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Baptists
TODAY
NEWS JOURNAL

'New beginning'

for NW Georgia church

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JANUARY 2013

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for adults and youth

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Cover photo

Little Cataloochee Baptist Church, now part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, provides a reflective stop for hikers. Photo by John Pierce.

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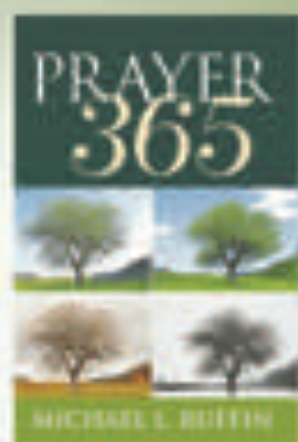
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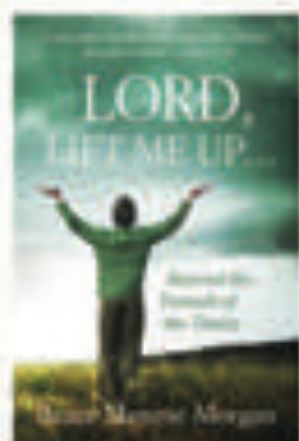
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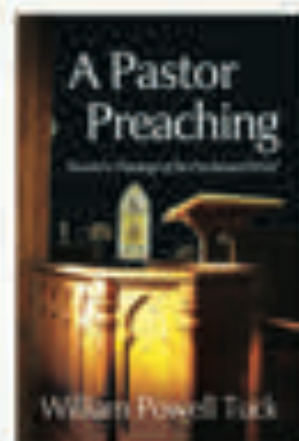
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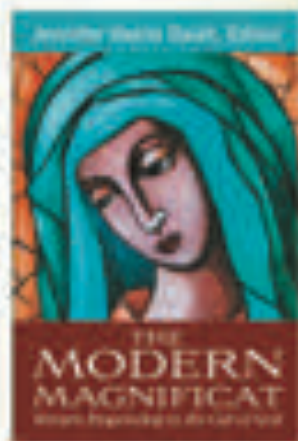
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'New Beginning'

Georgia church experiences renewal after deadly storms rip through town

RINGGOLD, Ga. — After 19 months of meeting in the local American Legion building, the members of Mt. Peria Missionary Baptist Church were beaming with excitement as they prepared for a community-wide open house and the first worship services in their new facilities in early December.

"Whoever wants to come," said longtime member and deacon Paul Croft, retired from the DuPont plant in nearby Chattanooga, of the congregation's open invitation to join in a time of thanksgiving.

The missing canopy of trees that once covered Ringgold, vacant lots where structures once stood, and a few remaining piles of debris are the only physical evidence now of the deadly tornadoes that ripped through the small county-seat town in Northwest Georgia on the night of April 27, 2011. But the memories remain strong — and so do the lessons learned from going through a storm with neighbors who have now become closer friends.

Phillip Maddox retired from the Electric Power Board where he was a research analyst and moved from Chattanooga to scenic Cherokee Valley just over the ridge from Ringgold's downtown eight years ago. It was the hardest hit area — where homes were devastated.

Maddox said the power had gone out, and he heard the tall hickory trees — that had attracted him to build a home there — snapping. But he was stunned when someone from Atlanta who was following the storms called and said: "Ringgold's been destroyed." The next morning he learned that five of his neighbors had died and many others lost their homes.

Maddox said he and his wife decided to join Ringgold's century-old Mt. Peria Church that had suffered significant damage to its three buildings — and was surrounded by homes, businesses and schools that had been damaged

or destroyed as well.

"I saw a need, and decided I wanted to recommit myself to helping my community get back on track," said Maddox, who now chairs the church's laymen's council, designed to "take a little pressure off the pastor."

Thanks to good insurance and generous donations from near and far, the church replaced the three buildings with an impressive new one. The mostly-white Concord Baptist Church in Temple, Ga., held a fundraiser and presented the church's pastor Jimmy Ingram with a check for \$120,000, according to the *Chattanooga Times-Free Press*.

The congregation's gratitude is so strong, said Maddox, they plan to support a church in New Jersey or New York that was damaged more recently by Hurricane Sandy. The church

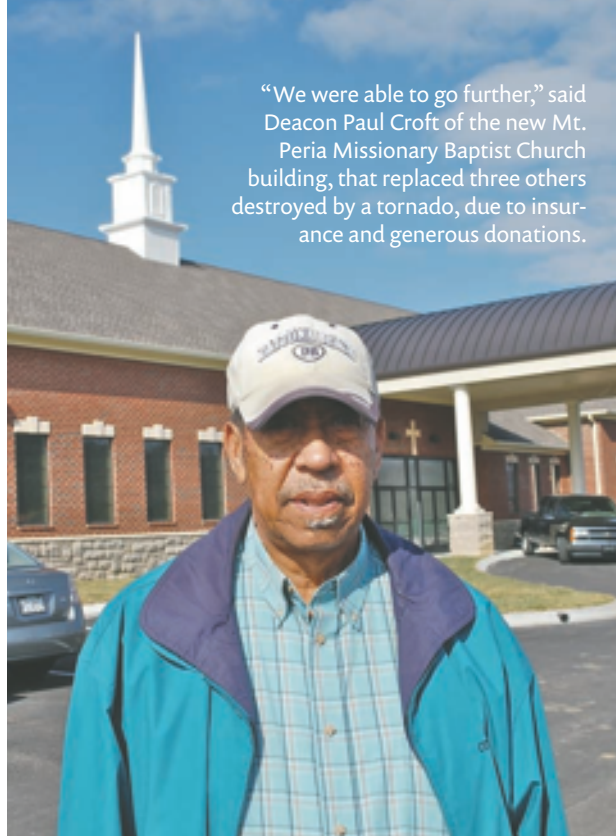
has also launched new ministries, he said, such as mentoring and after-school programs.

A car pulled into the church parking lot, and the driver's window came down. "I'm so glad for you; I'm so glad for all of us," the older woman said to Maddox before driving away.

Maddox thanked her and then said: "People have been so nice."

Responses to the storms brought the community closer together across racial and religious lines, he added. And while no one would wish such tragedy on a community, Maddox said both the church and the town are better for the wear.

"It's a new beginning." **BT**



"We were able to go further," said Deacon Paul Croft of the new Mt. Peria Missionary Baptist Church building, that replaced three others destroyed by a tornado, due to insurance and generous donations.



Lay leader Phillip Maddox speaks with a Chattanooga TV station about the early-December open house and first worship services in the new facilities of Mt. Peria Missionary Baptist Church in Ringgold, Ga. The church suffered extensive damage from the April 2011 tornadoes but now has stronger community ties, a larger membership and expanded ministries, he said.

“This is what, to me, is the essence of Christianity.”

—*The late jazz pianist and composer Dave Brubeck, stating that the heart of his sacred music is the profound biblical message to love your enemies (RNS)*

“Traditional Christian language is now almost fatally infected by the appearance of ideological bias and political taint. This is the damage done by a national habit of self-satisfied partisan division — and dragging religion into it.”

—*Columnist Ray Waddle in The Tennessean*

“I don’t have the right to ask the Anglican Church to change its traditions for me. I’m the one who has got to make the changes. Anglicanism has always been hesitant to define doctrine because it has opposing factions. It has left doctrine blurry. People can believe almost mutually opposing beliefs.”

—*Larry Gipson, 70, former rector of the nation’s largest Episcopal church, on becoming a Roman Catholic, which has slowly received married Episcopalians as candidates for priesthood since 1983 (RNS)*

“A steady diet of tepid or poorly prepared homilies is often cited as a cause for discouragement on the part of laity and even leading some to turn away from the Church.”

—*From a document approved by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops calling for better preaching (RNS)*

quotation remarks

“The [Baptist World Alliance] is deeply concerned about the continuing attacks being perpetrated by extremist groups, in many cases targeting Christians.”

—*BWA General Secretary Neville Callam following the killing of two Baptist pastors amid recent violent attacks in Nigeria*

“The court found that couples who wish to marry without involving clergy have many alternatives for doing so.”

—*Indiana Attorney General Greg Zoeller after a federal court rejected atheists’ requests to preside at wedding ceremonies, saying only clergy or public officials are licensed to do so (RNS)*

“Some of us play it overly safe, guarding our routines and practices, thereby missing growth opportunities for ourselves and for God’s church. Remember who we follow and seek to imitate?”

—*Mark Tidsworth, president of Pinnacle Leadership Associates, encouraging ministers not to confuse “life balance” with rigidity (ABP)*

“The work to them is meaningful. They enjoy process.”

—*Gary Rosenthal, who employs two 51-year-old, autistic men in his company known for creating excellent contemporary Jewish art (RNS)*

“Over the years, we’ve heard from people around the world how Grady touched their lives. We couldn’t think of a better time to communicate with his fans and release some of Grady’s best material.”

—*Toby Nutt, son of Baptist minister and comedian Grady Nutt who died in a plane crash 30 years ago, on the release of a commemorative two-CD collection of previously unreleased tracks and other clips at gradynutt.com (Baptist Press)*

“Church steeples make an excellent location for a cell site ... It’s giving good connectivity, and people don’t even see it.”

—*John Britton of AT&T to San Francisco’s KPIX on paying churches to use steeples as cell phone towers (CBS News)*

“For me, actually, when it comes to the age of the Earth there is no conflict. I believe that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and I think scientific advances have given us insight into when he did it and how he did it.”

—*Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, a Roman Catholic who often attends a Southern Baptist church, in an interview with Politico (Baptist Press)*

“It’s taken awhile to find our audience because nobody knows what our show was.”

—*NBC’s Today host Kathie Lee Gifford on her short-lived Broadway musical Scandalous: The Life and Times of Aimee Semple McPherson, about the controversial female evangelist (RNS)*

“Of the different faith segments ..., evangelicals were the most opposed to the Electoral College. Seventy-three percent preferred the popular vote.”

—*Napp Nazworth, reporting for the Christian Post on a Barna poll showing 64 percent of Americans and nearly three-fourths of evangelicals oppose the current system for electing a president*

“People are so worried about what they eat between Christmas and the New Year, but they really should be worried about what they eat between the New Year and Christmas.”

—*Author unknown (quotegarden.com)*

By John Pierce

Pat got it right this time; will we?

Pat is right. Yes, that Pat. Often he is not, but television host and former presidential candidate Pat Robertson offered an important insight to his religiously conservative viewers. It is one that needs to be heard and heeded by the larger Christian community as well.

Back on Nov. 27, while hosting the long-running *The 700 Club* on his Virginia Beach-based Christian Broadcasting Network, Robertson responded to a viewer's question about young-earth creationism.

To the surprise of many, he forthrightly dismissed Archbishop James Ussher's claim — included in the Scofield Reference Bible — that the earth was created instantaneously some 6,000 years ago. To be more precise, Ussher calculated the date of the earth's creation to the year 4004 B.C.

Robertson wasn't buying this.

"There was a time when these giant reptiles (dinosaurs) were on the earth, and it was before the time of the Bible," said the 82-year-old founder of Regent University and other enterprises, who is known for making some rather foolish comments on occasion. "So, don't try and cover it up and make like everything was 6,000 years. That's not the Bible ..."

As expected, the wide reporting of Robertson's response brought more energy to the ongoing debate between those who believe a literal reading of the Bible gives no choice

but to affirm a young earth, despite significant scientific evidence to the contrary, and those who believe the creation stories are concerned with more significant truth than scientific data.

And while that debate is sure to continue for a long time — perhaps 6,000 years or more — the old televangelist and political operative offered an additional, much more important comment that should not be missed.

"If you fight science, you are going to lose your children, and I believe in telling them the way it was," he added.

Read it again. Let it soak in.

So often, bright young Christians (or those who might affirm the call to follow Jesus) feel they must choose between some group's rigid religious doctrine (as well as political ideologies that are too often tied to the Christian faith) and the realities they are discovering in the educational process and in their own life experiences. Such is a false choice.

However, many vocal Christians proffer their personal understandings of right belief (doctrine, politics, personal behavior) as the only acceptable Christian perspectives — and equate their conclusions with a so-called biblical worldview.

Their affirmations of certain scientific theories and political positions on hot-button social issues get equated with Christian belief to the point that it often creates a dilemma for

inquiring young minds. In the process, Jesus is easily dismissed along with the rejected science that doesn't add up and the political positions that seem to contradict the basic characteristics of Christianity.

Churches and other Christian groups must provide safe places for open and honest inquiry. Otherwise, bright young people — who are or would be compelled by Jesus' call to compassion and service — will bypass or feel driven away.

We need strong public affirmations of the Christian faith — without the many debatable and often weak add-ons to what it means to be Christian. When left with a false choice between Christianity and critical thinking, many will choose the latter that gives them room to doubt, explore and grow.

When Christianity gets reduced to, and presented as, a firm checklist of beliefs that includes such matters as literal interpretations of the ancient biblical story and narrow political ideologies, many young people will simply check out — and, frankly, others who are not-so-young will too.

Give Pat Robertson credit. However, the media's wide reporting that he rejects young-earth creation is really not the big news.

Rather it is his important warning that Christianity loses — especially among bright, searching minds — when the compelling call to follow Jesus gets bundled up with debatable scientific theories. And, whether Robertson would say so or not, the same goes for many of the political positions he has advocated through the years. **BT**



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BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

In the midst of a war vividly marked by death and destruction on a scale unprecedented in American history, January 1 witnesses the most important moment yet in the great conflict — a moment not about death, but rather an affirmation of life.

On this first day of the new year and against the backdrop of growing Northern support for abolition, President Abraham Lincoln formally issues the Emancipation Proclamation, officially freeing all remaining African slaves in areas that are yet in rebellion against the federal government. Slavery, clearly understood by both the United States and the Confederate States as the one substantial issue over which the regions disagree, is an intractable divide. It is the issue over which hundreds of thousands of white men are sacrificing their lives — Southerners committed to a long-standing commitment of denying liberty to Africans, and Northerners increasingly devoted to a vision of freedom not defined by the color of one's skin.

Within the past two months, almost every Northern Baptist state convention and many (perhaps most) regional associations have voiced support for Lincoln's plan of emancipation for African slaves. This month, white Northern Baptists rejoice over the advancement of liberty and freedom central to their understanding of God's kingdom.

Yet while white Northern Baptists are joyous, black Baptists — including



150 YEARS AGO

January 1863

already-emancipated Southern blacks in areas of the South now controlled by the U.S. Army — are ecstatic. Along the Union-controlled South Carolina coast, black freedmen on New Year's Day pack Baptist churches from morning into the night, celebrating not only their freedom, but also the coming freedom of all African Americans.

Similar scenes take place in the North. Frederick Douglass, in Boston on January 1, describes the scene among the city's black population gathered at the Tremont Temple Baptist Church:

Eight, nine, ten o'clock [a.m.] came and went, and still no word. A visible shadow seemed falling on the expecting throng, which the confident utterances of the speakers sought in vain to dispel. At last,

when patience was well-nigh exhausted, and suspense was becoming agony, a man (I think was Judge Russell) with hasty step advanced through the crowd, and with a face fairly illumined with the news he bore, exclaimed in tones that thrilled all hearts, "It is coming!" "It is on the wires!" The effect of this announcement was startling beyond description, and the scene was wild and grand. Joy and gladness exhausted all forms of expression from shouts of praise, to sobs and tears. My old friend Rue, a colored preacher, a man of wonderful vocal power, expressed the heartfelt emotion of the hour, when he led all voices in the anthem, "Sound the Loud Timbrel O'er Egypt's Dark Sea, Jehovah hath Triumphed, His People Are Free." About twelve o'clock, seeing there was no disposition to retire from the hall, which must be vacated, my friend Grimes (of blessed memory), rose and moved that the meeting adjourn to the Twelfth Baptist Church, of which he was pastor, and soon

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that church was packed from doors to pulpit, and this meeting did not break up till near the dawn of day. It was one of the most affecting and thrilling occasions I ever witnessed, and a worthy celebration of the first step on the part of the nation at its departure from the thralldom of ages.

As black freedmen celebrate, most white Baptists of the Confederate South remain firmly committed to liberty for light-skinned persons only, insisting that a biblical faith demands the enslavement of the African race. An editorial in North Carolina Baptists' *Biblical Recorder* this month ignores Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, instead celebrating a great achievement for the white race — the recent and decisive Confederate victory at Fredericksburg, Virginia:

The year 1862 will ever stand forth pre-eminent among the great epochs in the history of our race. To the men of the South it possesses a deeper significance, is

invested with a peculiar, thrilling interest which can only pass away with their lives. It opened gloomily enough for the Southern cause, and gave no indications of the radiant glory which marked its close. All remember well its first months of darkness and depression, when our foes confident and boastful, were closing in around us, and our destruction seemed sure ... It was a sense of darkness, of imminent peril, the most critical period in our national history. Let it not be forgotten. If [a] day of disaster should come again, let us turn to it and remember the signal deliverance which followed.

... Who could have anticipated the pleasing change? ... It has come through the blessing of God on the energy and skill of our leaders Let us recognize the hand of God in all this ... and implore the continuance of His mercies to us. To Him belong the honor and the glory ... Such are the prospects of the opening year. We hope it will be marked by triumphs

as glorious as those which have already attended our efforts to establish our independence, and have won for us the admiration of the world.

