



Baptists
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NEWS JOURNAL



*The Baptist
who helped save
El Salvador*

JANUARY 2012

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**Calls for
justice and
mercy** roll
down at
*New Baptist
Covenant II*

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FEBRUARY lessons inside

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Amparo Palacios Lopez and her father, Edgar Palacios, are greeted by Father Ponselle Rogelio in Perquin, El Salvador. Fr. Rogelio lived among and ministered to FMLN guerrillas during the 12 years of the Civil War, and continues to serve in the area.

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Pat Terry makes new connections

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Cover photo by John Pierce. The Voices of Hope choir from Lee Arrendale State Prison in Alto, Ga., provide worship music during New Baptist Covenant II. **Story on page 4**

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New Baptist Covenant II

Calls for justice and mercy roll down at multi-site event

ATLANTA — Attendance was much lower than planners had hoped, but the passion was high. With their messages beaming to various sites, speakers repeatedly called for Baptists and other Christians to speak for the voiceless oppressed and to show mercy toward those who suffer.

Baptist layman and former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who convened the two-day event, called the effort “a positive, non-exclusive program of sharing the gospel of Christ.”

New Baptist Covenant II was held Nov. 18-19 at Atlanta’s Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church and beamed by satellite to other church settings nationally and also by webcast to smaller gatherings and individual computers. Speakers focused on what they called “the Luke 4 mandate” to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and to set the oppressed free.

The event was a follow-up to a larger Covenant gathering in 2008 that drew more than 15,000 to Atlanta to consider issues of justice and to work cooperatively across racial, ethnic and convention lines.

Speakers represented a broad spectrum of Baptist life that President Carter has sought to pull together through the New Baptist Covenant initiative. In his opening remarks, Carter said he had traveled to more than 130 nations and that many “unsaved people have a vision of division among us (Christians).”

Carter called for unity by sharing the words of the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians: “Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.” “Isn’t that clear?” asked Carter. “What we seek and what we can have is unity.”

KEN FONG

“Even with a low self-esteem, Baptists in the U.S., at 30 million strong, should make a

significant impact for good,” said the pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles, a multi-ethnic American Baptist congregation.

“When you identify as a desperate sinner ... you’re already at the bottom,” said Fong, who works closely with a drug rehabilitation program in L.A.

By helping bring about social change, Baptists can become known for “justice and hope,” said Fong. He cited Martin Luther King Jr. and President Carter as examples of Baptists who are respected by even non-Christians worldwide.

Fong told Carter, who was seated on the front pew, that even those who don’t approve of his politics “love you as a Baptist.”

The negative public image that many have of Baptists as narrow-minded and judgmental is challenging, but can be changed, he said.

“It’s almost like ‘I’m-not-that-kind-of-Baptist’ is a new denomination,” said Fong. “Maybe that’s what the New Baptist Covenant is all about. We can turn this Baptist negative thing into a positive thing.”



Ken Fong

ROSALYNN CARTER

The former First Lady said her work in mental health goes back more than 40 years to when her husband served as governor of Georgia. While campaigning, she was repeatedly asked what he would do, if elected, for a son, daughter or other relative with mental illness.

She described mental illness as a form of imprisonment and urged churches to give attention to the needs of those who are quietly suffering.

“Faith communities have often led the way in creating places of care for physical ailments,” said Mrs. Carter, noting the many hospitals founded by Christian denominations. Mental health deserves similar attention, she said.

Mrs. Carter, whose latest book is titled *Within Our Reach: Ending the Mental Health Crisis*, offered simple ways to minister to persons and families affected by mental illness including phone calls, home visits, grocery delivery, rides to doctor appointments and shopping, and providing respite for caregivers.

“There is no reason to feel ashamed,” the deacon at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., said of those often stigmatized. She urged churches to be sure persons with mental illnesses do not feel excluded.



LAY LEADERS- The Carters, active members of Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., greet Patricia Ayres (left), a former national moderator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and a lay leader in First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, during the New Baptist Covenant II gathering in Atlanta.

WENDELL GRIFFEN

An Arkansas circuit judge and Baptist minister called listeners to “proclaim relief to the captive” through prison reform and ministry to offenders. Judge Griffen said that while crime rates go down nationally, the number of persons going to prison increases.

Judge Griffen said that the so-called “war on drugs” has become a “war on black and brown people,” although drug use and sales are equal across racial and economic lines. Harsh drug-related sentences and a desire to fill prison spaces have pushed the U.S. prison population to 2.3 million, he said.



Wendell Griffen

“When you build more jails you are forced to fill them,” he said. “Nobody builds a building for less than full occupancy.”

He urged Christians to confront racism in the justice system and challenge mass incarceration, as well as work for the “restoration of status” for those who have served their sentences and re-entered society. That restoration, he said, would help former inmates to find jobs, benefit from public housing as part of re-entry, and to participate in the democratic process through voting.

“Unbind them and let them go!” said the minister-judge from Little Rock.

DEEDEE COLEMAN

The first female pastor of historic Russell Street Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit continued that theme — calling judicial reform “the Civil Rights movement of the 21st century.”

“Go behind prison walls ... and see the lonely, the outcast and the forsaken, who need to hear a word from the Lord,” said Coleman.

While her own work with prisoners is well supported by her church, Coleman said many Christians feel uncomfortable with reaching out to offenders or welcoming former inmates.

“The church has its own stigma about incarceration and those who come to church after release,” she said. “If any institution in the world should seek to release the captive, it is the salvation and glory of the church.”



DeeDee Coleman

Spiritual release must come from God, said Coleman, and churches have “a mandate from heaven” to bring the gospel to the incarcerated.

“Too many prisoners believe that, based on what they have done, Jesus would have nothing to do with them,” she said. “... [But] Jesus died for the very sin they have committed ... There is forgiveness at the cross.”

Coleman spoke of how long drug-related prison sentences separate parents from their children. Several members of the gospel choir seated behind her — from a Georgia women’s prison — wiped away tears.

President Carter said that if the New Baptist Covenant did nothing else but address inequities in the justice system and increase ministry to inmates, “that would make our whole effort worthwhile.”

CARROLL BALTIMORE

The president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention called listeners to “focus on the ministry of Jesus ... to those outside the social barriers.”

Noting that even among Jesus’ first 12 disciples “there were issues,” pastor Baltimore urged selfless service.

“Our job is to brag about the Lord, not our gifts, not our churches, but our Jesus,” he said.

Baltimore, who has made 67 trips to the Philippines for ministry purposes, urged fellow church leaders to break out of familiar confinements.

“The gospel is the equalizer that changes a dark world,” he said. “... If Baptists are afraid to take hope to a dark world, we should go out of business.”



Carroll Baltimore

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

“We have normalized child poverty in our nation,” said the founder of the Washington-based Children’s Defense Fund, sounding her familiar call to action.

Edelman said there are 16.4 million children living in poverty in the U.S. today. “Shame on us!”



Wright Edelman

Action, not just words, is required to bring about the needed changes that impact the youngest and most vulnerable members of society, she said. She, too, used the civil rights movement as an example of how ideas and action can come together to bring social change.

“We love to celebrate Dr. King, but we don’t like to follow Dr. King,” she said.



Tony Campolo

TONY CAMPOLO

The ever-energetic speaker and author said many evangelical Christians have interpreted Jesus through the writings of Paul rather than the writings of Paul through Jesus.

Many young people, however, Campolo said, are “becoming imbibed with Jesus” and discovering a “mocking discrepancy between the Jesus of the gospels and the Jesus of the church.”

Campolo said our churches are “steeped in Pauline theology” that has given us our doctrinal rooting. However, he added that the heavy focus on such doctrinal positions rather than the life and teachings of Jesus is causing “huge numbers of young people to leave the church.”

The writings of Paul are important for the church’s doctrinal teaching, he said, but “If you want to know about the kingdom of God, go to Jesus.” **BT**

Presentations at the New Baptist Covenant II are available at newbaptistcovenant.org.

Speakers include Ken Fong, Rosalynn Carter, Wendell Griffen, DeeDee Coleman, Carroll Baltimore, Marian Wright Edelman and Tony Campolo. A conversation between journalist Bob Abernathy and President Carter is also included.



Guinea Worm Disease, Middle East conflict, personal faith among topics **Carter** discussed with veteran journalist

ATLANTA — Former NBC News correspondent and current executive editor and host of *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* Bob Abernathy conducted a wide-ranging, sit-down interview with former President Jimmy Carter during the New Baptist Covenant II gathering Nov. 18.

On his pursuits that brought the New Baptist Covenant into reality, Carter said he was troubled years ago by the “lack of unity among Baptists and the lack of cooperation between black and white” Baptist groups.

“We’ve made some progress in bringing Baptists together for a common goal,” said Carter.

He once again identified that goal as a shared response to Jesus’ call in Luke 4:18-19 to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and to release the oppressed.

JUSTICE

Carter urged Baptists and other Christians to take more seriously the biblical teachings that focus on peace, human rights, equality, justice and compassion. Inequities and injustice remain in American society, he said, in places such as the judicial system.

“You don’t ever hear of a rich white man being sentenced to execution,” said Carter.

While it’s become politically popular to be “tough on crime,” the inequities in the judicial system are not being addressed, he said.

COMPASSION

Abernathy asked about the Carter Center’s effort to rid the world of the dreaded Guinea Worm Disease. Carter said only about 900 cases exist worldwide in inaccessible, war-torn places.

In the near future the disease that is traced back to biblical times “will only be a memory,” said Carter to applause.

Carter spoke of other efforts to better the lives of those who suffer around the world including the many needs in Haiti following a devastating earthquake.

“Rebuilding Haiti should be a priority for every Christian,” he said.

Carter credited his mother, Lillian Carter, a home-health nurse in Southwest Georgia, with giving him sensitivity to racial discrimination and injustice.

“My mother didn’t pay any attention to racial segregation,” Carter recalled.

MIDDLE EAST

Carter also spoke about the need for a two-state solution to the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. He said many Israelis support this plan as the route to peace.

“If I had one prayer that would permeate my life, it would be: bring peace to Jerusalem,” said Carter, who quickly added that this answered prayer would mean peace for the Palestinians as well.

Carter said seeking a solution that addresses the statehood of Israel alone is

“a mistake.” “Jews and Palestinians have the right to live in peace,” he added, which will take political courage to accomplish.

Carter reminded listeners that many Palestinians are Christians, although the number is being reduced. “We’re seeing the Christian entity in the Holy Land squeezed out.”

On finding peaceful solutions to conflicts, Carter said: “It’s not an accident that we worship the Prince of Peace.”

POLITICAL CLIMATE

Prefacing a question about politics, Abernathy stated: “I live in Washington ...”

Interrupting, Carter smiled and quipped: “I’ve been there.”

Abernathy went on to ask about the current divisive political climate. Carter said campaign reform is desperately needed.

Carter called the Citizens United ruling that allows heavy corporate funding of candidates, often in secrecy, “one of the stupidest decisions the Supreme Court has ever ruled.” The current campaign-funding practice, he said, is “legal bribery.”

Carter agreed with Abernathy’s assessment that the “people who hold the political power are beholden to the people with the financial power.”

However, Carter added: “We can change things in this nation if we all work together.”

PERSONAL FAITH

Christians should remain on guard against self-satisfaction or arrogance, warned Carter. “We are all the same in the eyes of God.”

When asked by Abernathy to reflect on his personal faith, Carter said he thinks more about those ultimate concerns now at age 87 than “when I was 75 or so — very young.”

Carter said he had held different leadership roles in his life — as a submarine officer, businessman, politician, and now with the Carter Center.

“The presence of my faith in Christ has not been contrary but compatible” with each of those roles, he said.

Throughout the conversational-style interview, Carter often returned to his belief that faithful efforts to bring about needed changes in society can arise and eventually succeed.

Carter noted that social changes, such as what took place in the civil rights movement, resulted from grass-root efforts often within congregations. Engaging issues of justice and mercy can make a significant impact, he said. “We can’t underestimate the power of doing what God ordains.” **BT**

Now all glory to God, who is able... to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. - Ephesians 3:20

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- Conclusion of Pre-Assembly Prayer Retreat on *The Questions God Asks*



Thursday, June 21

- Report from 2012 Task Force on CBF's future
- Commissioning Service of new mission field personnel
- Auxiliary Events and Fellowship Opportunities
- Hispanic Network Gathering



Friday, June 22

- Worship and Daniel Vestal's final sermon as CBF Executive Coordinator
- More from 2012 Task Force on CBF's future.
- Workshops and Mission Communities
- Auxiliary Events and Fellowship Opportunities



quotation remarks

“What is this mac ‘n’ cheese?
Is it a black thing?”

—81-year-old *Christian Broadcasting Network* founder and host *Pat Robertson* following a clip in which former *Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice* spoke favorably of the dish (AP)

“A spiritual discernment process is very different from a corporate strategic planning model or a biased approach to your future ... Spiritual discernment invites thinking, praying and reflecting at a level that most of us studiously avoid.”

—*Bill Wilson*, president of the *Center for Congregational Health* in *Winston-Salem, N.C.* (ethicsdaily.com)

“There’s something worse than being poor. It’s being ashamed.”

—*Preacher Fred Craddock*, who grew up in poverty, on hiding a donated sweater en route to school because a classmate might recognize it (CNN)



“It strikes me that Paul complimented the Corinthians on their ‘rich generosity’ ... The biblical emphasis is on what we do with what we have, not so much on how much we have.”

—*Scott Collins*, vice president of communications for *Buckner International* (Buckner Today)

“Some evangelicals look at religion, some look at the issues, some look at electability. So they have a number of criteria that they apply.”

—*Religion and politics expert John Green* of the *University of Akron’s Bliss Institute* on the difficulty in pegging which *Republican presidential candidate* will gain evangelicals’ support (RNS)

“Christians already possess unity in that they belong to the one body of Christ and are indwelt by one Spirit. But as the current divisions of the church attest, this unity is not yet fully realized, for its fullness is not visible.”

—*Steven R. Harmon*, *Baptist theologian* and author of *Ecumenism Means You Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity* (Cascade Books), urging participation in the *Jan. 18-25 Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* promoted by the *World Council of Churches*

“The concept of usury is a biblical issue. When you charge people a high interest rate, you’re effectively stealing from them.”

—*Stephen Reeves*, legal counsel for the *Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission*, in a panel discussion on *payday lending* at the *New Baptist Covenant* event in *Oklahoma City* in *November* (ABP)

“There are a lot of parallels between the culture of sports and the culture of the Catholic Church. They are dominated by men. Successful leaders are lionized and worshipped by their followers. And there’s a lot of money and power at stake.”

—*Media ethicist Kelly McBride* of *The Poynter Institute*, writing about recent *sexual abuse charges* against college coaches (ESPN)

“It would seem that the free-market capitalist who succeeds by ethical means and uses the fruits of his or her success to enhance the common good — as well as the occupier who calls out those who exploit the system, and indeed the system itself, for gains that benefit the few at the expense of the many — might both receive a ‘well done’ from the Master whose mission was to proclaim good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed.”

—*Colin Harris*, professor of religious studies at *Mercer University* and a member of *Smoke Rise Baptist Church* in *Stone Mountain, Ga.*, responding to recent claims that the Bible supports a particular economic system (ethicsdaily.com)

“They are finally getting the idea that the future of their denominations [is] tied to the vitality of their congregations.”

—*David Roozen*, director of the *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, on mainline Protestant denominations reacting to ongoing decline (RNS)

“This is unbelievably believable. It’s unbelievable because in the moment we’re all amazed when great things happen. But it’s believable because great things don’t happen without hard work.”

—*Baylor quarterback Robert Griffin III*, upon receiving the *Heisman Trophy* (USA Today)

“More than anything, it’s frustrating and exasperating. Various people in the church have had to spend a lot of time and energy dealing with this.”

—*Pastor David Fleming* of *Abingdon Baptist Church* in *Oxfordshire, England*, on the rash of *metal thieves* hitting his church and others across the country (Baptist Times)

“Our Founding Fathers would never have finished the Constitution had they required all of their religious beliefs to be identical.”

—*Jim Wallis*, president of *Sojourners* and member of *First Baptist Church of Washington, D.C.*

Choosing the preferred pain of critical thinking

When reading online publications and forums that allow for immediate feedback, I think the prophet Amos would have phrased his words differently today: “Let justice roll down like ignorance in a comment stream...”

Although not an educator by training, I keep wondering about the degree to which critical analysis can be taught or at least nurtured. Why? Because, obviously, independent thinking is in short supply.

At issue is not the expected conflict of ideas or opinions. My concern is about expressed opinions on varied issues — across the ideological spectrum — that are rooted in no serious critical thinking.

So many lazy-minded persons choose an ideology and simply agree with those voices they deem as right on all things. Political leaders, talking heads of the airwaves and pompous preachers blab on to nodding heads that shake rather than think.

