from the mid-19th to mid-20th century, politically dominated by Protestants, allowed Bible reading in public schools and mandated blue laws curtailing various activities on Sundays.

Historically, Mormons have continuously comprised an overwhelming majority of Utah’s legislature, and hence the government. In the present day, Utah’s Mormons and non-Mormons universally agree that the Mormon Church, also known as the Latter Day Saints (LDS), oversees the state’s governance.

Alongside the Mormon-controlled legislature, LDS leaders typically remain officially silent unless legislation involves a moral issue that intersects with Church doctrine. To prevent disconnect between the state and the Church, legislative leaders routinely meet with the Mormon Church’s Public Affairs Committee, effectively receiving the Church’s blessing or veto of legislative agendas.

Church leaders explain the synergistic working relationship between Church and state as a step short of theocracy, noting that Utah is governed by Mormon legislators rather than religious authorities.

Many non-Mormons, however, are quite certain they live within a theocracy and question why the Utah legislature is allowed to violate the First Amendment separation of church from state.

They point to state-approved Mormon “seminaries” adjacent to public schools, Church-mandated restrictions on alcohol, and Mormon-driven anti-LGBT legislation

(under the guise of “religious freedom”) as some of the more blatant examples of theocratic components of Utah’s government.

HISTORY

Adding to the surreal nature of Utah’s longstanding, quasi-theocratic government, LDS officials, claiming unwarranted persecution of their faith in the past, publicly proclaim their allegiance to religious liberty for all. Reality, however, does not match official LDS history.

Early Mormonism was not only theocratic, but also fraudulent, sexually licentious, violent and militant in nature, a narrative of which the digital age has allowed widespread dissemination through primary materials.

Faced with abundant historical evidence contradicting the official sanitized version of LDS history, many Mormon leaders, scholars and members at large, disillusioned and upset by the Church’s betrayal, have left.

LDS authorities are working to stop the hemorrhaging of members, which one Mormon scholar calls “an epidemic,” through an online public relations campaign that partially admits to, but downplays, troubling elements of LDS history.

Many scholars say the Church’s efforts to address the faith’s true history are too little, too late.

OPPOSITE: Mormon influences on scenic Utah are noted from the naming of Zion National Park to modern restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages as well as other legislation. Photo by John D. Pierce.



'TRUE CHURCH'

Birthered during the Second Great Awakening, at a time of religious fervor in America characterized by a desire on the part of many to restore the “true church” and evidenced in the creation of many new sects, Mormonism was the invention — according to period eyewitness accounts, court records and newspaper articles of the 1820s to 1830s — of a con man.

In 1832 Joseph Smith, a juggler (fraudster), treasure-seeker and sexual offender brought to court on several occasions, claimed to have had a vision from God near his home in upstate New York in 1820.

Multiple first- and second-hand stories of the 1820 vision, often conflicting, exist. Generally, the accounts purport that God revealed to Smith that Christianity was an “abomination” and charged Smith with establishing the “true church of God.”

From this and various other conflicting visions in the 1820s, Smith in 1830 published his *Book of Mormon*, claiming that it superseded the Bible.

Opponents of Smith then and scholars today note that Smith plagiarized from (variously) the King James Bible, the Apocrypha and several other books in circulation at the time. In the early 1830s the *Palmyra Reflector* in New York, for example, spilled much ink documenting the

“well known” fraudulent claims of Smith pertaining to his alleged religious visions and spurious *Book of Mormon*.

Also in 1830 Smith and a handful of followers established the “Church of Christ” (in 1834 renamed “The Church of the Latter Day Saints,” and in 1838 “The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints”) as the world’s one true Church.

PERSECUTION?

Married since 1827, Smith added sexual license in 1831 to his growing list of visions, declaring that God revealed to him that the Old Testament practice of plural marriage, or polygamy, should be reinstated in the one true church.

Smith’s vision possibly signaled his affinity for free sex as embraced by several other religious communities of the time, including the nearby Oneida community in upstate New York. Some who knew Smith noted that he was overly amorous.

Theology, however, was not foremost in the minds of the fathers and husbands whose daughters and wives Smith claimed as his own in the name of God. For years the target of numerous sexual allegations involving young women, in 1832 Smith received a tarring and feathering in Hiram, Ohio, for having sex with a teenager.

Forced to flee Ohio, from this incident

the mythological narrative of Mormon persecution took root.

Concurrently in 1831, Joseph Smith decreed that God had chosen western Missouri as the place where the true church was to establish “Zion” in anticipation of Christ’s second coming. He instructed his lieutenants, “elders,” to move to Jackson County and begin purchasing large tracts of land in and near Independence upon which to settle Mormons.

By 1833 more than 1,000 Smithites had relocated to Missouri. Overwhelming the frontier county’s other residents through acquiring land, co-opting the business scene and seizing local political power through questionable means, Smith and his followers set about to create the New Jerusalem, a frontier theocracy.

REACTIONS

Non-Mormons of Jackson County recoiled angrily at the Smithites’ efforts to supplant democracy with theocracy. One Ohio editor, following Smith’s exploits from afar, wondered whether Jackson County would be governed by popular will or “dictated by Christ.”

In July 1833 hundreds of citizens in Independence, angry at Mormon aggressions and views, demanded that the newcomers leave immediately, which

they refused. Non-Mormon outrage often focused on religious literature published by the local Mormon printing press. An editorial in the Mormon newspaper speaking positively of “free people of color” in a state peopled by many southerners proved the last straw.

Like many northerners of the time, most Mormons were not opposed to slavery. Not reflective of Mormons at large and perhaps misunderstanding the seriousness of the situation, the following day the writer insisted that Mormons took no position on slavery. Unsatisfied, a group of citizens burned the printing office.

In a subsequent encounter between the citizens and a Mormon elder, the LDS leader claimed he was unjustly tarred and feathered. Sworn statements from others testified that the sticky treatment was applied only after the Mormon assaulted his opponents.

Thereafter, the Smithites agreed to leave Jackson County by the end of the year. Violent clashes continued in the interim, the Mormon faithful using the conflict to further the emerging narrative of persecution.

The Mormons relocated to the Missouri frontier north of Independence, where the pattern of sexual license, fraud, intimidation, political shenanigans and violence continued. There Smith had another sexual affair, claiming polygamy as his defense. One of his lieutenants referred to the episode as a “dirty, nasty, filthy affair.”

Also in Missouri, Smith ran afoul of the law and many believers alike, who accused him of financial fraud. Many left the faith.

In 1838 some who remained loyal to Smith declared that if locals tried to “disturb” Smith they would enact “a war of extermination” upon Missourians. “We will follow them till the last drop of their blood is spilled, or else they will have to exterminate us,” Smith’s defenders decreed.

A subsequent attempt by citizens to prevent Mormons from stuffing ballot boxes led to a civil war in four Missouri counties, where a Mormon militia fought the Missouri militia in the Battle of Crooked River.

The governor of Missouri then ordered the expulsion of Mormons. Using the same extermination rhetoric as some Smith

loyalists, he fueled the narrative of Mormon persecution: “The Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the state, if necessary for the public good. Their outrages are beyond all description.”

More military clashes followed, resulting in the defeat of the Mormons, imprisonment for Smith and the exodus of his followers from Missouri.

Escaping from prison, Smith fled to Illinois and established Nauvoo, a town designed to be the spiritual home of Mormons, now numbering more than 15,000. There the Church organized the Nauvoo Legion, soon the largest militia in the United States.

ASPIRATIONS

Smith also published another holy book, the *Book of Abraham*, allegedly translated from Egyptian papyri he had acquired. In the late 20th century, however, the papyri were located in a New York vault. First verified as authentic by the LDS church, the papyri were then translated by experts and determined to be Egyptian funerary texts. Smith’s “translation” was a fraud.

Meanwhile, Joseph Smith secretly married another woman, one of more than 30 he would marry over the next few years, many of whom were already married. Other Mormon men also began practicing polygamy.

Smith and the Church publicly denied the polygamous marriages in the Church-owned local newspaper, even as Smith quietly claimed to have received a formal revelation from God authorizing polygamy.

Firmly in control of Nauvoo, Mormons in 1842 elected Smith as mayor. He also held the title of General of the Nauvoo Legion.

Still smarting over his treatment in Missouri, Smith was briefly jailed for his alleged role in the attempted assassination of a former governor of that state. Afterward a grand jury in Missouri indicted Smith on treason, from which he avoided imprisonment.

With aspirations far greater than Illinois alone, the Mormon leader ran for president of the United States in 1844 on

a platform of “theodemocracy,” or democracy under religious rule, with God as the “lawgiver.”

That same year he created a Council of Fifty (also known as the “Kingdom of God”) to “establish a theocracy” in the western United States. The Council elected Smith as “Prophet, Priest & King.”

In this role, Smith decreed, “I calculate to be one of the instruments of setting up the kingdom of Daniel by the word of the Lord, and I intend to lay a foundation that will revolutionize the whole world.”

THEOLOGY

At the same time Smith formally constructed a theology of eternal marriage and the plurality of gods as the basis of Mormon doctrine. In short, observant male members of the one true church could become gods in the afterlife, each the deity of his own planet.

As gods, each would spend eternity spiritually impregnating his wife or wives, producing spirit children who would be born as humans on the deity’s planet, the males of which in turn could one day become gods, thus perpetuating the human-to-god cycle.

Eternal marriage is part of what is known as Mormon Cosmology or Space Doctrine, a unique theological construct embedded in two popular media franchises: the *Battlestar Galactica* television series and the *Twilight* novels and movies.

Husbands of wives and fathers of teenagers whom Joseph Smith secretly married and bedded did not take his actions kindly. In 1844 a Hancock County grand jury indicted Smith for polygamy, fornication and perjury.

Irate husbands and fathers, as well as others angered at Smith’s grandiosity, broke ranks with the Church and as dissenters established an alternative Nauvoo newspaper, the *Expositor*.