Thus, black freedmen celebrate as never before — and black slaves dare hope that their liberation is nigh — while at the same time white Southerners rejoice in battlefield victories for white supremacy. Both seize the mantle of liberty. Both praise the Almighty as the author of their respective salvation. Suspended precariously in the middle of this epic struggle is freedom itself. Yet only one God can prevail: either the creator of a new future envisioned by an enslaved people and their Northern allies, or the lord of a dark past to which white Southerners are fiercely devoted. For Baptists, the dividing line runs right through the Bible. Southern biblical conservatism is firmly rooted in America's racist past, while a future of racial equality hinges upon a newer understanding of scriptural interpretation unfettered by the chains of biblical literalism. **BT**

King's impact closely tied to Baptist pulpit

Story and photo by John Pierce

Themes of courage, justice and social change surround Martin Luther King Jr. Day, a federal holiday celebrated on January 21. With international acclaim for the civil rights leader and Nobel Peace prize laureate gunned down on April 4, 1968, it is possible to overlook the fact that King was by vocation a Baptist preacher.

He assumed the pastorate of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., in 1954, and then joined his father as co-pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1960.

His powerful sermons that informed and inspired the movement have been collected into various volumes including *A Gift of Love: Sermons from "Strength to Love" and Other Preachings* (Beacon Press, 2012). Current Ebenezer pastor Raphael G. Warnock, in a second foreword to an earlier one written by Coretta Scott King, notes: "Hailed during his lifetime as a civil rights



The pulpit of historic Ebenezer Baptist Church

leader and honored in death with a memorial befitting a president, it should not be forgotten that King was at his core a preacher."

And, as Warnock notes, King himself said: "I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage ..."

For pastors who fear their words fall on deaf ears, King's sermons serve as a reminder that such proclamation can work its way into hearts, minds, hands and feet. For listeners who wonder if the message of the hour can impact the challenges of daily living, these

sermons affirm the potential for being truly doers, not just hearers of the Word.

King was reluctant to have his sermons published, claiming, "A sermon is not an essay to be read but a discourse to be heard." Yet, the powerful words often leap from the pages to convict, inspire and motivate now as they did when bouncing off the walls of Baptist churches in Montgomery, Atlanta, and elsewhere.

In his preaching, King often called for courageous yet balanced living — marked by "tough mindedness" and "tender heartedness." He challenged "blind conformity" that leads to suspicion and the protection of unjust systems.

He proclaimed that narrow provincialism gives an obstructed view of the value of all persons; that forgiveness is the catalyst for new beginnings; that materialism is false wealth; that both "superficial optimism" and "crippling pessimism" should be avoided; and that deeper thinking matters, or as he put it: "Never must the church tire of reminding [people] that they have a moral responsibility to be intelligent."

And he said this and more from Baptist pulpits, believing that those who heard his words could change their communities, nation and world for good. **BT**

News journal to celebrate 30 years of freedom, expansion

MACON, Ga. —Throughout 2013 the independent, national news journal *Baptists Today* will celebrate 30 years of publishing. The highlight will be a dinner event at the First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., on Thursday, April 25.

A reception time for fellowship, book signings and visiting exhibits will begin at 5:30 pm. The dinner will start at 6:30 and feature recognitions, a media presentation, and music by singer/songwriter Kate Campbell of Nashville. Participants will receive a copy of Bruce Gourley's upcoming history of *Baptists Today*.

Reservations can be made at baptists-today.org or by calling the *Baptists Today* office (1-877-752-5658) and paying by credit card. Individual reservations are \$25. A designated table for eight is \$250. The church is located at 751 Green St., N.W., in Gainesville.

Baptists Today is also seeking organizations and individuals as sponsors for the event. The \$1,000 sponsorships will be customized regarding dinner tickets, exhibit space and recognition. Call the *Baptists Today* office or email Ben McDade (ben@baptiststoday.org) for details.

The inaugural issue of what was then known as *SBC Today* rolled off the presses in April 1983. The publishing ministry was the first of many new moderate Baptist organizations to form in the decades during and after the Southern Baptist Convention's turn toward political and theological fundamentalism.

Since founding editor Walker Knight and a horde of volunteers, many from Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., where the publication was first housed, brought the first issue to life, the news journal has experienced many changes over the past three decades.

In addition to multiple redesigns and new focuses through ongoing denominational and cultural shifts, *Baptists Today* has relocated



offices, found leadership from numerous directors and staff, and more recently expanded its mission to provide Bible studies, books and other church resources.

In addition to the April 25 event and publication of the news journal's history, a series of articles will appear each month in 2013 focusing on how *Baptists Today* has recorded and helped shape the moderate Baptist movement.

The memoirs of Walker Knight will be published as well through Nurturing Faith, Inc., the book-publishing arm of *Baptists Today*. He and all other Nurturing Faith authors will participate in book signings on April 25. **BT**

BAPTISTS TODAY

A celebration of 30 years!

Thursday, April 25
First Baptist Church
751 Green St., NW
Gainesville, Ga.

\$25 individual reservation
\$250 designated table for eight
\$1,000 sponsorships (organizations or individuals)

5:30 Reception, book signings, exhibits, fellowship

6:30 DINNER CELEBRATION with recognitions, media presentation, and music by singer/songwriter Kate Campbell

JOIN US! Bring others! Receive a copy of Bruce Gourley's new history of *Baptists Today*. Reservations: baptiststoday.org / 1-877-752-5658

Editor's note: Thirty years ago a visionary editor, a horde of volunteers and generous supporters brought to life a uniquely autonomous, national publication now known as *Baptists Today*. A big celebration (see information on page 10) is planned for April 25 in Gainesville, Ga., for all who can attend. Throughout the year, reflections on the shaping of Baptist life from within the pages of this news journal will be highlighted.

IN THE BEGINNING...

Longtime Baptist editor Walker L. Knight had endured enough knocks on his door from denominational leaders who wanted him to stay clear of anything that might be considered controversial — particularly issues of racial and gender equality, justice and peace. He dreamed of something freer — that would serve thinking and engaged Baptists in the pews who took notice of changing times and were willing to wrestle with complex issues.

In Louisville, Kentucky, some Baptist leaders had gathered to plan resistance to political and theological fundamentalists gaining control of the Southern Baptist Convention. With an understanding that a free press is not favored in such circles, they talked of the importance of having an open, trusted source of information with unprecedented editorial freedom.

Those dreams connected in late 1982 — with Knight agreeing to leave his denominational post to launch a new publication (known first as *SBC Today*) and the leaders agreeing to raise startup funds. It would be

the chronicling of what proponents called “the conservative resurgence” and opponents called the “fundamentalist takeover” of the Southern Baptist Convention that would occupy most of the pages and much of the passion for many years to follow.

“By being autonomous, *SBC Today* can best serve Southern Baptists in presenting news and opinion,” said Knight in his first editorial.

In that inaugural April 1983 edition, church historian Walter B. Shurden, then of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and now chair of the *Baptists Today* Board of Directors, wrote: “Some Southern Baptists’ knowledge of their denominational heritage reaches all the way back to the last meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention they attended.”

In the years that followed, many new Baptist organizations and institutions would emerge — with the news journal reporting on and helping shape a new Baptist movement rooted in deeply-held principles of freedom. The formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was still nearly a decade away. **BT**



Founding editor
Walker L. Knight

Be a part of something good and growing!

Baptists Today is experiencing unprecedented growth and expanding into some wonderful new ventures. Our autonomy gives us the opportunity to dream, connect and collaborate.

But producing this uniquely independent news journal with excellent Bible studies — and developing exciting new resources — requires support from those who value such efforts.

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New Congress more religiously diverse

By David Gibson
Religion News Service

Three Buddhists, a Hindu and a “none” will walk into the 113th Congress, and it’s no joke. Rather, it’s a series of “firsts” that reflect the growing religious diversity of the country.

When the new Congress is sworn in this month, Hawaii Democrat Tulsi Gabbard, an Iraq war veteran, will represent the state’s 2nd Congressional District and will become the first Hindu in either chamber on Capitol Hill.

The 31-year-old Gabbard was born in American Samoa to a Catholic father and a Hindu mother, and moved to Hawaii as a child. She follows the Vaishnava branch of Hinduism, which venerates the deity Lord Vishnu and his primary incarnations.

Gabbard takes over the seat held by Rep. Mazie Hirono, who won a Senate race in November and will become the first Buddhist to sit in the upper chamber. There were already two other Buddhists in the House of Representatives, both of whom won reelection: Rep. Hank Johnson, a Georgia

Democrat, and Rep. Colleen Hanabusa, a fellow Hawaii Democrat.

An analysis of the incoming Congress by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life also notes that Kyrsten Sinema, an Arizona Democrat who narrowly won a seat in the House, is the first member of Congress to publicly describe her religion as “none” — the popular name of a fast-growing category of Americans who say they have no particular religious affiliation.

After Sinema’s win was heralded by non-theist groups, her campaign said she does not consider herself an atheist but rather “secular.”

The Pew Forum — which based its congressional analysis on data collected by CQ Roll Call — says that about one in five U.S. adults describe themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular.” Ten other members of the 113th Congress (about 2 percent) do not specify a religious affiliation, Pew says, up from six members in the outgoing 112th Congress.

The new Congress will also see significant shifts among the mainstays of the American religious landscape.

Protestants will still comprise the

majority, with about 56 percent of the members in both chambers. But that continues a steady decline since 1961, when 75 percent of members were some variety of Protestant.

Jews in Congress will see a decline, going from 39 seats to 32 seats — though at 6 percent that is still a significantly larger share than their proportion in the overall U.S. population, which is just under 2 percent. And even though Mitt Romney, the Mormon standard-bearer, lost the presidential election, the number of Mormons in Congress remains the same, at about 3 percent, or 15 seats overall.

Roman Catholics appear to be the big winner from the Nov. 6 vote, edging up from about 156 seats, or 29 percent of Congress, to 161, or just over 30 percent. That compares with the 22 percent of the wider U.S. population that identifies as Catholic. Catholic Democrats outnumber Catholic Republicans in the House by a 73-61 margin, and by an 18-9 margin in the Senate.

Two Muslim members of the House — Minnesota’s Keith Ellison and Indiana’s Andre Carson, both Democrats — will return to Capitol Hill. **BT**

Judge rejects much of Schuller’s claims against Crystal Cathedral

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

Crystal Cathedral founder Robert H. Schuller failed to get most of the \$5 million he requested in a bankruptcy case against the Southern California megachurch he started 57 years ago.

Bankruptcy Judge Robert Kwan of Los Angeles ruled Nov. 26 that Schuller, 86, and several family members did not prove many of their claims of breach of contract and copyright infringement against Crystal Cathedral Ministries.

Kwan awarded the family less than \$700,000, with Schuller himself receiving about \$600,000, *The Orange County Register* reported.

The Schullers argued that they had donated books and other materials to the ministry, but alleged that it took advantage of their intellectual property. While the former religious broadcaster and prolific author owned the rights to his books, the judge said his family did not prove who owned the

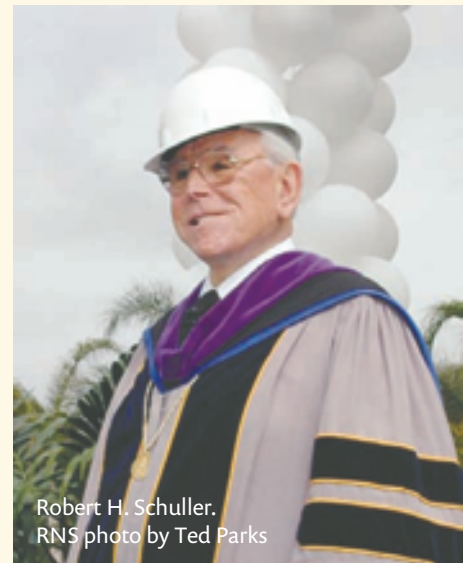
rights to the “Hour of Power” television show that is copyrighted under Crystal Cathedral Ministries.

Carol Schuller Milner, a daughter of Schuller’s who joined him in the case, called the ruling a “travesty” that would lead the family to “start liquidating everything,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported.

“It’s an avoidance of responsibility for an organization to not take care of those who have gone before them,” she said. “It’s tragic.”

In a fall 2011 bankruptcy proceeding, the cathedral, fraught with huge debt and family squabbles, reached a \$57.5 million deal to allow the Catholic Diocese of Orange to purchase its iconic glass sanctuary in Garden Grove. Its existing congregation will move to a former Catholic church next year and the diocese will rename the Crystal Cathedral, calling it Christ Cathedral.

“The ruling will enable the final creditors to be paid and give us the money we need to move on with our ministry, spreading a message of hope and love to the people



of Orange County and, through the *Hour of Power*, to the world,” John Charles, the Crystal Cathedral’s chief executive officer, said in a statement.

“The trial was painful for everyone involved, and our congregation is ready to move on. We love the Schullers and wish them well.” **BT**

Cru demotes Southern student for not allowing women to teach coed Bible study

By Bob Allen

Associated Baptist Press

The director of the University of Louisville's chapter of Cru, formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ, has been demoted after refusing to allow female staff to teach Bible studies to mixed-gender audiences.

According to *World Magazine*, Daniel Harman's views on women in ministry apparently weren't a problem during his eight years as a Campus Crusade missionary in Eastern Europe, but that changed after he moved to the Louisville post in 2009.

Harman, a student at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., contends that Cru's policy requiring that male and female campus staff share teaching duties violates Bible verses like 1 Timothy 2:12, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet."

Southern Seminary houses offices of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which promotes a "complementarian" position that says while males and females are created as equals, the Bible assigns leadership roles in the church and home to men.

Denny Burk, associate professor of biblical studies at Boyce College, Southern Seminary's undergraduate arm, commended Harman "for standing upon the truth of God even at great

personal cost" in a blog Dec. 1.

Cru spokesman Mark DeMoss told *World* that Harman's removal wasn't over theology but rather his refusal to abide by the ministry's policy. Burk labeled that explanation "nonsense."

"Cru's policy represents an egalitarian view of ministry roles, and that stance is irreducibly theological," Burk wrote. "Daniel was demoted because of theological conviction, not because of an arcane dispute about Cru's bureaucracy."

Burk said from time to time he will hear people argue that complementarianism applies only to the local church and not parachurch groups such as Campus Crusade, an interdenominational ministry started in 1951 by Bill and Vonette Bright now on 1,140 college campuses nationwide.

"This has never been a compelling argument to me," Burk said. "It is true that parachurch groups are not the church. They cannot baptize or administer the Lord's Supper. There is a worthwhile discussion to be had about the existence and role of parachurch organizations in relation to local churches."

"At the very least, I think everyone should agree that parachurch orgs should never adopt ministry practices which would undermine the teaching and discipline of actual churches," Burk continued. "For that reason, the complementarian/egalitarian issue cannot be skirted by groups like Cru." **BT**

Survey finds less cheating in high schools

By Cathy Payne

Religion News Service

Are American students making the grade when it comes to ethics? A new survey from the Josephson Institute of Ethics finds that the portion of high school students who admit to cheating, lying or stealing dropped in 2012 for the first time in a decade.

The reasons aren't totally known, but the results of the poll of 23,000 high school students give leaders of the Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization hope.

The survey is "a pretty good sign that things may be turning around," said Michael Josephson, the founder and president of the Josephson Institute. "I'm quite optimistic this is the beginning of a downward trend."

Among the highlights from the survey, which is done every two years:

- Students who said they had cheated on an exam in the past year plunged from 59 percent in 2010 to 51 percent in 2012.
- The number of students who said they lied to a teacher in the past year about something significant fell from 61 percent in 2010 to 55 percent in 2012.
- In 2010, 27 percent of pupils said they had stolen from a store in the past year. In 2012, 20 percent said they did so.

One reason for the decline may be more attention to character.

"Changes in children's behavior of this magnitude suggest a major shift in parenting and school involvement in issues of honesty and character," Josephson said in a statement.

Brian Jacob, a professor of education policy at the University of Michigan, said providing students with more information is one way to help curb cheating in schools. For instance, Jacob, who has looked at plagiarism in college, said research shows that you can help students understand, through tools such as an online tutorial, what constitutes plagiarism and strategies to avoid it. **BT**

More 'Most Influential Muslims' from U.S.

(RNS) — There are more Muslims from America than any other country on this year's "The Muslim 500: The World's 500 Most Influential Muslims," compiled by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, a respected think tank in Jordan, including two in the top 50.

Sheikh Hamza Yusuf Hanson, a California-born convert who founded Zaytuna College, an Islamic college in Berkeley, Calif., and is a leading Islamic authority in America, ranked No. 42, two places ahead of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, an Islamic studies professor at George Washington University known for his work in Islamic philosophy.

America's 2.6 million Muslims are a tiny fraction of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims, but they took 41 spots on the list. Countries with the next highest number of names were Egypt, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom, with 25 Muslims each, followed by

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, with 24.

"Compared to the global Muslim population, the representation of U.S. Muslims in this list is disproportionate, but yet representative in the way they shape global discourse," said Duke University Islamic studies professor Ebrahim Moosa.

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah took the list's No. 1 spot.