Then such loyal followers freely offer mindless regurgitations of what they have heard as if Moses had just brought something new down from a mountaintop encounter with God. So-called “group think” is really not thinking at all.

Critical analysis should be a prerequisite to making up one’s mind. And even made-up minds should leave room for continual re-examination and fresh revelation.

Ignorance spreads like wildfire in the digital age. That’s why snopes.com, which counters the rumor mill, and critical thinkers are desperately needed.

Martin Luther King Jr. once observed: “Rarely do we find [persons] who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think.”

Commercials on TV and radio make such ridiculous offers — yet they continue month after month and year after year. Somewhere there must be people who think they can buy a car or truck below cost and even with bad credit — or lose weight without diet or exercise — or get rich off the latest scheme.

And one wonders how poll-driven promises of politicians today can be taken more seriously than the opposite poll-driven promises they offered yesterday or how listeners will send portions of their meager income to wealthy TV preachers with no accountability and no community context.

Mental laziness and gullibility make suckers out of us. We become easy targets when we believe whatever we are told without second-level thinking. We look like larger fools when we repeat claims we have never explored.

It is not enough to latch onto a good word and assume that the whole related idea is a good

one. Christians are particularly lazy and gullible in this regard.

A politician uses religious language and the assumption is made that, therefore, the political philosophy that follows is pure and faithful. Or a preacher barks out: “The Bible says...” and listeners assume that’s what the Bible says.

A letter to the editor in a daily newspaper defended a particular faith statement being imposed on a Baptist college faculty recently. The writer argued that each doctrinal point was unquestionably accurate because — drum roll, please — it had a Bible reference at the end. Really? Is that all it takes?

Falling for an espoused ideology without any critical thinking or showing blind allegiance to a charismatic leader is often referred to as “drinking the Kool-Aid.” That phrase is rooted in the tragic mass suicide of cult followers of Jim Jones in Guyana in 1978.

In earlier years we simply spoke of someone who falls for a fallacy without serious examination as taking it “hook, line and sinker.”

Critical analysis is not simply a matter of intelligence. It is about making an effort to think before reaching a conclusion — and especially before repeating it as unquestionable truth.

We need more pain in our lives if that is what is required to think deeply. It is certainly less painful than drinking toxic Kool-Aid or swallowing the hook, line and sinker of faulty propositions and widespread ignorance.

Jesus said the truth sets us free. The ongoing discovery of truth is worth our best efforts of heart, soul and mind. **BT**





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Humble man proud deeds

Baptist Edgar Palacios helped save El Salvador

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador — He wasn't a politician, but he understood politics. And he wasn't a revolutionary, but he sympathized with the rebels.

He was the pastor of a small Baptist church, and he helped to save El Salvador. Few people have heard his story.

Until now.

Eager young man

Edgar Palacios spent his childhood in the mountainous eastern part of the country, before his parents moved to the capital city of San Salvador and sent him to a Catholic school, where he was avid in his faith and served as an altar boy.

He attended a public middle school for boys and remained a devout Catholic, but also came to know a couple from First Baptist Church who often hosted a group of youth in their home, offering wholesome food and patient love despite the boys' rowdy play. The hosts would often lead Bible studies and on one occasion, invited the pastor to lead an evangelistic program. Nineteen of the 20 youth present made a decision for Christ, Palacios said — "All but me."

But it was only a matter of time. He was baptized in the First Baptist Church of San Salvador when he was in the ninth grade, and two years later helped organize Emmanuel Baptist Church. He served as secretary (an important office in the Latin American church structure) and taught Sunday school. He also served as a deacon and sang in the choir — all while still in high school.

In the meantime, Palacios worked as an accountant's assistant at a bank, but he soon experienced a higher calling. On a night when the executive secretary of the Baptist Convention of Mexico preached in a special service and extended the call to Christian ministry, "A strong force pushed me to the front," Palacios said, "and I went crying, unable to stop."



Edgar Palacios with an aging campesino who benefits from a senior adult center that provides hot meals in the mountain village of Segundo Montes. The town, built by refugees returning from Honduras after the war, was named for one of the six Jesuit priests who were murdered Nov. 16, 1989.

Emerging theologian

A missionary from the American Baptist Churches soon helped Palacios begin studies at the Baptist seminary affiliated with the Theological Community of Mexico, an ecumenical consortium of schools located south of Mexico City. (In Mexico, students begin professional studies while completing the equivalent of a four-year university degree).

As a student, he directed the school's evangelism team and was charged with recruiting other students, a role that enabled him to travel throughout Mexico and the U.S.

The rich environment of the Theological Community brought Palacios into contact with Jesuits as well as Protestant leaders, and he was strongly influenced by the emerging movement of liberation theology.

Though not monolithic in their approach, liberation theologians hold that God has a



special concern for poor and oppressed people, calling upon Christians to be agents of change by actively working for social justice.

Palacios also admired Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights campaign, as well as his philosophy of peaceful resistance. He recalls how the students of the Baptist seminary held a special service of reflection the night King was assassinated.

An Old Testament professor inspired Palacios to study the prophets, who often spoke in behalf of the poor. The synergy of the combined influences forged in Palacios a lifelong commitment to advocating for those who live on the lower margins of society.

After a successful stint as a youth minister while in Mexico, Palacios returned to El Salvador as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church. In time, he became pastor of First Baptist Church in San Salvador and continued



A bright mosaic wall highlights a children's memorial in El Mozote, where a U.S.-trained military unit called Atlacatl massacred hundreds of villagers suspected of supporting the FMLN in December 1981. Names of the murdered children are engraved on the brown stone at the bottom of the wall.

his ecumenical activities, including a close working relationship with Catholic friends who also sought social change.

El Salvador is a predominantly Catholic country, and during the early 1970s, a number of priests and nuns started meeting together to plan ways to advocate for the poor and to denounce massacres and murders taking place in the country. When their archbishop at the time discouraged such activities and forbade them from meeting together in a Catholic church, Palacios invited them to meet at First Baptist.

Concerned about the lack of opportunities for Baptists in El Salvador to receive theological training, Palacios worked with American Baptist missionaries and with other theologically educated pastors to begin the Baptist Institute for Theological Formation.

The executive director of the association of Baptist churches in El Salvador thought the

school was too liberal, however. He accused the school of teaching communism, and persuaded other pastors to endorse a letter to Palacios indicating that pastors could no longer attend the school if its theological orientation did not change. Never a person to be cowed by authority, Palacios resigned from his position as rector and the school closed.

Growing activist

Palacios became increasingly involved in community enterprises, creating a team that worked directly with people in need. This whetted his appetite for deeper involvement and further training because seminary studies did not provide the tools he needed to objectively examine the deep social contradictions he saw.

"I could not understand properly the social phenomena and the social conflicts present in El Salvador," Palacios said. "I wanted to have more scientific tools to better understand the situation."

With support from his wife, Amparo, with whom he had three small children, Palacios first studied Central American sociology at the National University of Costa Rica, financing the first six months of study with a bank loan sufficient to support himself and his family until he could earn a scholarship to cover their expenses. After earning the equivalent of a master's degree, Palacios continued his studies. In the late 1970s, with scholarship assistance from a German foundation, he took his family back to Mexico so he could study political science at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) in Mexico City.

Before completing his master's thesis, Palacios came back to San Salvador for a teaching stint in the law school of the National University of El Salvador. The country was in a growing turmoil, as social activists on the left called for government reforms, while right-wing paramilitary groups and the government pursued a course that favored the wealthy and powerful at the expense of poor farmers who did the work but were often exploited.

The United States government, concerned about Communist influence and fearing a revolution such as the Sandinistas' recent ousting of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, supported the El Salvadoran government.

In the midst of the ferment, Catholic archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated while saying mass in a hospital chapel in March 1980. Romero, who had been appointed archbishop in February 1977 as a conservative, had become increasingly identified with the liberation theology movement after the assassination of Rutilio Grande, a friend and priest who worked to organize poor campesinos. Romero's death was

widely blamed on U.S.-trained Major Roberto D'Aubisson, who commanded special units often described as death squads.

Opposing the government and seeking to defend the growing number of civilians being killed, five opposition groups coalesced to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Leaders of the FMLN organized an armed force of guerilla fighters, and they soon controlled much of the eastern part of El Salvador.

When El Salvador's military took over the national university, Palacios rejoined his family in Mexico. He completed his thesis and won a teaching position at the respected Chapingo Autonomous University in Texcoco. There he was a researcher who also taught master's level students how to do scientifically controlled studies in political economics.

Social leader

But Palacios' heart was in El Salvador. In 1985, he and his family moved back to San Salvador, where he returned as pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church. In 1987, he organized Shalom Baptist Church in a poor area of southeast San Salvador, and immersed himself in the effort to promote a just peace in a country where armed conflict had led to thousands of deaths — most of them innocent civilians.

Attempted talks between the government and the FMLN had stalled, and Palacios joined a large group of civic and religious leaders working to end the war through respectful negotiation while also promoting structural changes designed to promote social justice. At a national assembly for peace organized by the Catholic archbishop, they presented papers that were transformed into a series of theses to be voted on by the assembly.

Over a period of two days, the participants discussed issues related to the economy, health, education and other matters. Together they drew up an agenda for change based on theses that were approved by at least 80 percent of the representatives.

Social activists were glad for the opportunity to work together with the Catholic Church, Palacios said, but the archbishop threw them a curve and presented the document to both government and guerilla representatives on his own, as if others had not been involved. He argued that, because of his experience, the document would be better received if it were seen as coming from him alone.

This did not sit well with other social activists. So, with the archbishop refusing to work within the growing social movement that had come to be known as the National Debate for Peace, representatives from the various social

forces organized the Permanent Committee for the National Debate for Peace.

The Committee initially consisted of representatives from 66 social entities organized into seven sectors: universities, churches, cooperatives, unions, women, micro and small enterprises, and indigenous and human rights. As a prime instigator of the movement, Palacios was elected to become leader of the church section — and coordinator of the organization.

After a devastating earthquake in 1986 and various attempts at peace, active conflict decreased for a while, but in October 1987, Herbert Ernesto Anaya, the head of the country's Human Rights Commission — and a close friend of Palacios — was assassinated. Anaya's death sparked days of protest, a suspension of peace talks, and international outrage.

In 1989, violence again escalated as the government began to target social leaders for assassination and responded to organized demonstrations with deadly force. When efforts at peace negotiations were rebuffed, FMLN leaders decided to leave their strongholds in the countryside and press the issue by launching an offensive against San Salvador, the capital.

The National Debate for Peace, Palacios said, was at the height of its influence, holding regular meetings, pushing the government for change, and holding press conferences that were widely reported. During an early November meeting at a large hotel in San Salvador, however, a leader of the FMLN approached Palacios, knelt at his side, and told him the offensive against San Salvador had begun. Knowing that Palacios was on the government's hit list, the visitor encouraged him to go into hiding.

That afternoon, Palacios and his wife Amparo sent their children to stay with friends. Amparo Palacios went home, accompanied by some foreign Lutherans who had come to offer themselves as human shields to protect Bishop Merdardo Gomez, a family friend.

Palacios, Gomez and two well-known democratic leaders took refuge in the German embassy, aided by the efforts of a Lutheran missionary. Three days later, Palacios moved to the home of a United Nations representative. When the director of the Lutheran World Federation rented the second floor of the "Camino Real" hotel, he and Gomez were reunited with their families.

Journalists occupied the first floor of the hotel, but many were afraid to leave, Palacios said. He traveled around with representatives from the Catholic archbishop's office, gathering information, pressing for peace, holding press conferences at the hotel. The conflict grew heavier, however. The army arrested some of the people on the first floor, while the hotel shook



A small lawn at the Romero Center, where six Jesuit priests were murdered in November 1989, has been transformed into a rose garden with a plaque honoring the dead. The husband/father of a housekeeper and her daughter, who were also killed in the attack, planted the roses.

from nearby bombings and tanks could be seen in the street.

About 5:00 a.m. on Nov. 16, Palacios was awakened by a call from his Catholic contacts with the news that six Jesuit priests — all of them friends — had been murdered. A special military unit had forced its way into their dormitory on the grounds of the University of Central America, marched the priests into a small garden, and shot them all in the head. Determined to leave no witnesses, the gunmen also murdered a housekeeper and her daughter.

Trusted pastor

Leaders of the National Debate for Peace soon gathered, and a special envoy from the Vatican urged Palacios and Bishop Gomez to leave the country for their safety. Palacios was asked to contact commanders of the FMLN and encourage them to call for a truce so the Red Cross could evacuate the wounded.

The two friends left the country in a U.N. motorcade and made their way to Guatemala, where they separated. Palacios went to Nicaragua and met with leaders of the FMLN, castigating them for going on the offensive when he felt the social movement was making progress. They defended the offensive as necessary to prevent the government from beheading the social movement by killing its leaders, such as the Jesuits who had been murdered. Palacios was still alive only because he had kept moving, they said.

Palacios ultimately traveled to the United States where he could lobby Congress to press for peace through political negotiations between the government and FMLN. His family was finally reunited with him for Christmas in New York. In early 1990, they moved to Washington, D.C., and set up an office of the National Debate for Peace on Capitol Hill.

Amparo Palacios was designated as executive director of the Washington office, and she

immediately began to lobby Congress to halt military aid to the El Salvadoran government. With added pressures from other Christian groups, the involvement of the U.N., and a congressional investigation that confirmed severe human rights violations, aid finally ceased.

Edgar Palacios successfully urged both the U.N. and the Organization of American States to begin formal peace talks. After three months in Washington, he returned to El Salvador, where he continued to lead the National Debate for Peace, and represented the social movement in pressing both sides to seek a peaceful solution that respected the rights and needs of the poor.

In time, both the El Salvadoran government under President Alfredo Christiani and FMLN leaders came to a series of agreements, and the war came to an end. In tribute to their determined efforts at promoting peace with justice, both Edgar and Amparo Palacios were invited guests when final peace accords were signed on Jan. 16, 1992, at the Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City.

The accords called for the army to function only in defense of national sovereignty. "Security forces" were to be eliminated and a national civil police created along with an ombudsman's office to oversee human rights.

The agreement also called for a strengthening of democratic institutions in which the FMLN morphed into a legal political party, and for a number of economic and social development projects.

After 12 painful years laced with more than 75,000 deaths, peace had finally come to El Salvador, in large part due to the efforts of a humble Baptist couple whose indomitable spirit and concern for the poor would not be quelled.

Once peace had been achieved, Edgar and Amparo made their home in Washington, D.C., believing they could be more effective there in lobbying to improve conditions for the poor in El Salvador and elsewhere.

Amparo Palacios, who shifted her work to assisting poor women and children in the D.C. area, died of cancer in November 2008. Edgar Palacios was called as associate pastor of Christian education at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., where he also leads a Latino congregation comprised mostly of El Salvadorans.

That's just the official aspect of Palacios' work, however. On his own, he continues to advocate in behalf of downtrodden people both in the U.S. and in El Salvador, where the FMLN party now controls the government, and Palacios is a respected and trusted friend.

It's hard to hold a man like Palacios to one job. After all, he's the Baptist who helped save El Salvador. **BT**

La Cruz Subversiva

Freeing the cross that frees

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador — The countless crosses that adorn churches around the world could be described in many ways. In El Salvador, a simple cross in a Lutheran church gained a reputation as being a subversive enemy of the state.

The cross was the brainchild of Medardo Gomez, the first Lutheran Bishop of El Salvador, but its real inspiration came from a movement that spread through Latin America in the 1970s, often known as “liberation theology.”

Though often identified with Roman Catholic theologians working in the area, a number of Protestant clerics also found meaning in the movement, including Gomez and his Baptist friend, Edgar Palacios (see preceding story).

The theology of liberation is not just an academic or ecclesial exercise, but calls for social action on behalf of oppressed peoples living on the margins of society. Such activity can lead supporters to run afoul of political systems that inherently empower the wealthy at the expense of the poor, and Gomez was no exception.

In November 1989, as guerilla fighters from the opposition FMLN prepared to attack San Salvador, special military units were assigned a list of social leaders to assassinate. Both Gomez and Palacios were on the list: they were warned of the danger and found refuge in the German embassy before moving to a hotel protected by the United Nations.

A few nights later, soldiers murdered six Jesuit priests in their dormitory at the Romero Center, and government forces searched for Gomez, Palacios and other social leaders. At Resurrection Lutheran Church, where Gomez was pastor, they arrested 15 peace activists who had come to offer themselves as human shields in an effort to protect endangered leaders, hoping soldiers would not fire if foreigners were present.

Along with the protestors, the soldiers “arrested” a large white cross standing beside the altar. Earlier, as an exercise in worship, Gomez had invited parishioners to come forward and write the sins of the country on the cross.

The scribbled list included Spanish terms and phrases for things like “hunger,” “social injustice,” “persecution of the church,”



Medardo Gomez

“oppression of women,” “unlawful seizure,” and a variety of other concerns.