The first and only edition of the paper condemned Smith’s sexual affairs, doctrine of plural gods, political aspirations, and ordination as king as, variously, “false doctrine,” “iniquities,” “perversion,” “follies” and the like.

His dissenters criticized Smith for

attempting “to unite church and state” and deemed him the “most pernicious and diabolical character that ever stained the pages of the historian.”

In turn, Smith condemned the *Expositor* as printing libelous statements against him and ordered the press destroyed. Upon the burning of the newspaper office on June 10, 1844, a furor ensued as citizens, including many former Mormons in Missouri and Illinois, demanded justice.

As mayor, Smith placed the town under martial law to protect himself.

DECLARATION

Smith, the mayor/general/presidential candidate/prophet/king, declared:

“It is thought by some that our enemies would be satisfied by my destruction, but I tell you as soon as they have shed my blood, they will thirst for the blood of every man in whose heart dwells a single spark of the spirit of the fulness of the Gospel. The opposition of these men is moved by the spirit of the adversary of all righteousness. It is not only to destroy me, but every man and woman who dares believe the doctrines that God hath inspired me to teach to this generation.”

Smith’s claim of innocence and righteousness aside, the Hancock County Justice of the Peace ordered him arrested for inciting a riot, to which the Mormon leader rallied the Nauvoo Legion in his defense.

Incensed, the governor of Illinois sent a state militia to apprehend Smith, who was eventually arrested, placed in the Carthage jail, and charged with treason.

Loyal followers smuggled pistols to the jailed Smith. Chaos ensued when a large group of angry, local citizens burst into the jail in an effort to ensure that justice was finally meted out to Smith.

The Mormon leader tried to shoot his way out, wounding and/or killing up to four men before he was gunned down. Framed by loyal Church leaders as martyrdom, Smith’s death further stoked an internal narrative of Mormon persecution.

FURTHER WEST

Two years of uncertainty followed, after which one group of Mormons led by

Brigham Young, Smith’s successor, trekked yet further West. Settling near the Great Salt Lake of present-day Utah, they enacted Joseph Smith’s revelations concerning polygamy and theocracy.

Shunning federal laws, the Church established schools, regulated the court system, created its own controlling political party, raised a militia and administered the irrigation system — the latter no small matter in the arid West.

In 1857 U.S. President James Buchanan sent an armed force against Young’s theocratic government for resisting federal oversight. Young, backed by the Mormon militia, vowed to resist the federal government at all costs. In the midst of the tension some Mormon militia members slaughtered an innocent party of settlers in what became known as the Mountain Meadows Massacre.

Despite vows to violently resist federal authorities, Young eventually backed down and accepted the U.S.-appointed governor of Utah Territory.

For the next three decades tensions characterized the relationship between Utah’s Mormons and the federal government. In the face of LDS insistence upon maintaining theocracy and polygamy, the U.S. gradually imprisoned Church leaders and tried to police polygamy.

Turning to the federal court system, Mormons charged the federal government with violating their religious liberties. The resulting Supreme Court decision, *Reynolds v. United States* (1878), was the first to restrict religious liberty.

Polygamist George Reynolds argued that his religion required him to marry multiple women, a violation of federal law. The court ruled the law constitutional and determined it did not violate Reynolds’ First Amendment right to free exercise of religion.

DISSENT

In 1896 Utah was granted statehood, but only after the LDS Church renounced polygamy. Theologically, however, the Church did not rescind Joseph Smith’s revelation of the holiness of the practice.

Polygamy in some instances is still

practiced quietly in Utah, and by Mormons in other states. Although Mormon polygamy is portrayed glamorously in various reality television shows and movies, including *Sister Wives* and *My Five Wives*, many former wives and children of polygamous families speak of the emotional, psychological and physical abuse they endured.

In addition, Mormons yet dominate the state legislature to the point that common perception is that the Church Administration Building at the bottom of Utah’s Capitol Hill is the true seat of power.

Bud Scruggs, a political scientist at Mormon Brigham Young University, states rather simply the continuing influence of Mormons upon the state of Utah: “The fact is that there are religious people running the state.”

Official LDS teaching yet maintains that “The truthfulness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints rests on the truthfulness of the First Vision and the other revelations the Lord gave to the Prophet Joseph.”

Even as LDS leaders continue suppressing dissent, many otherwise faithful Mormons are publicly downplaying much of Joseph Smith’s life and teachings. Emphasis is placed on LDS business successes, social services programs, family-centric focus and patriotism. And unlike Joseph Smith, today’s Mormons consider themselves to be a part of the Christian community.

Whether or not the Church’s fine-tuning of Smith will stop the “epidemic” of desertions from the LDS faith is uncertain. Many current and former Mormons feel betrayed by the Church’s sanitized cover-up of its own history and angry at Church leaders’ disingenuous claims of “religious liberty” as the reason for Utah’s anti-LGBT legislation.

As one young, former Mormon warns, “Church leaders can crack down and continue to see members, especially young people, leave. Or they can allow church-wide dialogue and changes relating to the church’s historical and doctrinal claims, financial dealings, proselytizing and treatment of women, skeptics and outsiders.”

Utah’s quasi-theocracy may finally be unraveling. **NFJ**

Exhausted *but* Exhilarated

Mercer professor gives heart, miles and years to serving Liberian church leaders

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

When Rick Wilson is not in Liberia he is growing Liberian peppers at his Macon, Ga., home and turning them into hot sauce.

He also fulfills his assignments as chair of the religion department at Mercer University — where he will soon settle back into an administrative and teaching schedule that preceded his three-year commitment as “president on loan” for the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary.

Traveling from Georgia to Monrovia, Liberia, is not easy — spending more than 30 hours in planes and airports going in either direction. But Wilson has made the journey 20 times since 2007.

The challenges in Liberia are far greater, however, than any inconvenience of travel as the West African nation still struggles to overcome the aftermath of a destructive civil war and an ongoing grapple for power.

Eleven of Wilson’s trips were part of his official service to the seminary that concludes the end of this year. However, his love for and investment in the Liberian people will long continue.

ON LOAN

One of Wilson’s former students, Olu Menjay, president of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention, returned to his undergraduate alma mater a few years ago and visited with Mercer

University President Bill Underwood.

When Underwood asked how the university might assist his ministry in Liberia, Menjay responded: “I am looking for a president of the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary. Could you send me a president on loan?”

“My rationale for asking for a president for the LBTS has been that if we have great leadership of the LBTS and an outstanding seminary, our churches will definitely grow stronger,” said Menjay.

Menjay said he didn’t ask for Wilson, but was not surprised when Underwood turned to him as the first and obvious possibility. With the support of his wife, Lucy, and at the urging of Underwood and others, Wilson assumed the presidency of the struggling seminary.



“It has worked out well,” said Menjay of Wilson. “He is humble, tough and wise! He has learned so much about Liberia, more than the average Liberian.”

THE CALL

“I wish I knew,” said Wilson candidly, when asked why he would agree to such a demanding commitment. Then he put his larger response within historical context and personal experience.

He recounted the history of the West African nation as a colony for former slaves from America and the religious influences, including a strong Baptist presence. And he recalled his first visit to Liberia — for two weeks in February 2007 — at the urging of his friend Olu.

“It was shocking to me, absolutely shocking,” said Wilson of the destruction from the civil war that finally ended in 2003.

Destroyed roads and U.N. checkpoints slowed travel. The seminary was in shambles too. “After two days, I said, ‘Olu, this is too hard; this is hopeless.’”

His former student and native Liberian was “very pastoral,” said Wilson.

“Professor, maybe your eyes fall on the wrong things,” he recalled Menjay saying.

Olu pointed to some newly mowed grass and some smiling children — bright spots in an otherwise dismal scene.

“You need to decide what you choose to look at and then you’ll find hope,” said Menjay, who had returned to serve his Liberian Baptist people after completing a doctorate at Boston University.

Wilson confessed: “That was a conversion moment for me.”

Nearly a decade and additional trips later, Wilson committed to leading the seminary despite the many challenges. On Nov. 22, 2013, he was elected the fifth president of the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary.

“It was, indeed, a Macedonian call,” said Wilson. “My Liberian colleagues used that language and, finally, I came to accept its relevance.”

Wilson said he was not naïve about the context there — having gone back and forth since 2007. He was familiar with the seminary as well.

“I knew the history of failed presidencies, corruption, and the political struggles of Liberian Baptists,” he said. “Nonetheless, I was compelled to join the fray.”

INVESTMENT

“Rick has offered a renewed spirit of mutual respect and dignity...” said Menjay. “The academic and fiscal integrity of the LBTS has been repaired under his leadership.”

He also credits Wilson with rebuilding “a contextual curriculum” and “relevant theological education” as well as improving campus facilities.

Aaron Marshall, chair of the seminary trustees, also affirmed Wilson’s leadership. He credited Wilson with stabilizing the administration, rebuilding the infrastructure and improving academics.

“On a personal level, Dr. Wilson has shown the entire Baptist community in Liberia how to live the life as a servant of the good Lord,” said Marshall.

REFLECTIONS

“The history of the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary straddles — pardon the Dickens allusion — the best of times and the worst of times,” said Wilson.

Influential Baptist leader William R. Tolbert Jr., who assumed the presidency of Liberia in 1971, was the first African president of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), serving from 1965-1970.

In 1969, while the nation’s vice president, Tolbert asserted his influence and pressed hard for a seminary that became a

reality in 1976, said Wilson.

It was formed in partnership with Southern Baptists, said Wilson, but Tolbert was careful to ensure that the seminary would be Liberian. The first graduation took place in 1979.

In April of the next year Tolbert was assassinated in the executive mansion, said Wilson, allegedly by Samuel Kanyon Doe, a master sergeant in the Liberian Army.

