



Baptists
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KEN MEDEMA

Stop the music

32




Bicycling Benny

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A gift to *Baptists Today* was made by Linda Jenkins
IN MEMORY OF JAMES F. YATES SR.,
longtime pastor of First Baptist Church of Yazoo City, Miss., who died March 5.



STOP THE MUSIC

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STORY AND PHOTOS

BY JOHN PIERCE

town chaplain

*Adventurous pastor
serves West Yellowstone
community*

WEST YELLOWSTONE, Mont. — Benny McCracken peddled up to the First Baptist Church on his bright red bicycle with his white beard blowing in the breeze. It's a common sight in this unique town just outside the west entrance into America's first national park.

"That's pretty much the way I'm known around here," said McCracken of his trademark beard and bike.

West Yellowstone is unlike any place most will ever live — and McCracken has discovered distinctive ways of being pastor to such a unique community. He is in his 15th year — where only the hardest souls stay that long.

McCracken said his work is best described as chaplain to a town where thousands of visitors, part-time residents and seasonal park workers flock during tourist season and where temperatures plummet to minus-50 degrees in the winter. Weather services often list West Yellowstone among the coldest places in the continental U.S.

TWO CHURCHES

So there is "summer church" and "winter church," said McCracken. Visitors from all over the U.S. and beyond fill the First Baptist Church on warm Sundays. And the church hosts student missionaries — mostly from the South — who work in various ministry programs for park visitors.

When Benny arrived from Arkansas to assume his new pastorate, there were people everywhere inside and outside of the church building. It was July 1, 1998.

TOP: Pastor Benny McCracken of First Baptist Church in West Yellowstone, Mont., is well known around town for his long beard, red bike and caring spirit.

RIGHT: First Baptist Church leader Brenda Geiger talks with friend Bruce Gourley who visits often from Bozeman. She manages the City Creamery that serves up homemade ice cream to the thousands of visitors who descend on West Yellowstone each summer, and also works with the student missionaries who come to town.



Breathtaking views drew more than three million visitors to Yellowstone National Park last year. Many enter through West Yellowstone, Mont., where pastor Benny McCracken and the First Baptist Church provide a caring ministry presence.



Then, as the seasons changed, he faced his first experience of “seeing [my] congregation fade.”

The snow comes and the crowds leave. Only about 1,300 persons live in West Yellowstone year ’round. A faithful few make up “winter church.”

There are no ski resorts in the immediate area, although a few visitors come out to snowmobile. However, controversy over the impact of those machines in the park — along with other factors — has cut those numbers down in recent years.

His wife, Juanita, is a retired schoolteacher who now works for the park service. One winter day last year only 66 persons entered Yellowstone from the west. On a typical summer day more than 4,000 will come through the busiest national park entrance in the U.S. — second only to the Grand Canyon’s south gate.

West Yellowstone gets much colder and quieter in the winter.

WINTER WAYS

Shortly after settling into his new pastorate, McCracken said he was often asked how he liked living in West Yellowstone. He would respond affirmatively about his new home and place of ministry. But he always heard a follow-up comment.

“I was sick of hearing, ‘Wait ’til winter.’” Winters are indeed hard, and the small

all-seasons population is quite transitional. McCracken said that 25 percent of the population turns over every two to three years. Many who come with intentions of staying forever will leave after their second winter, he said.

How cold is it? Benny laughed and told of hearing a noise on his roof last winter. His two dogs had found a new place to play — via the snow pile that provided easy access.

But 14 winters — with an average snowfall of 300-400 inches — and counting, this Arkansas native is still here.

“You either love [the harsh winters] or you don’t make it,” he said. And the McCrackens “love the cold, the snow.”

COMMUNITY CHAPLAIN

Longtime church member and year-round resident Brenda Geiger, who sells homemade ice cream to summertime tourists and guides summer missionaries who come to town, said her pastor’s bike — after the tires are replaced with spiked ones — still buzzes around the quieter winter streets.

“I just get up and go,” said McCracken, when asked how he rides a bike when thermometer readings hit 40 degrees below zero. And if the fresh snow piles up too high, he just walks.

“I’m legally blind so it’s a little safer than me driving,” he said.

Life in West Yellowstone is tough, said McCracken. In addition to the challenging

weather, there are very few good, steady jobs. The park has periods of closure during the winter.

“Everything here is completely related to Yellowstone,” said McCracken. “You have to be a good planner just to survive.”

But Benny said he has found the right place for his approach to ministry that he described as “chaplain for the town.” He goes to the people rather than waiting for them to come to church.

“I try to help them see that Christ is for them,” he said.

Faith backgrounds vary greatly in West Yellowstone, he said, with some seeking to fill a spiritual void through the grandeur of nature. McCracken said he often talks with residents and visitors about the “difference between faith and spirituality” and how the creator God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

So whether responding to an emergency or running into someone on a remote trail or pulling up to a place of business on his red bicycle, Benny makes himself available to the people of West Yellowstone.

“I don’t know of any place in Montana where the Baptist pastor is more embedded in the community,” said Bruce Gourley, executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society and online editor for *Baptists Today*, who lives in Bozeman and has known McCracken for many years.

WESTERN WAYS

“This environment is different,” said McCracken of the town he now calls home. “They have different expectations.”

West Yellowstone is used to people coming and going — and not asking too many questions. McCracken said his training and experiences as a chaplain in mental health and prison facilities are helpful — although “not that all the people here are criminals,” he added with a smile. In fact, most residents see no need in locking the doors to their homes.

But McCracken enjoys this unique environment. And the people of West Yellowstone — cycling in and out each year — have a pastoral presence among them.

“You have to go where the people are,” he said. “They are not coming to you.”

And go he does. Benny volunteers with the park service and the local chamber. He serves as chaplain for the EMS and gets the first call from local law enforcement when someone is threatening suicide.

“It’s an interesting town,” he said, noting the “cosmopolitan mentality” found in much of the West.

AVID OUTDOORSMAN

“People who come here are generally outdoor people,” he said. And so is Benny, who enjoys hiking, fly-fishing, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and rock climbing — even though that latter activity resulted in a broken shoulder recently.

A group of blind skiers comes to the park each February. Local guides who are familiar with Yellowstone’s massive array of trails are recruited. Benny is an eager volunteer.

“It’s a case of the blind leading the blind,” he said with a laugh.

Last February, when temperatures rose to a sunny 25 degrees, McCracken said he spent the afternoon skiing in shorts and a T-shirt — a sight about as memorable as riding his red bike around town on a snow-covered day.

Much of his ministry occurs when he encounters people out on the trails or while involved in other adventurous activities.

Some days are more adventurous than planned. Benny and church member Ed Geiger took some kids on a backpacking trip earlier this year. As they were setting up camp, one of the boys started yelling, “Bear, bear, bear!”

Although he couldn’t see the two big grizzlies, Benny used his bear management training that calls for making lots of noise. However, his yells bounced off the



Lay leader Ed Geiger (left) and his wife, Brenda, started coming to West Yellowstone to work with student missionaries. Now they are full-time residents. Ed and pastor Benny McCracken (right) share a love for the outdoor adventures in and around Yellowstone National Park.

mountainside and caused the grizzlies to run directly toward the camp.

When Ed heard the commotion, he sounded a loud air horn (a preferred bear deterrent) without leaving his tent.

“The bears did a 90-degree turn and ran away,” said Benny gratefully. But the campers would encounter two more before the trip ended. He and Ed will consider other camping areas for future adventures.

CLEAR SKIES, MINDS

Despite vocational challenges, the educational level of people in West Yellowstone is surprisingly high, said McCracken. Many people come to the Rockies to escape the demands of their previous jobs.

One of Benny’s friends, Doug, is a retired pediatric orthopedic surgeon who comes out to Yellowstone to work in the summers. He’s often busy directing traffic jams caused by bison that go wherever and whenever they wish.

“It’s not unusual for your server to have a Master’s degree,” McCracken said of those working in park restaurants. “They are tired of the fast track.”

Clear blue skies, open expanses and breathtaking views offer a different kind of reward.

GOOD FIT

McCracken began his ministry in Christian education following studies at Ouachita University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. But that was short lived when a new pastor came to the second church he served back in Arkansas.

The pastor pushed for bigger and bigger statistics, even noting during a morning worship service that God named a book of the Bible “Numbers.” Benny said he wrote out his resignation letter that evening, but it took awhile before he could submit it.

He headed to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., to study pastoral counseling with Wayne Oates and others. Then he did a mental health residency and worked briefly in Milledgeville, Ga.

Afterward, he returned to Arkansas where he spent nearly 20 years as a prison chaplain through the Arkansas Baptist Convention until Southern Baptists eliminated funding for such positions.

A minister friend in Colorado, who had introduced Benny to backpacking several years earlier, asked to recommend him to the West Yellowstone church.

“I’d never been to Montana in my life,” McCracken recalled. “I had to look at a map to be sure where it is.”

Fourteen cold winters later, the McCrackens are firmly in place. In fact, Benny was chosen to carry the Olympic torch through town and into Yellowstone National Park preceding the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

Many may wonder how in the world someone from Pine Bluff, Arkansas, with impaired vision could live in such a rough and ruggedly beautiful place as West Yellowstone. But McCracken sees things quite differently: “I’d never survive a county seat church in the South.” **BT**

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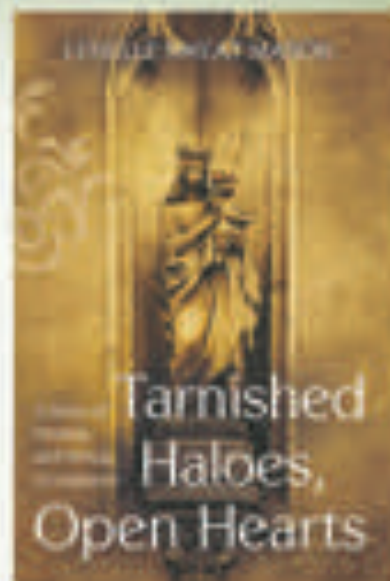
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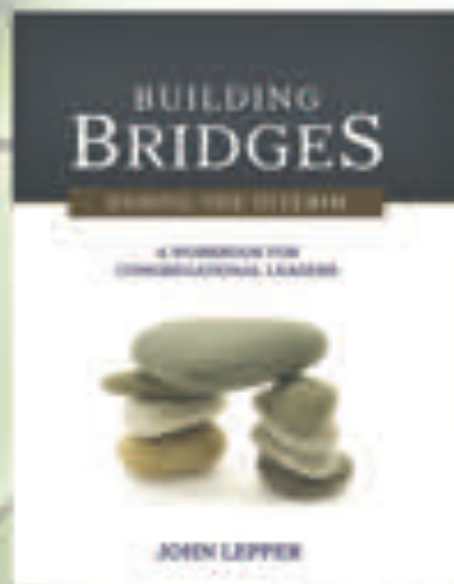
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quotation *remarks*

“I say to my non-Christian friends and neighbors, if you want to see the gospel of Christ, the gospel that has energized this church for 2,000 years, turn off the television. The grinning cartoon characters who claim to speak for Christ don’t speak for him.”

—Southern Baptist Seminary Dean Russell Moore, in a blog post in response to Pat Robertson’s claim that children who are internationally adopted might “grow up weird”

“A common theme around the table is that we need to stop the exaggerations and caricatures of those whose perspective on the extent of the atonement is different from ours. We must avoid the twin ditches of anger and arrogance that threaten to pull us off the road of cooperation.”

—Frank Page, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, following the first meeting of an advisory team dealing with division over Calvinism (Baptist Press)

“I’ve never seen more irresponsible personal attacks, mean-spirited slander, and flat-out dishonest attack ads, and I don’t expect that tone to change before the election.”