Other Americans to make the list include: Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, all-time NBA scoring leader, and boxing legend Muhammad Ali; Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council on American Islamic Relations in Washington, D.C.; Rep. Andre Carson, D-Ind., and Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., the only two Muslim members of Congress and Aasif Mandvi, actor, frequently appears on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*. **BT**

Secession theology runs deep in American religious and political history

Corruption has gone too far. The righteous must break away. Hope now rests with a holy remnant that will honor foundational texts.

The message sounds familiar. A church schism? No, mounting calls for secession from the United States.

Since President Obama won re-election, more than 750,000 Americans have petitioned the White House website to let their respective states secede, from Alaska to Iowa to Maryland and Vermont. Those leading the charge are framing it, observers say, in terms that suggest a deep-seated religious impulse for purity-through-separation is flaring up once again.

But this time, it's playing out on a political stage.

"Today's secessionist movements are just the latest example of a long parade of breakaway groups (in American history) seeking to restore some lost ideal," said Peter J. Thuesen, professor of religious studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis. "The problem is that the ideal is invariably a mirage."

Seeking purity through separation has marked American religious history since the Puritans sailed from Holland to establish a holy beacon in the New World. It helps explain why Baptists, Presbyterians and others have splintered into countless subgroups over the years, and why the Episcopal Diocese of South Carolina disaffiliated from the Episcopal Church this fall.

The pattern commonly involves one group breaking off to re-establish a holy community by living in fresh accord with sacred texts. Religious purists have the Bible to guide their quest; secessionists look to the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Both insist these centers of authority have suffered neglect and must be restored.

"That's a persistent line of thought," said Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. "There are people who are disappointed with the direction the United States has taken. ... It's primarily political and economic, and then they just find a religious cover for it (as) they tap into pre-existent religious language."

Dismissing the United States as hopelessly



A tribute to commander of Union forces Gen. Winfield Scott, shown as the mythical Hercules slaying the many-headed dragon or hydra, here symbolizing the secession of the Confederate states.

corrupt, secessionists are picking up the breakaway-for-purity motif and running with it. Radio host Alex Jones, whose show airs in 60 markets, alleged on Nov. 15 that "foreign megabanks have hijacked the government" and have made secession necessary.

"We do not want to secede from the Union to destroy the republic, but to restore it," Jones said. "Go to the White House website. Do your own petitions to reinstall the Declaration of Independence. ... It's now time to launch the second American Revolution."

Secessionists, such as Russell Longcore of Marietta, Ga., take inspiration from history. He sees secession as pursuit of God-given liberty, such as when American colonies seceded from Britain in 1776, when Southern states left the Union in the 1860s and when the Soviet Union dissolved into 15 separate states two decades ago.

In his view, petitioning the federal government is "silly" because states don't need permission to secede, but he regards the petitioners' goal as nonetheless serious and moral in nature.

"The moral decay comes from the fact that Washington, D.C., has summarily ignored the Constitution," said Longcore, an insurance claims consultant who blogs at dumpdc.com.

He offered the example of unsanctioned wars.

"Article One, Section Eight (of the Constitution) says Congress should have authority to declare war and to prosecute a war," Longcore said. "There hasn't been a declared war since World War II, but we've been in an awful lot of wars."

Other narratives help secessionists, as well as religious isolationists, understand their efforts as part of a noble tapestry. Evangelical groups have for years supported Christians in South Sudan, which broke off from Sudan last year after persistent clashes with Muslims in the north. Some now laud how Sudanese Christians separated and hope American Christians would do similarly by withdrawing at least culturally, if not legally.

Those inspired by such examples include Jim Rawles, an evangelical blogger and novelist who teaches survival skills for the coming day when America's economy collapses. He sees no point in seceding, since the federal government would "hammer" such efforts anyway.

Instead, he's getting more response these days, he says, to his call for Bible-believing Christians, Orthodox Jews and Messianic Jews to relocate to what he calls the American Redoubt: Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, eastern Washington and eastern Oregon.

One reason he gives on his website for separation: "Even if God has withdrawn his blessings from our nation as a whole, he will continue to provide for and to protect his remnant."

"It's time to distance ourselves from the vile corruptness that we see inside the Washington, D.C., Beltway," said Rawles, who blogs at survivalblog.com. "It is analogous to the Puritan exodus (from Europe). They couldn't fit in and said, 'We're going to move to completely virgin territory and start afresh.' ... In effect, we're becoming pistol-packing Amish."

Some scholars still aren't buying it. As Wolfe sees it, calls for secession and cultural withdrawal are just sour grapes.

"It's not religious in inspiration at all," Wolfe says. "It's like in the Old South, where if you gave (secession) a religious cover, you made it sound better. But it's just people who basically have difficulty accepting that we have a two-party system. One party wins. One party loses." **BT**

Evangelical commission suggests ways to keep closer eye on lavish ministries

A special commission created by the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability has called for clearer IRS guidance and greater involvement among donors to address “outliers” among congregations and other nonprofits that are not being financially accountable.

Its 91-page report was a response to a request for recommendations from Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, after he concluded a three-year investigation into alleged lavish spending by six prominent broadcast ministries in 2011.

Among the dozens of suggestions of the interfaith commission:

- Compensation for leaders of nonprofits should be “reasonable,” and nonprofits should make such information available to donors who request it.
- The Internal Revenue Service should clarify forms related to the income tax exclusion for clergy housing — which is being challenged in court by atheists who consider it unconstitutional.
- The IRS should not create a specific advisory committee for religious organizations, but should allow the religious community to give input as it creates more guidance on tax law.
- The tax agency should give more advice

about “love offerings” — monetary gifts sometimes given to clergy outside of regular congregational offerings — to avoid the “mistaken impression that there is 100 percent correlation between deductibility by the giver and taxability to the receiver.”

- The IRS should modify forms to permit organizations, such as operators of shelters from domestic violence, to redact sensitive information from public disclosure if it would put people at risk.

In an introduction to the report, commission president Michael Batts said a comparatively small number of organizations are involved in “egregious financial misconduct” and “excessive legislation” is not necessary to address them.

“We cannot allow the behavior of a few outliers in the religious and nonprofit sector

to threaten the freedoms of those who are not the problem,” said Batts, a former ECFA chairman, in an introduction to the report.

Grassley’s three-year probe concluded that evangelists Benny Hinn of Texas and Joyce Meyer of Missouri had made “significant reforms” to their operations.

Grassley’s final report said Texas-based Kenneth Copeland Ministries, Georgia pastors Creflo Dollar and Eddie Long, and Florida megachurch pastor Paula White had provided incomplete or no responses.

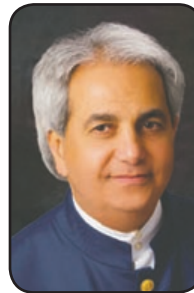
Grassley, in a statement, said the new report demonstrates the challenge of trying to prevent abuse without harming “above-board organizations.” He encouraged both donors and the IRS to heed the commission’s recommendations, but noted that Congress could extend the review if it addresses comprehensive tax reform.

“The report gives less attention to resolving some of the thornier questions, such as how to build accountability from entities that exploit vagueness in current laws and regulations for individual benefit rather than the greater good,” he said.

The commission plans to release a report sometime this year with recommendations about political expression of churches and other charities. **BT**



Joyce Meyer



Benny Hinn

Anglicans vow to vote again on allowing women bishops

Trevor Grundy
Religion News Service

CANTERBURY, England — The Church of England plans to rush through legislation to consecrate women bishops after a surprising defeat in November at the church’s General Synod in London.

The church’s Archbishops’ Council ended two days of closed-door meetings on Nov. 28, and said a plan to allow women bishops needs to be “restarted” when General Synod reconvenes in July. Church leaders originally said the issue could not be reopened until 2015.

“There was agreement that the Church

“There was agreement that the Church of England had to resolve this matter through its own processes as a matter of urgency,”

of England had to resolve this matter through its own processes as a matter of urgency,” the group said in a statement. “The Council therefore recommended to the House of Bishops ... to put in place a clear process for discussions in the New Year with a view to bringing legislative proposals before the Synod in July (2013).”

American-born Christina Rees, who is a member of General Synod and the Archbishops’ Council, said the unexpected

defeat of women bishops has left the church “galvanized and activated.”

“The ‘No’ vote on Nov. 20 has proved to be a wake-up call for the Church of England,” she said.

In a surprise move, opponents in the General Synod’s traditionalist Catholic Group and the conservative group Reform have called for talks to break the deadlock.

The Catholic Group’s Canon Simon Killwick and Reform’s Rod Thomas had argued there weren’t enough safeguards for dissenters, but said they would not push to block a second vote.

“It has never been our intention to prevent the consecration of women as bishops,” they said in a joint statement. **BT**

Pressing on

Birmingham congregation, pastor celebrate a milestone

BIRMINGHAM — The youngest of four children born to a successful Baptist pastor and a wife who was equally dedicated to the congregation and denomination, Sarah Jackson Shelton suspects that being a pastor is part of her DNA.

Passing her 10th anniversary as pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham, Ala., only served to validate her suspicion.

“Church was my favorite place to be,” she said. “In fact, I would rather be at church than any place: the grandeur of worship — all of it, I just loved.”

But for an 18-year-old female in the Southern Baptist Convention, heavily influenced by its Southern culture and heritage, getting there was an eternity. She was ordained to the gospel ministry in 1982, but the positions available to her and many of her female colleagues at the time included most everything but the pulpit.

She could have become a pastor right out of seminary, but not a Baptist pastor. The Methodists recruited and encouraged her, but she had always been a Baptist and wanted to stay one. She received some encouragement from her family, but even they knew a barrier existed at the time against women, especially in Baptist circles.

Still, she pressed on. Confiding her calling to a seminary professor with the disclaimer that she knew her Baptist heritage would likely prevent her from ever being a pastor, she received a rare encouraging word that she was on the right track. “Wouldn’t you rather be part of what is to be than what has been?” the professor asked.

Shelton graduated from the University of Alabama and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. While in seminary she received



honors including the coveted Clyde T. Francisco Preaching Award in 1981, which comes with an invitation to preach in the seminary chapel.

She worked through a stint as youth director, education director, associate pastor and briefly as a college teacher and administrator. Through it all, she said, “the nagging sense to be a pastor never went away.”

She occasionally received opportunities to preach, lead conferences and write articles and even books but was never offered a pastorate until 2002, when a church contacted her about being interim pastor. She agreed to meet with the committee, expecting not to hear any more about it. To her surprise, a second call came.

The pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant, formed in 1970 after Birmingham’s First Baptist Church refused to accept African-American members, had retired and the church was searching for an interim pastor to serve no longer than one year. She took the interim position.

The search for a permanent pastor dragged on, leading to a second interim. It was during that time that the pastor-nominating committee turned to Shelton. She was elected in a called business meeting on Aug. 11, 2002, by a vote of 131-2 announced to a standing ovation.

Ten years later, Shelton said she now receives “constant confirmation of what I should have been doing all along.” However, the calling is not without its challenges.

One of the most difficult tasks, she said, “is burying the people you have come to love.”

Shelton admits the passion that drives her

“is to be faithful to the calling God has given me.” As a result, she reads and studies a lot. “I love worship and I love to preach,” she said.

Her secret to sermon preparation — be it a baptismal service, a baby dedication or a funeral — is listening to the people.

“Listen to families,” she explained. “Over the years I have found they dare to be honest. Some hate the church. Others find it memorable. Regardless, it is unique for each person.”

Fortunately, Shelton has seen continuous growth in the church, not only in membership — from an average of 80 to 200 in attendance — but in baptisms and most other measurable facets.

For her anniversary, church members honored their pastor with a Book of Prayers edited by Bridget Rose, a Samford University faculty member, and a commissioned hymn by Milburn Price, dean emeritus of Samford’s School of Music.

The Book of Prayers includes a benediction by her late father, Lamar Jackson, offered by his grandson, Dan Shelton, son of the pastor. The hymn — “Who Was the Prodigal?” — invoked the pastor’s favorite parable.

In addition to being a pastor, Shelton makes time and opportunities to be a wife to her husband, Lloyd, a Certified Public Accountant, and mother to two sons: David, a graduate of The Fashion Institute of Technology in New York who lives in that city, and Dan, a senior at Mountain Brook High School.

For other women who may find themselves in the holding pattern where Shelton was for 28 years, her advice is to find ways to be faithful to their calling. That may include having to take another role in the church, to be a chaplain or even changing their denomination. **BT**

—Jack Brymer is a former Baptist newspaper editor, a retired communications official at Samford University and a member of Baptist Church of the Covenant.

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For **adults** and **youth**

February lessons in this issue

God's Desire and Israel's Glory

Jeremiah 1:4-10 — Inside and Out
FEB. 3, 2013

Exodus 34:29-35 — A Face Full of Glory
FEB. 10, 2013

Lent on the Loose

Luke 4:1-13 — Don't Tempt Me!
FEB. 17, 2013

Luke 13:31-35 — A Fox in the Henhouse
FEB. 24, 2013

Youth Lessons are on pages 22-23.



Adult teaching plans by **Rick Jordan** of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina are available at nurturingfaith.net

Thanks, sponsors!

These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (Bo Prosser, Coordinator of Congregational Life) and from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Feb. 3, 2013

Inside and Out

It takes both time and effort to get to know someone well. Many of us may think there are few people who know us well, and some may insist that “*Nobody* really knows me.” Yet, we want to be known, even when we have a hard time admitting it. Our text for today dares to claim that the God of all creation has known us from the womb, and knows us now even better than we know ourselves. We learn from Jeremiah that we should get to know God, too – because God has plans for us. 📖

📖 **Epiphany continued:** Today's lesson continues the theme of Epiphany that began in January. While we normally think of Epiphany as the manifestation of God in Christ, it's important to remember that the Old Testament also has stories of divine revelation. Today's text tells us about God's self-revelation to Jeremiah.

A knowing call (vv. 4-5)

There once was a man who grew up in the sleepy little village of Anathoth, an hour's walk northeast of Jerusalem. His father Hilkiyah was a priest, probably a descendant of Abiathar. He named his son Jeremiah, and he taught him what it meant to worship God, known to his people as Yahweh. Hilkiyah also taught Jeremiah to pray, and raised him up to become a priest. He and his wife didn't yet know that God had other plans for



Jer. 1:5a —
“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you ...”

their boy.

There was a mark on Jeremiah. It was the mark of a prophet, but no one knew – not even Jeremiah. No one knew until the indelible day when Yahweh spoke to the young man and called him to the prophetic task. This is the day we read about in our scripture text. Jeremiah tells us about it in his own words.

“The word of Yahweh came to me” (v. 4), he said. Literally, “the word of Yahweh happened with me,” or “came about with me.” For Jeremiah, this was a real event. It was not just a dream, a figment of his imagination, or an attempt to please his mother. Jeremiah was still young when God spoke to him, but he was old enough to recognize who was talking. God spoke to Jeremiah, and said: “I know you!”

“Before I formed you in the womb,” God said, “*I knew you.*” It was not by chance that Jeremiah had come into being: God had something to do with the miracle of Jeremiah's birth, even as we teach our children that God was involved with theirs.

And it is because God has made us that he knows us so well. “Before I formed you,” says the Lord, “I knew you.” As a careful potter knows every bump and bubble in the surface of her work, so God knows the work of God's hands. The text suggests that God had something in mind for Jeremiah even before he made him, even before conception. A skilled potter does not just throw clay on the wheel and see what comes out; she has a design in mind before she begins shaping a new piece. God's plan for Jeremiah was older than Jeremiah himself. 📖

God not only formed and knew Jeremiah, but also consecrated him. The word we translate as “consecrated” is a causative form of the verb that means “to be holy” or “to be set apart.” God had given Jeremiah a distinctive role even from the womb. Jeremiah was not necessarily more holy than everyone else, but set apart for a purpose: “*I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*” God had chosen young Jeremiah as a divine messenger not only to Israel, but also to the surrounding nations. 📖

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



A willing choice (v. 6)

That was God's plan, but Jeremiah had the ability to choose whether or not he would accept it. And, like many other persons called by God, Jeremiah was not necessarily thrilled at the prospect. When God called Moses to confront Pharaoh and to lead his people out of Egypt, Moses responded "But I'm not a good speaker!" When God called Isaiah to proclaim God's message in Jerusalem, Isaiah answered "But I am a man of unclean lips!" And when Yahweh called Jeremiah to speak the divine message, the young man said "*Alas, Lord God – I don't know speaking. It's just a lad I am!*" (v. 6, my translation).

Despite his youth, Jeremiah knew that the prophet's life was not an easy one. It could have been fun if all he did was predict future events, but a prophet's real business is not to tell the future, but to *tell the present* – to understand the times and to interpret the claims of God upon the people of God. We learn from scripture that God's word to Israel was often hard to hear.

We have no reason to believe Jeremiah's humility was less than genuine. But, his feeling of unworthiness is perhaps one of the best signs that he *was* ready. In our society, as in Jeremiah's, there are all too many false prophets, self-made prophets, people who are deluded in thinking their message of hatred or bigotry or prosperity or Christ's soon return is from God. But a true prophet does not choose himself. It is God who does the choosing. 📖

A firm assurance (vv. 7-10)

But God is not so cruel as to call someone to do something and then not give him or her the ability to do it. Thus, Yahweh spoke bluntly to Jeremiah: "Don't say to me, 'I'm just a lad,' for unto all that I send you, you will go, and all that I tell you, you will speak" (v. 7, my translation). I suspect there would have been some added emphasis on the "you will" part of that assertion.