“The horror that followed, including the deaths of many Baptists and the seizing of Baptist assets in the republic, still hangs in the air in Liberia,” said Wilson. “Now 36 years after Tolbert’s death, Liberian Baptists still yearn for the lost dream. In the midst of the yearning, however, we press forward.”

Wilson identified three lingering issues that make life in Liberia and at the seminary challenging. First, he said, the colonialists created dependency.

“There remains an expectation in Liberia that external influences are the primary hope for a better future,” said Wilson.

Second, he said, “missionaries, without malice, created a culture of entitlement.”

It was an era of deep pockets for mission agencies, willing and able to do *for* Liberians rather than *with* Liberians. “Every day I do battle with those realities,” said Wilson.

He finds it heartbreaking to tell Liberian Baptist leaders that he doesn’t have access to agency funding that they were once accustomed to receiving. “It is difficult to get people to believe that I’m not a money tree,” Wilson added.

Pervasive corruption in the republic is the third major challenge, said Wilson, noting that for years Liberia has been identified among the five most corrupt nations in the world.

“At the seminary we attempt to confront it, but are compelled to work with the system that is so deeply entrenched,” he said, adding that dozens of anecdotes could make this point stronger.

HIGH HOPES

“Beyond such systemic evidence we struggle with grinding poverty, poor health care and a



faltering economy,” said Wilson. Therefore, the seminary now practices “an aggressive work-study program that addresses the issues of dependency and entitlement.”

Gifts from supporters, primarily in the U.S., subsidize students who could not make it otherwise, he added. “We are making headway, but there is a long way to go.”

Wilson noted an increasing population of students from the interior who have commitments to return to their villages to plant churches and build schools.

The work of the seminary and Liberian Baptists in general is paying off, said Wilson, who has visited nine of the 15 counties in Liberia with his colleague and friend, Olu.

“Each time, we settle into the bush — in rural churches with unspeakable challenges — and conduct workshops and preaching events,” he said. “Every time, I return to my house exhausted and exhilarated.”

Such are the tensions with which Liberians live, he added.

“I don’t mean to be coy; I want to be honest,” said Wilson. “I have for decades adapted to the tension between high hopes and low expectations, yet my optimism always overshadows the reality of short-falls.”

Wilson said his experiences over recent years have been filled with defeat and despair, but the resilience and perseverance of his colleagues and students inspire him.

“I have high hopes for Liberia and beyond.” **NFJ**

Six self-inflicting wounds of American evangelicals

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Each day seems to bring another episode in the ongoing self-destructive saga of American evangelicalism. The dilemma is whether to ignore these abuses of the Christian gospel or to provide some alternative, though lesser, voice.

When choosing the latter, it is for good reasons. These are not minor, excusable missteps that we all make in our imperfect efforts to live faithfully in the ways of Jesus. They are continuous and damaging misrepresentations of the gospel and the church called to live out the way of Christ.

Here are six self-inflicted wounds that do considerable harm to the perception of Christianity and to the effectiveness of the church's mission.

ONE: PLAYING THE VICTIM

Most people know what persecution looks like, and it doesn't look like what many American Christians claim for themselves. Losing one's long-held cultural dominance through increasing diversity doesn't equate to persecution.

Suffering to some Christians seems to mean having to play by the same rules as everyone else. Yet the Bible and history reveal how the most faithful lived in trying times that we can't imagine.

If you can only be Christian when others do as you wish — even if coercion by government is needed — then your faith is too fragile.

TWO: PROCLAIMING A FEAR-DRIVEN, FEAR-INDUCING MESSAGE

Chicken Little appears cool and calm in comparison to many American Christians today.

What part of Jesus' "Fear not!" do we not understand? Where's the Good News?

There is an unjustifiable defensiveness among many conservative Christians today who reflect more talk-show political rancor than the gospel message. They act out of fear and induce fear in their gullible followers.

Stop the doom and gloom every time society shifts away from your personal comfort. Remembering how others feared changes — such as racial and gender equality — didn't bring the world to an end.

Change scares fundamentalists, but unfortunately it doesn't scare the hell out of them. It causes them to act in more hellish ways.

THREE: YEARNING FOR 'THE GOOD OLD DAYS'

We keep hearing calls from white, male Christian leaders for going back to a beloved time of spiritual bounty with no acknowledgment of the societal evils that existed.

It is offensive to all who didn't share in such bounty — and to those of us sensitive to the realities of those times.

Georgia Baptist editor Gerald Harris wrote an editorial in *The Christian Index* last Independence Day in which he played this idea to the hilt, writing that younger persons today "cannot possibly understand the spiritual bounty and blessings of life in America 50 years ago."

There was no acknowledgment that a half-century ago: black students attending formerly all-white schools in Grenada, Miss., were attacked by a white mob with chains, pipes and clubs; interracial marriage was still illegal in Virginia, leading to the arrest of a couple wed elsewhere; women

were excluded from attending most Ivy League schools; and many shelters and resources for abused women and children were yet to come along with the feminist movement.

Nothing is more out of touch with reality and the Christian gospel than for white American males to present as spiritually and biblically superior a time when they and their kind could succeed in a system stacked clearly in their favor.

Sadly, fundamentalism fears any future that doesn't look like a comfortable past — even if an imagined past was not so comfortable for everyone. "Bounty and blessings" for a favored few doesn't equal "liberty and justice for all."

It is far better to see the past for its mixed-bag reality and then to look ahead. There's a helpful biblical word for that: hope.

FOUR: MAKING 'RELIGIOUS LIBERTY' INTO A WEAPON

The good term "religious liberty" is being snatched and redefined by fundamentalist Christians (widely regarded as "evangelicals" by media) as a license to discriminate. They are not satisfied with the constitutional guarantees afforded all Americans.

Their initial claim seems benign if not beneficial: to guarantee religious freedom.

But scratch the surface of current political actions (aimed at LGBT persons) and one finds that the focus is not on the freedom of some persecuted minority but on their own licenses to discriminate.

Dig a little deeper and you'll find a mean-spirited agenda that seeks punitive actions against those viewed as "sinners" and a threat. Which leads to the next self-inflicted wound.

FIVE: PORTRAYING CHRISTIANITY AS 'GOOD GUYS' VS. 'BAD GUYS'

Fundamentalists create a divide among humanity in which everyone who is unlike them in belief and practice is portrayed as being in need of becoming like them.

They call it evangelism but, as noted above, it is judgment that should be reserved for God rather than a humble extension of “good news.”

For example, some talk about the concentration of “lostness” in their targeted areas — though one can hardly find a good measuring stick for the conditions of individual hearts. Other stats and projections have to be employed.

This good-guy/bad-guy divide creates an arrogant and alienating message: “We believe the Bible; you do not. We love God; you do not. We are saved; you are lost.”

How is that working? Talk with those disengaged from church — especially Millennials — and you will discover a startling revelation:

They are kind and gracious people doing much good in the world. Yet they see the church as less loving, kind and gracious than they choose to live.

The irony is that the very church leaders who think non-church people need confession, repentance and conversion just might be the ones most in need of such life changes.

It might surprise some to know that a lot of salvation and Jesus-like living occur beyond those who most loudly claim his name. Godly goodness is not so easily corralled by those counting their sheep.

It's time to face a harsh reality: Some people are too nice, too smart and too gracious to align with a group that labels them and/or many of their friends as the enemy and the targets of their faith.

SIX: OPPOSING SOCIETAL MOVES TOWARD JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Is there any issue of human equality for which conservative Christianity has taken a leading role rather than one of resistance? I'm still thinking...

Whether something as heinous as owning and abusing other humans for one's own economic benefits or pushing against equal rights without regard for race, gender or sexual orientation, it is predictable where more-conservative Christians take their stand: on the wrong side.

A tragic aspect of this approach is how the Bible is misused to support discrimination and even hostilities toward women and minorities. Yet humility never arises from the long history of being wrong in this approach.

Often the strength of their opposition is nowhere near equal to even the perceived threat. For example, gay and lesbian persons represent a tiny minority of Americans.

Listening to fundamentalist Christians, however, one would think those with same-sex attraction are some large, militant force threatening to burn down churches and recruit everyone to their sexual orientation. Such generalization is a false witness.

The reality is that gay and lesbian persons are more likely to be the kind, faithful members of their churches — if not pushed out by hatred — who simply want the same opportunities as other members and other Americans.

A great lie of Christian fundamentalism (and there are many) is that they “hate the sin yet love the sinner.” Those on the receiving end will tell you that only the hatred shows through.

Even the word “love” gets redefined beyond any reasonable definition. It is common to hear fundamentalist Christians proclaim, “Nothing is more loving than to tell someone the truth.” However, such “love” is highly conditional — relying on the capitulation of their targets to a narrow set of beliefs and a damaging, false concept of conversion.

Despite the worst possible record regarding issues of equality and justice, it takes several generations and widespread

social acceptance for more-conservative Christian leaders to get on board. If the move toward liberty and justice were a train, the U.S. military would be a driving engine and the white, evangelical church would be a dead-weighted caboose.

While admiring the romanticized past, it would be a good time to take note of how consistently wrong the church has been on basic issues of human equality and justice — and try getting it right up front one time.

THE RESULT

Christianity and therefore the Christian church lose their treasured message and mission — and are unattractive when seen in such poor light.

Rather than reflect the true demands of following Jesus — such as self-denial, generosity, peacemaking, care for the hurting, conveying grace and hope — this resulting resistance reveals the arrogance and ugliness of Christianity as often portrayed in America.

Sadly, many good, kind, thoughtful and generous people want nothing to do with a religious identity revealed as petty, fearful, self-serving, mean-spirited and, in general, in contrast to the life and teachings of Jesus.

To tell someone today that you are a Christian is to expect them to assume that you are suspicious of other ethnic and religious groups, fearful of immigrants, unloving toward LGBT persons, drawn to demagoguery, eager to seek an upper hand when it comes to actual expressions of freedom, and close-minded to any possibility of being wrong about anything.