The cross was kept by the altar, Gomez said, as a reminder of things the church needed to work on. The soldiers, however, saw the cross as a subversive means of socialist indoctrination — so they confiscated it and consigned it to a prison cell.

A few days later, protected by the presence of many journalists, Gomez was able to safely leave the embassy to attend funeral services for the murdered Jesuits, and was given an opportunity to speak. Afterward, he approached President Alfredo Cristiani, who also attended the service, and interceded for the 15 foreign peace workers, who were set free shortly thereafter.

For their safety, Gomez and Palacios were escorted from the country shortly thereafter, and both made their separate ways to the United States. Some time later, an ecumenical council was formed with the goal of returning Gomez safely to El Salvador. A number of high-profile individuals accompanied him on the return flight, believing that the government would not risk the negative publicity of attacking them.

The delegation was so distinguished that the U.S. ambassador was waiting to greet them at the door of the plane, Gomez said, and he took the opportunity to ask the ambassador

to intercede for the release of the cross from prison. The ambassador communicated with President Cristiani, who ordered that the cross be moved to his office at the *Casa Presidencia*. He later invited Gomez for an official visit and personally returned the cross to him.

Today the six-foot-tall cross, made of two simple boards, is back in the Resurrection Lutheran Church. Encased in wood and glass, it stands against the wall to the left of the altar, and has become known as *La Cruz Subversiva* — “The Subversive Cross.” Smaller copies of the cross are used in processions and given as commemorative gifts.

Gomez prefers the term “theology of life” to “liberation theology,” believing that God’s special care is not only for the poor, but also all who are needy. “Sometimes,” he said, “wealthy people can be the most needy.”

Gomez holds that the cross of Christ calls all people to serve God by caring for all who are needy, offering hope to those who experience suffering and pain.

“I have learned in my life that where there is more pain, there is more hope,” he said.

Where there is more pain, there is more hope — a hope that leads to action, inspired by *La Cruz Subversiva*. **BT**



The cross known as *La Cruz Subversiva* still stands in Resurrection Lutheran Church in San Salvador, a continual call for economic and social justice.

Honest options:

Declining faith communities to ask hard questions

By Les Robinson

Organized religion in America is in a slump. Numbers of regular attenders are down across all denominations, and many congregations are struggling with dwindling attendance and shrinking finances.

The verdict is still out on whether the declining numbers are here to stay. Faith communities should be aware of national trends, however, and be willing to ask hard questions about their own health and longevity.

Startling statistics

FACT (Faith Communities Today) disseminates the results of research generated by representatives of more than 25 faith groups in the United States. The most recent report compares data collected in 2005 with information collected in 2010.

According to this research, 40 percent of the reporting congregations had a decline of two percent or more in average adult worship attendance during this five-year period, with 31 percent of the reporting congregations experiencing more than a 10 percent decline.

More than one in four American congregations had fewer than 50 in worship in 2010, and just under half had fewer than 100. Overall, median weekend worship attendance of the typical congregation dropped from 130 to 108 (17 percent) during the last decade.

The picture is somewhat more jaded when reviewing only old-line Protestant congregations. Fifty percent of those faith communities experienced two percent or more decline, with 33 percent of the reporting congregations experiencing more than a 10 percent decline. In fact, in this five-year period, median old-line Protestant congregations saw their average worship attendance move from 179 to 73 — a 59 percent decline!

Faith communities must be dedicated to a new future and then be patient while working to make it happen.

Further FACT research indicates that while American congregations were doing a lot of the right things during the last decade (2000-2010), they were fighting against these strong headwinds:

A Steep Drop in Financial Health

Every year from 2000-2005, an additional four percent of participating congregations indicated a decline in financial health.

Every year from 2006-2010, an additional nine percent of the reporting congregations reported such a decline. In the 2010 FACT survey, 80 percent of all American congregations reported that their finances had been negatively impacted by the recession, and that the recession affected nearly every kind of congregation equally: large and small; north, south, east and west; financially healthy or struggling before the recession.

High Levels of Conflict

Almost two of every three congregations in 2010 experienced conflict. In a third of the congregations the conflict was serious enough that members left or withheld contributions, or a staff member left.

Ageing Memberships

Thirty percent of faith community members are over age 60, and when you add in the over-50 crowd, that number grows to 46 percent.

More "Nones"

Those who are not members of a faith community are the fastest growing religious segment of the American population and number more than any American denomination except Roman Catholics.

Therefore, it is no surprise that analyses of recent trends in individual religiosity in the United States are concluding that traditional forms of religious belief and practice (including worship attendance) are beginning to erode across the board.

Surprisingly, though, the FACT data reveals that the vanishing presence in the pews is not only true of old-line Protestant congregations whose numerical decline has been documented for the last 50 years, but also for typical white evangelical congregations and racial/ethnic congregations.

Of course, numbers are not the ultimate gauge of the health of a church, whether it is attendance, membership, financial gifts, and/or programs and mission opportunities. Yet generally speaking, when faith communities experience a decline in average worship attendance, a decline in the other areas is usually not far behind.

Warning signs

Thom S. Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, suggests there are five common warning signs to which congregations should pay attention in order to detect potential decline:

The church has few outwardly-focused ministries. Most of the budget dollars are spent on the desires and comforts of the members. The ministry staff spends most of its time taking care of members, with little time to reach out and minister to the community.

The dropout rate is increasing. Members are leaving for other faith communities in the area, or they are leaving the local church completely.



Congregations are experiencing conflict over issues of budgets and buildings. When the membership becomes focused on how the facilities and money can meet their personal preferences, congregational health is clearly on the wane.

According to the FACT research, average faith communities spend their money according to these percentages: staff (45), facilities (20), program support (10), missions/benevolence (10) and all other (15).

Corporate prayer is minimized. If churches make prayer a low priority, they make God a low priority.

The pastor has become a chaplain. Members view pastors as their personal chaplains, expecting them to be on call for their needs and preferences. When pastors do not make a visit at the expected time or do not show up for the class fellowship, criticism abounds. In some cases, pastors have even lost their jobs because they were not always present for the members.

According to Rainer, if these five patterns become normative, few churches can recover. In fact, the great majority of these congregations do not recover.

What can be done?

Most faith communities do not get into a declining mode overnight, so their patterns of behavior have become normative. Consequently, it will be a difficult process to change course — with no easy, quick or automatic solutions.

Like turning a large ship around in a small harbor, it takes a focused emphasis. The captains (pastor and lay leaders) must have a sense of urgency. The process will require dedication and patience because it is a slow and tedious process, and will require a tugboat (outside assistance).

Focused Emphasis

Since the decline has occurred over several years, perhaps even decades, some habits have been formed that will have to be broken. Leaders may well have held onto the wrong programs, traditions and even staff, simply creating further entrenchment.

Very likely some excess baggage will have to be shed as individual congregations become clear about their core values, and then focus on a clear and vibrant mission and vision to guide the pathway.

It also is important to note that most church growth happens relationally. We are created as relational beings. People are more likely to stay connected to the faith community if they have developed meaningful friendships and relationships with others in the fellowship. This often means that the people must commit to breaking cliques and finding a connection to new people, which includes finding ways to interact with the surrounding neighborhood and culture.

Urgency

In his seminal work, *Leading Change*, John Kotter suggests there are eight vital stages to successful change. The first of these is “a sense of urgency.” Until leadership (pastor and lay leaders) recognize and agree that something must be done NOW, the decline will continue.

Only after the leaders recognize that something has to happen in order for the future to be different than the past will they be ready to lead the congregation to work on core values, mission and vision statements, and a plan.

Dedication and Patience

As much as I would like to lose a few pounds by tomorrow morning, it simply is not going to happen. The only way I can accomplish that task is with dedication and patience.

Likewise, faith communities must be dedicated to a new future and then be patient while working to make it happen. There must be a balancing of risk as members willingly take chances, try new things, and accept that everything will not work.

Otherwise, the focus will be on maintaining the status quo — and they already know the outcome of hanging on to the past. Leaders will do well to find consistent words of hope and optimism as they lead the members through these changes.

Another Possibility

There is a more radical option. Turning to the words of Ecclesiastes 3, we are reminded that there is a right time for everything. Verse 2 reads, “a right time for birth and another for death.”

As much as most folks might want to live forever (on earth), we know that we must die in order to make room for new birth. Perhaps it is time for us to accept that nothing is permanent; that in order for new life to come into the community, some need to phase out; and that it is OK for congregations to acknowledge

that God has used them in a powerful way to spread the gospel message but now it is time to pass the mantle to others.

In human life we emphasize end-of-life decisions. While we are seeing an increase in the centenary population, the truth is that the average human life expectancy in the U.S. is 78. Rather than ignore or deny the inevitable, people are encouraged to have wills, medical directives and pre-arranged funeral services. In other words, we encourage death with dignity.

When all faith communities in America are considered, the median year of founding is 1947, making them 64 years old. For the old-line Protestant categories, that median year of founding is 1889 — making them 122 years old.

It seems that another legitimate option, then, is for congregations to accept that eventually they will die; that they will not disappoint God by admitting they can no longer sustain their ministry. Rather, they will accept that God continues to find new ways to keep the gospel voice alive, viable and powerful.

Perhaps faith communities should consider what death with dignity would look like and keep a medical directive on file so that when that time comes they will know what to do. They could plan to sell the property and use the proceeds to support other growing and viable ministries, or deed the property to another group that has the energy and resources to develop a new ministry in the immediate area, or consider merging with other nearby faith communities struggling with the same issues.

Final thought

There are no easy answers for the many faith communities that find themselves in decline today. Certainly, however, if they are going to make positive strides, they must be honest that this is not a short-term trend.

Also, they must sense an urgency to take action — and then practice patience as they intentionally work toward stopping the downward spiral.

The other certainty is that regardless of how congregations interpret their future, the members can be absolutely confident that God is in control. May God’s will be done! **BT**

—Les Robinson is vice president of the Center for Congregational Health (healthychurch.org) based in Winston-Salem, N.C.



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Bible Study

Isaiah 40:21-31

with Tony W. Cartledge

Feb. 5, 2012

Finding God in Every Gear


Have you ever faced hard days in which you felt like the cards were stacked against you and there was little hope of your life getting any better? These days, there are many people feeling that way.

Ongoing hardships caused by the global economic crisis have left countless people out of work, out of employee benefits, and maybe out of patience with governing officials who seem more concerned with political posturing than with helping people.

Conflict, it seems, is on every hand. Religious and nationalist extremists threaten peace and stability at home and abroad. There is tension in our homes, division in our churches, trouble in our hearts.

It is a time when many people are feeling short on hope and in need of encouragement to keep pushing on. We, of course, are not the first to find ourselves in difficult situations. During this month we'll be looking at four lectionary texts from the Old Testament, all of which contain surprising elements of hope and encouragement for difficult days.

A woeful people

Today's text finds us in Babylon, standing with exiled Israelites on the far side of the judgment that had been predicted by Isaiah of Jerusalem, thought to be primarily responsible for Isaiah 1-39.  Jerusalem lies in ruins. The people who once ruled their homeland have been conquered and captured and carried away, forced to work for a



foreign master, doomed to live in a foreign land.


The people's forefathers had heard Isaiah of Jerusalem speak words of warning and judgment and "repent, or else!" Now they were living out the "or else." They no longer needed words of judgment, but of hope.

Fortunately, one who studied the words and works of Isaiah was called by God to carry on the work of his ancient teacher, but with words of comfort rather than condemnation. He is the first and only biblical prophet whose mission was primarily to comfort. And through words of poetic splendor, he spoke powerfully to the needs of his people.

In a series of oracles we find in Isaiah 40, the exilic prophet spoke first of comfort, promising that the exile would soon end and declaring good news of a new day when God's glory would blaze through the wilderness and be made known to all nations (vv. 1-11). We often associate this text, which speaks of "A voice crying: 'In the desert prepare the way for our

God,'" with the Christmas story (see the lesson for Dec. 4, 2011).

A wonderful God (vv. 21-26)

Isaiah then turned to the task of magnifying God's power with a very personal challenge in vv. 12-20. With an almost "in your face" approach, he reminded the downtrodden people that they served the God of all creation, the only true God, a God far more real than the paltry idols worshiped by other peoples. 

The prophet wonders: had the people forgotten this? Had they lost all knowledge of the God who had not only made them, but also made covenant promises to them? Imagine the incredulity in the prophet's voice as he sought to awaken hope in the hearts of his hearers: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?" (v. 21).

Isaiah seems dumbfounded by the lack of faith he observes. It is as if the people had never learned, and after

Additional background information online where you see the "Digging Deeper" icon



👉 **Fun with words:** Translating v. 21 presents some interesting images, and challenges. The phrase “circle of the earth,” above which God sits, probably refers to the horizon, where the earth curves. The word for “curtain” in “he stretches out the heavens like a curtain” is otherwise unattested, but it appears to be derived from a verb meaning “to crush” or “to flatten.” An adjective formed from the same verb means “thin,” so in this context the word appears to describe the sky as a “thin curtain” (NET) spread over the earth.

those rare times of repentance and faith, they never remembered. The prophet feels compelled to remind the people just how great their God is: a God who sits above the earth, who stretches out the heavens like a tent, a God before whom humans are like grasshoppers (v. 22). 👉 A God like that can vanquish earthly kings – even the mighty Babylon – with no more than a breath, blowing them away like chaff (vv. 23-24).

Who can compare with a God who created the countless stars, who guides their movements and knows them all by name (vv. 25-26)? The answer, of course, is no one. No human king can compare with Israel’s God. No god who needs an image can stand against the God who rules the universe.

Isaiah’s message, then, begins with a reminder of God’s creative power over heaven and earth, and then moves to a celebration of God’s ruling power over kings and nations. Israel’s neighbors thought of the moon, sun and visible planets as manifestations of heavenly gods, but Israel’s God ruled over all of the heavens. Through the transcendent imagery of his poem, Isaiah offers a comforting word through a convincing description of God’s power – then turns to a challenge for the people to believe God is not only capable of helping, but also willing.

A willing God (vv. 27-31)

Some hearers in Isaiah’s audience may have feared that God had been defeated by Babylonian deities, or that God’s power did not extend beyond their homeland, or that God was otherwise limited. They may have wondered if it was time for them to give up on God.

Isaiah’s message insisted that God had neither grown weak nor given up on his people, and didn’t want them to give up, either. “Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God’?” (v. 27). 👉

The prophet returns to the format of v. 21, repeating the same astonished questions: “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” These are things Israel should know: the God of all creation is an all-wise and eternal God who never tires or grows weary (v. 28).

Isaiah understood why the exiles were weary with worry. He saw that their hope was nearly exhausted, but he pleaded with them to believe that their God was not only capable of delivering them from sorrow and suffering, but also willing and wanting to do so.

When humans find their hope depleted, they can trust in God, who “gives strength to the weary, and increases the power of the weak” (v. 29). Young and old alike may falter (v. 30), but should never give up hope.

Those who hope in the Lord, Isaiah says, will find strength for every situation in life. Through hope in God, they “will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint” (v. 31).

If the prophet had known anything about automobile transmissions, he might have said that God offers strength for all three gears. There are times in our lives when it seems we have the heart and the vision to soar on eagles’ wings, when ambition runs high and strength

is ready. There are other times when we settle back to earth but still run in pursuit of that vision, joyfully pursuing the dreams that yet lie before us.

But the truth is, most days we find ourselves walking, plodding, plugging away at being human, slogging through the muck and mire of what humanity has become, making the effort to become what God meant humans to be.

The glad news of today’s text is that God is with us in that daily walk, that occasional run, that rare but exhilarating flight. Our God is not only an awesome God, but also a personal God who goes with us — whatever the path may bring.

Isaiah’s challenge is for the exiles to remember and believe that God has not forgotten them, though they may have wandered far from home. Those who want God to walk with them have some responsibility for remembering to whom they belong.

Years ago, shortly after Hurricane Mitch left Honduras in a shambles, I visited the country for the first time. One of my lasting impressions was that, wherever we went outside of major cities, cows and other livestock could be seen wandering freely, grazing along the roadsides. Some had brands or other identifying marks, but most did not.

I asked a local man how people keep up with whose cattle are whose, and he laughed. His answer was in Spanish, but it translates to something like “The cows and horses know to whom they belong.”

The original Isaiah had warned pre-exilic Israel that they should know where their spiritual home is, and he did so by saying “the ox knows its master, and the donkey its owner’s manger.” The sad thing was, he went on to say, “But Israel does not know, my people do not understand” (Isa. 1:3).

Perhaps the latter Isaiah had that thought in mind when he twice asked: “Do you not know? Have you not heard?” There is a real God who loves us and cares for us, and walks with us. Whether we are flying, or running, or walking, we can be sure that God is with us, and we are at home. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

2 Kings 5:1-14

Feb. 12, 2012

A Muddy Water Miracle

Have you ever known someone who left the country to be treated for a disease? Some countries have laxer policies governing medical research, or give quicker approval to new techniques than the United States. As a result, clinics in Mexico or research sites in Germany attract patients from America who are desperate for a cure and willing to take the risk of lengthy travel and non-standard treatment.