Why did God have so much

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confidence in Jeremiah? Because God knew the budding prophet would not be alone. "Do not be afraid of them," God said, "for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD" (v. 8, NRSV). Or, more literally, "Don't be afraid on account of their faces, for I am with you to deliver you – *word of Yahweh!*"

Jeremiah would see many faces in his ministry: angry faces, cold faces, questioning faces, indifferent faces. Many of the faces would be hostile and even dangerous, but Jeremiah would not be alone. He had God's word on it.

In Jeremiah's vision, the Lord touched his mouth and said, "See, I have put my words into your mouth." When Jeremiah preached, he earnestly believed he had a word from God – a message *from* heaven, *for* earth.

Our mission and task also begin with an understanding of God's word to us – making it a part of us and proclaiming it to others. For every person who is called to proclaim God's word from the pulpit, many others are called to show God's love to children, or to give witness to God's way in daily lives characterized by grace.

While the text seems fairly straightforward to this point, at verse 10 God's instructions to Jeremiah begin to sound a little strange. God told the newly appointed prophet that he would be put over nations and kingdoms, "to uproot and to tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build up and to plant" (v. 10b, my translation). 📖

Jeremiah's message was to be both destructive and constructive, both negative and positive: He was to uproot what was evil and plant what was good. He was to tear down the walls of Israel's rebellion, and build up walls of faith.

That image speaks clearly to those who will listen. Are there things in our lives that need to be dug out, attitudes or actions that produce only bad fruit? Sometimes we need to uproot unhelpful habits and replace them with healthier ones. As our lives come into tune with

God's way, we are better positioned to have a positive influence on others.

God's word to Jeremiah is relevant to institutions as well as individuals. In the last years before Judah's exile, the political, economic and religious systems were badly in need of reform. Like old barns leaning in the wind, they were beyond repair. They would have to be torn down and rebuilt. Jeremiah himself would not do the tearing down or the rebuilding, but he would proclaim what must be done, and prepare the way.

When we look about at our own society, and even the church, we can see ingrained institutions or attitudes that need to be demolished. Bigotry against those who look different or whose lives we don't understand remains endemic. Injustice is rampant around the world. Those who study human trafficking tell us that more people are held in bondage and forced to work against their will today than at any time in human history. The economic deck in America and elsewhere is stacked to favor the rich at the expense of the poor.

We don't have to look far to see decrepit attitudes that ought to be torn down in the name of God, and replaced with structures of justice, or equality, of mutual love and respect.

That is not a popular course of action, which is why most Christians ignore it. It is much easier to go our own way, to make do, to accept prejudice and inequality and turn away when we pass by the poor. But, the difficulty of the task does not diminish its importance.

God promised to be with Jeremiah. The assurance of God's presence would not protect him from persecution, or trouble or difficult situations. Every true messenger of God will face opposition, but no true follower of God is ultimately overcome. The last thing God said in that first remarkable conversation with Jeremiah was this: "*They will fight against you, but they will not prevail against you*" (v. 19). 📖

Can we see structures, traditions or institutions in our culture that need to be torn down and rebuilt in a healthier way? Of course we can. So, what will we do about it? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Exodus 34:29-35

Feb. 10, 2013

A Face Full of Glory

You've seen it many times: the look on a child's face when she first sees the gift-laden tree on Christmas morning, or the glow that surrounds a happy bride and groom. Even a self-important young man who tries to hide his joy over driving home in his first car could be described with the familiar words: "His face was just beaming!"

When has your face glowed with joy or excitement or the simple pleasure of being near a loved one?

Our lesson for today describes a face that was seriously shiny, and not just from sweat or oily skin. After spending time with God, Moses' face was positively *radiant*.

On the liturgical calendar, today is called Transfiguration Sunday. It's the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany, the Sunday before the beginning of Lent.

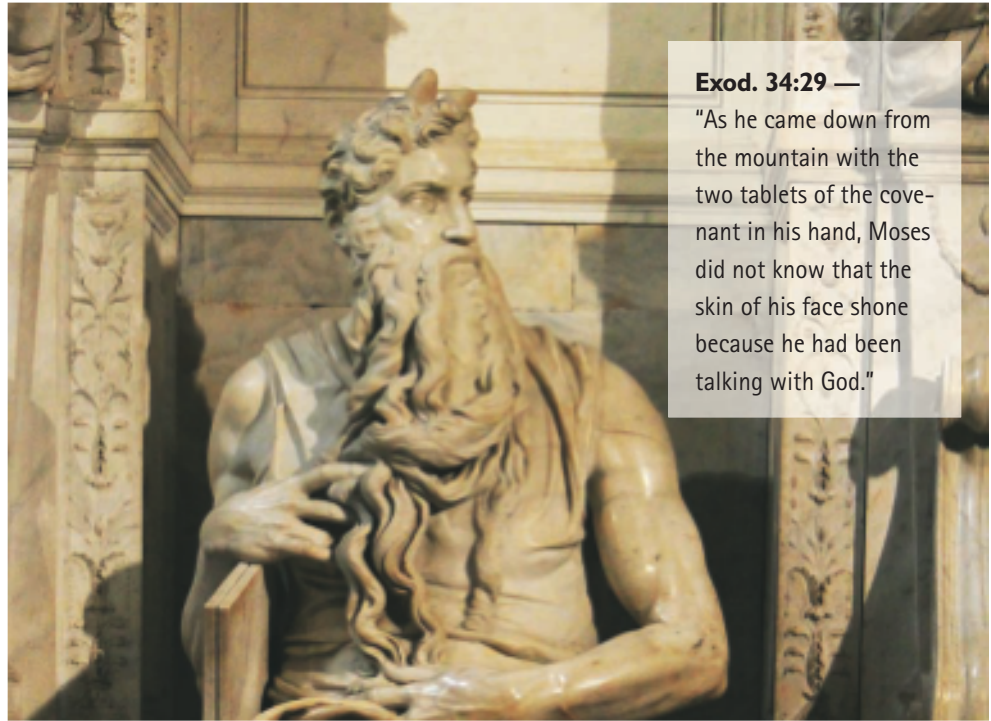
Epiphany celebrates God's personal revelation, and especially the public manifestation of God in Christ. Transfiguration Sunday recalls the story of how Jesus was transformed before Peter, James and John (Luke 9:28-36, see also Matt. 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8). The most notable difference was that "the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29).

That wasn't the first time the presence of God was revealed in a shining face.

Face to face with God (v. 29)

Today's text describes a time when Moses was said to have met regularly with God for face-to-face conversations,

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



Exod. 34:29 —


"As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God."

and the encounters transformed him. The first thing we learn from this text is that spending time with God will change a person – and that others can tell.

We should consider the surrounding context before jumping into Exod. 34:29-35. Exodus 32 describes how the people of Israel grew impatient while Moses tarried on Mount Sinai while receiving the law from God. Thinking that Moses had died, perhaps, they persuaded Aaron to cast a golden calf as an object of worship. Just as they started to sing and dance about the calf, however, Moses returned in a rage and slammed the stone tablets containing the commandments to the ground, shattering them.

God punished the people for their idolatry, but did not give up on Israel. And, when God threatened to remove the divine presence from the company (Exod. 33:1-6), Moses interceded for the people, spending much time in conversation with God.

These conversations took place in a "Tent of Meeting" (not to be confused with the Tabernacle) Moses erected at some distance from the main camp.

The text insists that when Moses went into the tent, the "pillar of cloud" that symbolized Yahweh's presence would descend and stand before the entrance, while inside "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (33:10-11). 

Having smashed the first set of commandments, Moses responded to God's instructions to cut two new tablets and ascend the mountain for a second go (33:1-4). There he experienced a further revelation of God in a cloud (34:5-8) and pleaded with God to accompany the people into the Promised Land (34:9).

God offered a new covenant, but instructed Moses to warn the people sternly against consorting with the peoples of the land or worshipping their gods (34:10-16), then added a variety of ritual requirements (34:17-26).

We learn from 34:27-28 that Moses reportedly spent a full 40 days on Mount Sinai conversing with God and engraving the commandments on the stone tablets, neither eating nor drinking the whole time.


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The encounter left Moses' appearance radically changed – but there were no mirrors on the mountain, and the text insists he was unaware that his face had taken on a noticeable glow.

**Face to face with Moses
(vv. 30-32)**

We should not be surprised that Moses had a different look about him when he returned from the mountain. We would expect him to be dirty, emaciated and weak from his 40-day fast: darker, if anything.

We would not expect Moses to descend with a face so radiant that it frightened all who saw him. As Moses approached, his brother Aaron and the Israelites could see that “the skin of his face shone,” with the result being “they were afraid to come near him” (v. 30, my translation). 

The people apparently turned away from Moses and fled. Did his altered appearance lead them to think he was a ghost? Were they afraid the light was a source of power sent to punish them?


In any case, when they heard Moses call out, they “turned back” long enough for him to “command them everything that Yahweh had said to him on Mount Sinai” (v. 32).

We assume that Moses did not give them all 40 days' worth of the conversation, but related the most salient commands, particularly those relative to avoiding idolatry, which had been their downfall during his previous stint on the mountain.

What, do you think, was the significance of Moses' face shining? There is no question that we are to see Moses' glowing visage as a direct reflection of the time he had spent in close proximity with God. The purpose of this shining sign, apparently, was to authenticate Moses' teaching as having its source in God.

As the people observed the light beaming from Moses' face, perhaps they would hear and understand that the words coming from Moses' mouth had their origin with Yahweh, and be more likely to respect and obey the commands.

**Living behind a veil
(vv. 33-36)**

After this initial speech to the panicky people, however, Moses apparently acknowledged that his frightening face left others uncomfortable, so he chose to shield them from it by wearing a veil whenever he appeared in public.  It is as if Moses insisted that the people behold his lustrous looks long enough to acknowledge the divine authority of the commands he was giving, but was careful not to give them more than they could handle.

While the people couldn't bear the regular reminder of God's presence “up close and personal,” Moses could not get enough. The text says he continued his practice of spending time alone with God in the tent of meeting, removing his veil when he did so.

What are we to make of this passage? The clear implication is that Moses grew so close to Yahweh that the divine glory was reflected in his face. Jesus' disciples, no doubt, would have recalled this story when Jesus took them to a lonely mountaintop and was transfigured before them. The appearance of his face changed, and even his robes began to crackle with light (the Greek word translated “dazzling” means “to flash like lightning,” Luke 9:29). Soon, in their vision, Moses and Elijah also appeared “in glory” (Luke 9:30-31).

As Moses had become the medium of God's presence to the Israelites, so Jesus mediated a glimpse of God's glory to his three closest followers. Even they had difficulty absorbing what they saw and tried to mask the brightness, in a sense, by offering to build shelters for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. John's gospel does not contain an account of the transfiguration, but still approaches the subject of God's glory being revealed in Jesus. “We have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only

son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Paul later used the veil of Moses as an ongoing metaphor to accuse the Jews of refusing to see the glory of God in Christ. Paul – who had met Christ as a blinding light from heaven – seems critical of Moses for hiding something of God's glory behind a mask, while he himself was bold to insist that all see the fullness of God's message. Paul saw a parallel between the ancient Israelites resisting the visual reminder of God's presence and their descendants, who maintained a veil between themselves and the light of Christ, refusing to see (2 Cor. 3:7-17).

But there was another possibility. Those who dare to look “with unveiled faces,” who contemplate the glory of God, “are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Paul seems to be arguing that those who spend time engaged with the Spirit of God will be transformed (the word is the root of our “metamorphosis”) into the image of God, becoming more of what God made us to be, more of what Moses and Jesus showed us how to be.

Have you ever known a believer so devoted to God that you could see it in his or her face? We may not radiate light as Moses or Jesus did, but we can exhibit the presence of God in our lives.

When we see the moon, flying high and shining brightly, we know that the orbiting object produces no light of itself, but reflects the light of the sun. Similarly, we may generate no intrinsic spiritual radiance, but we are quite capable of reflecting the light of Christ through the mirror of our lives.

We need not fear that our face will become so transformed that we will be forced to wear Moses' mask. Rather, the radiant smile and gentle compassion shown in the face of one who walks closely with Christ are more likely to attract others in the same way that moths are drawn to a streetlight.

Do you remember the old hymn, “Let others see Jesus in you”?

It's still worth singing. **BT**

Youth

February 3 — February 24, 2013

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

Nicknames

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Most of us have a nickname, and most of these nicknames have a great story behind them. Some of the stories you can tell, and with other stories you just laugh at and change the subject. There's only one rule with nicknames: you can't give yourself a nickname. The same is true for prophets, or at least true prophets: they don't name themselves.

Our scripture for today begins the story of the prophet Jeremiah and how he was called by God to be a prophetic voice to the people of his generation.

Jeremiah wasn't an unknown in his community. In fact, he was probably well known because his father was a priest. As was tradition, Hilkiyah raised Jeremiah to be a priest, but God had other plans. We read

that the plans God had for Jeremiah were formed before he was even in the womb. God set him apart, consecrated him to be a prophetic voice. But even with the plan God had, Jeremiah had to choose to accept it.

Jeremiah, much like Moses and many called before him, didn't leap at the opportunity God had placed in front of him. Instead, Jeremiah excused himself because he was only a boy and did not know how to truly speak. Maybe he offered excuses because he had a sense of the sort of life a prophet leads.

Whatever the reason, God had confidence in Jeremiah because God knew that Jeremiah would not be alone. God blessed Jeremiah with the gifts he would need to be a prophetic voice to his people. We know the rest of the story and when we read it, we know that Jeremiah was an important prophet.

FEBRUARY 3

Think About It:

What Jeremiah spoke wasn't always popular because he needed to uproot the evil before he could plant the good. What in your life may need to be uprooted before the good can grow?

Make a Choice:

God had plans for Jeremiah, but Jeremiah had to choose to accept these plans. Will you choose to live in the will of God, or will you find excuses to avoid God's purposes?

Pray:

Be grateful for a God who walks before you preparing the way, and for the freedom God gives you to choose.

Face Time

Exodus 34:29-35

Sometimes you can tell how someone is feeling simply by the look on his or her face. Has he just received horrible news? Is she radiant after an encounter with her crush? Is the stress of the day weighing him down?

It's amazing how much we show through our facial expressions. That's also likely why it wasn't difficult for Aaron and the Israelites to tell that Moses had just had a transformational experience.

It might have been even easier for Aaron and the Israelites because Moses' face was shining. Moses had no idea how his face looked after spending 40 days on a mountain with God, but he had to know something was up when the Israelites were afraid to come near him. The last time Moses came down to

them, they were afraid because of the golden calf they had created, but this time it was all Moses.

Moses called out to Aaron and the other leaders, and they came to him. Moses revealed to them the conversation he had just had with God. This probably wasn't a word-for-word account of the 40 days of conversation, but Moses let them know about the two tablets and what it would mean for all of them. During this time Moses must have felt the awkwardness, or maybe Aaron voiced it, but Moses decided it would be best for him to veil himself whenever he spoke with the people.

In those 40 days Moses spent with God, he became so close to God that the glory of God began to be reflected on Moses' face. What does your face show others about the ways God has been at work in your life?

FEBRUARY 10

Think About It:

Moses spent 40 days alone with God. Was there any question that he would come out transformed? How would you be transformed if you spent 40 days alone with God?

Make a Choice:

You show yourself to everyone you encounter. Some days you put on one mask, and some days another mask. What would happen if you chose to take off all the masks and show the true face God gave you?

Pray:

Pray that your time with God would be so transformational that you would reflect the will of God in who you are.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



A Dare

Luke 4:1-13

I dare you. No, I triple-dog-dare you." When faced with these words, there is only one thing to do to save your pride: you do it. It doesn't matter how stupid the dare is or what the outcome will cost you, you do it.

That is, unless you are Jesus. Anyone else dared by the devil, with the rewards he was offering, would have had a really tough time saying no. And not only did Jesus say no once, but he said no three times.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, had been led into the wilderness by the Spirit after his baptism. Jesus' wilderness experience was not unlike those of Moses and Elijah before him. He took nothing with him and ate nothing while he was gone, but when he was finished in the wilderness he was famished. Jesus had

to be weak in body through this experience, but he was sustained through the Spirit.

It was during this time of weakness that the devil appeared. The devil began by using Jesus' physical weakness to tempt him to turn the stones into bread. Jesus relied on the fullness of the Spirit instead of the emptiness of his stomach to rebuke the devil.

The second time the devil tempted Jesus to leave behind his weakness and embrace the power Jesus could have, but Jesus relied on the power of the Spirit that had sustained him thus far.

For the final temptation, Jesus was taken to the top of the temple and the devil tried to get him to use the power of the Spirit. Jesus denied him, saying that the power of God is not to be tested.

FEBRUARY 17

Think About It:

Jesus could continually say no to the devil because he was filled with the Spirit instead of things of this world. Do you lean on the Spirit to help you make decisions?

Make a Choice:

Jesus could have completed any of the three temptations with ease and had all the power and prosperity of this world, but instead he chose God's way. What do you have the ability to do, but instead choose God's way?

Pray:

Pray that you will be filled with the Holy Spirit so that you may choose the ways of God over the ways of the world.