Such public perceptions are not the propaganda work of some outside sinister group. They are the makings of those American Christians who repeatedly inflict these six wounds on themselves and others associated with their claimed name. **NFJ**

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LESSONS FOR 2017

Looking Forward (Seasons of Christmas and Epiphany)

Jan. 1
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
"It's Always Time"

Jan. 8
Isaiah 42:1-9
"A Time for Justice"

Jan. 15
Isaiah 49:1-7
"A Time for Light"

Jan. 22
Isaiah 9:1-9
"A Time for Hope"

Jan. 29
Micah 6:1-8
"A Time for Mercy"

Feb. 5
Matthew 5:13-20
"Salt, Light, and Law"

Feb. 12
Matthew 5:21-37
"Then, and Now"

Feb. 19
Matthew 5:38-48
"Seriously?"

Feb. 26
Matthew 17:1-19
"Keeping Secrets"

Faith Forward (Season of Lent)

Mar. 5
Romans 5:12-19
"Righteous Failure"

Mar. 12
Romans 4:1-17
"Trustful Faith"

Mar. 19
Romans 5:1-11
"Hopeful Peace"

Mar. 26
Ephesians 5:8-14
"Illuminated Fruit"

Apr. 2
Romans 8:6-1
"Mindful Spirituality"

Apr. 9
Matthew 21:1-11
"Royal Humility"

Forward Living (Season of Easter)

Apr. 16
Jeremiah 31:1-6
"Everlasting Love"

Apr. 23
Psalm 16
"The Path of Life"

Apr. 30
Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19
"Paying Vows"

May 7
Acts 2:42-47
"Signs and Wonders"

May 14
Acts 7:55-60
"Faithful Unto Death"

May 21
Acts 17:22-31
"A God Unknown"

May 28
John 17:1-11
"The Lord at Prayer"

June 4
John 7:37-39
"A Pentecostal River"

Forward Progress (Season After Pentecost)

June 11
Psalm 8
"Not Quite Angels"

June 18
Genesis 18:1-15
"Not Dead Yet"

June 25
Genesis 21:8-21
"Not Long Alone"

July 2
Genesis 22:1-14
"The Closest Call"

July 9
Song of Songs 2:8-13
"A Time for Love"

July 16
Psalm 119:105-112
"A Lamp and a Light"

July 23
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24
"A Life Exposed"

July 30
Psalm 128
"A Blessed Man"

August 6
Psalm 17:1-7, 15
"A Prayer for Justice"

August 13
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28
"Selling Joseph"

August 20
Genesis 45:1-15
"Making Peace"

August 27
Exodus 1:8-2:10
"Saving Lives"

Sept. 3
Exodus 3:1-15
"Meeting Mr. Is"

Sept. 10
Exodus 12:1-14
"Blood in the Doorway"

Sept. 17
Exodus 14:19-31
"The Day That Never Died"

Sept. 24
Exodus 16:2-15
"What Is It?"

Oct. 1
Exodus 17:1-7
"Unbottled Water"

Oct. 8
Matthew 21:33-46
"Stony Hearts"

Oct. 15
Matthew 22:1-14
"Wait. What?"

Oct. 22
Matthew 22:15-22
"A Taxing Question"

Oct. 29
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18
"Being Holy"

Nov. 5
Micah 3:1-5
"Being True"

Nov. 12
Amos 5:18-24
"Being Just"

Nov. 19
Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18
"Being Ready"

Nov. 26
Matthew 25:31-46
"Being Surprised?"

Forward Promises (Season of Advent)

Dec. 3
Mark 13:24-37
"Wakeful Faithful"

Dec. 10
Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13
"Kissing Cousins"

Dec. 17
Psalm 126
"Tearful Farmers"

Dec. 24
Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26
"Keeping Promises"

Praise It Forward (Season of Christmas)

Dec. 31
Psalm 148
"Praise Squared"

BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

A column provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches (chchurches.org)

Transitioning from unhealthy to healthy systems

Matthew Tennant

When asked about my church, I reply, “I have the privilege of serving as pastor of a healthy church.”

For far too many people, this is a rare statement. But, over seven years, I learned much about transitioning from unhealthy to healthy systems.

When I began, it seemed like a perfect match. As is so often the case, the package did not match the brochure.

Power struggles and unhealthy systems reared their ugly heads soon after my family and I arrived. Truthfully, even then, the congregation was and currently is a loving group, and they have legitimate needs and a desire to better know God.

In many ways they are like most other churches that cannot continue on a set path and expect past successes to yield future growth. This applies equally to spiritual growth, worship attendance and financial viability.

Each church must continually listen for God’s renewed calling. My experience is not an indictment of any of my predecessors. So, what transformed the best of the past into an unhealthy trajectory?

At the end of my honeymoon period someone wanted to move the piano in the sanctuary from underneath a portico, three feet into a walkway. In the end the church lost several members who left in a huff because they did not get their way, and the piano remained in the portico.

The question behind the piano episode was not about the piano location, but one of control. Who gets to make decisions in the church?

The answer: in a healthy church, the congregation makes decisions, often reaching a consensus.

As the congregation experienced conflict and some lay leaders jockeyed for control, I served varying roles: scapegoat, peacemaker, agent of change (alternatively, person to blame for change), mistake-maker and more.

One man tried to intimidate me and convince me to quit “before it’s too late.” The easiest path in a context of such turmoil is to leave. However, I stayed.

I prayed, studied the Bible, read books and talked with colleagues. Sometimes, I fought. Sometimes, I refrained from fighting (Ecclesiastes 3).

Generally, I followed some simple rules:

- Stay out in front of problems; do not avoid them.
- Visit people often, especially if they are in the hospital or request it.
- Apologize. (It is easier to apologize when one has actually made a mistake, but sometimes situations require an apology when the other person perceives having been wronged.)
- Be patient.
- Extend grace to other people.
- Ask for and expect grace in return.
- Take the long view.
- Develop thick skin.
- Try to understand the church’s past.
- Love people where they are, not where I want them to be.

Heraclitus said, “You can never walk through the same stream twice.” Over time, things change.

Consistent love, clarity of purpose, compassion and attentiveness facilitate transitioning from an unhealthy church system to a healthy one. The rules above are not a magic formula, but reflect a gospel

approach to ministry.

Nowhere does Jesus call superstar preachers. Each person is a sinner in need of God’s grace. Remembering this wisdom during difficult days of ministry can be a challenge.

A lay leader posed an ultimatum to congregational leadership: either they adopt his report outlining grievances against the pastor or he would leave. In that meeting the church members turned a corner. They reached a point at which they no longer were willing to struggle with unhealthy systems.

They could see the two paths before them, although they might not have been able to articulate them: (1) Follow God, which means not firing a pastor over minor disagreements, or (2) continue the old ways with power struggles and church functioning like a club.

I did not speak on my own behalf. Instead, nearly 20 lay members responded to this one person’s ultimatum. He held to his word and never returned.

No longer do I serve an unhealthy church. Lay leaders, congregants and pastoral staff regularly talk about how becoming healthy was no accident. We actively look at how we can grow even healthier.

Healthy churches thirst for worship and spiritual growth. They collectively seek God’s path for the future. And, they are a blessing to themselves, their community, staff and pastor.

I am far from perfect, but have discovered how to lead a church to become healthy. Can other people use some of these ideas and adapt them to their circumstances? I believe so. **NFJ**

—Matthew Tennant is pastor of Kilmarnock Baptist Church in Kilmarnock Va.

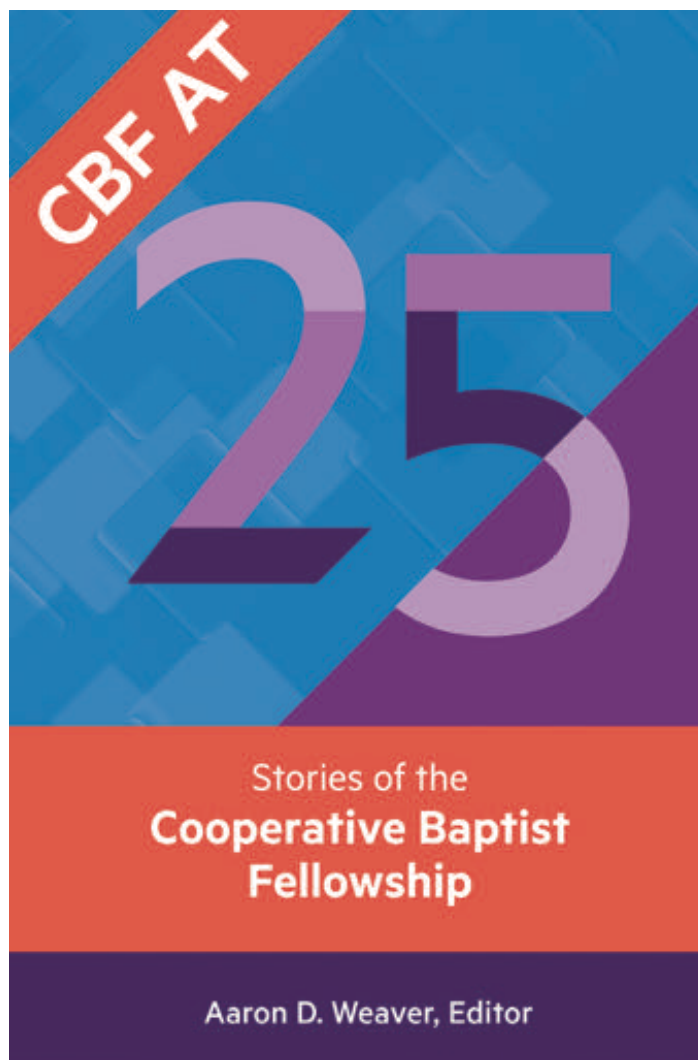
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New finds from an old geezer

By Tony W. Cartledge

Tel Gezer (pronounced “geh-zer,” not “geezer”) has been in the news lately. Though it has been excavated off and on (and sometimes poorly) since the early 1900s, recent excavations offer tantalizing evidence that seems to support biblical claims about the city.