—Baptist pastor Rick Warren, whose planned “civil forum” with the main presidential candidates didn’t materialize (Orange County Register)

“We have all loved the premises in Prague, but in the new economic climate with old buildings, declining donor income and much higher costs in the Czech Republic than previously, this represents an imaginative way forward.”

—Rector Keith Jones on efforts to move the International Baptist Theological Seminary that started in Rüschtikon, Switzerland, from Prague to Amsterdam (ABP)

“One way to be people of faith in a postmodern world is to admit our biases and be humble with regard to God’s character, scripture and one another. A posture of humility when approaching our faith and our world can help us see people, situations and God in a different light. God’s being, and the world overall, is much more vast than any of us can imagine.”

—Kate Hanch, children’s minister and ministry associate at Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo. (ABP)

“My mind and my way of expressing myself are not as clear as they used to be.”

—Franciscan friar Benedict Groeschel, 78, whose suggestion that some priests are seduced by minors brought outrage and then an apology (RNS)

“They have big, thick linemen. They’re going to line up and try to mash us.”

—Wayland Baptist University football coach Butch Henderson, whose team played its first game in 72 years on Sept. 1, losing 59-21 to Monterrey Tech from Mexico (KCBD)

“I send pictures back to my family while I’m having fun on the donkeys.”

—New York native Peter Scherr on riding Wi-Fi-equipped donkeys in Kfar Kedem, a historical park in northern Israel designed to give guests experiences from Old Testament times (AP)

“We need scientifically literate voters and taxpayers for the future.”

—Bill Nye the Science Guy, urging parents not to teach young-earth creationism to their children, in a video that drew the ire of some conservative Christians (HuffPo)

“Always secure an in-country doctor who is sympathetic to your project and to whom you can refer some patients for after-care after you leave.”

—Theron Hawkins, a Texas Baptist physician, advising short-term medical and dental teams going into other countries, some of which have become more restrictive recently

“I want them to learn that seeking God in prayer is the most important thing they will pursue in preparing for ministry, and it cannot be done solely in isolation.”

—Central Seminary President Molly Marshall on teaching prayer practices she learned from Benedictine monks to her spiritual formation students (ABP)

“Sexual abuse is always the fault of the one who is in authority ... or the one who is being trusted, or the one who is stronger, or the one who is in power. It is never the fault of the victim.”

—Pastor Gary Morgan of Cowboy Church of Ellis County, Texas, in a sermon urging his congregation to shine a light on sexual abuse (ABP)

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By John Pierce

Why I don't do dueling Bible verses

There is a popular game I no longer play: dueling Bible verses. It gets going whenever a controversial subject arises — such as homosexuality or gender equality. It has been played in the past over slavery, interracial relationships, poker and square dancing.

The rules of the game can be arbitrary and confusing. But it usually begins in the same way.

Someone throws out a verse (often from Leviticus) prefaced by: “But God says...” or “The Bible says...” Often, the initiator will quickly declare “checkmate” or “Bingo” as if the game is over and a victory lap is in order.

Any countering brings another verse or two — if not condemnation for being stupid, liberal or third runner-up in sword drills.

It's easy to get sucked into the game — and fire back with another verse or two that supports a different “right answer.” Then rounds two and three follow with back-and-forth verses as well as authoritative translation efforts by those who can't translate biblical languages.

Then some TV preacher or an author who gets his or her own display in the Christian bookstore will be quoted authoritatively

— and it all spirals downhill from there.

But the short answer to why I don't play dueling Bible verses is: carnage.

Human slavery, abuse of children, racial discrimination and oppression of women — just to name a few — have been carried by those with an arsenal of selective Bible verses.

Playing dueling Bible verses is usually more about trying to win someone over to a predetermined position rather than an honest pursuit of truth.

I'm reminded of William Sloane Coffin's insight: “It is a mistake to look to the Bible to close a discussion; the Bible seeks to open one.”

Also, those armed with a good verse or two in their favor will rarely talk about past defeats. They may join in way-late apologies for issues such as slavery or racism — after the issues have been settled by the larger culture — but don't expect detailed confessions about how biblical selectivity aided those grave errors. That would reveal too much about current defenses using the same methods.

The insightful Baptist scholar Bill Hull has rightly noted, for example, that if someone will show him how they arrived at the conclusion that the Bible doesn't favor slavery, then he can easily show them how the Bible affirms

gender equality. It is the same route.

Those of us who refuse to play dueling Bible verses — or simply surrender “truth” to those who do — get accused of denying biblical authority or other charges that can get you thrown out of some Baptist feller'ships. But that's OK with us.

We know there is a difference between embracing and respecting the authority of the biblical revelation and pretending the Bible is some consistent catalogue of truth from which a verse here and a verse there can provide a definitive statement on every issue we encounter.

As strange as it may seem, many of us still favor the idea that the Bible is best interpreted through the lens of the highest revelation of God: the life and teachings of Jesus.


To us, Jesus is a better “criterion for interpreting scripture” than any human authority who seeks that role. And the broader biblical themes of grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love of God and neighbor — so consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus — take precedence for us over lesser ones.

Having observed (in person or through readings from eras past) the ways selective readings of the Bible have been used as tools of oppression, condemnation and exclusion has caused my interest in this age-old game to vanish. There are simply too many losers and too few victories. **BT**



The short answer to why I don't play dueling Bible verses is: carnage.

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Survey: Economy continues negative effect on churches

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

The economy continues to weigh on pastors, with a new survey showing that nearly two-thirds say it has affected their churches negatively.

LifeWay Research asked 1,000 pastors about the economy's effect on their churches and found that 56 percent described it somewhat negatively and 8 percent very negatively. Nine percent reported a positive effect on their churches, and one-quarter said the economy was having "no impact on my church."

"Pastor views on the economy are similar to many economic outlook surveys," said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. "We weren't surprised the current perspective of economic impact on churches is predominantly negative."

Despite pastors' negative views on the economy and their churches, LifeWay researchers found a trend in fewer churches reporting declines in giving. While 23 percent of churches reported lower giving in 2010 than the previous year, just 15 percent of churches said giving through May 2012 was below 2011 figures.

LifeWay's most recent research is based on a May telephone survey that had a maximum sampling error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points. **BT**

Religious groups divided on gun control, but united against guns in churches

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

After the movie theater massacre in Aurora, Colo., and a deadly shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis., Americans are divided on gun control, and within certain religious groups, attitudes are far from ambivalent.

But on the question of guns in churches, there is actual consensus: A strong majority of Americans don't want them in the pews, according to a new poll released in mid-August by the Public Religion Research Institute conducted in partnership with Religion News Service.

"Although the issue of gun control tends to divide Americans by party, gender, region and race, there is broad agreement among the public that there are some places where concealed weapons should be off limits," said Daniel Cox, PRRI's research director.

More than three-quarters of respondents (76 percent) said concealed weapons should not be allowed in houses of worship, compared to 20 percent who disagreed.

The poll, conducted in the wake of the Colorado and Wisconsin shootings, shows that a slim majority (52 percent) of Americans favors passing stricter laws, while 44 percent are opposed.

But walk into a Catholic church or an evangelical congregation, and the worshippers may not be so torn about gun control.

Among white evangelicals, for instance, support for stricter gun control is weak, at 35 percent. That compares to the 62 percent of Catholics and 60 percent of unaffiliated Americans who would like to see tighter gun control laws on the books.

James Martin, a Jesuit priest who called for tighter gun control after the movie theater massacre, offered several reasons why U.S. Catholics may be more likely to support it.

"Catholics may congregate more in urban centers and may be more exposed to violent crimes than people in other parts of the country," said Martin, the author of *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*.

"And Catholics might be more sympathetic to government regulation, because the church has always seen legitimate government as one way of expressing the will of the people,"

Martin continued. What's more, he said, "there might be a slightly greater appreciation for the notion of the common good, which is enshrined in Catholic social teaching, in addition to individual rights."

Black Protestants favor stricter gun control even more strongly than Catholics, according to a 2011 *ABC News/Washington Post* poll, with 71 percent saying they want tougher gun laws.

As for white mainline Protestants, 42 percent endorse tighter gun control, according to the PRRI/RNS survey. This may be because most mainline Protestants (54 percent) live in a household with a gun, Cox said, and the survey found that those who don't live with guns generally tend to favor more gun restrictions.

As Americans remain divided on gun control, they show no consensus when asked about the most effective way to prevent mass shootings. "People are all over the map," Cox said, noting that:

- 27 percent of respondents said stricter gun control would help.
- 22 percent cited better mental health screenings and support for those who want guns.
- 20 percent argued for a greater emphasis on God and morality in school and society.
- 14 percent want stricter security at public gatherings.
- 11 percent said allowing more private citizens to carry guns for protection is the answer.

White evangelicals were more likely than any other group to choose "a greater emphasis on God and morality," with nearly four in 10 saying that this is the best way to prevent mass gun killings.



The survey also found:

- Women favor stronger gun control laws far more than men (60 percent to 44 percent).
- Democrats favor stronger gun laws (72 percent). Republicans (65 percent) and Tea Party members (78 percent) oppose them.
- Better enforcement of existing gun laws has strong support among all Americans, with 67 percent in favor and 31 percent opposed.
- More than two-thirds (68 percent) say the constitutional right to own and carry a gun is as important as other constitutional rights, while 30 percent disagree.

The poll of 1,006 Americans was conducted Aug. 8-12 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. **BT**

It's Official: Coke and Pepsi are OK for Mormons

By Peggy Fletcher Stack
Salt Lake Tribune

SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — Maybe now, reporters, bloggers, outsiders and even many Mormons will accept that the Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints does not forbid drinking cola.

On Aug. 29, the LDS church posted a statement on its website saying that “the church does not prohibit the use of caffeine” and that the faith’s health-code reference to “hot drinks” “does not go beyond (tea and coffee).”

A day later, the website wording was slightly softened, saying only that “the church revelation spelling out health practices ... does not mention the use of caffeine.”

The same goes for the church’s two-volume handbook, which LDS leaders use to guide their congregations. It says plainly that “the only official interpretation of ‘hot drinks’ ... in the Word of Wisdom is the statement made by early church leaders that the term ‘hot drinks’ means tea and coffee.”

That doesn’t mean church leaders view caffeinated drinks as healthy. They just don’t bar members from, say, pounding a Pepsi, downing a Mountain Dew or sipping a hot chocolate. Even GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney has been seen drinking an occasional Diet Coke.

This clarification on caffeine “is long overdue,” said Matthew Jorgensen, a Mormon and longtime Mountain Dew drinker.

Jorgensen, who is doing a two-year research fellowship in Germany, grew up “in a devout Mormon household, in a small, devout Mormon town,” where his neighbors and church leaders viewed “drinking a Coca-Cola as so close to drinking coffee that it made your worthiness ... questionable.”

That view was magnified when the late LDS church President Gordon B. Hinckley offhandedly told *60 Minutes* that Mormons avoid caffeine. Several earlier LDS leaders, including apostle Bruce R. McConkie, considered imbibing Coke as a violation of the “spirit” of the Word of Wisdom.

It was dictated in 1833 by Mormon

founder Joseph Smith and bars consumption of wine, strong drinks (alcohol), tobacco and “hot drinks,” which have been defined by church authorities as tea and coffee.

Even so, many outsiders and plenty of insiders get that wrong. Part of the confusion stems from LDS church-owned Brigham Young University, which neither sells nor serves caffeinated drinks. But BYU spokeswoman Carri Jenkins explains that is “not a university or church decision, but made by dining services, based on what our customers want.”

In the end, it’s up to individual Latter-day Saints to decide what to drink.

“I can understand why the church is cautious,” Jorgensen wrote in an email. “Saying that caffeine is OK might sound like saying that caffeine is healthy, maybe even an endorsement of caffeine. Plus, I think members need opportunities to work through questions of right and wrong for themselves.”