Foxes

Luke 13:31-35

There are some things you do and ask why later. It doesn't happen often, but when someone approaches with that intent walk, grabs you by the arm, looks you directly in the eyes and says go – you go. You might have questions for the other person as you are going, but your first reaction is to go. This is what happened with Jesus when one of the Pharisees told him that he needed to get out of town because Herod wanted to kill him.

It's odd to read that the Pharisees were the ones who initially helped Jesus out in this situation. Was their intention to truly protect Jesus, or was this just another ruse to get him out of their hair? Whatever the reason, Jesus left, but not before he got in a last word or two.

On his way out, Jesus called Herod a fox. The name wasn't a compliment or flattering on any level because foxes were seen as scavengers that couldn't do a lot of harm. Jesus was telling the Pharisees he was leaving but he wasn't really afraid of Herod. Jesus also let the group of Pharisees know that he would continue his mission and plan outside of the city, and that he would return.

Jesus started his exit speech by naming the fox, and now he named the hen: himself. Jesus told the group of Pharisees that he tried to gather "the brood" under his wings to protect them, but the Pharisees would not let him. In essence, he was saying, "What happens from here is on your hands."

Jesus will not be gone forever. He will come back for his brood. And when he comes, his name will be blessed.

FEBRUARY 24

Think About It:

Jesus knew his life's plan and was determined to fulfill it. Do you have a sense of God's purpose for your life? How far are you willing to go to fulfill it?

Make a Choice:

Jesus could have bowed to the pressure of the authorities and preached what they wanted him to preach. To what pressures do you bow when you have choices to make?

Pray:

Pray that you will have the strength to continue on God's path even when others place obstacles in your way.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Luke 4:1-13

Feb. 17, 2013

Don't Tempt Me!

The season of Lent has arrived, and with it we begin a seven-week sojourn in the Gospel texts, primarily from Luke. Lent emerged in the fourth century as a 40-day period (not counting Sundays) of fasting and prayer that begins with “Ash Wednesday” (Feb. 13 in 2013) and continues until Easter. 📖

While Lent has been a mainstay of Catholic and mainline Protestant churches for centuries, Baptists have been less liturgically inclined, and have come more recently to recognize the value of joining with other believers in a season of penitence and preparation for Easter. Many persons choose to forego some favorite food or activity during Lent as a symbol of devotion to Christ, and the struggle to keep that commitment is often difficult. Thus, the story of Jesus’ 40 days of fasting in the wilderness is a most appropriate text for the first Sunday of Lent.

The wilderness temptation appears to have served a significant role in Jesus’ emerging ministry, a disciplined retreat of self-exploration that helped to define and refine his understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah. As such, the temptation story is strategically placed in Luke. It comes directly after Jesus’ baptism (his public commitment to God’s way), and just before his rejection in the synagogue at Nazareth (his public announcement of ministry). 📖

Be prosperous! (vv. 1-4)

Luke tells us that Jesus was “full of the Holy Spirit” after his baptism, and was

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



Luke 4:1 —

“Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness.”

“led in the Spirit” to seek isolation in the desert (v. 1, a gentler image than that of Mark 1:14, which says the Spirit “drove him” or “threw him out” into the wilderness). The specific location is unclear; the word can refer to any desolate area, whether mountainous or desert.

Whether consciously or not, Jesus was following the footsteps of Hebrew heroes such as Moses and Elijah when he went 40 days in the wilderness without food (Deut. 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8), and his successful sojourn is a sharp contrast to Israel’s 40 years of wandering. Luke does not use the specific word for fasting, saying only that “he ate nothing at all during those days” (v. 2). Did Jesus intend to go without food, or did he fast mainly because no food was available, or was he simply too lost in meditation to even think of eating? We don’t know. Jesus was just as in touch with physical desires as we are, though, and in time his hunger became compelling. When those days were over, the text says, “He was famished.”

At that moment of weakness, the devil made his appearance. The English

word “devil” translates the Greek *diabolos* (the root of our word “diabolical”). 📖 In the first century, this character had come to be thought of as an antagonist of God who tempted persons to reject God’s way, and who was especially prone to strike in times of weakness.

Many stones of the desert are flat and brownish in color, similar to what we would think of as pita bread, not unlike bread that was common in Jesus’ day. When the devil dared Jesus to miraculously change stones to bread and so assuage his hunger, the message may have been sarcastic, or more about proving his divinity than filling his stomach: Since (or “if”) Jesus was truly God’s son, why should he be hungry?

The temptation to turn stones to bread could have worked on three levels. First, it appealed to Jesus’ physical hunger. Second, it would have fulfilled a natural desire to prove to the *diabolos* that he could do it. Third, it could have planted the thought that Jesus could win over the people by providing physical bread for them. In both cases, Jesus held firm.

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With each temptation, Jesus resisted, at least in part, by quoting scripture from the Book of Deuteronomy. Here, he recalled how Moses had criticized Israel for failing to trust God during a hungry stretch, reminding the people that they needed God, not just bread, to be truly healthy (Deut. 8:3). 📖

Jesus would not make that mistake. Like the suffering servant (Isa. 50:4-9), he would trust in God despite the present darkness. He would not use his divine power to guarantee personal prosperity, or even to promote the social welfare of others.

Jesus knew, as thinking believers should know, that God will not buy our love through the promise of prosperity. God calls us to love and obedience even in wilderness times and on hungry days.

The text demands that we ask what physical temptations trouble us most. Things that are good in themselves – food, material goods, leisure activities, sex, or even work – can become an unconscious substitute for the spiritual hunger that gnaws at our souls. What does the text suggest about how we can best cope with this kind of temptation? (see the online “Hardest Question” for more).

Be powerful! (vv. 5-8)

In the second temptation, according to Luke, the adversary “took him up and showed him in a moment all the kingdoms of the inhabited world” (v. 5, my translation). Matthew said he was taken to a high mountain. 📖 There is no mountain in Palestine that affords a vista of “all the nations,” but one could easily look at the patchwork landscape below and imagine nations stretching to and beyond the horizon.

The Bible is clear in teaching that ultimate authority over the world is God’s alone, but the devil claimed to have been given present authority over the world (cf. John 12:31; 2 Cor. 4:4). He offered to give that power to Jesus in return for service and adoration.

This temptation helps to explain

the tension that later caused dissent among some of Jesus’ followers. For many years, the downtrodden Hebrews had longed for a warrior Messiah who would conquer Israel’s enemies and restore the nation as a world power. By accepting the tempter’s offer, Jesus could become exactly what the people wanted. Surely, he could have done much good by ruling the world in a just way. Sometimes the greatest temptations are to do what seems good, but in the wrong way.

What would it mean for Jesus (or us) to worship the devil? We are not to think in terms of the modern concept of “Satan worship,” but rather that Jesus was enticed to seek heavenly goals by worldly means. Malcolm Tolbert wrote “To worship the devil is to adopt satanic methods, to choose the weapons of power, violence, and destruction to attain one’s ends” (“Luke,” in the *Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 [Broadman, 1984], 43). To worship the devil is to choose the tempter’s path of power instead of God’s chosen road of redemptive suffering.

As with the first temptation, Jesus again held firm by quoting scripture: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Deut. 6:13). In Hebrew, the same word is used to mean “worship” and “serve.” To truly worship God is to obey God’s way. That way may have seemed strange to the world, but Christ chose to follow it nonetheless.

Be popular! (vv. 9-13)

In the final temptation, the *diabolos* “takes” Jesus (whether in a vision or physically is beside the point) to “the pinnacle” of the temple in Jerusalem. Some interpreters see this as a place on the corner of the Temple Mount, standing high over the Kidron Valley. Others suppose it to be the highest point

of the temple roof. In either case, the place would have been high and in plain sight. There is nothing to indicate that Jesus and the tempter were visible, but normally many people would have been present. 📖

The tempter dared Jesus to jump from that great height and float to a safe landing below. Such a public spectacle would be widely reported, and one might expect many to regard such a wonder-worker as the Messiah. The adversary quoted scripture (Ps. 91:11-12) to reinforce the temptation, insisting that God would protect him.

This episode provides a helpful warning against the dangers of proof-texting, for even the devil can twist the Bible to make it say what he wants it to say. 📖

The attainment of instant popularity could have been a great temptation to Jesus. But he also knew that would be an inappropriate use of God’s power. He remembered how Israel in the wilderness had put God to the test (Exod. 17:2), and was determined not to follow their example. God’s power is meant to be used in accordance with God’s will – and Jesus had apparently come to understand that God’s will was for him to follow the path of the suffering servant, not a super-powerful warrior. Again, Jesus found strength in quoting scripture, recalling Moses’ exhortation that Israel should not put God to the test (Deut. 6:16).

Luke suggests that the devil then left Jesus for a time, but that was not the end of temptation for Jesus. The Gospels describe other times when he was tempted to take the easy way.

There may be times when we feel “spiritually strong” and do not feel uncommonly tempted. But temptation comes most forcefully when we are weak, when we are hungry for something, when we feel most powerless, when we feel most alone. These trials of Jesus suggest that when we are struggling, the devil works overtime precisely because he knows that such extremity may afford our best opportunity for spiritual growth. 📖

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Luke 13:31-35

Feb. 24, 2013

A Fox in the Henhouse

“The fox is in the henhouse” is a fairly modern proverb that reflects an age-old problem for anyone who keeps chickens. Today’s text begins with a report that King Herod had threatened Jesus’ life, and ends with Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. In the course of the passage, Jesus refers to Herod as a fox, and he places himself in the role of a mother hen, longing to gather her straying brood (the people of Jerusalem) under her sheltering wings.

The animal metaphors don’t match up as in the modern maxim, however. It’s not foxy Herod who is threatening the wandering chicks of Jerusalem: they are in danger of losing themselves.

This story is a part of Luke’s “Travel Narrative,” a section of the book that begins at 9:51, where Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem,” and describes his meandering journey to the city where death and the fulfillment of Jesus’ ministry awaited. ↓

In its literary context, the encounter follows teachings about the importance of repentance (13:1-9), the Sabbath healing of a stooped-back woman that led to conflict in the synagogue (13:10-17), teachings about the expanding kingdom of God (13:18-20), and a sharp response to the question “Will only a few be saved?” (13:21-30). Jesus’ response indicated that the door was narrow, and many who expected a reward would be surprised when they didn’t make it through.



Luke 13:34b –
“How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

Fox, or foxes? (v. 31)

Luke reports that, just as Jesus finished saying that many who were last would be first and the first would be last (v. 30), “at that very hour” certain representatives from the Pharisees approached Jesus with a warning that he should “go away and get out of here” (my translation) because “Herod wants to kill you” (v. 31).

Were these Pharisees a group of rare sympathizers who truly cared for Jesus’ safety, or were they telling tales as a ruse to get the trouble-making Jesus – who was often critical of the Pharisees – out of their territory? The question has been long debated with no clear solution (see the online “Hardest Question” for more). Fortunately, our understanding of the remainder of the passage does not hinge on this point.

Jesus appeared to treat the threat as real – but beside the point. Herod was the least of Jesus’ worries. He knew that he was indeed on a path toward death,

but Herod would not be the one responsible for it.

Jesus’ response describes Herod as a fox. Why? Modern readers commonly attribute a sneaky or crafty nature to the fox and thus read our own cultural bias into the story. In ancient times, however, foxes were thought of as scavengers who might be pesky pilferers, but rarely dangerous. Jesus was not implying that Herod was crafty, but that he was no more important than a small pest who lived on the fringes of human society. ↓

If the Pharisees had hoped to frighten Jesus into leaving, Jesus’ tagging of Herod as a “fox” would be a clear message that he was not afraid. Jesus had already planned to leave the territory, but would do so in his own time.

Priorities come first (vv. 32-33)

Jesus had plans and priorities, and would not be dissuaded from them.

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon



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Jesus saw his ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of one who would set free the captive and deliver the oppressed. Through "casting out demons and performing cures" he was doing just that, and he would continue to do so until he reached his ultimate destination.

If read literally, "today and tomorrow and the third day" would suggest that Jesus planned to arrive in Jerusalem three days later. An optional translation would be something like "day by day, and one day soon." Jesus wasn't laying out a timetable, but saying that he would continue to follow his own schedule until he "finished the course."

Although Jesus was still days from Jerusalem and would apparently spend a week while there, the ominous "third day" and the term "*teleioutai*" leave the text hanging in the shadow of the cross. The term means "to finish" or "to perfect," and is elsewhere used in the New Testament to describe the completion of God's plan. It could be translated as "finish my work" (NRSV) or "reach my goal" (NIV, NASB).

In v. 33, Jesus repeated the "three days" statement about arriving in Jerusalem, "because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem." Jesus' allusion to himself as a prophet might have caught the Pharisees off guard, for they would not have put him in the category of the prophets. 📖

If Jesus had died in an obscure rural village, few people would have known about it. For maximum effect, it was necessary that his death and resurrection take place in and about Jerusalem, the seat of Jewish power, the place of worship, the heart of the nation. Early in his ministry, Jesus had been tempted to find acceptance through a miraculous demonstration of power in the heart of Jerusalem (Lu. 4:9-13). Instead, Jesus chose to suffer and die there, facilitating the accomplishment of his purpose. 📖

Jesus and Jerusalem (vv. 34-35)

Jesus' touching lament over Jerusalem reveals deep grief over the great city

that would reject him, even as it had rejected the prophets before him ("killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you," v. 34a).

There is little biblical evidence of prophets being martyred in Jerusalem, though Jeremiah was arrested and beaten there (Jer. 37:15), and Zechariah was reportedly killed there (Luke 11:50-51). Jesus had earlier criticized Jerusalem as a place that built tombs for prophets "whom your ancestors killed" (see also Luke 11:47).

Jerusalem was the heart of the nation, both religiously and politically, so it was a natural place for prophets to proclaim their message – and to be rejected. Isaiah 5:1-7, like many other prophetic texts, emphasizes God's desire for Jerusalem to follow his way, and Jerusalem's persistent rejection of that way.

Having called Herod a fox, Jesus likened himself to a mother hen striving to bring comfort and protection to the wandering chicks of Israel (v. 34b).

The metaphor of Jesus as a mother hen grabs our attention, for it is one of the few texts that portray God in feminine terms. Culture and tradition dictated that God most often appears as masculine, but this text reminds us that God is beyond any human gender. Jesus could speak of the mother hen's concern for her chicks just as easily as the father's concern for the prodigal.

The key phrase in this verse is the last one: "but you would not." Jesus wanted to hold Jerusalem close, to comfort and protect its people, to be its teacher and guide. This had been God's desire throughout the Old Testament, as well, but Jerusalem consistently rejected God's loving advances (see Hosea 11:1ff for an equally plaintive lament). "You would not" means "you did not wish it" or "it was not your will." This emphasizes the element of free choice. Jesus wished to redeem Jerusalem and

make the people recipients of his grace, but they chose a different path.

Because Jerusalem rejected Christ, he proclaimed: "your house is desolate." Some interpreters see this as an assertion that God's presence had abandoned the temple, or as a reference to the temple's coming destruction. In Matthew's parallel version, this saying immediately precedes Jesus' prediction that the temple would be destroyed (ch. 24). However, "house" probably refers not to the temple so much as to the city, or perhaps the Hebrews as a whole. As its people had rejected God's presence in the person of Christ, God would allow them to experience the desolation of God's absence.

The final words foreshadow Jesus' final approach to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. "You will not see me until you say 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" The quotation is from Psalm 118:26, a hymn that proclaims glad welcome to both God and God's messengers. All three Synoptic Gospels cite this as one of the chants shouted by the people during Jesus' triumphal entry on Palm Sunday (Matt. 21:9; Mk. 11:9; Luke 19:38). In Luke, this seems to mark Jerusalem's last opportunity to accept Jesus as the Messiah. No person can see Christ or experience God's salvation until he or she willingly accepts Jesus, here symbolized by the welcoming invitation, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Some interpreters see "Jerusalem" as a symbol of institutionalized religion. Can you think of ways in which modern-day prophets have been squelched by the power of denominational leaders or popular preaching? Jesus stuck to his priorities, even under great pressure from the religious elite to conform to the status quo. Does this speak to the importance of the Baptist emphasis on following one's own conscience? 📖

Jesus had carefully thought through his life's plan, constantly aware of his goals and consistently committed to reaching them. Today's text challenges modern disciples to do the same. **BT**

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Pastor: Augusta Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., is seeking a pastor with a minimum of 5 years ministerial experience. A Master of Divinity degree from an accredited seminary is preferred. Qualified candidates may submit résumés by Feb. 28 to mtaylor@dp3architects.com.

Senior Pastor: Wyatt Park Baptist Church of St. Joseph, Mo., is actively seeking applications for a senior pastor with strong leadership skills and experience who will embrace with energy, commitment and passion the challenge of carrying out the vision of our church. This congregation of 300, affiliated with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and Baptist General Convention of Missouri, supports a faithful local and foreign mission outreach. With emphasis on families, our ministry diligently includes children, youth, adults, and senior adults within our congregation and in our outreach. Responsibilities of a successful candidate will include regularly preaching and teaching, planning and leading weekly worship services, leading in all areas of congregational ministry, staff administration, and promoting responsible biblical stewardship and community benevolence. To apply to lead us in serving the Lord and to learn more about this position, visit wyattpark.org. Send résumés to applytowayattpark@gmail.com.