Gezer is located in the Shephelah (foothills) of the Judean mountains, about midway between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It overlooks the coastal plain, but more importantly, was at the junction of a north/south trade route linking Egypt to Asia Minor and Mesopotamia, and an east/west route from the sea to Jerusalem.

Archaeologists have uncovered 13 inscribed boundary stones from Gezer — like ancient “city limit” signs — assuring us of its identity.

The city’s history goes back more than 6,000 years, but our main interest begins around 1400 BCE, when Gezer was a Canaanite city with close ties to Egypt, which held at least nominal sway over a number of Canaanite city states in southern Palestine.

The relationship didn’t always go well, and Egyptian records brag about having conquered Gezer more than once. Egypt’s final blow, by an unidentified pharaoh, left the city in ruins sometime in the Late

Bronze Age, around 1200-1000 BCE.

Here’s where it gets interesting: First Kings 9:16-17 describes a time when Egypt’s pharaoh reportedly had conquered Gezer, burned it down, killed its Canaanite inhabitants, and then gave what was left to his daughter as a dowry for her marriage to Solomon, who was known for having sealed many an alliance with a political marriage.

Solomon forced Israelite citizens to join a massive labor force (an unpopular move) in order to “build up” Gezer and other strategic cities, according to the preceding verse: “This is the account of the forced labor that King Solomon conscripted to build the house of the LORD and his own house, the Millo and the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer.”

As long ago as 1957, Yigael Yadin identified a large six-chambered gate at Gezer, connected to a casemate wall, and similar to those found in Megiddo and Hazor. It was popular at the time to identify all three gates as “Solomonic,” though many scholars believe they were built by

a later king.

Recent excavations led by Steve Ortiz of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Sam Wolff of the Israel Antiquities Authority have also clarified the presence of a large building adjacent to the gate. The excavation team calls the building “Solomon’s Palace,” though they doubt that any king ever lived there, and its actual function remains unclear.

The building includes two large and long rooms, probably open courtyards, surrounded by up to 15 additional rooms. Based on pottery findings, Ortiz and Wolff have tentatively dated the building to the 10th century BCE: Solomon would have ruled during the early and middle part of that century, about 970 to 940 BCE.

Carbon dating and other scientific analyses should provide a closer approximation of the date. Whether the builder was Solomon or a later king, we cannot be sure, but the size and scale of the city’s gate district suggests that only someone with considerable power and massive resources could have made it happen. **NFJ**

—For Tony’s blogs related to archaeology and a variety of subjects visit nurturingfaith.net.



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Religious Liberty Reflections

A CONVERSATION WITH J. BRENT WALKER, ADVOCATE FOR FREEDOM

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

WASHINGTON, D.C. — At yearend, J. Brent Walker retires as executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a (mostly) welcomed and respected (by non-extremists) voice on Capitol Hill. The following conversation allowed for his reflections on 27 years of advancing the cause of religious freedom for all Americans.

NFJ: What are the punctuation marks (highlights for you) from your time with the BJC that will long stay with you?

JBW: I could name so many, but these are some of the more substantive hallmarks:

Working to convince Congress to pass and President Bill Clinton to sign two important pieces of legislation to restore heightened protection for the exercise of religion: the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (1993) and the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (2000).

I enjoyed attending RFRA's signing in the Rose Garden, and my colleague Melissa Rogers attended RLUIPA's signing in the Oval Office.

Of similar importance was leading the coalition — along with David Saperstein — that successfully helped to defeat the attempt in 1998 to amend the First Amendment to return state-sponsored prayer to the public schools and to authorize government funding of religious education and ministry.

I take pride in several efforts to help us understand how religion should be dealt with in the public schools.

This includes several sets of helpful guidelines (including one adopted by the Federal Department of Education), to defending the constitutionality of the Equal Access Act of 1984, to giving



'EXTEND AND DEFEND': Brent Walker and Holly Hollman of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty defend religious freedom in the nation's capital and teach others of its importance.

practical advice to teachers and parents about how to accommodate the religious needs of students without permitting the government to promote religion or officiate religious exercise.

NFJ: Can you identify noticeable shifts in the religious liberty scene over the years since your work began?

JBW: The religious liberty scene has changed over the past quarter century. In some ways religious liberty is in better shape than it was when I started. In other ways it's worse.

We have lost ground when it comes to constitutional protection against the establishment of religion, such as state-sponsored religious exercises and government-funded church ministries and religious education.

We have been up and down concerning protections for the free exercise of religion, losing ground as a matter of constitutional interpretation but gaining through legislation supported by the BJC, such as RFRA and RLUIPA.

The law continues to be quite solid when it comes to the so-called “church autonomy doctrine,” designed to keep government from meddling in the internal affairs of houses of worship and courts from adjudicating internal property and employment controversies.

This was reinforced by the Supreme Court's unanimous opinion in the *Hosanna-Tabor* case in 2012, approving the “ministerial exception” to the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.

We are growing in our acceptance of the constitutional principle found in Article VI barring religious test for public office, both in terms of the letter and spirit of the ban.

The BJC has always worked to defend and extend religious liberty for all and uphold its constitutional corollary, the separation of church and state. We sometimes quip that 25 years ago we had to defend the “separation of church and state,” explain what it means and show why it is important.

Nowadays, we more often have to justify the importance of “religious liberty,” which in many quarters has become a catchphrase for denying civil rights of other citizens. A curious twist!

NFJ: What and from whom have you learned over the past 27 years?

JBW: From my predecessor James Dunn, I learned how to express complicated church-state issues simply (or try to) without skating roughshod over nuance and to express it with passion.

Buzz Thomas, my predecessor as general counsel, taught me almost everything I learned about the First Amendment, how to negotiate work on Capitol Hill, and the importance of compromise — accepting the “politics of the half loaf” — without sacrificing core principles.

In Rep. Chet Edwards I saw an example of a politician standing up for religious liberty at the risk of his political career.

NFJ: Organizationally, the BJC has experienced changes during your tenure. What pleases you most about the changes you helped to bring about as executive director?

JBW: After the separation from the Southern Baptist Convention, the Baptist Joint Committee has retained its “jointness” with our 15 bodies continuing to work together, despite disagreements from time to time.

[Another change is] developing and building the BJC’s Center for Religious Liberty on Capitol Hill and the opportunity for greater education efforts among Baptists and the country at large.

In addition to the BJC’s historic work in litigation — primarily at the Supreme Court — and legislation — mostly in Congress — we have elevated education as one of our principal activities.

This includes speaking in churches and denominational meetings; teaching in colleges, seminaries and law schools; and maintaining a consistent presence on social media.

Also important are various initiatives such as the BJC’s internship and BJC Fellows programs, high school essay contest, two lectureships, and our flagship publication *Report from the Capital*.

Finally, the BJC has become more financially secure through the work of intentional development programs, a successful capital campaign, and an expanded endowment funded in large measure by testamentary gifts. **NFJ**

EDITOR’S NOTE: This tribute is adapted from a blog posted last June following Brent Walker’s address to the Religious Liberty Council luncheon.



COLLABORATION. Brent Walker (right) and Rabbi David Saperstein taught constitutional law classes together and have worked on many religious liberty issues on Capitol Hill. Saperstein now serves as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

Good game, Brent

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

It might not have rivaled Lou Gehrig’s “luckiest man” speech in 1939, but neither was the situation so dire. However, J. Brent Walker gave an inspiring farewell address to about 750 friends and supporters during the June 24 Religious Liberty Council luncheon in Greensboro, N.C.

It was a time to honor and be challenged by the devoted executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a much-needed, rational voice on Capitol Hill. Walker has served this good cause for 27 years, the last 17 in the top post.

The BJC’s relentless work of “making sure government accommodates religion without advancing it,” he said, is “a marathon, not a sprint.”

Brent noted that he first learned in his youth about the importance of religious liberty during Training Union at Bayshore Baptist Church in

his hometown of Tampa, Fla. — long before any notion that this important cause would be his calling.

“We are faithful to our roots...,” said Walker of the 80-year-old educational and advocacy organization. “The separation of church and state is indispensable to ensuring religious liberty.”

Walker noted that his work has given him memorable opportunities to engage with national leaders, including four presidents, and to advocate for full religious liberty in the halls of power.

He has testified in opposition to those who seek to advance one religion over others through political power — including Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, who called Walker “a hypocritical Baptist minister.” Brent laughed off the accusation.

The BJC’s full name has meaning. “Baptist” means being true to the historic role of John Leland, Roger

CONTINUED ON PAGE 54

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 53

Williams and other early Baptists who advocated for the religious freedom that has served this nation well — despite many challenges from those (including some contemporary Baptist leaders) who fail to grasp its importance.

“Joint Committee” has nothing to do with Willie Nelson’s bus. Rather it refers to the varied Baptist bodies (15 of them now) that pull together to provide this clear voice in the nation’s capital.

The words “for Religious Liberty” acknowledge the sole purpose — “defending and extending religious liberty for all of God’s children” — carried out by the excellent BJC staff.

A few months remain before retirement sets in and, as Yogi said, “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

So Brent has more good work to do in the great cause of religious liberty at a time in which many preachers and politicians intentionally misconstrue religious freedom (in an effort to mislead) by seeking exclusive religious privilege.

The BJC, however, “gets it” when it comes to defending and extending full religious freedom that allows for everyone to embrace the religion of his or her own choosing or none at all — realizing that authentic faith can never be coerced or propped up by government power.

Brent followed a legend — James Dunn — whose small stature but enormous presence could never be matched. Yet Brent stepped up to the plate in his own influential ways and wisely never tried to wear that ill-fitting uniform.