Today's text is the story of a powerful man who suffered from a powerful disease, and no one in his home country could cure it. When he heard of a miracle worker in a neighboring land, however, he risked both his pride and his safety in seeking renewed health.

A soldier and a servant (vv. 1-3)

We first meet Naaman, commander of the army of Aram, roughly equivalent to modern-day Syria. Naaman is described as "a great man" and a "mighty warrior" who had led Aram to military victories that gained him favor with the king (v. 1).

But, Naaman does not appear to be a typical military man: his name means "pleasantness" or "delightful," and his demeanor apparently matched his name: everyone loved him, from the king of Aram to an Israelite girl who had been captured in a raid and given to Naaman's wife as a servant girl (v. 2).

And, Naaman had a problem: he suffered from a severe skin disease, and no one in Aram could cure him. 📌 Naaman's condition aroused sympathy



among those who loved him, including the servant girl, so she reported knowledge of a prophet who lived in Samaria and had a reputation for performing miracles. 📌

The girl believed the prophet could heal Naaman (v. 3), and her argument was so convincing that he went to the king and sought permission for a medical leave in Israel (v. 4).

A soldier and two kings (vv. 4-7)

The text does not identify either the king of Israel or of Aram, but fortunately, our interpretation of the story does not depend on the identification of the kings. Remembering Aram's recent raids into Israel, we may presume there was ongoing tension between the two countries, so the king of Aram provided Naaman with a load of silver and gold to use as payment, along with a letter of introduction respectfully requesting that the king of Israel see to Naaman's healing (vv. 5-6). 📌

Israel's king, knowing that he was incapable of healing the visitor, regarded the request as a provocation, thinking the

📌 **Samaria:** The term "Samaria" refers both to the city of Samaria – which served as the capital of Israel for most of the northern kingdom's history – and to the geographical region surrounding it. The prophets often used the term "Samaria" as a euphemism for the entire northern kingdom. Unlike his predecessor Elijah, who led the rustic life of a cave dweller, Elisha preferred the comfort of the cities, and had a home in Samaria (6:32, cf. 2:25 and 5:3), though he also dwelt in other places.

king of Aram might insist he had been offended and declare war if Naaman was not healed. Deeply disturbed, he tore his clothes and asked "Am I God, to give death or life?" (v. 7).

This question sets the stage for what happens next, for God will indeed enter the picture, acting through the prophet to demonstrate that there was indeed a God in Israel.

Additional background information online where you see the "Digging Deeper" icon



A soldier and a man of God (vv. 8-14)

Without saying how news of the king's distress came to Elisha, the text tells us that the prophet responded with the same immense self-confidence that characterizes him in other stories: "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel" (v. 8).

The king was only too happy to hand Naaman off, and the commander soon arrived at the entrance to Elisha's house, standing tall in his chariot and accompanied by an impressive honor guard (v. 9). By all standards of ancient Near Eastern hospitality, one would expect the prophet to personally greet his illustrious visitor and invite him inside for refreshments as they discussed his treatment. Instead, Elisha remained in the house and sent his servant to instruct the commander: "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean" (v. 10).

Nice-guy Naaman responded with anger, and for several good reasons. Not only had the prophet rudely remained inside, but he also had communicated an order that made no sense. Surely, Naaman thought, Elisha would have carefully examined his disease, waved his hand over it, said a prayer or worked a magic spell, and sent him on his way. Instead, Naaman flew into a rage and rode away (v. 11).

Naaman had seen the Jordan, and apparently had not been impressed, thinking it far inferior to the rivers he knew back in Aram. 📍 He was also being asked, essentially, to go and heal himself. Although readers often imagine Elisha's house to be within sight of the Jordan, Samaria was 22 miles from the river as the crow flies, and at least 30 miles by the road that was needed to accommodate the commander's chariot.

While Naaman had anticipated an on-the-spot ceremony in the presence of the prophet, he was being required to embark on a full day's travel to the Jordan and then to publicly dip himself in its muddy waters over and over,

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with no more to go on than the absent prophet's promise that he would be healed. Was the prophet doing this to ridicule him, sending him on the ancient equivalent of a snipe hunt to leave him waterlogged and feeling foolish in the middle of a mucky river?

We can understand the commander's discomfiture, but his servants persuaded him to swallow his pride and follow the prophet's instructions. After all, wouldn't he have embarked on some brave and dangerous quest if that had been required? Shouldn't he be willing to take the prophet's prescription, which required much less? (v. 13).

So, Naaman calmed himself, proceeded to the Jordan River and followed Elisha's directions: once, twice, three times; then four, five, six, seven times he plunged, head and all, beneath the waters. And somewhere along the way, the text says, his disease was healed. The scabby, disfigured skin sloughed away, and his skin became as pink and soft as a baby's bottom: literally, "his flesh turned back like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean" (v. 14).

The lectionary text, unfortunately, stops at v. 14, but we would be remiss not to consider the newly healthy man's happy response: he and all his retinue traveled the long uphill road back to Samaria, where the prophet came out to greet him and receive his happy thanks, though he declined to accept the rich gifts Naaman offered. Perhaps Elisha wanted Naaman to know that God's gifts are not for sale but are given by grace, requiring only obedience (vv. 15-16).

In a surprising move, then, Naaman asked a gift from Elisha – permission to gather two mule loads of dirt from the land over which the God of Elisha ruled, dirt that he would use to build a small platform for prayer and sacrifice to Yahweh, "for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD" (v. 17). 📍

Naaman's newfound allegiance to Yahweh came with a second request. Naaman knew that his duties included accompanying the king to worship in the temple of Baal-Rimmon, the national god of Aram. The commander asked if he could be pardoned from any offense caused by fulfilling that responsibility. Elisha's response implies acceptance of the request, as he sent Naaman away with the blessing "Go in peace" (vv. 18-19).

Lessons taught and learned

This intriguing story offers readers as many questions as answers. There are a couple of obvious purposes for the story's preservation, with the demonstration of Yahweh's power – as compared to the impotence of other gods, such as Baal-Rimmon – being foremost among them. The story should not be read to imply that Elisha's prescription is always effective, and that a pilgrimage to the Jordan will bring healing to our diseases. Naaman's healing was a one-time experience, but it teaches an all-time lesson about God's presence and power.

The story also emphasizes the importance of obedience for those who seek to be cleansed. While a few of us may experience skin problems, all of us must deal with a chronic sin problem. And, there is no real cure for sin, but there is the hope of forgiveness. As Naaman's skin was cleansed when he obeyed the prophet's directive, our sin is washed away when we repent and trust in Christ – not because we have accomplished some great feat in order to deserve it, but because we've been willing to humble ourselves and accept God's offer of healing grace.

How appropriate it is that we symbolize our initial experience of grace through baptism, which often takes place before a mural depicting the Jordan River. We may practice just one dip rather than seven, but we also must swallow our pride before entering the waters, to emerge with an amazing sense of cleansing and hope for a new life. **BT**

Youth

February 5 — February 26, 2012

Youth lessons are made possible through the generous support of the Eula Mae & John Baugh Foundation.

Where's My Hope?

"Are you listening to me?" I'm sure you've heard these words at some point in your life, maybe from a boyfriend or girlfriend or even your parents. Whenever you have heard this question, the reason is usually the same: you weren't paying attention to the person speaking to you.

In the passage for this Sunday, Isaiah confronts the Israelites in much the same way: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

The Israelites have been exiled to Babylon, removed from their homeland, and acting as if God was removed from them when they were forced to leave. Isaiah witnesses the people acting as if they have forgotten about their creator God and the covenants God made with them.

So Isaiah reminds the Israelites of God's creation, God's rule over the princes and rulers, and God's power. But most importantly, Isaiah reminds the Israelites that God wants to do these things with them.

And if they weren't listening the first time, Isaiah asks them again: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?" Isaiah understands why the Israelites would have been distracted or given up because he lived in exile as one of them. He reminds them of their past relationship with God and how God wants to continue that relationship.

As we read this scripture passage today, Isaiah asks us: "Have you not known? Have you not heard?"

We too have times when we feel as if we have been sent away, when our friends have left us, when our family has dismissed us, when we are alone. It is hard to be encouraged to do anything when we feel this way. This passage from Isaiah calls us back to community by reminding us that God has not forgotten us, our strength shall be renewed through God, and we shall walk again. Isaiah reminds us that we will find the hope we need with God.

FEBRUARY 5

Think About It:

Have you ever felt alone even though people surround you? Have you ever felt as if you didn't know what to do next? Where did you find hope?

Make a Choice:

God has, does and will continue to offer hope to you. God wants you to accept this hope. How will you accept God's hope? What will hope do for you?

Pray:

Thank God for remembering you even when you don't remember God. Ask that you might continue to live in the hope that God has given to you.

And the Choice Is ...

Lebron James is asked to practice the basic skills by his coaches when they know he can do amazing things with a basketball. Yo-Yo Ma's conductor asks him to practice simple musical scales daily when the conductor knows he can already perform intricate pieces. In our text for this Sunday, Naaman, the commander for a king's army, is asked to do something routine when something bigger can be done.

Naaman has a severe skin disease that no one in Aram can cure. One of Naaman's servant girls tells him of a prophet in Samaria who can cure him. There is a problem with the prophet being present in Samaria, however, because of an ongoing tension between the people of Aram and Samaria. To ease these tensions, the king of Aram gives Naaman a payment to take to the king of Israel. When Naaman goes to the king of Israel with his request, the king tears his clothes because he cannot heal Naaman.

We do not know how Elisha heard of the king's distress, but Elisha calls Naaman to his home to cure him. Because hospitality is a virtue of the Israelite society, Naaman is shocked when Elisha doesn't come to meet him. Instead, Elisha sends him to dip himself in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman is also shocked that he is to do this routine chore of dipping himself in a water when he has expected Elisha to do something more extravagant. As shocked as Naaman is, he still dips himself in the water seven times and is healed.

Naaman's pride had him expecting a welcome embrace and an exquisite cleansing, but Naaman had to leave his pride at Elisha's door. The healing occurred because Naaman let go of his pride, was obedient to Elisha and humbly accepted God's healing touch.

Like Naaman, our own healing will occur only when we let go of our pride and obediently grab hold of God's grace.

FEBRUARY 12

Think About It:

When was a time that you were asked to do something that was "beneath" you? What ran through your head as you were asked to do this chore? How did you come around to doing it?

Make a Choice:

Much of the difficulty we have in choosing Christ over our self is due to the fact that we have to deny our self to follow Christ. Will you make the choice to check your pride at the door to follow Christ?

Pray:

Ask God for the courage daily to choose Jesus over yourself.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



Let's Make It Two!

The Double Quarter-Pounder ... Double-Stuffed Oreos ... A double scoop of ice cream ... When something is good, why not make it even better by doubling it?

Elisha has followed Elijah and witnessed what Elijah could do. So when Elisha is asked what Elijah can do for him before he leaves, Elisha asks for not only one share of Elijah's spirit, but also a double share of his spirit.

This exchange between Elisha and Elijah occurs at the end of their time together, so let's rewind for a minute and learn why Elisha would have asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit.

Elijah is a prophet who routinely warns Israel's officials of the doom that is about to ensue as the result of their wrongdoings. Elijah calls Elisha out of a field to be his successor, and Elisha catches up with Elijah after saying his goodbyes. Their relationship is not always rosy, but Elisha continues to follow

Elijah, absorbing every word and action of Elijah.

Here is where our text for this Sunday picks up the story. Elijah knows that he is about to be taken away by God, so he tells Elisha to stay behind. But Elisha continues to follow Elijah, reminding him that he swore to stay with Elijah. Two more times Elijah tries to get Elisha to stay, but Elisha will not leave, absorbing every word and deed to the very end. After this third attempt, Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him. At that point, Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. Elisha still does not leave Elijah's side, but stays with him, listening to every word and watching every action until Elijah is taken up in a whirlwind by God.

Elisha's time with Elijah has stirred within a desire to do not only what Elijah did but to do it twice as well. What parts of your life should you seek to do twice as well?

FEBRUARY 19

Think About It:

Is there someone you admire? What is special about that person? Is there someone who looks up to you? What is it about you that person wants to repeat?

Make a Choice:

Your actions will reveal to those around you what you hold most dear. Will your actions show your love for the world or your love for God?

Pray:

Pray that the light of God may shine through you so that those around you might be blessed. Pray that they will follow that light to God.

I Promise ...

I have a friend who wears a simple beaded necklace he bought while on a mission trip to remind himself of how blessed he is in life. Is there something you wear or some object you have set some place to remind you of something?

In our text for this Sunday, God places a rainbow in the clouds as a reminder of the covenant with Noah never to destroy the earth with a flood again. That's right, the rainbow is set in the clouds by God to remind God of a promise. The rainbow isn't for us, but for God.

So if the rainbow in our scripture text is for God, what is in this passage for us? Let's take a closer look at the covenant for which God makes the rainbow to see what God promises to us.

First, the covenant God makes is not

only with Noah or with Noah's people, but with all of humanity and every living creature. The hope that God had in Noah, God also has in each of us.

Second, the covenant says the earth will not be destroyed by flood, but it does not say the earth cannot be destroyed. Our sinfulness can once again destroy the earth, and this time we may not need God to do it for us. Rather, it may be due to the toxins we put into the air, land and water, and the nuclear weapons waiting to be launched.

Third, the act of God covenanting with humanity shows that God wants us to be partners in continuing to create God's Kingdom here on earth.

The rainbow is a reminder for God, but the covenant at the end of the rainbow is for us.

FEBRUARY 26

Think About It:

What are the promises you believe God has made to you? What reminders help you remember these promises? Where do you look for the rainbows in your life?

Make a Choice:

Through Christ, God made a covenant with us, and it is our choice to live out that covenant on a daily basis. Will you make the choice today to build up the Kingdom of God?

Pray:

Thank God for the covenant God has made with you, and ask for the courage to live out your part of the covenant.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

2 Kings 2:1-12

Feb. 19, 2012

Give Me a Double!

We've all seen the stereotypical scenes on TV or in the movies. Some person, burdened or depressed, plops onto a barstool and groans something like: "Gin – and make it a double!" The main character in today's text also wanted a double – not of spirits, but of the Spirit.

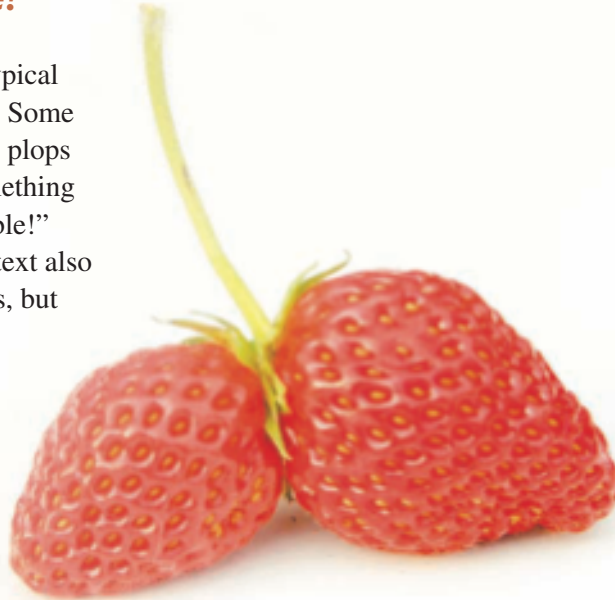
And he got what he asked for. Our designated text does not explore what happened after Elisha received a double portion of God's Spirit, but to make our study most meaningful, we'll need to take a look both backward and forward at the relationship between Elisha and his teacher, the inimitable Elijah. ⚓

A call to follow

We first meet Elisha in 1 Kings 19, as the prophet Elijah calls him to be his successor. ⚓ The text does not indicate whether Elijah had previously known of Elisha, who is identified to him as the "son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah" (v. 16). ⚓

Nor is there any indication that Elisha had a previous reputation for prophecy: when we meet him, he is plowing a field with 12 yoke of oxen. ⚓

And, although God had instructed Elijah to anoint Elisha, the text does not record such a ceremony: Elijah simply walked into the field where Elisha was plowing, threw his mantle over Elisha's shoulders, and walked away so quickly that Elisha had to run to catch up with him.