Caffeine, he said, “is the perfect, low-risk testing ground for members to make decisions for themselves.” **BT**

Bible game show aims for religious audience

By Chris Lisee
Religion News Service

The world’s best-selling book has made it to the small screen in what is thought to be the first religiously themed game show on a secular network.

The American Bible Challenge tests teams’ knowledge of the Old and New Testaments in a quiz show interspersed with stories of the competitors and the charities they play for.

The show represents a bid to tap the religious market by the secular GSN (formerly Game Show Network). The base audience is evangelicals, said consulting producer Maura Dunbar, but she hopes it will appeal to a broader audience, including nonbelievers.

“I think people of faith will have a very good comfort level, and I think this is an opportunity for all of us to hopefully open up the Bible to new audiences and engagement,” Dunbar said.

Comedian Jeff Foxworthy, coming from Fox’s quiz show, *Are You Smarter Than a 5th*

Grader?, hosts the Bible challenge. Foxworthy describes himself as a Christian, and details attending Bible study with friends on the American Bible Challenge website.

The show tests biblical knowledge in culture, history, literature and current events. In one segment, players try to differentiate “the Word of the Lord” from *The Lord of the Rings* and identify whether a character comes from the Bible or *Star Wars*.

“We find ways to open up the biblical word to references that I think make it easy to relate to,” Dunbar said. “We had fun with the content, never poking fun at the content.”

Dunbar is chief content officer of Odyssey Networks, which co-produces the show and has produced Hallmark Channel films based on Christian novels such as Angela Hunt’s *The Note* and Beverly Lewis’ *The Shunning*.

The show brings together the religious message of the multi-faith Odyssey Networks, the storytelling of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* producer Tom Forman, and the technical expertise of Embassy Row,

which produced *The Glee Project* and *The Newlywed Game*.

Producers face an interesting challenge in creating a Christian game show for an American audience. A 2010 Pew survey found that atheists and agnostics, Jews and Mormons showed the highest levels of overall religious knowledge in the United States.

Mormons scored highest on specific biblical knowledge, followed by white evangelical Protestants, atheists and agnostics, black Protestants, and Jews. White mainline Protestants and Catholics scored the lowest.

A poll by the American Bible Society — which sponsors the show — found 85 percent of Americans own a Bible. About one-quarter read the Bible several times a week or every day. However, the same percentage never reads it. The majority reads the Bible less than once a month.

Readers of the New International Version (NIV) translation might want to play along — it’s the official Bible of the show. Viewers can catch *The American Bible Challenge* Thursday nights on GSN. **BT**

National Cathedral gets boost for repair effort

By Chris Lisee
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — One year after an earthquake caused extensive damage to the Washington National Cathedral, church officials received a large gift to help restore the structure. The \$5 million grant comes from the Lilly Endowment Inc., a philanthropic organization.

The announcement came on Aug. 23 amid observances for the one-year anniversary of the quake. The ceremony was marked by pealing of bells at 1:53 p.m., the moment the quake hit.

Afterwards, a newly carved crocket stone — an ornamental carving of foliage that acts as a rainspout — was blessed and placed on the damaged southwest pinnacle of the 330-foot tall central tower. Standing 676 feet above sea level, the tower is the highest point in the nation's capital.

Though workers have spent the past year stabilizing structures and assessing damage, organizers said the anniversary marked the first significant exterior restoration.

The Lilly family's support for the church spans decades, explained N. Clay Robbins, president and CEO of Lilly Endowment.

"Eli Lilly, one of the endowment's founders, and his wife Ruth were devoted to the National Cathedral and provided major support for the cathedral's northwest St. Peter Tower decades ago," she said.

The announcement also marked the end of a smaller restoration fundraising campaign with a \$100,000 goal.

More fundraising looms, said the cathedral's interim dean Francis H. Wade. He said the cathedral has raised nearly \$8 million so far, but will need more than \$50 million to fix the earthquake damage and complete a full historic preservation. It will take an estimated \$20 million alone to repair the earthquake damage, and the work will likely take a decade.

"While we are overwhelmed by the generosity we have received, we know that we face a significant challenge in raising all the funding we will need for complete restoration and overall long-term preservation," he said.

The 5.8-magnitude quake was centered around Mineral, Va., and was felt as far north as Canada and as far west as Chicago. It caused all four pinnacles on the cathedral's central tower to rotate and weaken.

Artistic flourishes such as finials, angels and gargoyles were damaged, and the lead roof

was punctured by falling stone. Cracks were found in some of the more than 40 flying buttresses that support the cathedral walls.

Worship services were interrupted for eight weeks after the quake as essential repairs were made.

The National Cathedral was centuries in the making. When President George Washington commissioned Pierre Charles L'Enfant to design the nation's capital in 1791, the French architect envisioned "a great church for national purposes."

But the foundation stone was not laid until September 29, 1907, kicking off Washington, D.C.'s longest-running construction project. It was completed exactly 83 years later on September 29, 1990. The \$65 million to build the cathedral was raised through private donations.

The building is constructed of Indiana limestone blocks held together with mortar and reinforced by solid stone flying buttresses.

The earthquake damaged the cathedral's stone structure, but not its supporters' resolve, Wade said.

"The cathedral's mission has remained intact ... and that is to serve as the spiritual home of the nation." **BT**

New poll finds Americans divided in views of Muslims

By Omar Sacirbey
Religion News Service

Americans are almost evenly divided in how they view Muslims, according to a survey released Aug. 23 by the Arab American Institute in Washington.

But the online survey, which also gauged views on Mormons, Jews, Catholics, evangelicals, Buddhists and Hindus also found a striking generational gap and significant differences between political groups.

"The American Divide: How We View Arabs And Muslims," found that 41 percent of Americans had unfavorable views of Muslims, compared to 40 percent who held favorable views.

That's an improvement from 2010, when another Arab American Institute survey found that 55 percent of Americans viewed Muslims unfavorably, compared to 35 percent

with favorable views. The latest poll surveyed 1,052 people between August 15-16.

Professor Jack Levin, co-director of the Center on Violence and Conflict at Northeastern University, attributed the spike in anti-Muslim sentiment in 2010 to protests against a proposed Islamic center near Ground Zero. "That effect has been fading over time," Levin said.

In 2003, 47 percent of Americans viewed Muslims favorably compared to 32 percent who did not.

More than half of Republicans viewed Muslims and Arabs in general unfavorably in the latest poll, though their opinions improved when asked about Muslim Americans and Arab Americans in particular.

Among Democrats, 29 percent had unfavorable views of Muslims and Arabs, 37 percent had unfavorable views of Mormons, and 22 percent had unfavorable views of

evangelical Christians.

While Muslims were generally viewed more unfavorably than other faiths, they did fare better than some groups among younger demographics. For example, 34 percent of 18-29-year-olds viewed Muslims unfavorably, 37 percent viewed Mormons unfavorably, and 35 percent had unfavorable views of evangelicals.

Younger Americans gave Christian groups in general an approval rating about 20 percentage points lower than seniors 65 years and older.

Nearly a quarter of Americans had unfavorable views of Sikhs, compared to 35 percent of Republicans.

The poll, which had a margin of error of 3.1 percent, was conducted by JZ Analytics, a firm owned by John Zogby, brother of Jim Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute. **BT**

Give God the ‘first fruits’ of our lives

Economic woes seem to linger longer than many people thought they would, and as our country gets wrapped up in political debates, the economy takes center stage. What is a good Christian to do?

Are we to hide our money under the mattress and bury our collective heads in the sand, waiting and praying for the recession to be over? No. In fact, we are to do the opposite. We are to engage with our world, and, despite economic uncertainty, we are to give God the best we have to offer. That is, we are to give God our first fruits.

Proverbs 3:9 says, “Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce.” In James 1:18, we read that, in fulfillment of God’s purpose “We would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”

Seeing the words next to one another in our Bibles, however, does not necessarily make them any clearer.

In ancient Greece, the first fruits were an offering used for the upkeep and maintenance of the temple. In ancient Rome, the first fruits were much the same thing. Elsewhere in the ancient world, the Hebrew people used this principle of the first fruits as a response to the God who provides.

For us, first fruits can have two implications: what we bring to God and what God makes us to be. These two implications can take shape in daily life, and we can keep them in mind as part of our faith journey and spiritual discipline.

We do not profess Christ and then set our faith on a shelf while going on with everything else we have to do. We make Christ part of everything we do.

The first fruits are what we bring to God. They can take the shape of our offering — the money we give to our church. By “our church,” I mean the local congregation of sisters and brothers in Christ where we worship each week.

These are the gifts to the general fund of the church, not designated offerings to a specific mission or project. Our offering is a

gift to God, given in joy and love. It is given in faith that the gift we bring will be used for God’s glory.

As Baptists, we voted with our sisters and brothers for (or against) a budget. Now, our first fruits are what we bring to support this budget, even if we voted against it!

Joyfully giving to God is an exercise in trust. It means having faith that God will work through the stewards of the church’s money to spend it wisely. In many Baptist churches, this means trusting the budget and finance committee, but it also means participating in the life of the church. Perhaps this can include volunteering to serve on committees, and living out our faith means participating in business meetings in a Christ-like manner.



The first fruits we bring to God can also be our time and talent. Sometimes we have gifts we have not yet tapped. They lurk as potential, just beneath the surface.

Listening to God and seeking ways to serve can help us discover these gifts and bring them as a first fruit offering. When we use our talent (or our gifts) in faith, God multiplies everything we bring. When we give more (time, talent, money, etc.), we discover greater joy than we ever imagined was possible.

This brings us to the second implication of the first fruits. We are God’s first fruits. In James 1:17-18 we read, “Every generous act of giving,

with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that *we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.*”

We have the potential to do great and amazing things. This is what our offering to God can do, but it also works in reverse. We can be God’s offering to the world. We can share grace, peace, joy and blessings that supersede people’s expectations.

This is what it means to be God’s first fruits — to truly embody everything “coming down from the Father of lights.” When I think about what it means to offer the best we have to God and God offers us to the world, it is an amazing relationship.

God is still God and the one in control, but each one of us participates in this holy work. We give and are given. Even when we are given, we grow and can experience joy.

In a season fraught with partisan bickering, finger-pointing, greed and, dare I say, corruption, we have opportunities. When economic fear strikes and people begin tightening their belts, we can offer peace instead of bickering, point to Christ instead of each other, and generously give instead of burying our gifts.

It is a season of opportunity, and God is at work transforming people. **BT**

—Matthew Tennant is pastor of Kilmarnock Baptist Church in Kilmarnock, Va., and author of *Preaching in Plenty and in Want* (Judson, 2011). You can follow him on Twitter (@theologymatt).

LOOKING FOR A GREAT PLACE TO PUBLISH A BOOK?

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Why?

*Answers to
Baptist questions
from a historical
perspective*



QUESTION: Why do most white Baptists vote Republican and most black Baptists vote Democrat?

The president is the enemy of capitalism and wants to drive Christianity out of the public square, warn conservatives. Others, especially Baptists, affirm the president.

A letter from a Baptist association in North Carolina represents its congregations' widespread affection for Thomas Jefferson: "[W]e have felt the deepest gratitude to be due for the civil and religious liberties we enjoy under the administration of the government over which you, Sir, at present preside"

Conservatives accuse Jefferson of atheism because of the role he played in separating church from state. Baptists, long persecuted by colonial theocrats, greatly appreciate him for having allied with Baptists in the late 18th century to secure church-state separation in the new American nation.