Once when introducing Brent to a

church gathering, I jokingly noted that his being both an attorney and a Baptist minister provided a vocational combination with credibility that would rival a used car salesman. Brent responded that the only less credible mix might be that of a journalist-minister.

So I decided to stop using that introduction for him.

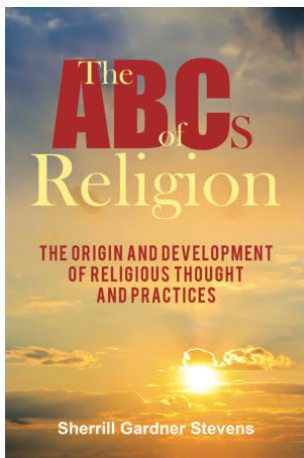
Anticipating many good years ahead, Brent (with whom I share a passion for baseball and games on occasion) referred to this transitional stage as the “seventh inning stretch” of his life.

Well, you’ve played your position well, Brent. Wave your cap proudly. Touch ‘em all.

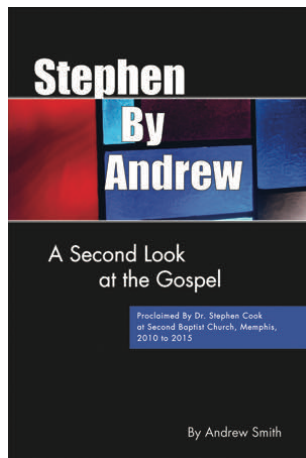
Enjoy your life’s seventh inning stretch. Here’s to a strong finish — and prayers for extra innings. See you in cheap seats. NFJ

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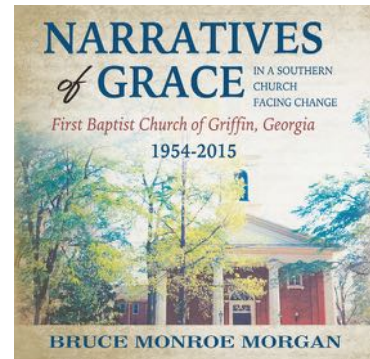
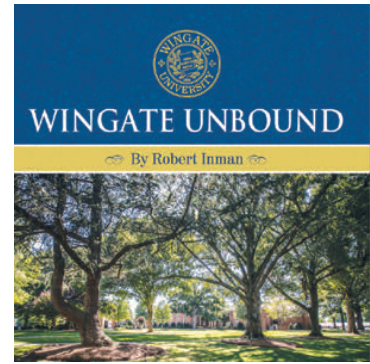
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Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865)

By Bruce Gourley

“There is not much of me,” lawyer and aspiring presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln wrote to a friend in December 1859, continuing:

“I was born Feb. 12, 1809, in Hardin County, Kentucky. My parents were both born in Virginia, of undistinguished families — second families, perhaps I should say. My mother ... died in my tenth year My father ... grew up, literally without education. He removed from Kentucky to what is now Spencer County, Indiana, in my eighth year. We reached our new home about the time the State came into the Union. It was a wild region, with many bears and other wild animals, still in the woods. There I grew up. There were some schools, so called; but no qualification was ever required of a teacher beyond ‘readin, writin, and cipherin’ to the Rule of Three. If a straggler supposed to understand latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizzard. There was absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education. Of course when I came of age I did not know much. Still somehow, I could read, write, and cipher to the Rule of Three; but that was all. I have not been to school since. The little advance I now have upon this store of education, I have picked up from time to time under the pressure of necessity.”

CREATED EQUAL?

Raised in an evangelical Baptist, abolitionist family, Abraham Lincoln arrived on the



national scene some 250 years after the introduction of African slaves into the American colonies. His religiously imbued, nuanced understanding of human equality, personal freedom and national destiny reflected the anguish of a nation irreparably divided.

Slavery haunted America. Ostensibly established upon principles of freedom, the reality in much of early America controverted the claims of colonial leaders.

Propertied, white Christian men alone enjoyed true freedom. Most persons of color awoke each day of their lives as the property of someone else, living in bondage for the sole purpose of enriching the Master, their lives legally dispensable.

Alongside the reality of African slavery, the Declaration of Independence from Great Britain boldly if awkwardly proclaimed that “all men are created equal.”

Although phased out in the North by the 1820s, African slavery became the

very foundation of the American South in the early 19th century. Economics. Culture. Society. Religion. Slavery coursed through all in the southern states.

BREAKING POINT

A nation too long divided by inequality reached the breaking point in 1860. Ripped apart on the shoals of slavery, America’s political leaders splintered into factions amid heated debate over the future.

White southern elites, their enormous collective wealth residing in enslaved black bodies, uniformly defended at all costs forced bondage of African Americans. Many northerners placed preservation of the Union above any particular position on slavery.

Other northerners, a rapidly growing number, believed African Americans, whether or not deserving of social or political equality, were otherwise entitled to the same rights and freedoms guaranteed to whites.

This is the 16th in a series of articles by historian Bruce Gourley on the religious faith of U.S. presidents. Gourley is online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith Journal and executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society.

Into this volatile climate the backwoods-born lawyer and one-time U.S. congressman from Springfield, Ill., emerged as the presidential candidate of the recently-created anti-slavery Republican Party.

Explicitly established upon the Declaration's proclamation that "all men are created equal," the 1860 Republican platform fleshed out the aspirations of America's founders:

"(T)he normal condition of all the territory of the United States is that of freedom: That, as our Republican fathers, when they had abolished slavery in all our national territory, ordained that 'no persons should be deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of law,' it becomes our duty, by legislation, whenever such legislation is necessary, to maintain this provision of the Constitution against all attempts to violate it; and we deny the authority of Congress, of a territorial legislature, or of any individuals, to give legal existence to slavery in any territory of the United States."

DIVISION

A beneficiary of a groundswell of northern anti-slavery sentiment, Lincoln bested three other candidates to win the 1860 presidential election with 40 percent of the popular vote.

White southern slave owners immediately condemned the election results. Although the Republican platform did not expressly embrace abolition, the South's wealthy elite were certain that Lincoln, whom they derided as the "black president," would abolish slavery.

Determined to defend and propagate black slavery in perpetuity, South Carolina's slaveholders led their state to secede from the Union on Dec. 20, 1860. The formation and military arming of the Confederate States of America followed.

By the time of Lincoln's inauguration on March 4, 1861, the Confederacy comprised a total of seven Lower South states committed to fighting for white freedom and black slavery.

On April 12 the Confederacy fired upon the federal installation of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, declaring war upon the U.S. Three days later Lincoln called for volunteer troops to "suppress" the treasonous states.

Many northern states, enraged at the Southern Rebellion, responded enthusiastically to the call to arms. Upper South states expressed outrage. Border state responses ranged from caution to measured resistance.

Within 10 weeks four additional southern states seceded, completing the Confederacy's roster of 11 states.

AT WAR

The American Civil War defined and consumed Abraham Lincoln's presidency, his tenure marked by an unfolding series of political, legal, economic and military initiatives designed to preserve the Union without alienating the Border States or creating a backlash in the North.

North and South alike openly understood that the war was about slavery. Both sides sought the moral high ground.

Many northern pulpits and religious journals preached freedom for all as the teaching of Christ and foundation of America's democracy. White southern religious leaders countered that God's will consisted of freedom for whites and subjugation of blacks, often touting the Confederacy as God's chosen nation to protect and advance black slavery.

In 1862 Lincoln determined that the defeat of the Confederacy would require the emancipation of slaves.

Freeing the South's labor force would cripple the economic engine of the South and provide military reinforcements for the North. His Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863, legally freed slaves in rebellious states. Black Americans hailed Lincoln as their Moses, the one called of God to free a people living in bondage.

Even as southern states ignored the proclamation, from 1863 onward a growing number of slaves escaped to freedom behind Union lines and fought for the North, draining the South's economy. Fiscal hardships in turn sapped Confederate morale and generated an epidemic of soldier desertions.

Steadfast assertions by white Christian leaders that God would rescue his Confederate nation from defeat proved to be empty promises. Unable to recover from a string of decisive U.S. military victories in the South from 1863 through early 1865, the Southern

Rebellion effectively came to an end on April 9, 1865 as Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to U.S. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant.

RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

By then in his second term of office, President Lincoln fell victim to an assassin's bullet a mere six days after the surrender. His killer, John Wilkes Booth, was a northern-born, southern sympathizer.

Many southern whites viewed Lincoln's death as his just reward, while most northerners reacted with even greater anger toward the states that had ripped the nation asunder and caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Americans.

For their part, black Americans mourned deeply the loss of their Moses.

Lincoln's religious thought played a critical role in his prosecution of the war — layering atop practical concerns a theological dimension.

The beneficiary of a Calvinistic-infused environment and the son of a Baptist deacon, Lincoln's early evangelical religious experiences endowed him with biblical familiarity that in his adult years informed deep theological introspection.

Yet rarely one to discuss religion in a personal sense, Lincoln's reticence provided fertile ground for speculation by his contemporaries and generations of scholars following.

Many political opponents during the 1830s and 1840s criticized Lincoln as a deist or infidel for denying the divinity of Christ. In 1846 as a congressional candidate and in response to critics he wrote an open letter to his district.

"That I am not a member of any Christian Church, is true," he noted. (Nor did he ever join a church.) "[B]ut I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular."

In the past he had been "inclined to believe in what I understand is called the 'Doctrine of Necessity'" [fatalism], Lincoln declared. Nonetheless he insisted that "the higher matter of eternal consequences" should be left between the individual "and his Maker."

“I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures; and I have never spoken with intentional disrespect of religion in general, or of any denomination of Christians in particular.”

AMBIGUITY

Of Lincoln's later adult years his friends generally agreed that the president evidenced little religiosity other than being, according to some, “a fatalist.”

One close friend and confidant summarized the ambiguity surrounding Lincoln's religious thought: “On the innate depravity of man, the character and office of the great Head of the church, the atonement, the infallibility of the written revelation, the performance of miracles, the nature and design of present and future rewards and punishments, and many other subjects, he held opinions utterly at variance with what are usually taught in the church.”