A reluctant teacher (vv. 1-8)

The relationship between Elijah and Elisha remains an enigma, as the text records very little dialogue between them, and most of that is strained. When Elisha asked permission to say farewell to his parents, Elijah's response was gruff. But, after saying his good-byes, Elisha did catch up to Elijah, and became his assistant. ⚓

Elijah remained involved in governmental affairs, predicting doom to Israel's King Ahab after he murdered Naboth to obtain his vineyard (1 Kgs. 21:1-29), and later castigating Ahab's successor Ahaziah, who sought the aid of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, after being injured in a fall (2 Kgs. 1:1-18). ⚓

Elisha is not mentioned in either of those stories, though we presume he would have observed and learned. The next time Elisha enters the picture is in today's text, as Elijah prepares for his exit, and seems to be doing his best to get away from his pupil.

⚓ Swearing: In the ancient Near East, an oath consisted of two parts: (1) a promise to do something and (2) the invocation of a curse, usually in the name of a god, against oneself in the event that he or she failed to keep the promise. This is often abbreviated to a form similar to Elisha's oaths in 1 Kgs. 2:2, 4, and 6: "As the LORD lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." The curse part of the oath is obscured in English translation, where "I will not leave you" renders the Hebrew "if I leave you."

The unstated part of the oath, the self-directed curse, is "May Yahweh do such and such to me," as in, "As Yahweh lives, if I leave you, may Yahweh do such and such to me." Oaths were so common in Hebrew thought that simply calling on Yahweh (and in this case, Elijah as well) and adding "if I ..." was sufficient to imply the expectation of dire consequences if the promise was not fulfilled.

The narrator leaves no surprise as to how Elijah will depart: "Now when the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind," the narrator says, "Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal" (v. 1).

As Elijah set out from Gilgal to Bethel – a full day's uphill journey over winding mountain paths – he told Elisha to stay behind, but Elisha swore he would not leave him (v. 2). ⚓ In Bethel, a company of prophets asked Elisha if he was aware that Yahweh would be

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taking Elijah away. Had Elijah gone to Bethel in order to meet with the prophets there and tell them what was about to take place, or had God revealed his imminent departure to the prophets directly? The text does not say.

The scene is then repeated almost verbatim: Elijah told Elisha to stay behind, for God had called him to travel to Jericho. Again Elisha swore to remain with his teacher, and followed him back down the mountainous road to Jericho, which was just south of their beginning point in Gilgal. Again, the local prophets asked Elisha if he knew Elijah was leaving (vv. 4-5).

A third time, Elijah instructed Elisha to leave, saying God had called him to the Jordan River – and a third time, Elisha swore to remain with him (v. 6). Jericho is located only five miles or so from the Jordan, so a company of 50 curious prophets followed at a distance to see what would happen (v. 7), but were left behind when Elijah slapped the river with his mantle, causing it to part so he and Elisha could cross on dry ground (v. 8).

An ardent pupil (vv. 9-12)

The reader wonders why Elijah told Elisha to stay behind three times, but allowed him to follow along when Elisha refused to be parted. Was Elijah unconvinced that Elisha should succeed him? Was he afraid that Elisha would ask too many questions or make demands before his departure? Was he simply testing Elisha, to see if he was committed enough to stay close, even when discouraged from doing so?

We can only speculate. It's possible that Elijah just wanted to be alone when he met his maker, not wanting to share the experience. Or, since it was widely believed that no one could see God and live, Elijah may have been trying to protect his disciple by shielding him from Yahweh's approaching appearance.

But Elisha was determined. Whatever discouragement Elijah might offer, whatever danger might lie ahead, Elisha

was resolved to remain with his teacher.

Finally, the crusty prophet seemed convinced of Elisha's worthiness, and spoke more kindly to his disciple. In the tradition of a father blessing his children before dying, he said "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you" (v. 9a).

Elisha appears not to have hesitated. He had long admired Elijah's God-empowered spirit, his zealous commitment to God, his ability to channel God's power for prophetic purpose. "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit," he asked (v. 9b).

Have you known someone who seemed abundantly blessed with spirit? The most successful Christian leaders are often people who are not so much spiritual (though they may be that), but spirited – they have such a spirit of enthusiasm and energy and hope, they motivate others to follow them.

Elijah had that kind of spirit, and Elisha wanted a double portion of it. Whatever Elijah had done, he wanted to do even better. Elijah's instructions in v. 10 may have been yet another test: to receive the blessing, Elisha would have to stay close enough to see what happened when Yahweh came to claim Elijah.

The function of the fiery chariot is to separate Elisha from Elijah, who is carried aloft by the whirlwind – not the chariot (religious art notwithstanding). This grabs our attention in v. 11, but we should not overlook what took place just before that: "As they continued walking and talking..." Elisha remained close to Elijah as long as he could, absorbing every insight possible, before the heavenly apparition separated them.

Similarly, the most important aspect of v. 12 is not Elisha's cry of amazement, but the note that Elisha "kept watching" until "he could no longer see him." Once it was clear that

Elijah was gone, Elisha tore his clothes to express his mourning. But had his ability to see Elijah depart mean he had received the double portion of the prophet's spirit?

That remained to be seen.

A tale of two mantles

The lectionary text stops at v. 12, but the story is not complete until we note how Elisha found Elijah's mantle lying beside him and took it up to replace his own garment, which he had just torn apart. Quickly putting God to the test, the ambitious Elisha used the mantle to strike the Jordan, saying "Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" (vv. 13-14).

The water parted, demonstrating that Elijah had become heir to Elisha's power. And, as the Elisha stories continue, the narrator is careful to show that Elijah not only did the same things Elisha had done, but often did them in a bigger way.

What might this story suggest about how others see our spirit? Do we have positive characteristics that would inspire others to follow and learn from us? Do we take the time to share our talents, to teach and encourage others?

Children, especially, watch what we do, hear what we say, absorb our attitudes, and pick up on our feelings. From us they learn to love people who are different, or to hate them. From us they learn to appreciate the things of God, or to accept the secular life as all-important.

We learn from our parents, but also from others who have passed their mantle on to us through both word and example. They may have been Sunday school teachers or sports coaches or older friends who made it their business to show kindness to us. From walking with them and talking with them, we wear their influence throughout our lives.

What kind of mantle do we wear? Does it look good on our children? Does it flatter others who might pick it up and wear it? If not, perhaps some adjustments are in order. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Genesis 9:8-17

Feb. 26, 2012

Always and Never

Are there symbols in your life that remind you of some commitment? Wedding rings remind us to be faithful. Colorful plastic bracelets may remind us to “Live Strong” or to pray for the troops. Peace symbols or equality stickers may remind us to work for justice.

Today’s text speaks of a symbol that we often think of as a comforting reminder from God, but there’s a twist – a closer reading shows that the rainbow was a message from God, to God: any human comfort is an added bonus.



Covenant provisions (vv. 1-7)

Genesis 9 concludes the infamous story of the flood that begins in chapter 6, and recounts a divinely decreed judgment to destroy all human and animal life on earth with the exception of the people and creatures Noah had brought on board a giant houseboat, at God’s direction. ⚡

The biblical account consists of two different versions of the flood story that have been spliced together. Most readers haven’t learned to expect that, so they don’t read closely enough to recognize the internal inconsistencies. The older Yahwistic story and the later Priestly account differ in the number of clean animals brought on board, the source of the floodwaters, the length of the flood, and other matters, but they both carry the same general message: that humankind became so sinful, God decided to wipe the slate clean and start over with a single family.

Following the flood, God entered a

covenant relationship with Noah and his family, according to the Priestly story. In 9:1-7, the writer reflects commands from the creation account in Genesis 1, also a product of the Priestly source. The section begins and ends with a reminder of the command to be fruitful and multiply (echoing Gen. 1:28).

But something is new: while humans were given dominion over animal life in Genesis 1, they were authorized to eat only fruits and vegetables. Now things have changed: animals will live “in fear and dread” of humans, who are now given “everything that lives and moves” as food (vv. 2-3), with the single proviso that blood should not be consumed, because it is the source of life and belongs only to God (9:4). ⚡

Recognizing that Noah and his descendants were just as prone to evil as their forbears, God also announced limits on vengeance: human blood should not be shed, under severe penalties (9:5-6).

These commands both recognize the value of life and also provide for occasions when life can be taken. They seem to be concessions to the sinfulness of humankind rather than aspects of God’s true desire for the earth.

A covenant promise (vv. 8-11)

Our focus text for today begins with v. 8, where God moves from commands to promises. ⚡ Although it is called a covenant, Gen. 9:8-17 is quite different from other covenants that give structure to the Old Testament. ⚡

⚡ Four structural covenants:

Richard Elliott Friedman outlines the primary covenants of the Hebrew Bible this way: “The Noahic covenant promises the security of the cosmos. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 15 and 17) promises the land to Abraham’s descendants and makes YHWH their God. The Israelite (or Sinai, or Mosaic) covenant (Exod. 20, 34; Deut. 5; 7:12-15) promises well-being in the promised land. And the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7; Ps. 89, 132) promises kingship over Jerusalem to David and his descendants” (*Commentary on the Torah* [HarperOne, 2001], 42).

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Later covenants with Abraham, with Israel, and with David all relate to God's relationship to a particular people and thus require their response, but the covenant with Noah is for all the earth, and depends on God alone. The writer insists that God has established the covenant not only with humans, but also "with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (v. 10). All living things had been subject to the flood's destruction, and all living things had been included in the commands of vv. 1-7. Now all creatures will be recipients of God's coming promise.

Nothing about this covenant is conditional: it exists as a promise of God, steadfast and sure, emphasized through multiple repetitions of key words and phrases. As Terrence Fretheim puts it: "The covenant is as good as God is. God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in eternal faithfulness. . . . Humans can rest in the arms of this promise" ("Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1 [Abingdon, 1994], 400).

And what is the promise? "That never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" (v. 11).

And why should this be such glorious news? Ancient peoples believed the heavens and earth were surrounded by the fearsome waters of chaos. The creation story in Genesis 1 begins with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark waters: creation begins when God calls forth light, seals off earthly waters from the waters of chaos with the firmament (sky), and then separates the waters from the dry land – all acts designed to bring order out of chaos.

In the Priestly account of the flood, "the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened" (Gen. 7:11). That is, when the flood began, the boundaries God had set between the earth and the surrounding waters of chaos had given way, putting the entire cosmos in danger.

Thus, for the narrator, the most comforting thing God could do was to guarantee that the earth was secure, that God would hold the floodwaters at bay and never allow such an event to happen again.

A covenant sign (vv. 12-17)

God made that promise, according to the writer, and then declared that the rainbow would be an everlasting reminder of it. Note how often the text speaks of the rainbow appearing "in the clouds." Today, we know that rainbows appear when there is a mix of sun and clouds, because the rainbow is formed when sunlight shines through atmospheric water droplets that act as tiny prisms. ☵

Such explanations are immaterial to the biblical writer, of course, and to his pre-scientific audience. For them, every appearance of clouds could bring the threat of another flood. As someone who has been in an automobile accident watches the highway with renewed trepidation, so Noah's family might fear every new cloud formation, but the rainbow would remind them that God had sworn off destroying the earth by flood.

The text does not suggest that God created the rainbow for that purpose. Rather, God calls attention to a natural phenomenon and names it as a sign that the earth will not be destroyed by water again.

In doing so, God transformed the meaning of the rainbow. The ancients typically included a weather god in their pantheons, and imagined that storms – especially thunderstorms – were the result of the god's anger. The Canaanite god Baal, for example, was often depicted with a lightning bolt in his hand. The rainbow was imagined as a weapon of the gods, used to shoot lightning bolts at the earth. With God's promise, however, the bow was transformed into a sign of peace, that God

would not again destroy the earth with a flood. ☵

This is how we typically view the text, but on closer reading it becomes clear that the sign of the rainbow was not intended for humans, but for God: "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (v. 16).

From God's perspective, the appearance of clouds could symbolize a gathering storm of judgment. Yet, a rainbow in the clouds would remind God that any judgment must be mercifully limited: universal floods were no longer in the divine arsenal.

Covenant questions

Perhaps you have known many people who fear floods induced by rain-swollen rivers or hurricane-spawned torrents, but you probably don't know anyone who worries about a universal flood. Are there still lessons here for us?

Of course there are. Humans, for example, are always in need of hope. We face storms and floods of many types. God's care for humankind following the flood is a reminder that God continues to care for all people and desires to be present with us through the Spirit of Christ.

We can also find an ecological lesson in this story. Although God allowed humans even more sway in terms of "dominion" over the earth, there were always limits having to do with the sacredness of life. And, though God promised never to destroy life on earth by means of a flood, that does not mean that life on earth cannot be destroyed. With global tensions rising and growing numbers of nations possessing nuclear weapons, this text is a reminder that we are called to care for all life on earth, including its people: the covenant with Noah was for all people, not just a select few. Thus, God's wish for good and for life provides the operative framework for later covenants between God and humankind, including the work of Jesus. **BT**

Adventures with Luler

the Hound



Kelly Belcher



On Feb. 22, a month before spring, the season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. Lint is dirt or fuzz on your clothes. Lent isn't dirt; it's the 40 days before Easter. But it starts with dirt! You may see people walking around with gray crosses finger-painted on their foreheads. They went to a special worship service where they asked God to forgive them. About a thousand years ago, some Jesus-followers started the custom of putting dirty, gray ashes on their skin to show they had repented, which means to turn away from doing wrong things, and start in the right direction.

Luler the Hound likes to roll on her back in the dirt on a nice warm day. It's what dogs do to feel good. When people ask each other and God to forgive us, we set ourselves in the right place with each other and God. It's what people do to feel good!

As days lengthen toward spring, begin the season of Lent by asking God to forgive you. How can you change directions to be a better kid?

The Idea Box

For the 40 days of Lent, try to surprise a different person every day by forgiving them – 40 people! Who needs forgiving most?

The Bow-wow

Luler says to forgive people who repent and ask you to forgive them. Jesus promised that God will forgive us when we ask. On Feb. 22, look for people with ashy foreheads — they're some of the Jesus followers.



More Online: Jump online at nurturingfaith.net to discover weekly ideas for children's leaders.

Whom does God choose?

Two new books add to continuing debate over Calvinism

WACO, Texas — Roger Olson, professor at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, agreed to write a new book refuting Calvinism because he believes somebody needs to rescue God's reputation.

“I am against any Calvinism — and any theology — that impugns the goodness of God in favor of absolute sovereignty, leading to the conclusion that evil, sin and every horror of human history are planned and rendered certain by God,” he writes.

Olson doesn't particularly like the title of the book, *Against Calvinism*, but Zondervan publishing insisted on it. He admires Calvinist colleagues and students, and he makes it clear he respects their Christian commitment. It's radical Calvinism — generally held by those who identify themselves as “young, restless and Reformed” — he feels the need to oppose.

Olson believes Calvinist theology crosses the line into radical territory when it “makes assertions about God that necessarily, logically imply that God is less than perfectly good in the highest sense of goodness found in the New Testament and especially in Jesus Christ, the fullest revelation of God for us.”

So, when it comes to the TULIP of so-called five-point Calvinist doctrine — total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and perseverance of saints — Olson seeks to mow down at least the U, L and I, leaving just two petals blooming.

“In spite of their best efforts to avoid it, the ‘good and necessary consequence’ of their soteriology (doctrine of salvation) — TULIP — is that God is morally ambiguous if not a moral monster,” he asserts.

In the companion volume, *For Calvinism*, Michael Horton of Westminster Seminary prefers the terms “particular redemption” to

limited atonement and “effectual grace” to irresistible grace. But otherwise, he mounts a spirited defense of the five points he and other Calvinists refer to as the “doctrines of grace.”

“Chosen in Christ from all eternity, we are called effectually to Christ in time,” Horton writes. “Through faith, which itself is God's gracious gift, we receive Christ and all of his benefits.”

Rather than defaming God, Horton insists, Reformed theology acknowledges God's rightful place as sovereign and offers a biblical and accurate assessment of humanity's inability to attain salvation apart from God's initiative.

“It is impossible to read the Bible without recognizing God's freedom to choose some and not others — and the fact that he does in fact exercise that right,” he writes.

Unconditional election should remind Christians “God is always on the giving end and sinners are on the receiving end of grace,” he adds.

Books and sermons on “how to be born again” miss the point, Horton asserts. Sinners do not choose to follow God until God chooses to draw sinners to himself.

“The new birth is a mysterious work of the Spirit in his sovereign freedom, not an event that we ourselves can bring about any more than our natural birth,” he writes.

Horton dismisses criticism that God's election of only some to salvation is unfair by insisting fairness would demand every sinner's eternal punishment.

“God is not arbitrarily choosing some and rejecting others,” he writes. “Rather, he is choosing some of his enemies for salvation and leaving the rest to the destiny that all of us

would have chosen for ourselves.”

Olson doesn't accept that argument. “The issue is not fairness but love,” he writes. “A God who could save everyone because he always saves unconditionally but chooses only some would not be a good or loving God.”

Election rightly understood refers to the people of God in general — all those who freely respond to the invitation to be “in Christ” — not to specific individuals, he writes.

Reprobation — the idea that God has predestined some people for hell — follows logically if one believes God is absolutely sovereign and has chosen only some individuals for salvation, Olson insists.