Baptists of the late 18th through mid-20th centuries, in short, carried one overriding concern to the presidential voting booth: the preservation of church-state separation. Most presidential candidates in the early years of the nation shared this commitment with Baptists, although by the 1830s some contenders found themselves pressed by a conservative Christian campaign to halt Sunday mail service (a practice since Revolutionary days) and decree the Sabbath a holy day.

Richard M. Johnson, the only Baptist to serve as vice-president (1837-1841) during the century, administered the post office as a congressman, thwarting conservative Christian efforts to prohibit government activities on Sunday by declaring that government is "a civil, and not a religious institution."

There were exceptions among Baptists. During the Civil War, Southern Baptists condemned the United States as a secular nation, praised the Confederacy as a Christian nation, and demanded that even Confederate soldiers

— as employees of the nation — observe the Sabbath.

The same North Carolina association that decades earlier had gushed over Jefferson's role in securing church-state separation, during the Civil War celebrated the bonds of church and state in God's chosen nation of the Confederate States of America.

Yet by the end of the 19th century, Sunday mail delivery had ceased, with few Baptists complaining of the violation of church-state separation. Nonetheless, even as the strict church-state separation championed by earlier Baptists gradually grew less and less clearly defined, Baptists largely voted with church-state separation uppermost in their mind until the 1970s.

The Civil War, however, changed the voting paradigm. White Southern Baptists, with few exceptions, had opposed Abraham Lincoln — the first Republican president — on the issue of race. Black Baptists, unable to vote, placed their hope in Lincoln and revered him for his Emancipation Proclamation.

In the decades following the war, white Baptists of the South overwhelmingly voted Democrat, while white Northern Baptists were less monolithic. Conversely, black Baptists nationwide voted Republican.

Yet by the 1920s, Southern Baptists faced more complicated presidential dynamics. In 1928, Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith generated strong opposition from Southern Baptists due to his anti-prohibition stance and his Catholic faith; Roman Catholic Church teaching denied the validity of church-state separation.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, four-time Democrat President Franklin Roosevelt broke new ground by allowing blacks into the Armed Forces and creating the Fair Employment

Practice Commission that prohibited racial discrimination in government hiring. By 1940, the African-American vote — including Baptists — had largely migrated to the Democratic Party.

Democrat Harry S Truman, the nation's first Southern Baptist president, ascended to the presidency in 1945 following Roosevelt's death. During his two terms, Truman called upon the nation to halt violence against African Americans and end segregation.

The issue of civil rights, however, challenged both political parties. Republican president Dwight Eisenhower's leadership in the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act garnered strong opposition from the Southern Baptist public, but proved to be only a bump in the road.

By the time John F. Kennedy, a Catholic, ran for the presidency in 1960 (many white Baptists opposed Kennedy, despite his affirmation of church-state separation), the voting patterns of white Baptists of the South were shifting toward the Republican Party, while black Baptists were solidly in the Democrats' camp.

In ways similar to that of the earliest white Baptists in colonial America, African-American Baptists' overriding political agenda was freedom and equality — expressed as civil, rather than already-obtained religious, liberty.

The bitter racial conflict in the two decades following hardened these patterns into the largely nationwide white Baptist Republican and black Baptist Democratic divide that remains to this day.

Conservative Christian leaders of the 1970s and 1980s pointed to the backlash against President Jimmy Carter's and the IRS's

Continued on next page

Religious labels matter less in 2012 campaign

By Bob Smietana
USA Today

(RNS) — There aren't any white Protestants on the presidential ballot this year — a first in American history.

Instead, the race features two Catholic candidates for vice president, and a Mormon Republican and African-American mainline Protestant for president.

Perhaps lucky for all of them, voters care more about issues such as social justice or gay marriage than they do about denominational brands.

That's particularly true for Republican Mitt Romney and running mate Paul Ryan, who hope to woo evangelical voters that share their values rather than their theology.

"If you had told Jerry Falwell back in 1980 that by 2012 that there would not be a white Protestant on the ticket — he would have died right there," said Shaun Casey, professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington.

But the same dynamic doesn't bother David French of Columbia, Tenn., a blogger at *EvangelicalsforMitt.org*. He wants a candidate who shares his values, not his theology.

"The real questions are: Is this person pro-life? Are they pro-marriage? Is this person really conservative?" French said.

The answer to all three of those questions is yes for Romney, he said, and that's more important than the fact that some evangelicals see Romney's Mormon beliefs as heretical.

He also said that Americans in general no longer worry about denominational labels. French, for example, grew up attending a

Church of Christ and now attends a conservative Presbyterian church. A Pew Forum study in 2008 found that 44 percent of Americans have changed faiths at least once.

Casey, however, said having a Mormon and Catholic on the ticket could be risky for Republicans because both groups have been seen as suspect in the past by evangelicals.

According to CNN exit polls in 2008, about three-quarters of evangelicals voted for Arizona Sen.

John McCain, the Republican nominee for president. During the election, McCain touted the fact that he attended a Baptist church.

A quarter voted for Obama, who joined a United Church of Christ in his 20s.

Among the evangelicals who voted for Obama was John Lamb, a Southern Baptist from Nashville, Tenn. He plans to support Obama again. His main concern is immigration reform.

"I am dismayed at the lack of concern for the poor and for disenfranchised immigrants in this country," he said.

Lamb doubts that denominational labels make much difference to voters. He points out that former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton were Southern Baptists, and evangelicals opposed them both.

But it's not just the voters who downplay denominational identity.

A recent study of voting patterns in



Barack Obama



Mitt Romney

Congress found that legislators follow ideology and party affiliation, no matter what their religion.

Bill D'Antonio, a senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, looked at roll call votes on abortion from 1977 to 2010.

Before 1980, the votes followed denominational lines. Mainline Protestants from both parties voted for abortion rights. More than half of Catholics from both parties voted against, according to the study, being published in a new book, *The Religious Factor in Congress: 1960 to 2010*.

After 1980, the pattern changed. Most Democrats became supportive of abortion rights, and most Republicans became anti-abortion.

In recent years, Democrats have tried to woo evangelical voters on the issue of social justice. That makes sense to Marcia Pally, author of *The New Evangelicals: Expanding the Vision of the Common Good*.

"When the ordinary person in the pew starts working in a prison ministry program or food pantry, or goes to Haiti or Uganda and works to prevent malaria or build houses — their priorities change," she said.

Still, Democrats' appeals to evangelicals have largely failed — abortion is a big reason, Pally said — and polls show that a growing number of evangelicals support Romney.

Robert Jones, president of the Washington-based Public Religion Research Institute, said evangelicals were skeptical about Romney at first. In October 2010, about 40 percent of evangelicals had a favorable view of the Republican candidate.

Once it became clear that Romney was Obama's opponent, that figure shot up to 68 percent, said Jones. **BT**

Continued

crusade against the tax-exempt status of the racially-discriminative Bob Jones University (not *Roe v. Wade*, as some have suggested) as the catalyst for the formation and rise of the modern Christian Right. Meanwhile, black Baptists flocked to the Democratic Party in even greater numbers in the 1980s.

In the decades following, social issues — particularly gender equality, abortion and

homosexuality — reinforced the loyalty of most white Baptists to the Republican Party, while support for social programs of importance to African Americans deepened the support of most black Baptists to the Democrats.

A recent edition of the *Wall Street Journal* reported that, nationally, 80 percent of the Republican vote is now white, while Democrats claim 98 percent or more of the black vote. These numbers are broadly reflective of Baptists as a subset of the nation's citizenry.

Accordingly, white Baptist votes for Democratic candidates are a minority — and often are cast by more moderate Baptists — while black Baptist votes for Republicans are even rarer. **BT**

—*This series is provided by Baptists Today in partnership with the Baptist History & Heritage Society. Bruce Gourley serves as online editor of the news journal and as executive director of the Society.*

Nurturing Faith: *Texts and Themes for 2013*

Jan. 6-Feb. 10: God's Desire and Israel's Glory

Jan. 6 – Isaiah 60:1-6 (Epiphany)
“Rise and Shine!”
A day of glory is coming for Israel.

Jan. 13 – Isaiah 43:1-7
“You Are Mine!”
A day of deliverance is coming for Israel.

Jan. 20 – Isaiah 62:1-5
“A Cherished Bride”
As God's bride, Israel gets a new name.

Jan. 27 – Nehemiah 8:1-10
“Law School”
Ezra teaches the first mass Bible study class.

Feb. 3 – Jeremiah 1:4-10
“Inside and Out”
God calls Jeremiah, explaining that he has no choice.

Feb. 10 – Exodus 34:29-35
“A Face Full of Glory”
God speaks – and shines – through Moses.

Feb. 17-Mar. 31: Lent on the Loose

Feb. 17 – Luke 4:1-13
“Don't Tempt Me!”
Jesus's ministry begins with a test – three of them, over 40 days.

Feb. 24 – Luke 13:31-35
“A Fox in the Henhouse”
Jesus, like a mother hen, weeps over Jerusalem.

Mar. 3 – Luke 13:1-9
“The Year of No Fig Preserves”
Jesus refuses to explain tragedy, but calls for repentance.

Mar. 10 – Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
“Prodigals, All of You”
Who's the biggest prodigal?

Mar. 17 – John 12:1-8
“Better Than a Pedicure”
Mary shows appreciation for Jesus.

Mar. 24 – Luke 19:28-40
“A Day for Shouting”
Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a day ordained for praise

Mar. 31 – John 20:1-18
“The Power of Persistence”
Mary stays at the tomb when all others leave – and meets Jesus.

April 7-May 26: The Apocalypse?

Apr. 7 – Revelation 1:4-8
“Look Who's Coming!”
John insists that Jesus will come again.

Apr. 14 – Revelation 5:11-14
“Songs of Angels”
John visualizes heaven's throne room.

Apr. 21 – Revelation 7:9-17
“Visions of Terror”
Trumpets you never want to hear.

Apr. 28 – Revelation 21:1-6
“No More Tears”
A new heaven and new earth emerge, where death and grief are no more.

May 5 – Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5
“Better Than You Can Imagine”
John describes heaven as a place beyond earthly beauty and majesty.

May 12 – Revelation 22:12-21
“I Am Coming Soon!”
John promises that Jesus is coming soon.

May 19 (Pentecost) – Psalm 104:24-35
“Life in the Spirit”
The psalmist attributes all life to the Spirit of God

May 26 (Trinity Sunday) – Romans 5:1-5
“Love Three Ways”
Paul writes of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit

June 2-30: Elijah: Prophets Gone Wild

June 2 – 1 Kings 18:20-21 (22-29), 30-39
“Baal, Bulls and Blazes”
Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a duel of the Gods.

June 9 – 1 Kings 17:8-16 (17-24)
“Giving and Getting”
Elijah challenges a poor widow's faith – and then calls God on the carpet.

June 16 – 1 Kings 21:1-10 (11-14), 15-21a
“How Low Can You Go?”
Elijah confronts Ahab and Jezebel, who have stolen Naboth's vineyard.

June 23 – 1 Kings 19:1-4 (5-7), 8-15a
“The Sound of Silence”
God speaks to Elijah – very quietly.

June 30 – 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
“If the Mantle Fits ...”
Elijah commissions Elisha to follow him ... sort of.

July 7 – Psalm 30
“Mourning into Dancing”
The psalmist offers a hymn of ups and downs – or downs and ups.

July 14-Aug. 4: Reviewing the Basics

July 14 – Colossians 1:1-14
“Triple Strength”
Paul prays that the Colossians may be “strong with the strength of ... power”

July 21 – Colossians 1:15-28
“The Hope of Glory”
Christ, the reconciler, is the head of the church and the hope of glory.

July 28 – Colossians 2:6-19
“Stuck on Jesus”
Paul urges the Colossians to remain firmly fixed on Jesus.

Aug. 4 – Colossians 3:1-11
“The Be All and End All”
Paul calls believers to put the past behind and focus on Jesus.