President Lincoln's periodic attendance at Protestant worship services, expected by many in Washington but certainly not required, did little to quell the mystery of his faith.

John G. Nicolay, the president's private White House secretary, a few days after the president's assassination wrote in a signed statement:

“Mr. Lincoln did not, to my knowledge, in any way change his religious views, opinions, or beliefs, from the time he left Springfield to the day of his death. I do not know just what they were, never having heard him explain them in detail; but I am very sure he gave no outward indication of his mind having undergone any change in that regard while here.”

Whether consistent over time or not, Abraham Lincoln's religious thought as president centered on the existence of a distant, mysterious God to whom he prayed at low points of the war. In instances where he spoke of religion in discourses or letters, Lincoln arguably approached a personal dimension only in formalities, such as asking for prayer, or when replying warmly yet vaguely to persons who voiced personal faith in God.

Upon the death of his son William in 1862 the president in private reportedly

spoke words of religious restraint tinged with fatalism: “May God live in all. He was too good for this earth. The good Lord has called him home. I know that he is much better off in Heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!”

In this respect he was like many other bereaving parents, whether religious or not, during the war.

GOD'S WILL

Beyond momentary prayers of agony and religious language in discourse and personal loss, the war drove Lincoln to deeply probe theological thought in order to understand God's veiled will in the great and bloody conflict.

Always, freedom and slavery hovered over the president's theological reflections on behalf of the nation.

Increasingly convinced that God willed freedom for enslaved peoples, according to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, Lincoln in 1862 “made a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of Divine will, and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. It might be thought strange, he said, that he had in this way submitted the disposal of matters when the way was not clear to his mind what he should do. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied it was right, was confirmed and strengthened in his action by the vow and the results.”

From this discerning of God's will through the course of battlefield results, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, a watershed event in the nation's history. Near the end of the document the president, willing God to be on his side, declared, “... upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.”

FREEDOM

The same year the president's Gettysburg Address of Nov. 9, 1863 — months after the crucial but costly Union victory in the Battle of Gettysburg — wove vivid if subtle biblical imagery into an unfolding, overarching American narrative of human freedom:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Religiously infused were Lincoln's use of “four score,” “hallow” ground and themes of consecration, death, dedication, devotion and “new birth.” The simple address offered hope and meaning to a suffering nation.

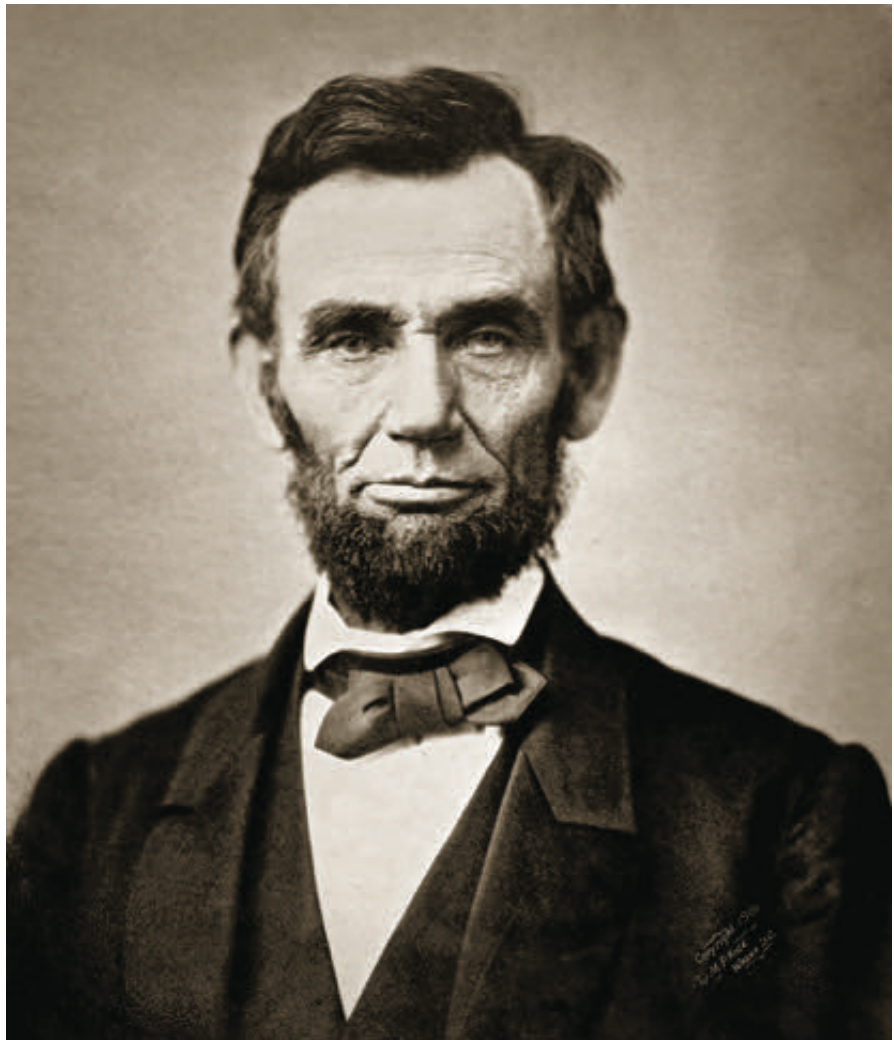
“New birth,” a phrase popularized during the Second Great Awakening of the president’s younger years in relation to Jesus’ invitation in John 3:16 to be “born again,” here served to evoke a rebirthing of America from the ashes of physical human bondage.

Numbering 272 words, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address is considered by some scholars to be the greatest speech in America’s history. Yet the war was not over.

SAME BIBLE

Some 16 bloody months later and on the cusp of the defeat of the southern slavocracy, Lincoln delivered a second, even more powerful theological discourse to a battered and weary nation. In the second half of the address and from a lifetime of theological thought and biblical familiarity he spoke to both North and South:

... Both [North and South] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the



Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

HEALING

Fatalism, arguably the dominant motif in Lincoln’s religious thought, is here on full, unsettling display. God’s will is mysterious, the future unknown, and “woe to that man” (Matt. 18:7) that is on the wrong side of the Almighty. “The judgments of the Lord,” whatever they may be, “are true and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9).

Yet amid uncertainties clouded in divine mystery emerges a decisive conviction

“in the right as God gives us to see the right” that human freedom is sacred.

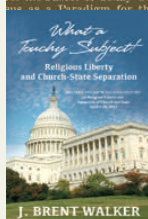
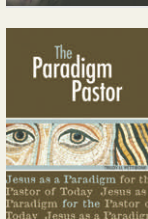
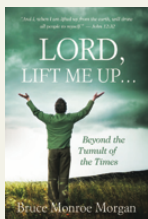
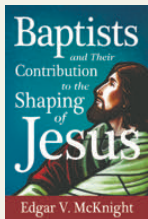
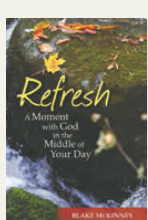
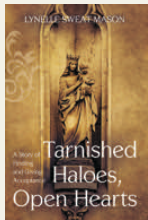
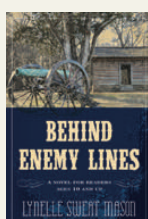
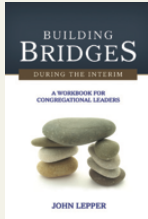
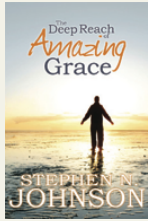
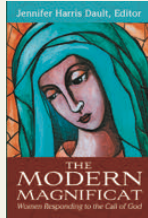
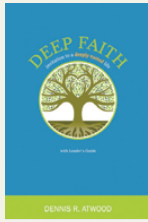
With slavery abolished, hate must be set aside and kindness resurrected in order to heal the wounds on both sides, provide for shattered families, and bring peace to the land.

From the mind and thought of a humble president who never personally embraced Christ or Christianity came a ceaseless and desperate search for the will of God, a search that led to truth and the redemption of America.

Lincoln’s second inaugural address is considered by many to be America’s supreme sermon, the finest statement of political theology in the nation’s history.

In much of the scholarly and public mind alike to the present day, Abraham Lincoln — America’s Moses — remains the greatest theologian to ever occupy the White House. **NFJ**

Lots of great books



DEEP FAITH

Dennis Atwood introduces ordinary Christians to the core issues vital to personal and corporate spiritual formation and a more intentional and deeper faith.

MANNERS & MONEY

Lynn Brinkley addresses the issues of preaching and hosting etiquette in a manual written for current and future ministers and for teachers and churches.

WHAT THE WILLOWS KNOW

Claude Bryan tells the story of a university professor who returns to his rural hometown to deal with internal demons and external injustice.

THE MODERN MAGNIFICAT

Jennifer Harris Dault shares the stories and struggles of 23 women who heard God's call to ministry.

THE DEEP REACH OF AMAZING GRACE

Steve Johnson urges fellow "ragamuffins" needing "a handout of amazing grace" to explore the profound richness of God's outlandish grace.

FROM ZION TO ATLANTA

Walker L. Knight shares in his autobiography a message of missions ministry that focused on grace, compassion, inclusion and reconciliation during his five decades as a religious journalist.

BUILDING BRIDGES IN THE INTERIM

John Lepper helps lay leaders build a healthy bridge between pastors by knowing what to expect and how to proceed with various tasks during the interim.

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Lynelle Mason crafts a young reader's historically accurate story, from a 12-year-old's viewpoint, of how the Civil War came to Chattanooga and North Georgia.

TARNISHED HALOES, OPEN HEARTS

Lynelle Mason forthrightly tells a story of giving and finding acceptance in people and places behind the common masks of fragile humanity.