Minister to Students: River Oaks Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, is seeking a minister to students (7-12th grade) to develop and implement discipleship and ministry events. The student minister will assist in outreach ministries to River Oaks Baptist School. Some ministry experience is desired. Send résumés to mmiley@robc.org.

In the Know

Hal Haralson of Austin, Texas, died Nov. 27 at age 77. After serving in the Army and as a pastor, he attended law school at the University of Texas. The recipient of numerous awards, he turned his struggles with bipolar disorder into ministry to persons with mental illness. He wrote numerous columns for *Christian Ethics Today* and other publications. Two collections — *Gentle Mercies: Stories of Faith in Faded Blue Jeans* and *The Lost Saddle* — were published as books. Bill Jones, in a tribute posted by the T.B. Maston Foundation that Haralson helped found, said "You couldn't read Hal Haralson without circling back to, and reflecting on, something in your own life; that was Hal's gift to us all."

Timothy D. Gilbert is dean of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. He comes from Tarrant County College in Ft. Worth where he was professor of philosophy and served in various administrative roles for nearly 30 years.

Stephanie Totty Patterson is minister to students and families at Boulevard Baptist Church, Anderson, S.C. Previously she served as associate pastor at First Baptist Church, Lake View, S.C.

H. Edgar Twine of Tampa, Fla., died Oct. 16 at age 83. A North Carolina native, he served as pastor of churches in Virginia and Maryland as well as Riverside Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also worked in capital fund-raising and stewardship with the Southern Baptist Convention. A memorial service was held in Virginia Beach, Va. **BT**

Remembering on purpose

Zacchaeus, a wee little man, disappeared from the tax office from time to time. Even during the busiest days of April he would tell his assistant, “I can’t be disturbed,” put his Blackberry in the desk drawer, and slip out the back door.

No one was sure where he went until the assistant’s curiosity got the best of her and she followed Zacchaeus. She followed down the dusty road that leads into Jericho. She watched as Zacchaeus climbed into a sycamore tree, “What are you doing up there?”

Zacchaeus answered for all of us, “I need to remember.”

- Eve never could bring herself to eat apple pie.
- Noah stayed off boats.
- Sarah laughed when she heard the phrase “biological clock.”
- Isaac preferred plastic knives.
- Lot didn’t use salt.
- Jacob liked looking at the ladders at Home Depot.
- Joseph wore plain brown coats.
- Moses went barefoot.
- Pharaoh hated frogs.
- Joshua enjoyed a good trumpet.
- Gideon had a closet full of fleeces.
- Delilah felt guilty when she got her hair cut.
- Ruth ordered sandwiches on wheat.
- Elijah’s favorite birds were ravens.
- Elisha went to the zoo to watch the bears.
- David rooted against the Giants.
- Bathsheba started taking showers.
- Absalom’s friends kept their hair cut short.
- Solomon kept wedding pictures on his desk. (He had a really big desk.)
- Isaiah burned incense.
- Daniel laughed through *The Lion King*.
- Hosea cried through *Pretty Woman*.
- Jonah supersized his fish sandwich.
- The shepherds volunteered for the night shift.

- The wise men started humming Christmas carols whenever they caught a whiff of frankincense.
- Mary liked to look for the brightest star on cold winter nights.
- When the couple in Cana shared a glass of wine, they smiled and said, “This is not the best we’ve ever had.”
- Nathaniel planted a fig tree in his yard.
- When his wife asked what they should have for dinner, Andrew enjoyed saying, “Five loaves and two fishes.”
- Nicodemus put up wind chimes.
- The Samaritan woman had her own spot at the well.
- The woman with the crooked back bought full-length mirrors.
- The prodigal son always had fatted calf on his birthday.
- The sower started aiming more carefully.
- The good Samaritan carried Band-Aids.
- Peter hated the sound of roosters.
- The couple from Emmaus never forgot to say grace.
- Timothy named his son Paul.
- When Dorcas went to a funeral, she would remember and laugh.

We do most of our remembering by accident. You smell an apple pie and suddenly you are in your grandmother’s kitchen. You see an old house that reminds you of the house in which you grew up and almost see your father mowing the lawn. You are looking for scissors in a kitchen drawer and find a photograph of your family at the beach. Were your children ever that small? Were you ever that small?

We remember, but we remember indiscriminately and not nearly enough. We don’t remember on purpose, because we don’t see how important remembering is.

When Elie Wiesel was asked to summarize all of scripture he said, “It’s one word: remember.”

We go to church to remember. We listen to the stories from scripture, because they are our stories. We sing to remember the holiness of God. We worship to remember.

Remember the person who took you to church the first time.

Remember when you walked to the front of the church and said you wanted to be a part.

Remember when you were baptized. Remember how cold the water was and how warm your church family was.

Remember when you started sitting in the same place each Sunday.

Remember when you found your Sunday school class and how you used to wish they could stay on topic.

If you’re my age, remember GA coronation night, RA pinewood derby, Bible drills, flannel graphs, Sunday school perfect attendance pins, Church Training, and Bible drills.

If you’re my parents’ age, remember quartet singings, Training Union, baptisms at the lake, funeral home fans, mourning benches, BYPU, and missionary slide shows.

God invites us to remember just as surely as God invites us to pray. Remembering may be the best praying we do. **BT**

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

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Nurturing FAITH

Churches and the Church Everlasting

By Aaron Brittain

When called to a previous pastorate, it was a time of great excitement for both the church and me. I was a young minister right out of seminary who was eager to do big things. The congregation was aging but ready for some new blood.

Over the next six years, however, it became increasingly apparent that our mutual expectations did not match current reality. Despite our good efforts, attendance and giving continued to decline. After much prayer and careful consideration, the church made the difficult decision to close its doors after 112 years of existence.

In reflecting on that experience, I have found it helpful to distinguish between a church (with a lowercase "c") and the Church (with a capital "C"). The church (small "c") is a particular congregation. Then there is the Church in all times and all places throughout history, what the Nicene Creed refers to as "the one, holy catholic Church."

These two share much in common — including the desire to serve Christ by spreading his Gospel throughout the world. However, there are some differences as well. Christians affirm that the Church is a divine institution and will continue throughout history, not because we will it, but because it has been established by Christ himself.

Local congregations, however, do not last

forever. They exist in a specific time and place to accomplish a specific purpose.

Just as God calls each individual to a particular ministry in life and gifts him or her for that purpose, so too does God call groups of people to come into communities of faith in the same way.

Some recent news about congregational life in the United States has not been positive. Most churches have experienced a plateau in growth, and some are in steep decline.

As a result, many congregations are in a state of panic. There is a sense of fear and confusion over how to stem the flood. An entire cottage industry has stepped into this gap, with the latest church management gurus promising quick fixes and miracle solutions to turn things around.

Perhaps our anxiety can lead us to recognize that, in some settings, decline is part of a natural process. Some of the anxiety we have in our congregations today may have resulted from confusing the role of the church with that of the Church.

We may have failed to see our church as part of something much bigger. In the process, we may spend time and energy trying to save something that was never intended to be permanent.

Humans have a natural lifespan, which includes aging and eventually death.

Congregations do as well. Whether it lives five years or hundreds of years, each congregation has a lifespan.

Most of the earliest Christian churches no longer exist. However, we still read about those churches today. They continue to inspire and challenge us.

They may be gone, but they accomplished their God-given mission. Isn't that the Christian story? The good news of Jesus Christ is that death is not the end for us as believers. So, why do we continue to insist that death is the end for our churches?

Is it possible that through the natural death of churches, Christ could be doing something redemptive to bring new life to the larger Church and to the kingdom of God here on earth? Jesus once said that we "find our life by losing it." Could this apply to some churches, too?

A new model of doing and being the Church is needed — one in which we no longer equate success with the survival of particular churches. Too many congregations today are only asking the fearful question, "How much longer can we last?"

A better question might be: "Are we faithfully accomplishing the mission Christ has given us in this time and place?"

Yes, we need to build and foster vibrant and healthy congregations. But when we face inevitable congregational decline and death, we no longer have to do so with embarrassment, shame or panic. Instead, we can point to the cross and the empty tomb as our way forward.

This will mean using our collective imagination to envision new life beyond current congregations in the form of church plants, mergers, partnerships and hybrid ministries.

No doubt the process will involve grief and loss, something always experienced at a time of death. But thanks be to God, we in the larger Church do not mourn as people without hope. Let us look forward to that resurrection together! **BT**

—Aaron Brittain is the pastor at Talbot Park Baptist Church in Norfolk, Va.



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The might of the ‘widow’s mite’

“Just like the widow in Jesus’ story, Ms. Jean gives freely of herself to others in creative and caring ways.”

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — The sunny room at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in which my husband Paul and I gather with college students each Sunday morning is where the faith journeys of young adults interweave with stories in the Bible.

Recently, while studying the Gospel of Mark, we encountered the story of the widow’s mite in chapter 12. Jesus describes the public offering scene at a synagogue. Many wealthy participants pour pocket-loads of money into the offering plate for everyone to see.

Then a widow gives her last two coins, of little value, as an offering. When Jesus saw this, he told the disciples her gift was the greatest of anyone’s on that day because while others gave from their wealth, she gave sacrificially.

During our discussion about good gifts, generosity, faithfulness, and what God delights in, one student replied that the story reminded her of a woman in her home church. Hannah Bowers is a high-achieving, double major in biology and Spanish — on the pre-med track at University of Alabama Birmingham.

Hannah’s story

There is a 95-year-old widow in my church, Trinity Baptist Church in Madison, Ala., who was diagnosed with cancer eight years ago. She was told she would not survive another year.

But today, Ms. Jean Mabury is one of the most active members in our congregation. Every Sunday she scoots into the sanctuary with a walking cane in one hand and a stack of cards in the other. Each week Ms. Jean makes a handmade card for anyone in the church who has a birthday during the upcoming week.

She knows everyone’s birthday in the entire sanctuary, and she wants the whole



Jean Mabury (left) shares homemade birthday cards with Shelby Hogan and Jon Melton. Photo by Teresa Bowers

BY TERRI BYRD, WITH HANNAH BOWERS

church family to know that she cares about them.

Just like the widow in Jesus’ story, Ms. Jean gives freely of herself to others in creative and caring ways. She has helped me to better understand the value in giving to God even if it seems like our gifts are small.

Sometimes Ms. Jean will call the church office during the week to make sure no one is overlooked. She also asks the ministers about fellow church members who are sick and in the hospital.

After the phone calls ends, someone in the church office will sometimes ask the minister, “Who was that?” The common response is: “Jesus.”

I am glad that Jesus is a part of my church. Some churches have a few — but it would be all right if our churches were full of them.

Too often we keep our two little coins, thinking they are nearly worthless. We forget that gifts to God are never too small.

Trust me, there is not a soul at Trinity

Baptist Church who would call a birthday card lovingly created and delivered by Ms. Jean to be anything less than priceless.

Faith lived out

Reflections such as the story shared by Hannah are common in our class. These young adults often see parallels between their personal stories and the scriptural stories.

In the midst of higher education and launching new careers, they are exploring how faith impacts their lives each day. Hannah has been on several mission trips to Spanish-speaking countries. Jessica is a leader in her campus ministry program. Andrew has served as a Passport camp staffer and now works at the church. Lilly is doing groundbreaking work with young girls in her college community.

Several have served through summer or semester mission programs. Others have moved on to graduate schools or job opportunities in other places where they serve in churches and throughout new communities. **BT**

Looking ahead

Moderators talk about the Fellowship in transition

Keith Herron, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., is the moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. He is a native Texan and a former campus minister. Layman Bill McConnell of Knoxville, Tenn., is moderator-elect. A graduate of Carson-Newman College and Wake Forest University, he served as a special agent in the U.S. Air Force. He is now a partner in a firm that sells industrial air pollution control equipment and is a member of Central Baptist Church of Bearden where he taught high school seniors for 12 years. *Baptists Today* editor John Pierce asked these two elected leaders for insight into this time of transition within the 20-year-old Fellowship.

BT: You assumed the moderator's role at a time of great transition for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Has that assignment lived up to your expectations?

Herron: When I was first asked to serve as moderator, I realized most moderators had either a big project to navigate or at least a theme they pursued through the work of the Coordinating Council. In thinking through whether to accept this position of service or not, I wondered what project or theme would I wish to embrace.

I shouldn't have worried as the realities of change at every level of the Fellowship would occur in my year as moderator, some of which has been intentionally planned and some of which has been circumstantial.

Just in the past few years we've navigated through the difficult challenge of right-sizing the CBF Resource Center by trimming staff and the budget. Related to that, in consultation with the group of CBF partners that gathered at Callaway Gardens, we appointed a task group to study the Fellowship and to make recommendations that would point us in the right direction for the third decade of existence.

In my first year in serving as moderator-elect we've experienced significant organizational change with the retirement of our executive coordinator and adopting the 2012 Task Report. My worries about what

project or theme would be mine to lead have been resolved with the major changes of seeking a new leader and moving into a new system of governance.

BT: Last June, CBF participants approved some significant organizational changes. How is that implementation playing out?

Herron: In receiving the report, the "What's next?" question has guided my thinking. The 2012 Task Report had no game plan for how the eight recommendations would be made. Thus I came away from the General Assembly thinking we needed a playbook that described how we would implement the report.

The issue of "sequencing" seemed important as some steps toward change would be important initially while others needed certain prior actions to be strategically taken in sequence. Revisions to the constitution and bylaws illustrate how sequencing works, recognizing the importance

of following our guiding documents. Sequencing is also important in bringing actions to the Fellowship for approval and authorization.

Consequently, following the Fellowship's adoption of the 2012 Task Report, the officers appointed an Implementation Team that would review the eight proposals in the report and recommend to the Coordinating Council specific actions that must be taken to bring those recommendations into reality. The intent of the officers has been to accept the stewardship of the Task Report and lay out a strategy that leads the Fellowship to seriously embrace the changes of the report.

The Implementation Team worked this fall and presented an initial report to the Coordinating Council in October. [The team] listened to [the Council's] responses to it and will continue developing an action plan that will bring the new structure into being. They will continue working on this playbook in dialogue with the Coordinating Council at their February meeting and will report back to the Fellowship at the General Assembly this June in Greensboro.

We've felt that at some point, the work we're doing needs the input of the new executive coordinator, so the work that's done is held in tension with the particular gifts and energies of our new leader. The Executive Coordinator Search Committee will be announcing the candidate for this position in sequence for the approval at the February Coordinating Council.



Keith Herron



Bill McConnell

BT: Particularly, what about these changes do you believe strengthens CBF for the future?

Herron: The Task Report moves the Fellowship from a large, unwieldy Coordinating Council to the creation of three smaller councils with specific duties. I believe the streamlining of councils will energize our work together in missions and ministries and in our governance.

The national CBF will also strengthen its relationships with the state and regional organizations. I believe we'll see a stronger bond developed with our states and regions, and a collective boost will define our notion of "partnerships." The shift will be felt as we recognize a new appreciation for how shared partnerships and concerns can energize our fellowship as a movement.

BT: What challenges must the Fellowship face over the next few years?

Herron: It's obvious these changes will be as strengthening to the CBF as the Fellowship gives it energy. By "the Fellowship," I mean the individuals and churches that comprise the Fellowship across the country. That includes laity and ministers and also includes the collective power of churches that desire to see the Fellowship flourish.

One of the issues that cannot be institutionally implemented or voted into being is the life force that's created by our collective will. We must choose to give our Fellowship the power to be something larger than we can do on our own.

BT: What gives you hope for CBF's future?

Herron: No question, our hope is found in the persons where there's a fire in the belly for the Fellowship to exist and to thrive as a movement of God. In the good kingdom of God, there are ample resources and vision needed to accomplish great things in response to our calling as Fellowship Baptists.

I encourage folks to come together in Greensboro this summer where we'll consider specific stages needed to put the new organization into being and to welcome a new executive coordinator. It will be a time to hoist our sails for a new day.

BT: You agreed to be moderator-elect of CBF at a time of significant transition. Why?

McConnell: This is not an easy question for me to answer. There are many people who are probably better qualified to be the moderator of this organization than I am; this was my first thought when I was notified of my nomination for the office.

I received several calls from friends and talked to several whose opinions I value during my deliberations, and all urged me to accept. I spent much time in prayer before accepting.

I love the Fellowship and want to serve in any way that will benefit CBF. This is important work, and I think my experience in operating a business can be helpful in accomplishing the re-organization of the governing body.

BT: In addition to a major leadership transition, CBF is implementing some major organizational changes this year. How are they going, and what do you see as the advantages of these changes?

McConnell: The re-organization is moving at a faster pace than we had envisioned. Keith Herron appointed a team to implement the transition, and we have met to begin the process. We are being led in the effort by Dave Odom of the Duke Divinity School.

The constitution and by-laws are being rewritten by the legal committee in order to bring these documents in line with the 2012 Task Force findings. The officers have requested names for appointment to the first nominating committee that will be approved by the Coordinating Council in January of 2013.

The nominating committee will then constitute the first governing board, nominate the next moderator-elect, and suggest the first leaders of the new missions and ministries bodies. These names will be approved by the Fellowship at large at the Greensboro General Assembly in June of 2013. I think the changes will streamline the way the Fellowship functions.