Aug. 11-Sept. 1: What God Really Wants

Aug. 11 – Isaiah 1:1, 10-20
“How to Make God Happy”
What God really wants is justice – and those who do justice are blessed.

Aug. 18 – Isaiah 5:1-7
“How to Make God Mad”
Stinking fruit does not a happy vineyard owner make.

Aug. 25 – Isaiah 58:9b-14
“Justice's Reward”
Isaiah insists that showing justice is good for all, including the just.

Sept. 1 – Jeremiah 2:4-13
“Dumb and Dumber”
Exchanging living water for a cracked and empty cistern is not a smart move.

Sept. 8-Oct. 27: Gospel Stories

Sept. 8 – Luke 14:25-33
“Counting the Cost”
Do we really want to be disciples?

Sept. 15 – Luke 15:1-10
“Counting Sheep”
People who love look out for the lost.

Sept. 22 – Luke 16:1-13
“Counting Coins”
Jesus applauds a crook. What?

Sept. 29 – Luke 16:19-31
“Counting Options”
The story of the rich man and Lazarus suggests we should think ahead.

Oct. 6 – Luke 17:5-10
“Feeling Small”
Mustard-seed faith and worthless servants can accomplish great things.

Oct. 13 – Luke 17:11-19
“One Came Back”
The healing of the 10 lepers leads to a lesson on gratitude and service.

Oct. 20 – Luke 18:1-8
“Persistent Prayer”
Does God really give in to our wheedling?

Oct. 27 – Luke 18:9-14
“Humble Prayer”
Does a pushy prayer get us anywhere with God?

Nov. 3-24: Latter Prophets, Future Dreams

Nov. 3 – Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
“When Things Look Bad ...”
Habakkuk sees trouble on every hand, but holds on to hope.

Nov. 10 – Haggai 1:15b-29
“I Will Fill This House with Splendor”
Haggai looks at a ruined temple and sees visions of grandeur.

Nov. 17 – Malachi 4:1-6
“With Healing on His Wings”
Malachi sees a sick nation – and a new day of healing and life.

Nov. 24 – Jeremiah 23:1-6
“A Righteous Branch”
Jeremiah lives in a troubling time but hopes for a new and just leader.

Dec. 1-29: Advent Hopes, Old and New

Dec. 1 – Isaiah 2:1-5
“You Don't Need That Spear”
Isaiah envisions a day when weapons will become tools of peace.

Dec. 8 – Isaiah 11:1-10
“Odd Bedfellows”
Isaiah views a time of peace between natural enemies, even lions and lambs.

Dec. 15 – Isaiah 35:1-10
“From Highway to Holy Way”
Isaiah looks ahead to a happy return to God's holy city.

Dec. 22 – Isaiah 7:10-16
“With Us – God!”
Isaiah has a vision that even he does not understand.

Dec. 29 – Matthew 2:13-23
“A Strange Beginning to a Happy Ending”
The joyful news of Jesus' birth gives way to a bloody slaughter of innocent children.

Nurturing FAITH™ BIBLE STUDIES



Tony Cartledge, a popular Bible scholar and teacher, writes each of the weekly lessons (beginning on page 18) and the insightful background materials available online.

Rich Jordan, a Christian educator serving with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina, offers creative lesson plans to enhance teaching.

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

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Youth Lessons (pages 22-23) build off Tony's Bible studies and direct these biblical truths to the daily lives of students. Curriculum developer **David Cassady** writes the youth lessons in the news journal, and student minister **Jeremy Colliver** provides the online teaching guides for each lesson found at nurturingfaith.net (or linked from baptiststoday.org).

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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Mark 12:28-34

Nov. 4, 2012

What Rules Matter Most?

For the month of November, we'll be following the gospel texts in the Revised Common Lectionary. These three texts from Mark – plus one from John – raise some of the most important questions that Christian believers ask – beginning with the bottom line: What rules guide my daily behavior?

Think about it. Can you state your guiding philosophy for life? Of all the principles that drive your decision-making, which is most important? If we are honest, many of us – even though we claim to be Christ-followers – are primarily motivated by self-interest. The choices we make and the things we do are simply designed to make our own lives, and the lives of our families, better, easier, or happier. Personal survival is built into our genes, but altruism must be cultivated.

Trick questions (v. 28)

The Bible often communicates a divine desire that humans should learn to look beyond themselves and care for others. Any number of passages could be chosen as “life verses” to guide our living as people whose responsibility extends beyond ourselves. Many have adopted Micah 6:8 as a touchstone for living: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (NRSV).

But, the prophets' writings were not universally accepted among the



first-century Jews who entered dialogue with Jesus. When the rabbis debated what rules for living were most important, they searched for the greatest of God's commandments as found in “the Law,” or “the Torah.” Christians more commonly refer to this section of scripture, the first five books of the Old Testament, as the Pentateuch.

Late in his earthly life, Jesus found himself in deep conversation with some of the Jewish leaders. His persona and his teachings had become quite a threat to the established religious authorities, so some of them tried to trip Jesus up by asking some of their favorite trick questions.

After Jesus told a parable that could be interpreted as critical of the Jewish leaders (Mk. 12:1-12), Mark says “they sent some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said” (v. 13, cf. 14-17). Later, a group of Sadducees joined the conversation with their own tricky query (vv. 18-27).

The big question (vv. 29-31)

Jesus skillfully reframed all the questions designed to entrap, and turned them back on his accusers. A scribe who overheard the conversation was so impressed that he decided to posit a hotly debated question of the day: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (v. 28).

Jesus did not hesitate, as Mark tells it: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (vv. 29-31).

In giving this answer, Jesus quoted from two familiar texts. The first (Deut. 6:4) was a part of a prayer well known to observant Jewish men, who were expected to repeat Deut. 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Num. 15:37-41 twice daily

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as a confession of faith. The prayer was (and is) called the “Shema” after the first word in the Hebrew text, an imperative verb that means “hear.” The tenet that there is one God, rather than a multiplicity of gods, is central to the Hebrew faith. There is not a separate god for each nation, occupation, season of the year. There is one God, and that God is Yahweh.

Given the belief in one God, it follows that humans should serve God with every capacity available to them. Deut. 6:5 says one should worship or serve (both concepts are included in a single word) God with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, and with all one’s strength (literally, “muchness”).

The quotation in Mark does not line up precisely with either the Hebrew text or its Greek counterpart, the Septuagint. In the Hebrew mindset, both thinking and feeling were associated with the heart, but Greek and Roman thought separated the two. Almost certainly due to this influence, it became common in the first century to expand on the text by adding “with all your mind” as a way of emphasizing one’s mental capacity, and that is the way Mark presents it. The point is to cover all the bases: to love God with all that we have.

By adding the second commandment from Lev. 19:18, Jesus gave new meaning to the first. One cannot truly fulfill the first without the second. Genuine love for God will naturally find expression in the love of one’s neighbor.

The call to love both God and neighbor undercuts the arguments of legalism, for one is to be motivated by love rather than by checking all the required boxes. Love is an internally motivated and perpetually unfinished task, not an external requirement that can be completed.

In essence, the call to love God and neighbor subsumes every other commandment. Paul put it this way: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You

shall not steal; You shall not covet’; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom. 13:8-10).

Paul stated it even more succinctly in Gal. 5:14: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” James 2:8 describes the command to love others as “the royal law.”

John’s gospel emphasizes Jesus’ insistence that the disciples should be motivated and known by their love: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (13:34-35).

Eduard Schweizer has pointed out that the open-ended nature of the love command means that it can never be completely fulfilled: “if anyone were to achieve his goal in loving, he would cease loving.” Yet, a believer need not despair at failing to achieve his objective: “He has the confidence of one who knows that God loves him, and he so lives in this confidence that love flows on and on” (*The Good News According to Mark* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970], 252).

An agreement, and a challenge (vv. 32-34)

The scribe seems to have been pleased with Jesus’ answer, agreeing that the twin commands of loving God and loving others are “much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (v. 33).

Noting the scribe’s perception, Jesus replied: “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (v. 34). The kingdom of God can be thought of as the reign and realm of God. In one sense, the kingdom of God has always existed, though humans have tended to live

without regard to it. Jesus began his preaching ministry by declaring “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mk. 1:15).

In Christ, God’s kingdom has been personally revealed. Those who draw near to Christ and his teaching approach the kingdom of God. To the extent that they follow his teaching, they actively participate in the kingdom of God.

Jesus’ response can be read as an invitation for the scribe to move beyond being “not far” from the kingdom, and to actively enter the kingdom through acceptance of the royal Christ and obedience to his teachings.

Mark does not reveal whether the scribe responded positively or negatively to Jesus’ observation that he was not far from the kingdom.

What Mark does tell us is that Jesus’ responses were so masterful that “after that no one dared to ask him any question” (v. 34).

Jesus’ insistence that true love of God is best expressed in love for others is a powerful statement. Most of us can probably remember times when someone showed love to us – perhaps unexpected love – and the difference it made to us.

My high school days are long past, but I can still remember how nervous and intimidated I was the first day I sat down in Latin class as a high school freshman. I was a perfect 1960s nerd, and I knew it, and I didn’t expect anyone to be nice to me. But Nellie Jane Mobley made a point of turning around in her desk and talking to me. Not only was Nellie Jane a senior, but she was the homecoming queen – and she talked to me just like I was a regular person. That little bit of kindness gave me a tremendous jolt of confidence, and helped to set the stage for my high school career. There were plenty other people who acted like I didn’t exist, but Nellie Jane Mobley talked to me. She didn’t stand to gain anything from being so nice: she made a choice to be kind, and I have never forgotten it.

Love God, love others, and the stars will dance. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Mark 12:38-44

Nov. 11, 2012

What Really Pleases God?

As we think this month about what God expects from us, we have to consider the issue of stewardship, and today's lesson is drawn from a perfect text to address that subject. The root meaning of "stewardship," of course, goes back to the word *steward*. A steward is someone who has been entrusted with another's property. Joseph was made the steward over Potiphar's house. Jesus told a story of three men who were given charge of a businessman's finances while he was out of town. Stewardship is what we do – rightly or wrongly – with what has been entrusted to us. 🇺

Loud contributions ... (vv. 38-41)

Try visualizing the scripture lesson as a brief video clip. In the background is Jerusalem at Passover time. It is a busy, bustling city. It is filled with Jews and Arabs, pilgrims and permanent residents, people who sell and people who buy. The streets are dusty and crowded. If you back off and look from a distance, it is difficult to tell one street from another.

But, if you could see it, if you could stand on the Mount of Olives and look across at Jerusalem before climbing down through the Kidron Valley, you wouldn't pay much attention to the streets. Your eyes would be drawn to the highest point of the city, to the temple mount. There you would see a tall rectangular building constructed of clean white limestone with highlights of lustrous gold veneer. You would see



two huge self-standing columns just outside the temple doors, and beyond them two rows of smaller columns extending all the way around the temple. The entire surface of the ground is paved with flat, well-laid stones. A long and impressive stairway leads to the temple mount.

The outer courtyard is sometimes called the "women's court," the only part of the temple compound that women can enter. Like a large, open-air vestibule, it is a gathering place for Jews who come to worship. It is a place where rabbis sit, surrounded by pupils who are eager to study the Torah.

You may think this is a Baptist temple because scattered about the courtyard are 13 collection boxes. It is here that people come to pay their tithes and give their offerings for the upkeep of the temple, for the priests, and for the poor. 🇺

Off to the side you notice a remarkably young rabbi who is teaching near a prominent collection box. He doesn't

sit in a nice chair that his disciples carry around for him, but on the steps. He is not so well dressed as the other rabbis, and he doesn't talk as much. He has directed his disciples to be silent and to watch what is happening around them.