Radical Calvinists' belief in the absolute sovereignty of God amounts to divine determinism, and it makes God responsible for evil, he asserts.

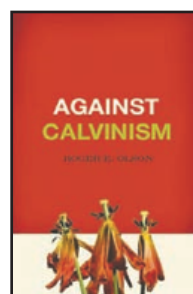
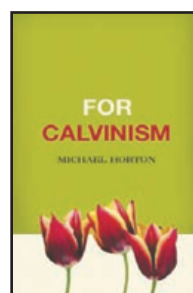
“The one main reason Arminians and other non-Calvinists believe in free will is to preserve and protect God's goodness so as not to make him the author of sin and evil,” Olson writes. “Calvinism makes it difficult to recognize the difference between God and the devil except that the devil wants everyone to go to hell and God wants many to go to hell.”

Horton rejects that assessment of Reformed theology. However, he acknowledges the excesses of some zealous converts to the “New Calvinism” movement.

“We have to distinguish between a God-centered perspective and thinking that you have God on your side — which implies that he's against fellow brothers and sisters,” he writes.

“Unfortunately, we can turn God into a mascot for our team while extolling his sovereignty, glory and grace. ... For all sorts of reasons, we can be misguided in our approach, and we can do all sorts of nasty things ‘for the glory of God.’” **BT**

—Ken Camp is managing editor of the Texas Baptist newspaper, Baptist Standard.



Classifieds

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church of Columbia, Mo., (fbc-columbia.org) a progressive church with 188 years of ministry in the downtown of a vibrant college community of 100,000, seeks a gifted preacher and leader to partner with the congregation in ministry and mission. FBC has 500-plus members and an average worship attendance of 175 with Sunday contemporary and traditional services. Mission partners are ABC, CBF and Alliance of Baptists. The church has completed a self-study process. To apply, please submit résumé and cover letter to PastorSearch@fbc-columbia.org. Questions may be addressed to the search committee co-chairs Charles Hunter (573-864-2050 / charles.hunter@mchsi.com) or Nick Kieffer (573-489-7325 / dadnickieffer@gmail.com).

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church, Orangeburg, S.C., (fbcorangeburg.org) is seeking a senior pastor. FBC has served the Orangeburg community for 150 years. Affiliated with CBF and SBC, it has a resident membership of 1,000 and a family life center. The senior pastor must be an ordained Baptist minister, and have a degree from an accredited seminary and pastoral

experience. The senior pastor will serve as spiritual leader of the church, lead the congregation and staff in pursuing the mission of the church, and provide direction for and coordinate the work of the staff of three ministers. Submit résumés by Jan. 15 to Senior Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 637, Orangeburg, SC 29116-0637. Audio and video recordings are welcome and will be retained.

Minister of Music: A small, growing, urban, CBF and Alliance of Baptists congregation having creative, free-church, liturgical worship is seeking a part-time minister of music to serve on a collaborative pastoral staff. Contact Dr. Tim Moore, Sardis Baptist Church, 5811 Sardis Rd., Charlotte, NC 28270 or tim@sardisbaptistcharlotte.org, or (704) 362-0811 by Jan. 31.

Minister to Students Minister of Music and Administration

Résumés:
mnewton@sanmarcosfbc.org
Search Committee
First Baptist Church
325 W. McCarty Ln
San Marcos, TX 78666

Associate Pastor for Administration and Senior Adults: Morningside Baptist Church in Spartanburg, S.C., a congregation of 1,550-plus members and a team of six ministers, is seeking an associate pastor for administration and senior adults. Appropriate college and seminary degrees are required. Candidate must have the ability to coordinate the administrative responsibilities of the church and the senior adult program. This person also needs to be a good communicator. Morningside affirms women in ministry and worships in a traditional form. Send résumés to areggiehill@bellsouth.net or to Associate Pastor for Administration/Senior Adults, c/o Reggie Hill, Morningside Baptist Church, 897 S. Pine St., Spartanburg, S.C. 29302.

CBFO Coordinator: The Cooperating Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma is seeking a coordinator to lead and direct the ministries and missions of the organization. Applicants should possess ministerial experience and essential relational skills. Seminary or theological training is preferred but not required. Submit résumés to stacy.cbfo@gmail.com or to CBFO, 1017 Elm Ave., Norman, OK 73072.

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In the Know

People

Russell T. Cherry Jr. died Dec. 2, 2011. He had served as pastor of churches in Indiana, Kentucky, Virginia and North Carolina. He retired in 1992 from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Lumberton, N.C., where he was named pastor emeritus in 2004.

Ardelle Clemons died Nov. 26, 2011, in San Antonio, Texas, at age 93. She had an early career in Baptist campus ministry serving at Rice University, Baylor Medical School and Texas Tech University. She was a founding director of Associated Baptist Press. For 57 years she was married to Hardy Clemons, whose pastoral ministries included the First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C.

Jack H. McEwen of Signal Mountain, Tenn., died Dec. 5, 2011, at age 84. He was pastor emeritus of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga where he served from 1973-1980. He also taught psychology at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and Chattanooga

State Community College, and was dean of the School of Christian Education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1980-1983. He and his wife, June Holland McEwen, were actively involved in various Baptist causes. June lives in a retirement community on Signal Mountain.

Ronald D. Vaughan is pastor of St. Andrews Baptist Church, Columbia, S.C. He previously served as pastor of Parisview Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C.

Places

Baylor University's School of Social Work has received a \$3.6 million gift from Cincinnati philanthropists and Baylor parents Carl and Martha Linder for a program for international students pursuing a master's degree in social work. There are currently five students from different countries in Southeast Asia enrolled in the Global Mission Leadership program. Three students are working on dual social work and divinity degrees, in conjunction with George W. Truett Theological Seminary. The other two students are pursuing a master's degree in social work.

Events

The Religious Liberty Council of the Baptist Joint Committee announces its seventh annual **Religious Liberty Essay Scholarship Contest**, open to all high school students in the graduating classes of 2012 and 2013. The scholarship contest offers a grand prize of \$1,000 and airfare and lodging for two to Washington, D.C. To enter the contest, students must write an essay addressing the following topic: The religious beliefs and affiliations of presidential candidates often become campaign issues. Is that fair? Should presidential candidates talk about their religious beliefs? Are there certain religion-related questions each candidate should or should not have to answer? In an essay, examine the role religion should play during a presidential campaign. Complete rules and contest entry forms are available at www.BJOnline.org/contest.

Frank Lambert, a professor of history at Purdue University, will deliver the 2012 Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State. The three lectures are set for **April 17-18 on the Mercer University campus in Macon, Ga. BT**

A warm spot for benchwarmers

Sitting on the bench has a lousy reputation, but it's undeserved. Motivational speakers encourage us to "Get off the bench! Get into the game!" How do they not understand that if we're on the bench it's not by choice? Our decision is whether to sit on the bench or quit the team. Who decided that picking on the people on the bench is fair?

My son is a senior on the varsity basketball team at Parkview High School. Making the team with my genes is no small accomplishment. Parkview has 2,700 students. Caleb is 5'7" and a reasonable speed in a sport that rewards tall and fast. He's pretty good. Last year on the junior varsity he started several games. Whenever he made a great play I felt like I was cheering for someone else's child. He's a smart player who hustles, but it's finally caught up with him that he can't dunk. His game takes place several feet below the rim.

We're now parents who bring a book. When our team wins or loses by 20 points we happily watch our son play the last three minutes, but when I look at Caleb on the bench I couldn't be more proud. He claims he's there to hold up the team GPA, but he knows how to sit on the bench. He listens during timeouts. He fist-bumps players coming back to the bench. He is appropriately despondent when his team loses. "That's my boy" means more this year. My son has never seemed more like a chip off the old block.

I spent some of the best hours of my life on the bench. My first bench was in Little League baseball. I sat next to Coach Harbour who was like a gracious uncle taking care of his myopic nephew. I was on the bench, in part, because I couldn't judge a fly ball. Anything 10 feet off the ground was an adventure. I was a blind squirrel trying to catch a nut with a glove.

Baseball benches are good because they're in a dugout, which is like a really cool clubhouse, except we were allowed to spit on the floor. Most of us spit sunflower seeds, but a few of the 12-year-olds chewed tobacco (it was Mississippi). Bench warmers had important responsibilities like arranging the bats in



Caleb Younger, #12, making his parents proud

order by size. We were the ones who shouted at the opposing team's hitters, "Hey batter batter." The bench was a great place from which to enjoy a game.

I would have sat on the bench during junior high football if Coach Buse had allowed benches. He felt strongly that players who weren't in the game should stand. I didn't like football, but every male without a doctor's excuse was expected to be on the team (it was Mississippi). I enjoyed the pep rallies and the bus ride to the games. My one attempt at dipping snuff was on the football bus. It was particularly good that I didn't play that night.

I was a second-string wide receiver on a team that had no pass plays. I prayed for the first-string wide receiver to stay healthy. The

other team invariably included large, violent young men who enjoyed hitting smaller people. Coach Buse seemed angry that I weighed 120 pounds. He made Bear Bryant look soft.

My last bench was in the gym. For most, basketball was a way to kill time between football and spring football (it was Mississippi), but I love basketball. I was better at hoops, but by my last year I had a place on the bench with my short, slow friends. Coach Coggins was encouraging: "That was a fine idea, Brett. If you were Pistol Pete Maravich, you might have pulled it off." He forgave me for being 5'7".

Caleb is an excellent bench warmer. We enjoyed it when our son got to play every game, but it's easy to be happy when you're getting to play. Sitting on the bench is the real test of character. Some who could be sitting on the bench decided it was too hard and quit. Caleb could have chosen to make it to all the meetings of the Latin Club.

God doesn't just love the tall and fast. God understands that most of us spend a significant amount of time on the bench. Some of the best Christians in the sanctuary never sit on the platform. Some of the most dedicated choir members never get to sing a solo. Some of the most loving followers of Jesus aren't on the cover of *Baptists Today*. Some of God's favorite players sit on the bench. **BT**

—Brett Younger is associate professor of preaching at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology.

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Winter troop movements are restricted during the winter months, although not altogether forsaken. On Jan. 1, Confederate General Stonewall Jackson, taking advantage of spring-like warm weather in Virginia, sets out with 9,000 troops on a maneuver to push federal forces from the Union-supporting western portion of the state.

Designed as a campaign of preparation for spring battle plans, the effort is partially successful. Federal forces that the Confederates encounter mostly retreat in surprise, abandoning their winter camps with supplies and food intact. Although the weather turns frigid during the expedition and thwarts larger-scale ambitions, by the end of the month, Jackson is successful in seizing control of the Shenandoah Valley and Allegheny ranges.

Despite continued Union setbacks, volunteers are now pouring into U.S. army ranks and preparing for battles certain to commence upon the coming of spring. Winter does not deter the newly-formed 8th Michigan Infantry, as this month they assemble for a sacred consecration.

A veteran of the War of 1812, Abel Bingham gazes down over the young men before him. The pastor of the First Baptist Church of Grand Rapids, Bingham as a military veteran knows war and peace. The old soldier also knows spiritual struggle.

Following the War of 1812, the New Hampshire native for 27 years served as a missionary to the Indian tribes in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, his work marked by hardship and marginal success. In his most enduring legacy as a missionary, Bingham established what later became known as the First Baptist Church Sault Ste. Marie.

Yet this occasion is especially poignant. His gaze lingers upon one soldier in particular: his son-in-law. Doubtlessly, Bingham is thinking of the soldiers and their families as he offers a prayer:

May the Lord of Hosts be your Leader, ever inspiring both officers and men with true patriotism, and a confidence reliance on the Divine arm in every emergency, and make you brilliantly triumphant in every combat.

Victory in “every” engagement is a bit much to ask of God, yet the 8th Michigan does serve valiantly throughout the war as the regiment traverses both the eastern and western theaters of engagement.

The high cost of war, however, is becoming all too real for many home-front Baptists North and South. Representative of many stories is a belated death notice that appears in this month’s *Tennesseer Baptist*:

Died in the hospital at Richmond, Virginia, L. B. Oldham, son of John and Clarissa Oldham, now living in Lavaca city, Texas. The subject of this notice was born May 5, 1839, in Carroll county, Mississippi. Moved with his parents to Western Texas in the fall of 1854, and in August 1860, returned to Mississippi, and joined the Confederate army in June last—took the measles which terminated his life Oct. 5, 1861. He leaves behind him a father, mother, sisters, and three brothers, and many friends to mourn his loss; but we weep not as those who have no hope, for three days before his death he professed, and we have no doubt obtained, the religion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The above testimony was received from his nurses that attended on him while sick.

Apart from death, troubles are arising in Confederate army camps, as related by a Baptist soldier from North Carolina who writes to that state’s *Biblical Recorder*:

I had heard of the immorality in a campaign life before as being very great, but not the half has been told. Profanity, both among the officers and privates, seems to be the ruling passion Intemperance and gambling come in for their fair share How we hope to

150 YEARS AGO

January 1862

prosper with the severest denunciations of the Bible upon these popular vices, seems to be presuming upon God’s goodness! We have no Chaplain to our Regiment. I have not heard a sermon in camp for several months – men sicken and die without any spiritual counsel. Vice in every form, the most hideous, stalks abroad without warning.

J.H.F.’s observations will be shared by numerous other Southern Baptist soldiers during the war. Confederate Baptists, so often espousing Christian nationalism, thus confront a disconnect that few will choose to openly recognize: how can the army of God’s chosen nation be characterized with overwhelming evil? This uncomfortable, often unspoken question will linger throughout the war. Afterward, some will point to the evilness of camp life as a contributor to southern defeat, yet be hard pressed to recant of their convictions that the slaveholding Confederacy was holy and just. **BT**

—For a daily journal along with references to source material, visit civilwarbaptists.org.



General Stonewall Jackson

The Brook of Life

Reblog

By Tony W. Cartledge

Selections from recent blogs at
baptiststoday.org

don't often wax poetic, but some beautiful days and a chance to walk in the woods inspired me to put some words together in a non-narrative fashion, a sort of paean to the life God gives, one way among many of giving thanks ...



*The brook in our wood runs softly today,
no rush from the rain,
when high water shouts around the bends
and dark debris skates down a frothy path
to jangle the corners ...*

*No. The brook runs quiet today, this fine fall day,
this earthy day of pin-wheeling leaves whispering
down,
a strip-tease of trees and cast-off couture
that blankets the ground and cloaks the still water
and snickers at unknowing dogs.*

*On days like this only seeps and springs feed the
indolent flow,
the frog-high falls that tumble over braided roots
and push back the floating carpet so minnows can
find their prey.*

*This is where the life is.
Here, in tannin-tinted pools where crayfish hide
and salamanders spawn,
where forest flies drum the golden air
and lay their larvae and feed the fish.*

*This is what life is,
splashing and silence,
sprout and fruit, rot and rebirth ...
those who write about it differ in purpose and
power
but not in the end.*

*This is how life is,
still water and restive rush,
joyful eddies and hopeful roots,
current to ride or to fight or to change,
a quest in the blood of the earth.**BT***

Don't be Gone with the Gumption

By John Pierce

The intriguing life of Margaret Mitchell is revealed in an excellent Georgia Public Broadcasting production that will air nationally next spring.

Amazingly, *Gone With The Wind* was her only novel. More amazingly, it has been released in more than a thousand editions and in multiple languages, and still sells a quarter-million copies each year.

The documentary looked at and beyond the book and subsequent movie to the private life of the writer. And indeed she protected her privacy.

Interestingly, she and Atlanta's well-known educator Benjamin Mays secretly corresponded about the need for training African-American physicians. A student courier from Morehouse College, where Dr. Mays served as president, would pick up and deliver the checks that Mitchell wrote in support of that effort.

Current Atlanta leaders spoke of how the late novelist was responsible for

the medical school producing an early generation of doctors to serve the black community.

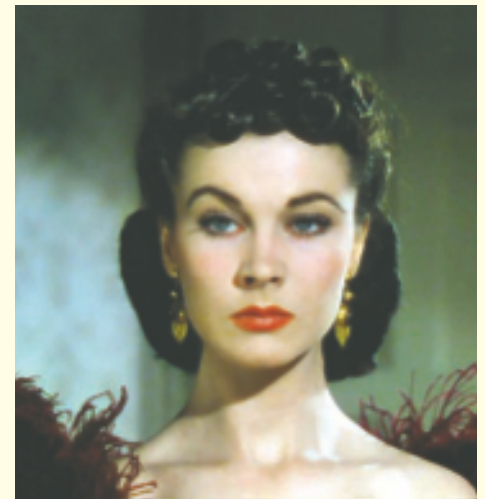
About *Gone With The Wind*, Mitchell said (and I pulled out a pen): "I wrote about people who had gumption and people who didn't."