REFRESH

Blake McKinney believes that God intends for our faith to intersect with our everyday life, so offers devotional readings to help facilitate that contact.

BAPTISTS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE SHAPING OF JESUS

Edgar McKnight traces the story of Jesus in an insightful and thoughtful fashion appealing to scholars and laity.

GOING BACK TO NEW ORLEANS

Bert Montgomery shares stories from friends, neighbors, and classmates in and around New Orleans based on their journey through the storm Katrina and into interconnected wholeness.

LORD, LIFT ME UP

Bruce Morgan shares inspirational thoughts and an anthem of gratitude based on the hymn, "Higher Ground."

THE PARADIGM PASTOR

Trudy Pettibone focuses on scripture texts that support the various aspects of Jesus' pastoral ministry and relate to the calling of pastors in general.

HOPEFUL IMAGINATION

Mike Queen and Jayne Davis tell of how an "Old First" church adapted to changing times and managed not only to survive, but also to thrive by approaching ministry in new and different ways.

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Brent Walker identifies the historical and theological principles that undergird freedom of religion.

at nurturingfaith.net!

BEING A PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN

Chuck Queen seeks to nurture theological imagination, critical thinking, and faith and spirituality from a distinctly progressive Christian viewpoint.

GROWING A JOYOUS CHURCH

Charles Roberts examines how a covenant relationship with God, the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit build Christian fellowship.

MORNING CONVERSATIONS

Jon Roebuck offers an inspirational thought from every chapter of the New Testament, intended to draw readers into a daily conversation with God.

CHRISTMAS: THEN AND NOW

Jon Roebuck shares 25 original stories, set from centuries ago to modern life and offering a fresh look at God's unfolding plan of redemption and grace.

PRAYER 365

Michael Ruffin shares his daily offerings to God to enlarge on the sense of Christian community found in the commonality of human experience.

WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT GOD

E.B. Self encourages deep thinking about God by exploring questions regarding God and violence, human destiny, the existence of God, good and evil, and science and faith.

A GYPSY DREAMING IN JERUSALEM

Amoun Sleem shares her journey as a Gypsy woman, from experiencing discrimination as a child to founding the Domari Center in Jerusalem to serve the needs of her people.

MOUNTAINS TO MOVE

Charles Taylor explores how the early Christians dealt with their challenges and how the gospel message overcame all obstacles and moved on unhindered.

DISCIPLESHIP DEVELOPMENT COACHING

Mark Tidsworth and Irceel Harrison offer coaching exercises that are highly relational and have the potential to empower all Christians to find their places in the world.

A PASTOR PREACHING

William Tuck offers "best practices" that result in offering one's "best gifts" for the pulpit ministry.

THE PULPIT MINISTRY OF THE PASTORS OF RIVER ROAD CHURCH, BAPTIST

The identity of a church is revealed through the preaching of five pastors spanning seven decades. Edited by William Tuck.

REMEMBERING MISS ADDIE

Lamar Wadsworth makes fiction come alive through the story of a young female pastor and her older female mentor.

COME IN THE HOUSE

Howard Williams shares remembrances from simpler times that remind us to celebrate the little things in life and to love one another while doing so.

WOMEN I CAN'T FORGET

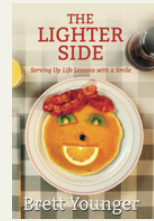
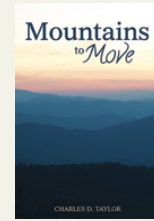
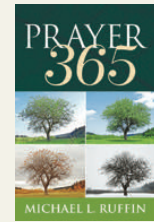
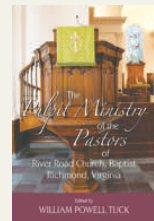
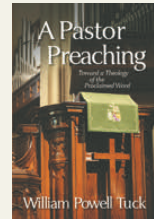
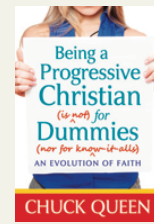
Winnie Williams describes the beauty of people and places she has seen around the world and examines the role of hope in fulfilling dreams that can lead to change for the better, especially for women.

THE GREATER GIFT

Jennifer Wylie introduces her personal story of servant leadership by saying, "Our lives are like bridges, and, when we share them and the things that God has taught us through them, we are like bridge builders."

THE LIGHTER SIDE

Brett Younger brings humor to the ordinary, and meaning to the mundane in this delightful collection.



Questions Christians ask scientists

Why do scientists think their calculations for the age of the universe (almost 13.8 billion years) and the size of the universe (billions and billions of light years) are better than beliefs based on the Bible such as that creation occurred in 4,000 BC and that our planet, whatever its size, is the center of God's attention in the whole universe? —Ben Self, Hopkinsville, Ky.

Suppose your child walks up to you and says he feels bad. You place your hand on his forehead and sure enough, it's hot.

Worried, you break out an oral thermometer, and after two minutes it reads 102.2 degrees F. Just to be sure you try a fancy, in-ear device that tells you his temperature is 102.0.

Does your boy have a fever? Yes. Three independent measurements tell you so. There is no way all three methods are wrong.

To be sure, they are not equally reliable and the numbers you get are somewhat different, but you can say with confidence that his temperature is in the neighborhood of 102. It might be 101.9 and it might be 102.3, you can't say for sure, but it doesn't matter because you know what you need to know: It's time to take him to the doctor.

This is similar to why we think the universe is about 13.8 billion years old. Like the 102-degree fever, this figure comes from a number of different kinds of measurements.

Three of these are: (1) observations of a class of stars called white dwarfs, (2) details of something called the cosmic microwave background, and (3) the recession velocities of distant galaxies.

These methods all point to an age in the neighborhood of 13.8 billion years. If the age of the universe is significantly different than this, then these methods — and several more I have not mentioned — must not only be wrong individually; they must be wrong such that they all give the same result.

But, as in the case of the sick child, these are independent observations. They do not depend on the same assumptions or observations, so the probability of them all giving the same wrong answer is zero.

Paul Wallace is a Baptist minister with a doctorate in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University and post-doctoral work in gamma ray astronomy, along with a theology degree from Emory University. He teaches at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga. Faith-science questions for consideration may be submitted to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

BY PAUL WALLACE



Also, just as in the measurement of the child's temperature, different methods give us slightly different ages. The universe might be 13.7 billion years old according to one method and it might be 13.9 billion according to another, but we know what we know: the cosmos is billions of years old.

This does not square with a face-value reading of scripture. If you take the Bible and simply count back the years from the time of Jesus, you will find that creation week occurred about 6,000 years ago. Many people believe this is an accurate date for the origin of the universe. But this obviously contradicts the scientific consensus.

There is more. A different (and much larger) group of independent observations does not tell us the cosmos is 13.8 billion years old, but do tell us it is more than 6,000.

Three of these are (1) measurements of the distances of nearby stars, (2) surveys of radioactive nuclei found in the Earth's crust, and (3) the drifting of continental plates. Again, these methods independently point to the same conclusion: the Earth

and the cosmos have been around longer than 6,000 years.

You also ask about the size of the universe. Its size is related to its age.

The cosmos has been expanding for the last 13.8 billion years and by now it is quite large, many billions of light years across. There is a host of overlapping methods for determining distances to stars and galaxies, and they work together to form something called the "distance ladder."

The distances to the closest stars are measured by a simple approach called parallax. Our eyes and brain use parallax to produce depth perception for nearby objects.

More distant objects require other methods. Some of these methods are more reliable than others, but constant progress and cross-checking mean that the distance ladder gives better and better results over time. This progress is largely due to advances in telescope technology and refinements of observing methods.

There are of course assumptions behind all of this. For example, we assume that the speed of light is constant; that is,

it was the same a billion years ago as it is today.

We also assume that rates of radioactivity have not changed over time and that the physics that applies out there is the same as the physics that applies here on earth. Scientists are keenly aware of these and other assumptions and are constantly testing them.

So far they have stood all tests. One hundred percent certainty is not possible in science, but we have good reasons to believe our assumptions are reliable.

We have another reason to trust our assumptions: they have led us to a self-consistent understanding of the cosmos. For a simple example of this, the age of the earth is less than the age of the universe, even though the ages of both are determined in completely different ways.

Also, the age of the universe is greater, but not much greater, than the age of the oldest stars. And the time required for stars to produce the elements needed for life is far less than the age of the universe.

And the methods of determining

distances to celestial objects such as stars and galaxies overlap and fit together, and are doing so better every day. The list is nearly endless.

To be sure, there are still pieces of the puzzle missing. Major questions are still being asked. This is to be expected — it has always been so.

But the sense one gets from looking at the scientific work of the last five centuries is that of consistency and fruitfulness. This would be quite surprising if our assumptions were all wrong.

There is of course a simple argument available to anyone who disagrees with the conclusion of such an ancient and vast universe: perhaps God made the cosmos appear to be much older than it is, much as Genesis describes Adam and Eve as being formed as a man and woman and not as children.

And perhaps God made the cosmos appear to be many billions of light-years across. Maybe light from distant stars and galaxies was created in mid-flight. Maybe South America and Africa were formed to

look exactly as if they were part of a single original continent and have been drifting apart for 200 million years. Maybe the comic microwave background radiation, which scientists believe is a relic of the Big Bang, was put in place to make it look as if the cosmos was 13.8 billion years old.

Maybe, but this is deeply problematic.

There might be theological and poetic reasons to describe Adam and Eve as a man and woman, but what would be the point of God deliberately adjusting the actual cosmos to appear in every detail to be 13.8 billion years old? To test our faith?

I just can't agree with that. Any God who would manipulate the universe in such a way — just in order to test us — is not a God who can be trusted. That God would be an anti-rational agent of disorder.

That God would be rooting for us to reject our own God-given capacities for reason, imagination and creativity. That God would be a deceiver.

And that is not the God of life and love and reason and wonder in whom we all believe. **NFJ**

"Paul Wallace is an astrophysicist who writes with magic . . ."

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