Some men swagger across the court. They belong to a club called the Pharisees. They wear matching headbands and bracelets with little leather boxes containing tiny scrolls on which a few scriptures are written. They wear matching expressions of disdain for the people about them who are not as devoted to the law as they are. Some of them are also teachers of the law. They are called scribes. They love it when other people call them "Rabbi," and they probably call themselves that, too.

You notice the young rabbi nodding toward this group. Quietly, he warns his disciples to "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have the best seats in

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the synagogues and places of honor at banquets” (vv. 38-39).

Despite their pious appearance, the same men might foreclose on a poor widow’s house with no concern for her plight, or offer long prayers intended to impress other people rather than truly addressing God. “They will receive the greater condemnation,” Jesus said (v. 40). 📖

A second group approaches, more boisterous and less holy. They parade their wealth in fine robes of white and scarlet, purple and blue. Their sandals are of new leather, their skin is well oiled, and their toenails are manicured.

A man with a wide belt of folded cloth steps up to the collection box. He carefully unfolds one side of his belt to reveal a soft leather purse. Deliberately, he takes several heavy gold coins and drops them into the box, one at the time.

He has no sooner moved away than another takes his place. His cash is stashed in a decorative moneybag of finely woven cloth, hidden on a string around his neck and behind his glistening beard. The bag clinks softly as he carefully counts coins to be sure that he gives the full tithe, but no more.

A silent sermon (vv. 42-44)

After the others have moved away, Jesus alerts his followers to the stooped figure of a poorly dressed woman waiting quietly on the fringe. Her outer robe is worn through in some spots and patched in others. It looks like she’s been sleeping in it. Her feet are covered with dust, and her sandals already well worn when the first owner threw them away.

The dark color of her faded clothing makes it obvious that she is a widow. 📖 Whether she feels shamed by her clothing, her social status, or hurtful glances from the more wealthy, she has been standing apart from the group in front of her, looking down, trying to be invisible, avoiding rejection, awaiting her turn.

The righteous rich eventually move on as the men prepare to enter the Court of Israel, where only Jewish males over

age 13 are allowed. They leave their wives behind to talk among themselves and perhaps, to recite a prayer.

The poor woman moves quickly. She steps quietly to the box, bows her head for a moment, and opens her calloused hand. Two tiny copper coins fall into the slot and land with a small, tinny sound.

Perhaps you wonder how she had obtained those little coins. Did she earn them by sweeping someone else’s house? Cooking someone else’s food? Had the mites been thrown to her as a gift of charity?

The Greek text calls these coins *leptons*, the smallest coin then used in Jerusalem. Like the rabbi’s disciples, you may be unimpressed. A poor little woman put her two cents’ worth into the collection box. So?

But hear what Jesus says: “Look! I tell you the truth – this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. Every one of them gave out of their surplus, but this woman, despite her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on!” (Mk. 12:44, slightly paraphrased).

What is two cents worth?

For that woman, two cents was worth everything, because it was all that she had to live on – every penny she owned. Such was the gift of a poor widow whose name is buried with her, but whose faith and devotion will live forever.

If anyone ever had a reason not to give, it was this destitute woman. She didn’t have any other money hidden away in a cookie jar, and she probably didn’t have a cookie jar to begin with. She may not have had a home. And yet, she gave.

What Jesus wants us to understand is this: the amount we give is far less important than the measure of our sacrifice. The rich who had filled the

coffers with coins of gold could give substantial sums and never miss it. This woman’s gift could not begin to compare in a quantitative sense. But their gifts could not compare in a qualitative sense.

Surely this is one of the many reasons for Christians to practice tithing. Both the Greek and the Hebrew words for “tithe” actually mean “tenth.” Most of us cannot give away 10 percent of our income without feeling it – without giving up something else. Ten percent may be a car payment or a weekend at the beach. It may be a new suit or dress. It may be hot dogs instead of steak. 📖

When we give as an act of obedience and worship, we gain a sense of peace that comes from knowing we are contributing to God’s good work. We grow in faith as we see how God continues to provide. We gain a sense of ownership in the work of the church, and grow in our maturity as Christians.

Obviously, there is more to stewardship than money. Our time is also a trust from God, as are our talents. Do we ever consider tithing our time? Imagine what could be accomplished if we devoted a tenth of an average workweek to serving others. We could devote it to preparing and teaching a Sunday school lesson, caring for children so others can worship, volunteering with a social service organization, or just spending time with someone who needs a friend. There is always something that can be done to bring light and love into the world, into the lives of others, into the world God has given to us.

The poor widow’s gift is a ringing illustration of what radical faith and radical commitment is all about. It is the kind of faith that can change our lives as we learn to trust Christ with our property as well as our heart.

When she put in her two cents’ worth, it was all that she had. 📖

When we think about serious stewardship, we may automatically think “I can’t afford to do that.”

Perhaps it is better to ask if we can afford not to. **BT**

Youth

November 4 — November 25, 2012

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

One Thing

The concept of “bumper sticker theology” is simple: Make what you believe short enough that it fits on a bumper sticker. Maybe this is why Twitter is spreading like wildfire, since you have to post in less than 140 characters. We like it short and simple — on point and to the point.

Jesus spent a lot of time talking with people and telling parables, but stories don't fit well on bumper stickers or in a Twitter feed. However, when Jesus spoke about the greatest commandment, he kept it short and simple.

In the Scripture text, Jesus is dealing with a series of trap questions the Sadducees and Pharisees have been asking to try and catch him. You know what trap questions are: either option ends with you in trouble. (The classic example is, “Do these jeans make

me look fat?”) But Jesus sees through these questions and avoids their traps. In this instance, he surprises them with the greatest commandment.

One of the scribes, who is an authority in the law, asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment. Jesus responds by quoting two passages that are very familiar to those in attendance.

We know the passage as Deuteronomy 6:4-9, what the Israelites called the Shema. They prayed it many times a day, and it was at the heart of how they approached life. Jesus also quotes from Leviticus 19:18. But Jesus forever interlocks these two separate passages, giving both of them new meaning: To love God, you are to love your neighbor; and to love your neighbor, you are to love God.

NOVEMBER 4

Think About It:

In talking about the greatest commandment, Jesus didn't say we are to love only “if this” or “if that”. How does it make you feel that God loves all people the same — even the ones you love or hate?

Make a Choice:

You don't always get to choose what happens in your life, but you do get to choose how to respond to situations. What would your life be like if you chose to do the loving thing in each situation?

Pray:

God, we are grateful that you love us all and that you love all of us.

That's It?

If you search the Internet, you can find some humorous signs homeless persons have created to grab the attention of pedestrians and encourage them to drop their spare change into their cup. The coins and bills that are dropped are an afterthought to those who drop them, but to those receiving the leftovers it might mean a hot meal instead of what is found after dumpster diving.

Sometimes I wonder if the homeless look at the fancy shoes and clothes of the people dropping their money into the cup and think, “Is that it?” Likewise, there are times when I imagine God looks down on us and says, “Is that it?”

In today's Scripture, Jesus has turned to those following him and he begins to teach. He paints a picture they know all too well: scribes walking around piously in their long

robes and rich people dropping large coins into the collection box so the money can be heard by those around them. You can envision Jesus sitting back and murmuring under his breath, “Is that it?” These men live well enough, so the coins they drop into the collection box won't be missed. They may even be giving the coins as an act of pity.

Then a widow approaches with her only two copper coins. She places them in the collection box and walks away. If this were Hollywood, the woman would walk away with the help of her cane and Jesus would stand up and say, “Now that is it!” You could see Jesus' followers with puzzled looks on their faces as Jesus tells them she has given more than the others because she has given all she has.

NOVEMBER 11

Think About It:

The poor widow gave all she had. When you give, do you give out of your abundance? Do you give only after you have made yourself comfortable?

Make a Choice:

You are at a time in your life when most of the money you have isn't obligated before you earn it. How do you choose to spend your money? Does it build up the work of God?

Pray:

God, may we choose to give with a willing and joyful heart so that our offerings may go toward creating your kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



What's Left?

Can you imagine a world where no skyscrapers dot the skyline? Can you imagine streets and highways being overgrown with grasses and trees? Can you imagine driving down Main Street of your hometown and nothing being there?

These are similar questions to what the disciples are thinking after Jesus tells them their buildings will be demolished, with not even one stone stacked on another. Jesus says the city will be leveled.

When one of the disciples makes what seems to be a passing comment about how large and impressive the temple and its stones are, Jesus chastises him — declaring that none of it will exist and the stones will be made flat. The difficulty you may be having in picturing your city leveled to dust is the same struggle the disciples have envisioning the destruction of the temple.

The disciples sit quietly until four of them find Jesus to ask him when to expect the destruction. It's a natural question: "If all of this is to be destroyed, when will it be done?" Jesus lists several concrete things that will happen before the destruction of the temple, but he then warns that the destruction of the temple will be only the beginning of many conflicts.

Jesus is telling his disciples that the fancy buildings with large stones will not matter because they will ultimately be destroyed. Perhaps this is Jesus' way of leading his disciples to consider what they will do to make an eternally lasting impact.

The same question applies for us today: What are you doing that will last when all the mortar has given way and the walls have folded in on themselves?

NOVEMBER 18

Think About It:

Millions upon millions of dollars are spent to build some absolutely beautiful buildings. But what is the true value of these investments if the buildings will one day become rubble?

Make a Choice:

Do we have the ability to make a lasting difference in the lives of others? How does your faith lead you to focus on those actions that will last the test of time?

Pray:

God, we pray that we may be your hands and feet in ways that sustain and create your kingdom.

A King

Recently there have been a lot of political interviews. Reporters often ask questions they think might lead to a story or even a headline. Knowing this, the persons being interviewed are usually very careful in their responses lest a negative headline result from the conversations.

In today's lesson from John, we may wonder who is interviewing whom. Pilate and Jesus both already seem to suspect how the other will answer, leading to a somewhat awkward and interesting exchange. Pilate asks Jesus a question about his kingship. Jesus doesn't directly answer Pilate's question, but instead seems to speak to the reason behind Pilate's question.

Pilate then moves from asking about who Jesus is to asking about what Jesus has done. Jesus responds by explaining "whose" he is. Jesus is of the kingdom of God and testifies to the truth, and thus those who adhere to the truth listen to Jesus' voice.

Jesus does not have to be the King of the Jews to do what he was born to do: to testify to the truth. The truth of Jesus gets him in trouble with the religious leaders in power. When the people begin to listen to him, those in control become fearful that they might lose their influence. They testify to themselves instead of truth, while Jesus testifies to the truth — even if it means death.

NOVEMBER 25

Think About It:

There are all kinds of truths out there. Some of these truths sustain life, and some destroy life. Christ calls us to reflect a sustaining love, and thus the truth of God. Which truth will you follow today?

Make a Choice:

You choose daily to represent the truth of Christ or to represent yourself. Who will you choose to represent today? What kingdom will you choose to live in today?

Pray:

God, help us better understand who we are and whose we are.

Bible Study

Mark 13:1-8

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 18, 2012

What's Next?

Don't you love a scriptural conundrum? Something open to wild and crazy interpretations? Mark 13, which has parallels in Matthew 24 and Luke 21, fits into that category. Misunderstandings of the text have caused no end of alarm.

I was a young preacher boy in 1970 when Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* became a best seller. Basing his argument largely on predictions from these texts, Lindsay catalogued alarming statistics claiming to show a rapid increase in wars, famines, earthquakes and the like, raising an alarm that the world was coming to an end and Christ would soon return.

A more careful reading shows that Jesus' words were indeed a warning, but his intention had little to do with forecasting a date for the world's end.

So, what is this puzzling chapter about? What did Jesus intend for his disciples to take from his long string of admonitions, and how might his discourse speak to contemporary disciples?