Language evolves over time, and words gain pejorative meanings. Urban slang uses "gumpshun" to mean smart-mouthed or quick-witted, which certainly applied to some of Mitchell's characters.

In the novelist's time, however, the word "gumption" defined other characteristics such as fortitude, determination, risk-taking, courage and spunk. Having a good dose of gumption is a good thing, I believe.

It took gumption for the early disciples to leave the familiar and the secure to follow Jesus. It still does unless you tone Jesus down enough to fit social acceptability.

It takes gumption to stand with those whom many put down, to love unconditionally and to live sacrificially. All of that goes



against the larger push to always play it safe and focus on self.

I'm not sure the biblical text contains a word that can be fully translated as "gumption" — although Clarence Jordan may have done so in *Cotton Patch Gospels*. But the concept is certainly there.

Having a good dose of gumption can certainly help modern disciples when facing the challenges ahead. **BT**

Wounded Warriors

Returning veterans, families struggle to adjust

CAMP LEJEUNE, N.C. (ABP) — Sitting around the kitchen table, the Riverses are a picture of the quintessential American family. Over a freshly prepared meal, they share stories of the day's events.

But it wasn't that long ago one significant piece of this portrait — the family's patriarch, Ray Rivers — was absent, as he served tours of duty in Afghanistan and Iraq as a Baptist-endorsed chaplain. His deployment in 2008 and 2009 forced the family to adjust.

When he returned from duty, the Rivers family needed to adjust again. A father was back. A husband had returned. Deployment was stressful, but reconfiguring roles within the family after Rivers returned also proved to be a trying time.

"It's stressful when they get home," said his wife, Paula. "He came home and said to me, 'What happened to my wife?' Because I changed. I had to. I was forced to change. I was forced to become more self-confident, more bold, more militant, more whatever just to make things work."

Challenges of military families

The Rivers family faced and overcame challenges typical of a military family looking at, dealing with or readjusting in the wake of a deployment, according to a recent Pew Research Center survey that marked the 10th anniversary of the war in Afghanistan. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq make up the longest period of sustained military engagement in U.S. history, and the nation has carried out these campaigns entirely with a voluntary force, leaving 0.5 percent of the nation's population to shoulder the brunt of the effort.

The theater of war is only the beginning of where post-Sept. 11, 2001, veterans sense issues, according to the report. More than four in 10 said adjustment to civilian life has been difficult, up from the 25 percent of pre-Sept. 11 veterans.

Thirty-seven percent of post-Sept. 11

veterans reported suffering post-traumatic stress. That number escalates to 49 percent when dealing with veterans who served in a combat zone.

Nearly half of married post-Sept. 11 veterans reported their deployments had a negative impact on their relationship with their spouse. Thirty-four percent of veterans from pre-Sept. 11 said the same thing.

Dealing with emotional scars

Brad Riza, associate director of chaplaincy relations for the Baptist General Convention of Texas and a Vietnam veteran who has dealt with his own post-traumatic stress issues for about 40 years, said improvements in medicine have helped soldiers on the battlefield but left more veterans to work through the scars of war.

"Because the care is better, they get treated better and survive," Riza said. "Because of that, we're dealing with more emotional scars."

Military personnel often are haunted by the images they saw, a sense of leaving friends and fellow soldiers behind as well as wondering why their lives were spared, Riza said. Military personnel are taught never to leave a fellow soldier behind. Yet some of them struggle with the reality that they did.

Platform of support

The military offers a variety of options to help active personnel deal with their wartime experiences, Riza said. After military personnel have finished their service, they can go to a Veteran's Administration hospital for help, but there may not be one close to where the veteran lives.

Yet some veterans are left without a viable avenue through which they can find help for their post-traumatic stress issues, including flashbacks, flashes of anger, feelings of regret and lack of closure, Riza noted.

Emotional and psychological issues are compounded when combined with the current economy, said Baptist Chaplain Mike Mackrell, who serves in the U.S. National Guard in Austin, Texas. Many service people are struggling to find work after serving their nation.



Photo by S Braswell/
stockxchange

Approaches to ministry

Churches realize the need for ministering to military personnel and their families and have tried different approaches to serving. To make a more direct impact, churches can contact their local bases, armories or chaplains, Mackrell said.

Chaplains often can provide specific points of need churches can fill. Recently, Mackrell connected a church with a soldier who returned from deployment only to see his home had burned. The church provided supplies for the soldier and his wife.

"Churches could increase their attendance just by reaching out to soldiers," Mackrell said. "When they come back, half of them are asking serious questions."

No matter how congregations approach ministry to veterans, Riza believes it's vital. People who have seen some of the darker aspects of life need to hear a word of encouragement and have the opportunity to ground their lives in the love of Christ, he said.

"Church can give a message of hope," Riza said. "That's the one piece of advice I would give." **BT**

Divinity students aim to heal ‘unseen war wounds’

DURHAM, N.C. — Combat veterans, pacifists, pastors and military leaders gathered at Duke Divinity School in November to discuss how the church, the military and academia can understand and begin to heal the unseen wounds of war.

Initiated by second-year student Logan Mehl-Laituri and sponsored by the divinity student group Milites Christi, the “After the Yellow Ribbon” conference featured lectures, panel discussions, and workshops led by active military, pacifist activists, local pastors, theologians, military chaplains and students.

On its Facebook page, Milites Christi describes itself as a student organization “dedicated to cultivating conversations with students, staff and faculty, to advance the interests of prospective, current and former service members in the church, world and academy. Our primary aim is to develop a pastoral response to the problem of war and peace based on a fundamental conviction that God directs us towards peaceful resolution of conflict.”

“Veterans today suffer from the highest rate of suicide in our nation’s history, have startlingly high rates of prescription drug and alcohol abuse, and are often thought of as ‘damaged goods,’” notes the group’s website. “Our society must accept the responsibility of acknowledging and confronting the moral fragmentation that our service members suffer as a result of their experiences in war... We invite practitioners of all disciplines, from music and the arts to theology and mental health, to respond to the challenge presented by the plight of soldiers and veterans in our midst. We want to work together to improve our efforts at prevention and reconstitution, and overcome this tragic epidemic.”

“The church needs to hear stories of war from combat veterans and allow them to share their experiences with a community that will truly listen,” said Warren Kinghorn, assistant professor of psychiatry and pastoral and moral theology at the divinity school, in highlighting the purpose of the conference during a panel discussion.

Kinghorn was one of several Duke Divinity faculty members who led discussions and workshops at the event, which started with an unveiling of a new icon of St. Martin of Tours and ended with a concert by Christian singer and songwriter Derek Webb.

Lt. Col. Peter Kilner, a professor who teaches military ethics at the U.S. Military

Academy in West Point, N.Y., gave the keynote address. He spoke about the hidden beauties of war, such as the camaraderie between soldiers, and argued that the moral uncertainty of war must be confronted before members of the military are called into active duty.

Discussions and workshops focused on such issues as post-traumatic stress disorder; the recognition of spiritual and moral trauma; resources for recovery; reframing the horrors of war in the context of Christ; and the necessity for the church, military and academic

communities to listen to the stories of combat veterans as a way to prompt confession and reconciliation.

“Healing begins with a recognition of trauma in the church,” explained retired Army chaplain Col. Herman Keizer Jr. during a panel discussion, “in members of the military, and in society.” **BT**

—Article provided by Duke Divinity School
Communications and distributed by
Associated Baptist Press.

Where will Vacation Bible School take your church this summer?

Finding HOPE

Get ready for a life-changing field trip of faith with the newest children's resource from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Inspired by the rural poverty ministry of Together for Hope, *Finding Hope: A Field Trip of Faith* shares the biblical concept of hope in fun and meaningful ways while leading children on a missional field trip to five of the poorest communities in the United States.

Sold as a downloadable PDF, *Finding Hope: A Field Trip of Faith* is a user-friendly and cost effective VBS resource. For just \$99.95 you receive everything needed for a successful experience, including daily lesson plans and activities for preschoolers and children, logos and clip art, worship plans and skits, and teaching guide.

To view a sample or pre-order online, visit www.thefellowship.info/vbs or call (888) 801-4223.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Religious groups spend nearly \$400 million on D.C. advocacy

By Kevin Eckstrom
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — The number of religious advocacy groups in the nation's capital has more than tripled since the 1970s, with conservative groups seeing the biggest growth, according to a new report.

Together, faith-based lobbying and advocacy groups spend \$390 million a year to influence lawmakers, mobilize supporters and shape public opinion, according to the report, released Nov. 21 by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

The report reflects shifting fortunes in religion and politics: the rise of the religious right 35 years ago, the decline of mainline Protestant churches and the outsized presence of the Roman Catholic Church.

Conservative groups have seen some of the largest budget increases; the National Organization for Marriage, which has racked up a string of victories in its fight against gay marriage, saw its budget grow from \$3.2 million to \$8.5 million between 2008 and 2009.

There are now as many Muslim advocacy groups as mainline Protestant groups, and evangelicals and Roman Catholics constitute a strong 40 percent of religious lobbyists in and around Washington.

"Religious advocacy is now a permanent and sizable feature of the Washington scene," said Allen Hertzke, a political scientist at the

University of Oklahoma and the primary author of the report.

Hertzke's report surveyed 212 religious advocacy groups, ranging from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to the American Jewish Committee to the American Friends Service Committee (the Quakers).

The groups surveyed by Pew have grown from 67 in the 1970s, and Hertzke conceded that figure is probably an undercount. "We don't claim to have gotten all of them," he said.

Using financial reports from public tax forms, Hertzke said the biggest spender is the pro-Israel American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which spent \$87 million on advocacy in 2008. U.S. Catholic bishops were second, with \$26.6 million spent in 2009, followed by the Family Research Council, with \$14 million in 2008.

The biggest winners and losers — at least as judged by their budgets — reflect the turbulent politics of the last few years:

- As the Obama administration took office and the recession worsened, the progressive PICO National Network boosted its budget by \$100,000 to advocate for the poor, health care reform and other social justice causes.
- The nation's Roman Catholic bishops boosted their advocacy budget by \$1.4 million as fights heated up against Obama's health care overhaul and same-sex marriage.
- The Muslim American Society boosted its budget by 29 percent, and the American Islamic Congress by 41 percent, between 2008 and 2009 as Islamophobia intensified in the form of opposition to mosque building and the so-called Ground Zero mosque.

Many religious advocacy groups are relatively modest operations; the median annual budget was about \$1 million for the 131 groups where financial data were available.

Most groups split their portfolios between domestic and international issues, with a plurality (42 percent) representing individual voters or constituents. Just 15 percent represent religious bodies such as denominations.

Despite their presence in the nation's political capital, only 7 percent have formed political structures that are able to advocate for or against particular candidates. The vast majority of groups are tax-exempt and prohibited from partisan politics.

That surprised Maggie Gallagher, co-founder of the National Organization for Marriage, who traced the rise in religious advocacy to the political ascent of conservative Christians in the late 1970s and 1980s.

"Not everyone has to be involved in politics, but if you are going to claim to want to be involved in politics, you need to build institutions to accomplish your political goals," said Gallagher, who has been targeting candidates who support same-sex marriage. **BT**

Charitable giving up slightly but still ailing

By Melanie Eversley
USA Today

(RNS) — Charitable giving is trickling back up as the economy heals, but it could take years to return to pre-recession levels, nonprofit leaders say.

Giving totaled \$291 billion in 2010, according to the 2011 annual report by the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. That's up 3.8 percent from 2009 and follows two consecutive years of declines.

Little change was expected in the close of 2011. Charity Navigator, a Glen Rock, N.J., organization that evaluates nonprofits, anticipated donations would be flat during the recent holiday season.

About 35 percent of nonprofit

contributions come from state, federal and local government grants and contracts, and those gifts are declining, CEO Ken Berger said. Only 15 percent is from individuals.

"Staying the same is generally not a great place to be when you've got increases in demand and operational costs because of inflation and so on," said Patrick Rooney, executive director of the Center on Philanthropy.

If the recuperation continues at its current rate, it will take U.S. charities six years to return to where they were financially in 2007, Rooney warns. "We are not out of the recession, and we are not recovered from the recession," he said.

Some leaders in the nonprofit world see the glass as half-full. An American Red Cross survey of 1,020 adults last fall found that

although 80 percent of respondents said their finances were the same or worse than the same time last year, 57 percent planned to give to a charity during the holidays. Almost seven in 10 said that because of the economy, it is important to give to charity.

"Despite the difficult economy, Americans want to give to help others in need," said Gail McGovern, Red Cross president and CEO.

The Center on Philanthropy report said Americans contribute 2 percent of their disposable income, a figure that has remained constant for decades.

Nonprofit leaders agree that charitable organizations must think innovatively to keep the cash coming in.

Berger of Charity Navigator said organizations should avoid duplicating services. He said nonprofits should adjust to meeting the public's need for openness about finances and organization. **BT**

Gospel trail

Israel's new integrated paths let hikers follow Jesus' steps

GALILEE, Israel (RNS) — Perched on Tel Kinrot, a hill above the Sea of Galilee, Winston Mah turned his face toward the warm sun and took in the tranquil view before him.

To his right, the Christian pilgrim from San Diego saw banana groves at the edge of the calm fresh-water lake; to his left, on the opposite hill, rose the majestic Mount of Beatitudes

Tourism and the Jewish National Fund, the project has the enthusiastic support of local Christian leaders, whose flocks depend on the tourist trade.

“It is our hope that this trail will bring many more Christian pilgrims to the Galilee, where Jesus lived and had his ministry,” said Bishop Boutros Muallem, the Melkite archbishop emeritus of Galilee, who attended the

Trail “represents a major means for maximizing the tourist potential” of the Sea of Galilee region.

“It will encourage economic growth in the north through the creation of new jobs,” he said, “and an increase in income from the visitors.”

The Gospel Trail isn't the first Christian-oriented hiking/cycling trail in the region. The 39-mile Jesus Trail begins in the city of Nazareth, the home of Mary and Joseph, and ends at the Sea of Galilee. Though the trails overlap in many areas, the Jesus Trail winds its way through more Christian, Muslim and Jewish population centers and already has an infrastructure.

Both trails capitalize on the beauty of the Galilee region. One of the only truly green places in Israel, the hills are dotted with towns and villages, cows, sheep and olive trees.

Proficient hikers can make the entire journey in about four days.

The Gospel Trail includes the Arbel Cliffs, which served as the backdrop of many ancient battles; the ancient ruins of Beit Saida (Bethsaida), a biblical-era fishing village and the birthplace of the disciples Peter, Andrew and Philip; Capernaum, the starting point of Jesus' ministry in the Galilee; and Kfar Kana (Cana), where Jesus healed the nobleman's son.

Also along the route: Migdal/Magdala, identified in the Gospels as the home of Mary Magdalene; and the Mount of Beatitudes, where a picturesque church, surrounded by greenery and special areas for prayer, overlooks the sites related to Jesus' ministry. The late Pope John Paul II held a large Mass on a nearby knoll in 2000.

Whenever possible, the trail leads through unspoiled vistas full of indigenous plants and small wildlife. Israel, and especially the Galilee region, is a top bird-watching destination.

At Tel Kinrot, which was part of the major trade route between ancient Egypt and Syria on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, an Italian pilgrim named Stefano gazed at the archaeological ruins.

“I'm very happy to be on this trail, to see the sites where Jesus lived and the archaeological sites,” the 26-year-old said. “It helps me to thank God for what he does in my life.” **BT**

Pilgrims hike along the Gospel Trail in Israel, a 39-mile network of trails and paths that trace Jesus' steps. RNS photo by Michele Chabin.

at Tabga, where, according to Christian tradition, Jesus delivered his Sermon on the Mount.

“This is a unique experience,” Mah said, gazing at a lone fisherman on the water's edge. “This is the view Jesus must have seen, the path he might have walked, the water he walked on. It's a privilege to walk in his footsteps.”

It's one thing to read about biblical sites while seated in a church pew back home, Mah said. But “it's another thing entirely to be in the actual place, just as it's described in the Bible,” he said, his voice full of wonder.

Mah and his church group were among the first hikers on the newly inaugurated Gospel Trail, 39 miles of integrated paths leading from Mount Precipice on the southern outskirts of Nazareth to the site of ancient Capernaum on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

Developed by the Israeli Ministry of

trail's festive opening aboard a boat on the Sea of Galilee.

Roughly 150,000 Christian Arabs live in Israel, the vast majority of them in the Galilee region, in the north of the country. As elsewhere in the Middle East, many Holy Land Christians have emigrated in search of economic stability and peace.

Now that the political situation is relatively quiet, and a record number of tourists are flooding into Israel and the Palestinian-ruled territories, local Christians are benefiting and emigration is slowing, according to government statistics.

Two out of three tourists who visit Israel are Christian, according to the tourism ministry. Leading a group of journalists down a section of the trail on horseback, Tourism Minister Stas Misezhnikov said the Gospel



Making connections

Pat Terry's broader musical
artistry finds listening ears

STORY BY
JOHN PIERCE

ATLANTA — Singer-songwriter Pat Terry was featured in the November 2008 issue of this news journal under the title: “Whatever happened to Pat Terry?”