BT: You bring a business and lay leadership perspective to CBF. What does the Fellowship look like from your perspective?

McConnell: One thing that has always drawn me to CBF is that laity is valued in the

governance of the organization. This brings a depth of experience and a broad viewpoint as we, clergy and laity, serve together.

I see leadership at the state and national level that is talented and committed to the vision of CBF. I see young leaders emerging from our seminaries as well as young lay leaders rising from our churches. I see mature leaders who are willing to share responsibilities with the younger generations.

This is all reassuring; however, I am concerned with the funding of our mission. We can and must do better here if we are to fulfill that vision.

BT: By the time you assume the moderator role next June and then complete a year of service, a new executive coordinator will be in place and the organizational changes will be in effect. What do you hope the Fellowship will look like at that point?

McConnell: I really hope that we will have fully transitioned to the new organizational structure as laid out in the 2012 Taskforce Report and voted upon in Ft. Worth at this past General Assembly. I expect that the new executive coordinator will have had a chance to fully evaluate the Atlanta organization and will be well underway in putting an imprint on that structure.

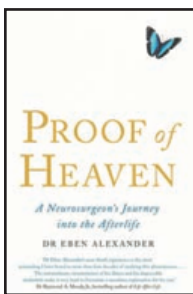
I also hope that we at the national level will be working even more closely with the state organizations. I heard [task force chair] David Hull say something recently that I like. He said that we have emphasized the fellowship part of our culture for years; now we really need to emphasize the cooperative part of the organizational culture.

BT: What would you like to see the Fellowship look like in five years or so?

McConnell: I would like to see a situation in which individual churches as well as state organizations and national are working together on mission — with the group having the greatest expertise for a particular project given the lead.

I would like to see a fundraising mindset that allows us to do all of our mission projects as well as provide the necessary funds to support both the national and state administrative needs. I would also like to see a Fellowship in which racial, generational and gender issues are forgotten as we work together to be the presence of Christ in our world.

We are doing these things now to an extent. We can always do better. **BT**



Proof of Heaven
A Neurosurgeon's Journey
into the Afterlife
By Eben Alexander

Review by Tony Cartledge

Faith, not proof, is final destination of Neurosurgeon's Journey

Over the Thanksgiving weekend I read Eben Alexander's popular *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife* (Simon & Schuster, 2012). The book, which once topped the New York Times best-seller list, adds to a growing corpus of volumes detailing "near death experiences," with the difference being that Alexander is an academic neurosurgeon who knows as much about how the brain works as anyone on the planet.

Alexander is a North Carolina native whose father was chief of staff at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center for 20 years. His book takes the reader on an intriguing journey through an amazing sequence of personal experiences as the highly-trained neurosurgeon examines what it's like to be brain dead from the perspective of the patient.

Alexander was stricken with an extremely rare form of gram-negative bacterial meningitis in 2008 and spent seven days in a coma while the neocortex of his brain — where what we recognize as consciousness and higher thinking functions reside — was effectively non-functional.

Yet, he describes a series of very conscious out-of-body experiences in which he traveled

through a murky "Realm of the Earthworm's-Eye View" and a "Gateway" of spinning, melodious light to a beautiful green land of waterfalls and happy people in peasant clothes.

There he traveled on butterfly wings in the company of an angelic woman who turned out to be (he learned later) a birth sister he had never met, who had died some years before.

The angelic escort led him to an "infinite void" (which he calls "the Core,") that was both "pitch black" and "brimming over with light," and transfused with the unmistakable and comforting presence of God (whom he calls "Om").

There, he writes, a pulsating "Orb" (a transformed version of the "Girl on the Butterfly Wing") interpreted divine knowledge and revealed to him (without words) deep truths about multiple universes and the secrets of dark energy and dark matter.

After a statistically improbable recovery that Alexander describes as medically miraculous, he is convinced that he still harbors those truths, but the constraints of human limitations prevent him from explaining or understanding them fully.

Alexander's account is a fascinating story,

all the more so in that he had been a full-blown skeptic who had given up on any belief in God, and had previously pooh-poohed similar accounts of near-death visits to the heavenly realms.

He's a full-blown believer in heaven now — but surely he knows that his experience does not really provide a "proof" of heaven. I have to believe the publisher must have chosen the title.

No matter how much Alexander knows about brain function and how many theories he tries and dismisses (there's an appendix of them) to explain what happened in terms of neuronal activity — thus arguing that his conscious encounters with the divine must have originated outside of the brain — his own memories of the experience are clearly resident in his brain. How they got there is certainly a mystery — but it is not proof that he traveled to heaven.

When it comes to dealing with the divine, mystery rules.

We'd all like to have proof of heaven, I suppose. We'd like to have someone tell us, as the "Girl on the Butterfly Wing" told him: "You are loved and cherished, dearly, forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong."

And we can certainly believe, as Alexander says he learned, that the heart of God (and hence the universe) is love. We can hope in a beautiful, soul-full life that extends beyond the bodies we currently inhabit.

But we can't prove it.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).

As we trust in the revelation of God through scripture, we can feel a confident conviction about heaven, but we can't subject it to scientific proof.

That's what faith is for. **BT**



Tony Cartledge

Let's celebrate
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Baptists Today

Thursday, April 25, 2013
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Kate Campbell



‘The Rock’ provides positive hangout for teens

BOZEMAN, Mont. — Don’t let the quietness fool you if you stop by The Rock Youth Center while classes are in session at Bozeman High School across the street. These are the treasured before-and-after hours — times when director Gary Cook and volunteers can catch their breath and prepare for the next time the doors swing open and students flow in.

“I like to work with these kids — and I like doing music,” said Cook of assuming this ministry position when he moved from being a member of First Baptist Church of Bozeman to joining the ministry staff.

The Rock is part of the larger family of Bridger Community ministries supported by First Baptist and a local foundation. Its close presence to the high school is “so ideal,” said Cook.

From 7:00-8:30 a.m., students and teachers stream in for a good start to their busy day. An espresso machine steams out coffee drinks to go with bagels and other foods that are available.

Lunch at The Rock is a good option for students who enjoy an open campus. Faithful volunteers arrive each day, including Cook’s wife, Tammy, who runs the kitchen.

Since Catholic and Lutheran churches make use of the facilities on occasion, they also

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN PIERCE

provide volunteers at lunchtime. And meals are quietly provided at no cost to students they know who lack funds.

Then, after school, students “like they’re on mission” come to the center, said Cook, to get an afternoon snack — with “some actually doing their homework here.”

Because The Rock offers a relaxed atmosphere away from the highly scheduled school routine, Cook said he is careful not to “over-program” activities there. But various opportunities have emerged and evolved since the center opened in the fall of 2006.

Students initiated a weekly, lunchtime Bible study using Gary’s office. After more than 30 packed into the small space, they found a faculty sponsor and formed an official club that meets in the high school orchestra room.

Cook, a former school teacher who later worked in water education, advises students

who plan a Tuesday evening worship service called “Illuminate.” Other Bible study groups have formed as well, and Young Life meetings are held at the center too. And sometimes churches throughout the area will hold their youth gatherings there.

Special events include an open-mic night for budding musicians, a Super Bowl party, a “senior send-off” featuring root beer floats, and a teachers’ appreciation luncheon on their last day of the school year.

Closer ties are being fostered between the church and the school, said Cook. Pastor Jay Smith, a former band director, offers his talents to the school. In turn, some of the musicians have shared their talents at The Rock and during services at First Baptist.

When the opening of The Rock was first announced, there was suspicion about just how open and hospitable this Baptist-supported effort would be, Cook recalled. The newspaper did an article that he said could best be summed up as: “Let’s see.”

Four years later, the same publication wrote a cover story titled, “Come one, come all!”

But Cook said he is especially grateful when a neighbor, Grace, comes by to tell him how much better the neighborhood is now that The Rock is there. **BT**



Gary Cook

Why?

*Answers to
Baptist questions
from a historical
perspective*



QUESTION: Why do Baptists ordain ministers and deacons?

Since their beginnings, Baptists have thought of themselves as a New Testament people, seeking to ground their faith practices within the scriptural text. This focus on the New Testament, however, was not without controversy in 17th-century Christendom.

The early Puritans who settled in the New World and established the Congregational Church identified with and wrote about the Old Testament far more than the New Testament. For example, half of the statutes in the New Haven colony's Code of 1655 contained Old Testament references or citations, compared to the three percent of New Testament references. The Massachusetts and Plymouth colonies also leaned heavily on the Old Testament in their legal codes.

In short, the Puritans/Congregationalists believed God had covenanted with them to turn the New World into the New Israel. Today's conservative, American Christian public infatuation with the Jewish Ten Commandments, as opposed to Jesus' two greatest commandments, is a legacy of early Puritan/Congregational influence.

A heavy reliance on the Old Testament in government and church in the New World — as well as within the Catholic Church's priestly system for more than a thousand years — had served the purpose of sanctifying church-state

union, controlling access to God's grace, and preserving church hierarchies. Not surprisingly, Baptists' primary focus on the New Testament, and corollary beliefs in religious liberty for all and church-state separation, led to some 150 years of persecution from the colonial Congregational and Anglican theocracies. In addition, Baptists' New Testament faith, with a strong emphasis on freedom of conscience and the priesthood of all believers, shattered traditional church hierarchies and elitism.

In the place of priests and episcopacy, Baptists taught that the working of the Holy Spirit through Christ was equally accessible and available to all believers and that through this direct relationship of individuals with the divine, certain persons were set apart by God for "the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 3:12). However, the New Testament does not provide an actual model for normalizing this setting apart of individuals, and not until the 17th century did Baptists settle solidly on the formal practice and language of ordination. Even so, some Baptists historically — including Charles Spurgeon — resisted ordination as an empty ritual that was unnecessary in light of the priesthood of all believers.

While not specifically a New Testament practice, Baptists' framing of ordination is within a New Testament context. Ordination takes place within a local congregation

(sometimes with the assistance of other area Baptist ministers), and is bestowed upon an individual by the approval and will of the congregation, evidenced in the application of the New Testament practices of the laying on of hands and prayer, signifying the invoking of God's blessing. Ordained individuals are considered the spiritual equals of non-ordained church members; their setting apart is in the context of serving the church, rather than ruling as a priest or bishop — although the title of bishop in recent years is commonly utilized among black Baptist pastors.

Historically, ordination was reserved for clergy and deacons, and usually for men — although from their beginnings some Baptists voiced the belief that the office of deacon included both men and women. However, as churches and ministers moved into an era of professionalization in the 20th century, accompanied by an expansion of the concept of ministry, Baptists increasingly applied ordination to a wide variety of ministerial roles.

Today, numerous persons on a large local church staff may hold ordination credentials, in addition to ministers who work outside the walls of a specific congregation, including chaplains and some collegiate ministers. However, all ordinations yet take place within the context of a local congregation, the center of Baptist ecclesiology. In addition, many Baptist churches now ordain both men and women to the ministry and/or diaconate.

Thus, while the scope of Baptist ordination has changed and expanded over time, today's normative Baptist concept of the practice remains rooted in historic, overarching New Testament convictions of freedom of conscience, the priesthood of all believers, the primacy of the local congregation, and the practice of the setting apart of otherwise spiritually-equal individuals who are called by the Holy Spirit to serve the body of Christ. This legacy stands in contrast to many hierarchical structures in other denominations, emphasizing the grassroots nature of the Baptist faith. **BT**

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Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

Eat the BBQ first

By John Pierce

Age can bring perspective. For example, the U.S. Civil War seemed like ancient history when I was a child and youth.

Yet less than a century had passed from the bloody Battle of Chickamauga on Sept. 19-20, 1863, to my birth just outside the nation's oldest and largest military park.

The pristine grounds where my family would picnic and I would toss Frisbees or footballs with friends in front of Wilder Tower had just nine decades earlier been the scene of such gruesome American-on-American crime.

Recently I stopped by the Chickamauga National Military Park visitor center to see what had taken shape in recent years and to browse through the exhibits. One episode — following the war — caught my attention unlike it had before.

On Sept. 19, 1889, exactly 26 years after the devastating battle, some Union and Confederate veterans gathered in nearby Chattanooga to consider turning the battleground just over the Georgia line (and other sites in the area) into a national park. Those fellow Americans who had bludgeoned one another just years earlier now shared



handshakes, memories and a common goal.

Union General William Rosecrans, whose Army of the Cumberland had been defeated at Chickamauga but whose side emerged victorious from the larger war, remarked: "One of the most noble features to me of this occasion is this: It is very difficult to find in history an instance where contending parties in after-years meet together in perfect amity. It took great men to win that battle, but it takes greater men still, I will say morally greater, to wipe away all the ill feeling which naturally grows out of such a contest."

The next day, the blue and gray veterans

shared a big barbecue beside a spring in what is now Chickamauga, Ga. And they agreed to move forward with the park (which was dedicated in 1895) as a memorial to those who fell in the costly, two-day battle: 4,045 killed with thousands more wounded or missing.

Whether in personal relationships, community life or large-scale conflicts, reconciliation is good and important work. However, prevention is so much better.

I kept wondering: What if that barbecue had been thrown before the conflict?

It may not have made a difference. Passions were high, power struggles were growing, and economic interests were at stake. Such are the ingredients of most conflicts.

My thoughts focused less on that particular war a century and half ago than on the larger idea of finding more constructive ways to address conflict — before rather than after the damage is done and broken pieces need to be glued together.

Baptists Today's founding editor Walker Knight coined a good phrase that has appeared on the lips of a U.S. president and on refrigerator magnets in Israel: "Peace, like war, is waged."

Indeed. Eat the barbecue first. Seek better, more constructive ways to resolve differences. **BT**

In (almost) living color

By Tony Cartledge

Looking through some examination copies of potential textbooks for a course on religion in the Bible and the ancient Near East, I noticed that all of the books were some shade of brown. I glanced over my bookshelf, and realized that several of my Old Testament survey books looked like they'd been dipped in chocolate as well.

What is it with art designers and old stuff? Is it because so much of the land there is sandy and tan, or because many of the material remains from that period are coffee-colored?

Admittedly, clay tablets, pottery, mud bricks, fertility figures and city walls of the period could all fit on a single color palette. But people of the period loved color.

The Sumerians crafted beautiful artifacts of gold and lapis lazuli, using rare gemstones for added color. The Babylonians learned to glaze bricks with bright hues, and some of their ziggurats featured blue bricks or tiles on the top levels.

The Egyptians were an artistic people, and often painted hieroglyphs, tombs and public places in vivid colors. Beyond that, people of the time lived colorful lives and had vivid imaginations, as well.

Don't think so? Read the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, or the Ugaritic tales of Kirta, or some of the Egyptian love poetry — or the Hebrew Bible. Polychromatic characters abound.

I considered these things as I prepared to attend the Nov. 16-20 Society of Biblical Literature/American Academy of Religion



meeting in Chicago. The huge bookstore/exhibit area there was to die for, and academic ideas floated like dust in the air.

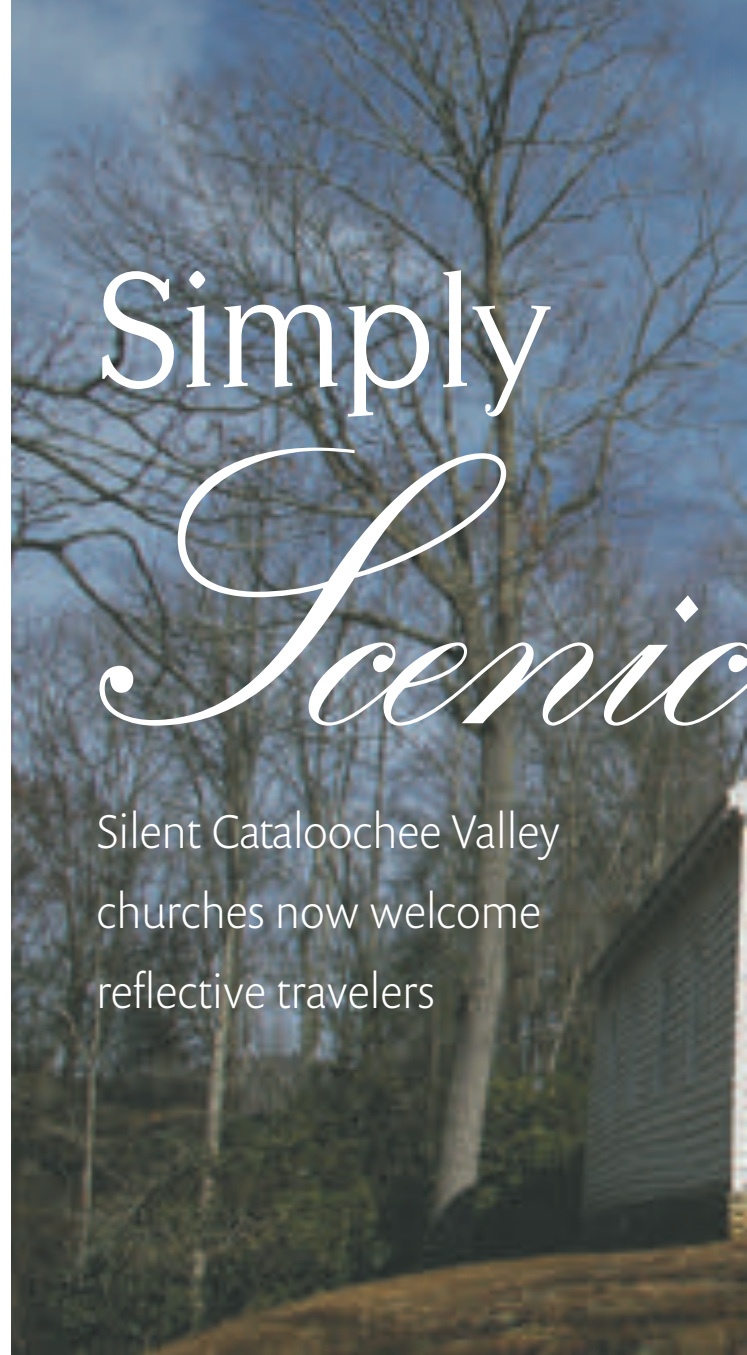
Pedantic pompousness was also present in good measure, but I enjoyed hearing presentations on a variety of arcane subjects, and some of the speakers were as colorful as their topics. As a personal statement, though, I didn't pack anything that was brown. **BT**



GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS — One can almost taste the fried chicken, potato salad and sweet tea that once graced the tables behind Little Cataloochee Baptist Church. Or feel the warmth coming from the single, central stove between the pulpit and the pews — the sole source of heat for the simple wooden structure built for worship in 1889.