There's no question that "Mark 13 is one of the most debated chapters in the New Testament" (Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Commentaries [Smyth & Helwys, 2007], 443).

It is important that we note the context. Much of Jesus' teaching in the previous two chapters took place inside the Jerusalem temple, and was highly critical of the temple and the privileged religious establishment that had grown up around it. In chapter 13, Jesus led his disciples away from the temple grounds and predicted that the beautiful edifice would be destroyed.

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



Jesus' remarks about the coming destruction of the temple ultimately led to a discussion of the last days. The lectionary text extends only through v. 8, but to understand what is happening, we must give some brief attention to the remainder of the chapter.

Trouble for the temple ... (vv. 1-2)

According to Mark's chronology, Jesus followed his triumphal entry (11:1-11) into Jerusalem by going to the temple for a quick look around before returning to Bethany for the night. The next day, while returning to the temple, Jesus cursed a fruitless fig tree that subsequently withered, which some see as symbolic of the temple establishment (11:12-14, 20-21).

Jesus' attitude toward current temple practices became clear that morning when he caused a stir by upsetting the tables of merchants and moneychangers who had been allowed to do business in the temple courts (11:15-17). His reference to the temple as a "den of robbers"

did not sit well with the chief priests and scribes, who feared Jesus' rising popularity and sought for a way to kill him, Mark says (11:18).

On the next day, Jesus and the temple officials exchanged verbal barbs over the issue of authority, with Jesus gaining the upper hand (11:27-33) before telling a parable about wicked tenants of a vineyard who kept profits owed to the landowner, mistreating servants and killing the owner's son (12:1-9). The priests who ran the temple in God's behalf were the clear targets of Jesus' story, and they knew it (12:10-12).

Various Jewish groups sought to entrap Jesus with tricky questions about taxes (12:13-17) and the resurrection (12:18-27). Further questions related to identifying the greatest commandment (12:28-34) and the identity of the Messiah (12:35-37). Jesus then lambasted the greedy and surface piety of religious leaders, contrasting their public sanctimoniousness with the humble devotion of a poor widow (12:38-44).

With this clearly negative judgment in the background, Jesus led his disciples away from the temple, but one of the 12 looked around and could not help exclaiming his delight at the magnificent sight of the majestic temple compound (13:1).

Was Jesus exasperated by his student's apparent failure to grasp how the whole temple enterprise had departed from its divine mission to serve its human leaders? Frustrated or not, Jesus pointed to the massive stonework of the temple building and insisted that the entire complex would be leveled, with not one stone left upon another. Can you imagine the disciples' astonishment? The temple was constructed of stones weighing many tons. 📌 The thought of it coming to ruin might have seemed ludicrous, but Jesus used two strong double negatives (allowed in Greek) to emphasize its certainty. 📌

Don't be troubled (vv. 3-8) ...

The verses immediately following Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction read as a second introduction. While sitting on the Mount of Olives with his disciples, Jesus was approached by Peter, James, John and Andrew. 📌 They had a question: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" (v. 4).

Some scholars, such as Schweizer, argue that "these things" does not refer to the preceding prediction of the temple's destruction, but to the things that follow, beginning in v. 5. Mark has intentionally structured the text, however, so that the question "when will this be?" follows immediately upon Jesus' claim that the temple would fall. It seems clear that Mark intended for "these things" to address the issue of the temple's destruction.

Jesus responded to his disciples' troubled question about his troubling prediction by saying they should not be troubled (v. 7). Mark's gospel was probably written in the late 60s A.D., during a period of increasing tension between the Jews and their Roman overlords. A Jewish rebellion had erupted in

66 A.D., leading Emperor Nero to dispatch Vespasian to put down the revolt in 67 A.D. The Jews were not easily quelled and the war dragged on for years, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem – and of the temple – in 70 A.D.

During this chaotic period, various rebel leaders spoke of themselves as messiahs, though some drew more followers than others.

Mark writes as if Jesus knows such troubles are coming, but wants his disciples to know that things such as self-styled Messiahs, wars, earthquakes and famines are commonplace, and should not be interpreted as predictive signs. 📌 Thus, he said, "Beware that no one leads you astray" (v. 5).

When modern believers are presented with statistics about escalating wars or natural disasters as evidence for the coming return of Christ, they should likewise recall Jesus' advice and not be led astray by putative prophets.

The sign of the temple's coming destruction was not to be found in human conflicts or natural disasters, but in Jesus' own words. Culpepper states it clearly: "In a sense all of Mark 11-12 has been his interpretation of the signs of God's coming judgment on it and on the religious leaders. Jesus interprets the coming destruction not as the result of Roman imperialism but as God's judgment" (*Mark*, 448).

Jesus' concern is that the disciples not confuse earthly upheavals caused by the temple's destruction with the cosmic chaos to be associated with the last days. It was common for apocalyptic works, such as the latter half of Daniel, to arise in times of great travail. By nature, apocalyptic writings sought to encourage beleaguered people to stand strong in great travail by predicting that the trials were signs of a new age dawning.

Jesus wanted his followers to know that troubles alone, no matter how severe, should not be interpreted as signs of the end. Rather, his followers would have

to learn to endure trials even when there was no end in sight. In vv. 9-23, Jesus goes on to speak of more trials to come: his followers would be rejected in the synagogues and beaten by both religious and governmental authorities. Family members would turn against one another, sacrilegious forces would invade the city and overrun the temple, and presumptive messiahs would offer empty promises of deliverance.

There would be an end to the present age, Jesus taught, a time of his future appearing, but the ordeals surrounding the temple's destruction were not signs of it. Indeed, he emphasized: "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (13:32-33).

... but learn from this

What can contemporary Christians learn from this intriguing interaction between Jesus and the disciples? After all, the temple has already been destroyed, and it has not been rebuilt. Today, Jerusalem's Temple Mount is occupied by the landmark Mosque of Omar ("the Dome of the Rock") and the Al Aqsa Mosque, present reminders that the Holy Land was ruled by Muslims of various stripes for well over a thousand years.

We no longer acclaim the beauty of the Jerusalem temple, but do we not admire other accomplishments – our beautiful church buildings, our impressive cities, the wonders of technology? Should we contemplate the possibility that these things that give us such pride are also subject to destruction? Many large churches host tiny congregations; cities often have pockets of blight; a computer virus or failure of the power grid could leave us virtually unable to communicate or work.

The things we accomplish may be impressive, but they are also transient. Culpepper states it well: "... human striving and human achievement endure only when they contribute to God's eternal purposes" (*Mark*, 473).

For what are we striving? To what are we contributing? And will it last? **BT**

Bible Study

John 18:33-37

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 25, 2012

What Really Counts?

Our gospel texts in November began by emphasizing the importance of recognizing the Lordship of Christ, and of contemplating what is expected of subjects in the kingdom of God. Today's text approaches the subject of God's kingdom from a different angle: the questions posed to Jesus by the Jewish and Roman authorities who had arrested him. Did Jesus claim to be a king, or not?

One mark of a good story is its unpredictability. Well-told tales often include unexpected twists and work on several levels. The story of Jesus' passion is written as non-fiction, but it incorporates the kind of multivalence that marks a captivating, well-told story. Today's text revolves around the question of who really had charge of Jesus' fate: the Romans or the Jews?

Jesus' measured responses to his captors revealed that, despite appearances, neither the Jewish nor the Roman authorities controlled his fate. As the story is told, both the Romans and the Jews were playing unwitting parts in a divine drama that would have eternal and universal implications.

Jesus was also living out his own role in that great drama of human redemption, but intentionally. If anyone was in control of the situation, it was not the Romans or Jews, but God. And, despite his outward appearance as a victim, Jesus was the only character in the story who knew what was really going on.



A bit of background (vv. 28b-32)

Although the lectionary text begins at v. 33, we'll understand it better if we think back to what has taken place in the previous few verses. ↓

After Jesus' arrest, he was brought to trial before multiple authorities, beginning with the Jewish Sanhedrin. The Fourth Gospel differs from the synoptic traditions in that it gives primary attention to Jesus' trial before the Roman authorities, while the synoptics emphasize the earlier trial before Caiaphas. John's gospel also gives more attention to the issue of Jesus' kingship, which plays only a minor role in the synoptics. ↓

Only John describes Jesus' initial, informal appearance before Annas, the high priest's father-in-law. ↓ After a brief interview with that formidable priestly leader (18:19-23), Jesus was sent to stand before Caiaphas, the official high priest. John records nothing of this confrontation (18:24), choosing instead to focus on the courtyard scene of Peter's denial (18:25-27) before

returning to Jesus as he was brought before Pilate for the first time.

Rome allowed the first-century Jews great leeway in "home rule," granting the religious leaders considerable authority to police their own people. To maintain their upper hand, however, the Romans built a large fortress called the Antonia (or "Praetorium") adjacent to the temple complex. This may also have been the site of Pilate's residence. ↓

Pontius Pilate served as the Roman official in charge of Judea from 26-36 C.E. Pilate's appointive position as "prefect" or "procurator" granted him complete judicial, financial and military control over the area, so long as he kept things under control and was not guilty of behavior that would harm Rome's interests in the area. When Pilate conducted an ill-advised massacre of Samaritans a few years later, he was replaced.

Jesus was brought before Pilate "early in the morning," a phrase that could refer to the last watch of the night, between 3 and 6 a.m. This is not

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



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surprising, since Jesus had been arrested late at night, with his hearing before the Jewish authorities being a clandestine affair hidden by darkness. If Pilate had been roused from bed to meet the high priest's impatient demands, he would have had sufficient reason for irritation.

Pilate first sought to brush the matter off, leaving Jesus in the hands of the Jewish authorities. When he asked Jesus' captors for their accusations against him, they dodged the question, saying: "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you" (v. 30). Only when Pilate began to withdraw did they venture that Jesus was charged with a capital crime. Claiming they had no authority to order the death penalty, the Jewish leaders insisted that Pilate hear the case (v. 31).

Apparently, Jewish leaders could have ordered death by stoning for religious offenses, but only Rome could execute someone by crucifixion. Jesus had spoken earlier of being "lifted up" (12:32-33). Thus John observed parenthetically that Jesus' prediction of his manner of death would be fulfilled (v. 32).

A troubling encounter (vv. 33-37)

Pilate initially spoke to the Jewish leaders outside of his quarters, because the Jewish leaders refused to come inside. Entering the home or business of a Gentile would cause ritual defilement and prevent them from participating in the Passover meal (v. 28). According to John's calendar (which differs by one day from the synoptics), the Last Supper had taken place on the *eve* of Passover.

Once convinced that he must deal with the matter, Pilate summoned Jesus to his quarters, taking the two of them out of the hearing of Jesus' accusers. Since Pilate's first question was "Are you the King of the Jews?" (v. 33), one would think the Jewish authorities had accused Jesus of positioning himself as a self-appointed king and political rival to Pilate.

Given the dramatic setting, it's a shame we cannot hear the emphasis in Pilate's voice as he questioned Jesus. Did he ask: "Are you the King of the Jews?" "Are *you* the King of the Jews?" "Are you the '*King*' of the Jews?"

Jesus' response begins a pattern of responding to Pilate's questions with questions of his own. Jesus asked: "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Jesus' question not only changed the dynamics of the conversation, but also clearly shifted the burden of responsibility to Pilate, who would have to convict him on the basis of his own judgment, and not what he had heard from others.

Pilate claimed ignorance of Jewish affairs, implying that Jesus must have posed as a political rival, for apparently nothing else should have earned his attention (v. 35). Pilate then abandoned the question of kingship and resorted to a simpler question, "What have you done?" It is possible that Jesus could have denied all charges and been dismissed, but as he had done in the garden (v. 8), Jesus took control of the conversation and pressed the issue. This seems to have been lost on Pilate, but the reader recognizes that, though Pilate is the official ruler, Jesus is guiding the interrogation.