Many readers who were students in the '70s, like this writer, had found inspiration from the well-traveled Pat Terry Group that helped shape what became Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). Pat's songs of faith became standards around campfires, in coffeehouses and in sanctuaries when youthful influences were allowed.

Hundreds if not thousands of couples were wed with someone singing Pat's well-known song, *That's the Way*. One song about heaven was recorded by several artists, including pop singer B.J. Thomas who made *Home Where I Belong* into a familiar hit.

But after disbanding the group and recording some more reflective solo albums, Pat disappeared from view. Unbeknownst to many, he quietly established himself as a country music songwriter and avoided the discomfort that came from disappointed fans who wanted him to play only the music he had put in their heads and hearts years ago.

DISILLUSIONED

“I really became frustrated about what I thought were the narrow confines of Christian music,” said Pat in an interview last fall in front of the *Baptists Today* Board of Directors. “It was never my concept that we'd create a genre that was kind of limited to singing for Christians.”

Pat and band mates Randy Bugg and Sonny Lallerstedt cut albums (with Myrrh Records) and toured some 200 dates a year in the '70s, hitting churches and college campuses all

SEE & HEAR

- See excerpts from the interview with Pat Terry and hear him sing at baptiststoday.org.
- To book Pat for a concert, workshop or other event, visit thefaithlab.com/talent.
- To learn more about Pat and to buy his music, visit patterryonline.com.

across the country. Pat's hits such as *I Can't Wait to See Jesus* and *Meet Me Here* were written out of the overflow of his newfound faith and delivered with a desire to spread the news broadly, he said.

After years on the road and seeing his music become a new commodity to be marketed to a growing audience, Pat felt the need to do something different. Namely, he wanted to take an approach to songwriting that allowed room for doubt and could address the challenges of cultural change.

"By '79, I didn't think I could keep doing this," he said. "So I broke up the group."

EARLY '80s

With the help of the late musician and producer Mark Heard, Pat wrote the songs of his heart and recorded three solo albums. But his former Christian audience wanted something different — or actual something familiar. They wanted Pat to write and play just for them.

"I didn't understand this consumerism in the church," said Pat, "where they adopt celebrities as their own."

Pat took his new music out on the road to mixed reviews. "Some people connected to it, ... but a lot of people didn't."

Pat got tired of having to defend himself against charges that he'd left Jesus, sold out to the world or whatever. He admits to being "a little abrasive at times" when fans of his early Christian music made such charges whenever he appeared on stage and sang something different from what they had known.

"That's what I did for a few years until I got exhausted," he said of his solo touring in the early '80s. One day he concluded: "I can't continue going out and playing for audiences that get mad at me."

NASHVILLE

Resting and recovering back home in the Atlanta suburb of Smyrna, Ga., Pat contemplated his musical future while noting: "I also need to make a living."

He called his one friend in Nashville and began the back-and-forth travels that occurred almost weekly between 1986 and 2002. Pat said he thought his early success in what became CCM might open doors. However, he found the opposite to be true.

"It was a great experience learning to write songs," said Pat of joining seasoned songwriters in such creativity. His first five or six years in Nashville, he said, were "learning the craft of writing country music" with minor success in getting his music recorded.

Pat said he had "a couple of little things"

recorded when some Nashville friends urged him to go hear a fellow Cobb County, Ga., native named Travis Tritt who had just signed a big recording contract. So Pat went to an Atlanta area club and was impressed.

After the show, Pat introduced himself to Travis and told him how much he'd enjoyed the show.

"Pat Terry ... didn't you play in my church one time?" Travis asked.

"I played in everybody's church at one time," Pat replied.

WRITING HITS

The conversation led to Travis coming over to Pat's home studio where they wrote Travis' first number-one hit from 1990, *Help Me Hold On*.

"We spent the afternoon eating my wife's chicken salad and working on that song," Pat recalled. "We finished it that evening, and it paid my insurance for a few years."

Other of Pat's songs found their way to the recording studio and radio including Tanya Tucker's 2002 number-one hit, *It's a Little Too Late*.

The Oak Ridge Boys, Confederate Railroad, John Anderson, Kenny Chesney, Tracy Byrd and other country artists recorded songs Pat had written or co-written with songwriters like Roger Murrah.

However, an industry emphasis on artists owning their songs and other factors began to make it harder to get music recorded in Nashville. Plus, the competition continued to grow.

Pat warns: "If you're ever in Nashville, be careful. Ninety percent of the drivers are songwriters with pens and pads."

So Pat no longer makes the frequent drives across Tennessee's Monteagle Mountain where the words "It's a little too late to do the right thing now" first came to mind.

NEW MUSIC

When Pat was interviewed for the 2008 article in *Baptists Today*, he was putting the finishing touches on a self-produced CD of his most recent songs. *Laugh for a Million Years* was released the next year — and Pat started gradually getting back out on the road.

The songs are varied and creative, giving the songwriter the freedom to explore a wide range of thoughts and feelings. And Pat's faith comes through in songs that would not fit the earlier confines of so-called "Christian music."

If Jesus Was Like Me has even found its way into some sermons — although the song does not come across as "preachy" when sung and played by the soft-spoken artist. And of his



song, *The Gift of Mercy*, Pat said: "This is the kind of song I could put some things in that I cared about the most."

Also, Pat has returned to singing before Christian audiences again and even resurrecting some of his old hits of the '70s that have the 50-somethings in the crowd singing along. And he is finding greater appreciation for the wider range of music he writes and sings.

CREATIVITY AT WORK

"I'm enjoying going back into churches now," said Pat of his opportunity to do coffeehouses, songwriting workshops and concerts. Whether a song neatly fits the "Christian" niche or not, Pat said "the workings of my faith" are expressed throughout his writing.

"God is a creative God; we are made in his image as creative people," he said. "I'm having fun going out and singing again."

And Pat is hopeful about what is taking place in the genre of music he unknowingly helped to create.

"I'm really encouraged by some of what I'm hearing from young artists in Christian music ... who genuinely have something to say," he said. "They are connecting with audiences in a real way."

And he senses that more churches are now open to a variety of musical expressions of faith. But, in doing so, he hopes they don't neglect the great hymns of the church.

Hymns, he said, were not written with a publisher in the room trying to decide what might sell to the largest audience or to a particular customer base.

"That's why they've lasted so long — and ring so true." **BT**

Bidding Wars

Mission causes win at church's annual auction

PELHAM, Ala. — When you enter the doors at Crosscreek Baptist Church, you hear lots of laughter and catch the aroma of hamburgers and chocolate. Members and visitors crowd the fellowship hall of the small church, piling plates with mini burgers, taco salad, and homemade fudge and brownies.

Children from two to 12, dressed in Santa hats, circle the floor in picnic fashion with cupcake icing on their faces while adults gather in folding chairs with plates on their laps — and checkbooks in their pockets. This good Advent Sunday is time for Crosscreek's 26th annual missions auction.

Proceeds from the auction of homemade items and services support Crosscreek's mission efforts and its partners for the coming year. Those include a mission trip to Mexico, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Alabama CBF, Global Women and CBF missionaries Jon and Tanya Parks.

Typically, the church raises one-fourth of its annual missions budget from the auction.

Crosscreek pastor Jay Kieve is a young man with a bald head, a wicked sense of humor and a strong sense of justice. He greets everyone who walks through the door with a smile on his face and a warm hug.

Jay's wife, Melanie, has a contagious smile too and links her arm through mine as we head to peruse the tables laden with auction treasures.

"The missions auction is a fellowship event as well as a fundraiser for missions," said Jay Kieve. "We enjoy good food and good company as we vie for Christmas items."

With a long history of doing good, this early December event helps set the tone for Crosscreek's Advent and Christmas celebrations. And items created by children often bring the highest bids.

The missions auction began in 1986 when the women's missions group at Crosscreek sought new ways to raise funds to support international missionaries. During the first few



Pastor Jay and Melanie Kieve got so caught up in their church's mission auction that they were bidding against each other. He says the annual event is a fellowship opportunity as well as a fundraiser for the Pelham, Ala., congregation.

years of the auction, only the women's group participated in purchasing homemade items and food. But soon the auction grew to include the entire congregation.

Now, each year congregation members and friends contribute items to be auctioned that range from homemade cakes and pies to furniture, home maintenance services, quilts and decorative items. Some items come from ministries and mission endeavors around the world. At the latest auction, notable entries included handpainted bobble-head Santas and snowmen, handmade Christmas ornaments, and a unique outdoor shower.

Cowboy-hat-wearing auctioneer Fred Wilhite calls for bids. A volunteer, he holds the bidding open until pies sell for \$70 or a child's painting fetches \$80 or more.

A bobble-head Santa brings in \$210. Whoops of laughter explode around the room as bidding wars and friendly "fights" break out over favorite items.

"If you raise that bid one more time, I'll break your legs!" cries out one lady seeking the much-desired three pounds of Fantasy Fudge on the auction block.

"OK, it's yours," laughs a man, two rows

ahead, as he lowers his hand. They end up sharing the fudge.

Pastor Jay bids on a decorative metal Christmas tree. Melanie's hand quickly rises to counter the bid.

"Hey, you're bidding against me!" he calls out to his wife.

"Oops! Sorry honey," she laughs. "You go right ahead." Everyone in the room laughs.

However, they are outbid by a church member who pays a high premium for the decorative Christmas tree — and then gives it to the Kieves as a gift before leaving the church that evening. With the bidding conducted in a fun and playfully competitive manner, Crosscreek's mission causes are the real winners of the night.

The emcee for the evening is David Farry, a chaplain and church member who has served on the missions committee. He moves the evening and the items along with delightful puns that keep the crowd moaning and laughing.

"I started emceeing when I was on the missions committee and they needed a volunteer," he said. "And then I had so much fun, that I continued."

This year his wife, Stacy Farry, is co-chair with Cathy Lee of the missions committee that spends months preparing for the auction.

"We have a saying," says David Farry. "What happens at the missions auction — spreads around the world."

There are no leftovers. Every item is sold and followed by a round of applause.

When the auction comes to a close, Kieve offers a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing: "God of multiplication, God of all great gifts, God of all creation, we give you thanks."

As the prayer flows, the meaning behind all the fun and fellowship rises to fill the room. More than \$6,000 has been raised in less than two hours by fewer than 100 people — all in a fun-filled effort to support important mission endeavors and the people who serve the name of Christ near and far. **BT**

—Jay Kieve contributed to this story. He can be reached at pastor@crosscreekbaptist.org for information on holding a missions auction.

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‘Engaging the reality’

Diverse Canadian Baptists cover miles, cultures

MISSISSAUGA, Ontario (ABP) — From early churches springing up on the Atlantic from the seeds of displaced American slaves to the metropolitan Pacific coast, Canadian Baptists reflect their huge, diverse nation.

In the world’s second largest nation by land mass that stretches 5,514 kilometers east to west and harbors 33 million citizens, Canadian Baptists are a small but significant presence. Canadian Baptist Ministries is the correlating body for four distinct groups that relate to the North American Baptist Fellowship.

Sam Chaise, a British-born Baptist of Indian descent, is general secretary of CBM, which resulted from the merger 16 years ago of the efforts of the four bodies.

Canadian Baptists “tend to identify with our regions,” Chaise said, and each region has cultural distinctions. CBM operates as the common international mission arm of each and the mutual missions encourager in a nation where 80 percent of the population live within 100 miles of the U.S. border.

“Overall we are definitely engaging the reality that Canada is a post-Christendom society,” Chaise said. He said Canadians have “an interest in spirituality, but not in the traditional framing of the gospel or in the church as an organization.”

With this realization comes a renewed vision to see the mission field “across the street and across the city” as well as across the oceans.

Toronto is often described as the world’s most diverse city as measured by the number of distinct people groups in residence — and host to an ongoing parade of new arrivals who do not know the language or the culture. With his own offices there, Chaise is determined to help Canadian Baptists “learn how to be God’s

people in the midst of a wonderfully diverse set of cultures and learn to welcome people to Canada.”

More churches have multiple language services, but often the best relationship builder is the ancient and simple art of “having someone to your house for dinner,” Chaise said. Canadian churches cultivate a growing involvement with social justice, he said, an attribute that “has always been a part of our past.”

That conviction leads Canadian Baptists to involve themselves with the environment, homelessness and — especially in the east — racial equality. Baptist churches in the east are among the oldest on the continent — up to 250 years old. The most significant number of African-Canadian churches is in the east, born among the communities of American slaves carried to freedom by volunteers in the Underground Railroad.

The Union d’Églises Baptistes Françaises au Canada in French-speaking Quebec is the most recently formed of the unions.

Internationally, CBM collected significant funds for relief work in Haiti following the January 2010 earthquake. Canadian Baptists support work there, although they do not “own it” Chaise said. They work through NABF and partner groups for effective relief ministry.

In Africa, Canadian Baptists work in Kenya with Somalian refugees in a situation of “great need.” CBM member bodies also work in Rwanda and the Congo.

“We’re very deeply committed to a holistic approach to missions that integrates classic missionary evangelism and disciple making, with classic community development, such as health, education and water,” Chaise said.

CBM missionaries also are in Asia, the Middle East and South America.



Sam Chaise

The Canadian National Baptist Convention, organized by Southern Baptists, is also a member of the NABF.

Other primary Baptist groups are found in Canada as well. Jeremy Bell, executive minister for Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, said Fellowship Baptists have about 500 churches, Converge Worldwide (formerly Baptist General Conference) has 103, North American Baptists have 130 churches and Southern Baptists in Canada have about 250 churches through the country.

Tim McCoy, executive minister of Canadian Baptists of Ontario and Quebec since 2010, is also an immigrant. Born in Charlotte, N.C., he and his wife, Julie, were seeking a challenge for their family and came in 2006 to direct youth ministry.

Of the 355 churches in the CBOQ, 84 are in greater Toronto and worshippers speak 27 different languages every Sunday. Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries Marc and Kim Wyatt say they visit seven to 10 countries every week and never have to leave the city.

While church planting is a part of his evangelism strategy, McCoy said, “In Ontario our strategies much more revolve around our desire to understand a culture and find how they embrace the gospel and raise someone up within that culture to be the gospel vehicle.”

There are about 185 churches in the growing Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, where Jeremy Bell has been executive minister for nearly six years. The convention added 16 churches last year. Some were independent and looking for a home.

Bell’s convention defies description. A church in one town — that is 30 percent Muslim — ministers to immigrants who work for an American company and the pastor is a woman from Zimbabwe. “How do you put that all together?” he asked. **BT**

—Norman Jameson writes for the North American Baptist Fellowship.

In Africa, Canadian Baptists work in Kenya with Somalian refugees in a situation of “great need.” CBM member bodies also work in Rwanda and the Congo.

Cautionary tale: Crystal Cathedral offers lessons for church leaders



According to one scholar, the cash-strapped Crystal Cathedral's pending transformation from a Protestant megachurch to a Roman Catholic cathedral provides important lessons for church leaders.

"They don't want to sink countless millions into building larger and more elaborate buildings," said Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary.

A bankruptcy judge in November approved of the sale of the iconic cathedral to the Catholic Diocese of Orange, Calif., for \$57.5 million.

Thumma said the huge debt that led officials of the Southern California ministry to accept the sale of their 35-acre campus reflects what happens when a prominent pastor, a television ministry, or an iconic structure becomes the focal point. Leaders retire and die; television gives the congregation an unrealistic larger-than-life image; and buildings become a drag on finances.

After a bidding war between nearby Chapman University and the Diocese of Orange, the judge agreed with the cathedral board's choice to take the diocese's offer — even though it was \$2 million less — to ensure that the campus continues to have a religious purpose.

The diocesan deal permits worship to continue

on-site for another three years and other religious activities for 18 months. Senior Pastor Sheila Schuller Coleman said the decision "breaks my heart."

"If it's God's will for us to move, we believe it will be where he needs us most. It does not mean that our ministry will be diminished," the daughter of founder Robert H. Schuller said in a statement.

Bishop Tod Brown of the Orange diocese acknowledged the "difficult circumstances" facing the ministry founded by the elder Schuller in 1955.

"Those challenges have now enabled the Diocese of Orange to protect this wonderful structure as a place of worship and will soon provide our Catholic community with a new cathedral, pastoral center, parish school and more," Brown said in a statement.

Known for its *Hour of Power* television broadcasts and elaborate holiday pageants, the glass-walled Crystal Cathedral has been mired in family, leadership and financial turmoil in recent years.

Thumma said the trend of large churches using multiple satellite sites instead of one large edifice is validated by the outcome of the bankruptcy deal.

"To fill this space and maintain this space takes over the effort to spread the gospel and to live out the Christian mission," he said. **BT**

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