The first European settlers came to the fertile valley surrounded by tree-covered mountains and ridges, where Cherokees lived and hunted, more than two centuries ago. Others followed, establishing homes, schools and churches in the scenic Cataloochee Valley — a series of three valleys, actually, with Little Cataloochee being the smallest.

Descendents of those who carved life out of the scenic territory now return for annual gatherings to share familiar lore and place flowers on the graves of relatives. Otherwise, the little church with bare walls, rustic pews and a belfry welcomes hikers who stop by for rest and reflection.



Simply *Scenic*

Silent Cataloochee Valley churches now welcome reflective travelers





STORY AND
PHOTOS BY
JOHN PIERCE



Creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1930s, after tourists had already found the desirable getaway, meant the residents who grew apples, trapped wildlife and raised livestock in and around the North Carolina township of Cataloochee, near the Tennessee border, would eventually move beyond the park's borders.

But those with family ties as well as curious travelers are drawn to the relatively remote valley where stories of mountains, moonshine and more continue to be told. Like the one about reclusive Robert Palmer, who on the first day of school was asked by the teacher what he wanted to be when he grew up.

"The Boogerman," the Palmer boy responded, according to the legend, sealing a nickname that would follow him throughout his life in the dense forest where he spurned all offers from lumber companies. As a result, hikers along Boogerman Trail encounter some of the tallest trees in the valley.

Other visitors come to see the elk that were reintroduced to the park in 2001 or the neatly-preserved structures — log cabins, simple churches, houses and school — and the well-tended cemeteries that speak silently of another time and place in American life where faith and families took root. **BT**

The Soldier of the Lord (1900) is part of a new exhibit at the Museum of Biblical Art that reveals a spiritual side to the master designer and craftsman whose studio single-handedly shaped the image of American churches. RNS photo courtesy the Museum of Biblical Art.



Master designer

Exhibit highlights Tiffany's lasting impact on American church design

NEW YORK — Louis C. Tiffany is perhaps best known for his intricate glass lamps, but a new exhibit at the Museum of Biblical Art reveals a spiritual side to the master designer and craftsman whose studio single-handedly shaped the image of American churches.

“Louis C. Tiffany and the Art of Devotion,” which runs through Jan. 20, centers on the religious memorials and decorations that Tiffany and his firm created for American congregations for about a half-century, beginning in the 1880s.

“We know Tiffany for his lamps, but what we overlook is that Tiffany was most prolific for his work in houses of worship,” said curator Patricia Pongracz, the museum’s acting director.

Several Tiffany leaded-glass windows take pride of place in the exhibit, but MOBIA also features mosaics, church furniture and other items. Pongracz said the current exhibit is a first in examining the ecclesiastical tradition of what was once one of the nation’s most famous design “brands” — and is still a cherished name for lovers of American decorative arts.

In a walk-through of the exhibit, Pongracz said that, in Tiffany’s life (1848-1933), the devotional side of his firm’s work was well known.

Tiffany lived in a time of a quickly growing, and increasingly urban, United States. Church expansion — some 4,000 new churches were built between the 1880s and 1910 — was an integral part of the era, which played out under the still-haunting shadows of

the U.S. Civil War.

“People were turning to the power of cultural memory, and where did they find it? In churches and synagogues,” Pongracz said.

The growing ascendancy of well-heeled Protestant churches in urban areas meant that middle-class and prosperous congregations had the money to pay for the superbly crafted stained-glass windows, altarpieces, mosaic floors and other decorative work created by Tiffany’s firm.

The Protestant Tiffany knew no sectarian boundaries; his works are also found in Roman Catholic and Jewish houses of worship.

“This happened at a time when it was thought to be important for a congregation to invest in their church building,” Pongracz said, “and people really did put money into these buildings.”

Tiffany’s ruling aesthetic was sometimes called “The Gospel of Good Taste.” That was supported by a canny business sense, with Tiffany displaying religion-themed work at hugely popular world fairs, such as the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

As an accompanying essay by art historian and curator Jennifer Perry Thalheimer notes, “demand from churches for decorative art was so great that Tiffany designated an entire department of Tiffany Studios for the creation” of church art. By the time of the 1893 exposition, Thalheimer notes, Tiffany’s studio “had established itself as the premier ecclesiastical design firm.”

The result? Thousands of older churches

and religious institutions in the United States have a Tiffany piece of one kind or another. One of the best examples of Tiffany work is at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Paterson, N.J., which boasts 12 Tiffany windows and a Tiffany altar rail.

Yet the very placement of such treasures inside worship spaces makes them largely unknown to a wider public. That’s a key reason why, even today, there is no complete catalog of Tiffany’s devotional works.

“People have talked about producing a census, but that’s a daunting task,” Pongracz said.

One thing the current exhibit provides is the chance to see some of the famed Tiffany craftsmanship up close. The layered glass in some of the pieces — such as *Lydia Entertaining Christ and the Apostles* and *The Righteous Shall Receive a Crown of Glory* — are so skillfully done that the depicted folds of clothing “have a real billowing effect,” Pongracz said.

When asked if she has a favorite in the exhibit, Pongracz chose a baptismal font that displays noticeable Islamic influences with its blue and white coloring that reflects the time Tiffany spent in North Africa.

While it is important to appreciate the religious character of the Tiffany artifacts, the MOBIA exhibit also affirms the pieces for their sheer aesthetic pleasures.

“The notion of beauty,” Pongracz said, “the craft of making something beautiful, elevates us all.” **BT**

Surprising Grace

A church start with a history

HARRISBURG, N.C. — Walk into Hickory Ridge High School on a Sunday morning and you'll find all of the things you'd expect of a new church start on a more or less contemporary model.

Friendly greeters wait at the door. Clear directional signs, a well-staffed welcome table, and fresh coffee and pastries add to the warmth.

Smiling church members chat in the halls and show the way to a Sunday school class where adults sit in student desks and discuss the latest *Nurturing Faith Bible Study* lesson.

The school auditorium has undergone a weekly transformation into worship space. A praise team sings, accompanied by a piano, a keyboard and a guitar. The pastor plays drums.

Words to the mix of choruses and hymns are projected on a screen flanked by worship banners. All seems typical until you scan the congregation and realize that most congregants are past retirement age, their youthful enthusiasm crowned with gray hair.

This is Grace Crossing Baptist Fellowship, and it's going on 112 years old, but acting much younger. It is, as members like to say, "a church start with a history."

Grace Crossing was born just east of downtown Charlotte in 1901. It began as Belmont Baptist Church, but moved within a year to Pegram Street and became Louise Baptist Church. A dozen years later, the growing congregation moved again and became Allen Street Baptist Church.

The church continued to grow, but as the neighborhoods surrounding it changed, the facilities were sold in 1968 and the congregation moved yet again, becoming Shamrock Drive Baptist Church.

Urban flight to the suburbs continued, however. Many of the church's members moved



Pastor Jason Blanton hopes Grace Crossing's new facility and service-oriented approach can make it an anchor for the growing community along I-485, east of Charlotte.

east of the city, and those who remained struggled to connect with the evolving community. The church decided to move yet again.

After a protracted effort, the building was sold in 2006 and the congregation made brief stops at an elementary school and a Presbyterian church gym before settling in at Hickory Ridge High School in Harrisburg, arriving just as the school prepared to open in 2007.

Change continued. The pastor left in 2008, and so did many of the younger adults. Undaunted, the remaining 60 or 70 members persevered. They persuaded veteran pastor and professor Chuck Bugg to serve as interim pastor, and in the early fall of 2010, called Jason Blanton to serve as pastor.

Blanton's easy-going manner relates well to people of all ages, and his administrative acumen got the church on a sound financial track. They no longer dip into reserves for operating expenses, but ended 2012 in the black, with a surplus for the building fund.

The church owns 16 acres of highly visible

land at the junction of I-485 and Rocky River Road in East Charlotte. The first building of a multi-phase building plan is under construction, and the church hopes to hold services there on Easter Sunday.

The congregation of Grace Crossing is "a remarkably resilient and faithful group of people," Blanton said, people who want to offer the community a needed voice of grace and service from a posture of theological humility.

A ball field for community use is part of the initial building phase, and plans for an organic community garden are in the works. Blanton hopes the building can become a local resource for weddings, homeowner association meetings, and other gatherings. Blanton believes the congregation is on the right track, and that natural growth will follow as the church seeks to finally settle in and become "an anchor for the community."

Grace Crossing is affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the CBF of North Carolina. **BT**

"Grace Crossing's congregation is 'a remarkably resilient and faithful group of people.'"

By Jenny Lee

Dinner and a survey

Young adults crave community, yet space for spiritual searching

It started with an online survey and family dinner. After years of reading and hearing about how my generation was disappearing from church, I wanted to know what my peers would say about why they were increasingly less interested in being part of a church.

Simultaneously, my friends-who-are-becoming-family and I decided to institute a weekly “family dinner.” We are all in our 20s, and needed to work harder on building relationships with one another.

The survey responses started flooding in. Within 36 hours, 76 people had completed the survey.

Simply by inviting my Facebook friends between the ages of 22 and 35 to answer a few questions about their faith experience, they shared intimate details about living faithfully in a world where church is simply an option.

The results were complicated. Even “Do you consider yourself a Christian?” required an explanation for many.

While nearly all of the respondents grew up in a church, only 68 percent currently have a congregational connection. They told me about feeling “displaced” and anxious about being judged. Some shared that they simply do not see the need for church attendance.

I provided a list and asked them to choose all the options that described what they most looked for in a church. Two thirds responded that they wanted “thoughtful sermons.” The second highest answer (58.1 percent) was “mission opportunities.”

I asked, “What would you want church leaders to know about how you experience God and faith?” The responses were overwhelming.

Resentment and fear of judgment

resounded through their words. They wanted church leaders to know that faith is hard for them and they need space to explore and ask questions.

They asked to be invited to participate. But, mostly, they asked for the church to evolve.

Meanwhile, our family dinners began to expand. What started as four people has grown to eight. We have a list of others we want to invite. Our light-hearted attempt at time together has evolved into an intentional response to our craving for community.

My simple survey coupled with our new dinner tradition reflects information coming from a variety of sources. Since the 1960s, there has been a steady moving away from the institutional church. Across denominational lines, fewer and fewer people are finding a meaningful spiritual and religious connection within church doors.

The phrase “spiritual but not religious” is currently popular though much debated. But for the Millennial generation, “spiritual, but not religious” is the honest voicing of those who have experienced and are experiencing God in their culture and conversations, but less frequently in their churches.

After the 2011 tsunami in Japan, Toshihito Aisawa, a 9-year-old boy, waited every day at a nearby shelter with a sign listing his family members’ names and a simple promise: “I will come again tomorrow.”

Most churches have a small population of 20/30-year-olds who survived the social and religious tsunami of the college years and are remaining faithful to their local congregations. Few, however, would report that their spiritual and emotional needs are met at church. More likely, they come out of a fierce hope that their congregation will, at some point, surprise them.

Aisawa’s faithfulness is analogous to these

church-going Millennials. They look forward to the day when they will find what they need in the church.

When I talk to my peers, they tell me that their greatest spiritual need is community. They need friends who will pray for them, support them and show up for them. For reasons related to the changing sociological face of the Millennial generation, this is happening less frequently at church.

People are staying in school longer, getting married later and having children later. The traditional structures of church intended to create fellowship are no longer relevant.

We are trying to find organic ways to make this happen; “family dinner” is one way. Ironically, we host dinner at a house on Union Chapel Road.

While we fiercely desire community, there is also a fear of community. Anxiety bubbles up in many young adults when they feel that being accepted into a community requires needing to assent intellectually to the community’s belief and identity.

These postmodern adults, me included, resist anything resembling propositional truth. For those of us who remain engaged in a congregation, we are struggling to accept propositional truths about a God we are grasping to understand.

Most of us have no interest in deconstructing the sanctuaries that built us. Rather we seek creative and meaningful ways to respond to the quiet voices within us asking for more.

Fundamentally, we must relinquish the fear that is holding us back from evolving into the church the Holy Spirit is creating among us. Forget the budget. Ditch preconceived notions about what church must be. Listen to the Spirit.

Howard Thurman famously wrote, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

In the same way, ask what makes the



congregation come alive, what makes people passionate, and do it. Our world desperately needs churches that have come alive.

We must practice empathy. As we pursue justice and mercy, it is time we do so not because it helps other people, but because it helps us all. As our Trinitarian God dances in a perfect perichoretic dance, so we must also dance with all people.

There's no "us" and "them," only "we." Justice is not justice unless it can share a pew, and maybe lunch afterwards. Millennials have a bent toward justice; the way a church chooses to engage in the social questions of our day will largely determine whether or not a Millennial will find a home in that congregation.

It is time to re-imagine the Bible. As post-modernists disregard propositional truths and metanarrative, the challenge falls to us to find new ways to let scripture speak.

Embrace the ancient Hebrew ways of reading our stories and ask where you find yourself in the story. Ask better questions of scripture; never give prepackaged answers. Consider how modern science fits with our hermeneutic. It may surprise us how much theology you can learn from a science textbook.

Intentionally develop the practices of the

community, and make the faithful keeping of those practices the center of religious life. A community of practice transforms the church from the crass consumerism of a spiritual shopping mall to the earnest religion of Jesus followers.

In the Millennial search for authenticity, the desire for truth trumps self-satisfied spirituality.

Many of us moderate Baptists define ourselves by what we are not rather than what we are. We have contributed to the angry and combative rhetoric of our culture, and this must end. We must learn to be peacemakers and effective communicators. We must be unapologetic, but constructive.

Finally, and most importantly, we must get to know Jesus — by approaching the Gospels with fresh eyes. Who is this Jesus, who speaks in stories and can change a person with one brief conversation? How should we worship this lover of sinners and saints?

Whatever this evolution looks like in the end, it will certainly revolve around Jesus.

If we believe in the God we purport to believe, we know the church will not fail. We cannot fail as long as we are faithful to the prophetic call to love God and love people.

If, however, we believe faithfulness looks like stoicism and inflexibility, we should call ourselves museum curators rather than ministers. I believe the church can evolve into something more closely resembling the Kingdom of God, and when it does, all people can find a home — even the most wary and cynical 20-somethings.

Recently I entered a time of prayer with these ideas heavy on my heart. I was trying to pray the Lord's Prayer, but the words kept tangling in Robert Frost's "Birches."

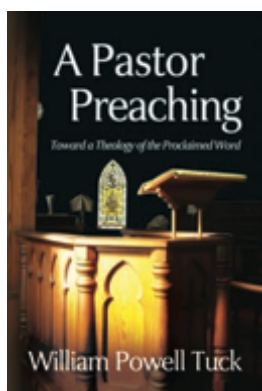
As I prayed the words Jesus taught us, I imagined a church that could swing and bounce with laughter and life. My messy prayer was God assuring me that the church is more possible than ever.

I believe this is a hopeful and creative time to serve the local congregation. We have the exquisite opportunity to raise our prophetic voices as we co-labor with God in creating a church that is a home for Jesus. May we swing from birch branches as we joyfully respond to the Spirit. **BT**

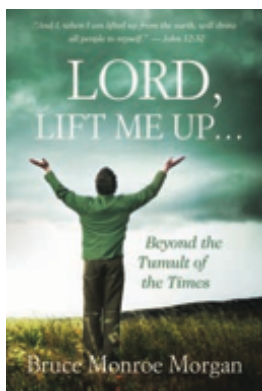
—Jenny Lee, a graduate of Campbell University Divinity School, is minister with students at First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C.

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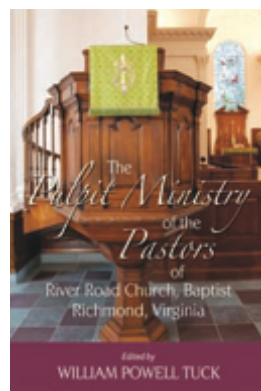
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