Jesus returned to the issue of kingship, implying that he was in fact a king, but insisting that his kingship had no connection to the current political situation: "my kingdom is not from here" (v. 36, NRSV). We should note that "kingship" is a better translation than "kingdom." Jesus was emphasizing the nature and origin of his reign, not the location of a political entity.

Recognizing the importance of Jesus' claim, Pilate returned to the initial charge: "So you *are* a king?" (v. 37, emphasis mine). The Roman leader was accustomed to thinking of kingship only

in political, material or military terms. Jesus' talk of a kingship that was "not from here" seemed like smoke and mirrors to him.

Jesus continued to speak in ambiguous terms, however. He pointed out that Pilate had first used the word "king," not he. Then, turning a different light on the subject, Jesus said: "For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth" (v. 37). There is a connection between Jesus as king and Jesus as the truth. Not everyone could understand this. Those who belong to the truth, Jesus said, are those who listen to his voice. Here, as is often the case in scripture, to listen is to obey.

A question of truth

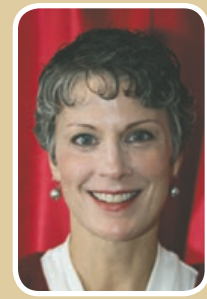
Pilate reacted to Jesus' claim of truth by asking the question that has become proverbial: "What *is* truth?" (v. 38a). In Pilate's world, kings ruled by might alone, and truth was secondary. He who held power could make anything he wanted to be "the truth." The concept of a rival to the "truth" of his political power seemed foreign to Pilate, and irrelevant. As a result, he tried his best to escape his conundrum, a story that takes up much of the next chapter.

Although the procurator officially held a position of greater authority, the influence of the Jewish leaders – who could do an end run around him with higher Roman authorities – forced Pilate to do something. By the drama's end, Pilate would order that Jesus be crucified, not because he loved or favored the Jews, but in part to show his disdain for them. Issues of guilt or innocence did not really concern Pilate, as John tells the story: only what served him best.

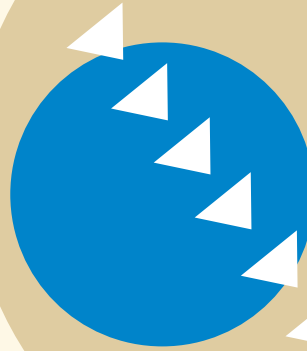
Pilate's question should lead modern readers – especially in this postmodern world – to ask questions about truth. Can something be true for one person, but not for another? Can we make the truth what we want it to be?

More importantly, do we understand what Jesus had in mind when he talked about truth, and do we follow his teaching? **BT**

Adventures with LULER the Hound



Kelly Belcher



The Bow-wow

Luler says worship time includes at least four things: gratitude, praise, asking forgiveness and giving. Find those things in your church's worship time.

I

t's election month! Take an opinion poll at your church and tally the votes to see how people answer this question:

If you had to pick one thing about participating in worship that is most important, what would you pick?

- ___ (a) bringing a large offering
- ___ (b) being thankful to God
- ___ (c) singing all the hymns well
- ___ (d) memorizing the pastor's sermon
- ___ (e) opening all your loud candy wrappers ahead of time

Luler the hound will use her tail to answer (b). She wags her tail in thanks for every supper dish, belly scratch and toy thrown. How many things can you list that make you feel grateful, besides the usual things like good food, comfy clothes and a loaded iPod?

Make a long new list of things for which you thank God, and go into worship prepared to spend time feeling your gratitude to God (and to people!) for these things. By Thanksgiving Day, could you even be grateful for hard stuff like math class – because some kids don't get to have it? Now, that's real thanks-giving, because gratitude is worship!



The Question Box

After you have made your gratitude list, can you tell a difference in the way you feel? Does it feel better to be grateful?



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Classifieds

Assistant Director The Rock Youth Center

A Community Service Ministry of
First Baptist Church
Bozeman, Montana

The Rock Youth Center is seeking an assistant director to join our ministry team as soon as Fall 2012. The Rock is a community service ministry of First Baptist Church of Bozeman, and is located in a facility directly across the street from Bozeman High School. The ministry team at The Rock seeks to minister to the students, parents, teachers and staff of Bozeman High and other Gallatin Valley schools.

The assistant director will be available to students, and will help the staff keep The Rock open during operating hours. The assistant director will join the ministry team of The Rock and First Baptist Church to imagine, create and lead Christian evangelism, discipleship, worship, service and recreation programs designed to meet the needs of our constituents. In addition, the assistant director will have the opportunity to partner with the ministry team of First Baptist and The

Rock to develop a dynamic youth ministry for First Baptist Church of Bozeman.

Qualified candidates will be able to demonstrate — through experience — a love of youth ministry as well as calling, proficiency and commitment. A Bachelor's degree is required, with seminary training preferred.

The salary range is \$26,000-\$35,000 annually, depending upon qualifications and experience. Annual benefits include: 3 weeks paid vacation; 13 days paid sick leave; up to 10 days continuing education, depending on availability of funding; health insurance; and retirement account, depending on funding and annual reviews.

Questions/Inquiries:
garycook@bresnan.net
(406) 522-7979

Applications:
(with cover letter, résumé, references)
garycook@bresnan.net
The Rock Youth Center
214 N 11th
Bozeman, MT 59715

In the Know

Robert H. Culpepper died Aug. 10 in Richmond, Va., at age 87. A native of Tifton, Ga., he served (with his late wife, Kay) as a missionary to Japan for 30 years. After retirement in 1980, he taught at Southeastern Baptist Seminary.

Deborah Jackson was elected executive director of the American Baptist Ministers Council. She is the former pastor of First Baptist Church of Needham, Mass.

Louise McKinney died Aug. 15 at age 82. She was a longtime social advocate, educator and philanthropist. Her husband, Samuel Berry McKinney, served as pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Seattle for 40 years.

Calvin Miller died Aug. 19. He taught preaching and pastoral ministry at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School from 1999-2007, and then became distinguished professor and writer-in-residence. His writings included the trilogy: *The Singer*, *The Song* and *The Finale*.

John Roberts died Aug. 15 in Greenville, S.C., at age 85. He served the longest tenure as editor of *The Baptist Courier*, newspaper of the South Carolina Baptist Convention. He became editor in 1966, one year after joining the paper as associate editor, and retired in 1996. **BT**

Pastor

Lattimore Baptist Church

Baptist seminary degree and
experience preferred

Résumés:
Pastor Search Committee
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Thursday, April 25, 2013
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Featuring singer-songwriter
Kate Campbell

CBF OF GEORGIA FALL GENERAL ASSEMBLY

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
GRIFFIN, GA

SUNDAY, NOV. 4

4:30 p.m. — CBF/GA Coordinating Council
6:00 p.m. — Registration
6:45 p.m. — Pre-service music
7:00 p.m. — Business meeting/worship service
8:30 p.m. — Dessert reception

AUXILIARY MEETINGS

5:00 p.m. Sunday — Baptist Women in Ministry
1:00 p.m. Monday — Peer Learning Groups

MONDAY, NOV. 5

8:00 a.m. — Breakfast
9:00 a.m. — Breakout sessions, pastors gathering,
staff networks
10:15 a.m. — Break
10:45 a.m. — Breakout sessions, pastors gathering
advocate networks
12:00 p.m. — Lunch

(Online reservations due Oct. 22. \$10 due at the door)



By Brett Younger

The perils of peer groups

When we moved to Atlanta four years ago, I joined one of the 140 Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ministerial peer groups because I thought I needed to be around smart people. My peer group is excellent, but for a while I feared that we had lost our way.

We started out reading challenging theological texts. We asked, “What books will stretch us intellectually? What will keep us on the cutting edge of religious inquiry?”

Our meetings were like the Harvard Divinity School faculty if they were talking about God at the Harvard Divinity School.

Michael Tutterow would exclaim: “*Was zur Hölle!* Why is Wolfhart Pannenberg so simple-minded?”

Greg Smith would bellow: “The Germans never say anything that isn’t obvious.”

We were C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien at that bar in Oxford, without the adult beverages.

Ron Grizzle would ask, “What difference would it have made to the Reformation if Martin Luther had been taking Prozac?”

Bill Bigger would wonder, “If an emerging church goes down, is it a submerging church?”

We explored the theological implications of the work of Adam Sandler, Kanye West and both Madonnas.

Our questions were stimulating. Our answers were provocative. Marcus Borg wanted to be in our group, but we weren’t sure he could keep up. We put Brian McLaren on the waiting list.

I knew we couldn’t keep it going forever. One meeting I noticed that my colleague Dock Hollingsworth was off his game. He wasn’t saying much. I wondered if perhaps extenuating circumstances had kept him from reading the entire book. I hoped no one else



would notice. For a while you couldn’t be certain who had read the book. We were clearly on a slippery slope.

Randy Shepley prefaced a comment by saying, “I only read three-fourths of the book.”

A few months earlier no one would have even considered publicly confessing such a horrible sin, but now people seemed impressed at his three-fourths commitment. It was painful, like watching Elvis get fat.

David Sapp started saying things that didn’t add up. *Jerusalem: The Biography* is not about a guy named Jerusalem.

I began to suspect that some group members were trying to cover the fact that they hadn’t read the book by talking a lot.

The books got shorter. We went from Jürgen Moltmann to stuff that was perilously close to Joel Osteen.

Mimi Walker suggested some book that wasn’t at Cokesbury, *Fifty Shades of Grey* — something like that. ...

We decided to take two months for each book.

Then Jim King said, “I saw an interesting

article in *The New Yorker*. Let’s read that.”

It was over.

“Have you heard about the Comic Book Bible? That would be worth a look.”

“I saw a YouTube clip of funny baptisms. Let’s talk about that.”

“Have you seen *The Lighter Side: Serving Up Life Lessons with a Smile*? It’s available at Amazon.com.”

It took me a while, but I’m learning. Maybe when we get together we don’t have to impress one another with how smart we are. Perhaps we can simply ask, “What are you up against?” and “What are you celebrating?”

When a brother talks about the difficulties he’s facing and we respond with a word of comfort, we can hear God offering us comfort. When a sister shares her joy at the way God is at work in her life, we can hear God inviting us to see the Spirit moving in our lives. That is more than enough reason to get together. **BT**

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

“Worship planning hemmed in by perceived congregational expectation is tantamount to a pitcher ‘aiming’ his pitches, instead of simply trusting his eye and his arm; the result in both cases is mediocre and tentative.”

Pastoral *perspectives*

BT: How would you briefly describe your leadership style as a pastor?

JR: Like a songwriter. I have some lyrics, but there’s plenty I don’t have. I need someone to write the music; I need someone to play the instruments; I need someone who knows how to get music published.

I have something to offer, but I’m not the only one with something to offer. Leadership brings something to the table, but it asks for something from others as well. In the end the project is “ours,” not mine or yours.

When pastors need too much, they are perceived as weak. When they don’t need anything, they are perceived as too distant or a dictator. But when pastors are interdependent, bringing something to the table but also eating from others’ bowls, then they can guide a congregation.

BT: Can you identify a couple of the biggest challenges in pastoral ministry today and share how you and your congregation are facing them?

JR: I’m reluctant to isolate current challenges to pastors and congregations because challenges vary from place to place and vary according to the age and economic status of the congregation.

Further, I think most congregations see such a question and expect the challenge to be on the line of reaching young people or making ends meet during a recession. Our first response is to think of a challenge as an “organizational challenge.”

Yet, to me, the real challenges for pastors and churches remain deeply embedded in the gospel: the challenge to forgive when we have been hurt. Will we as church members and pastors forgive our fellow believers when they have hurt us? Is fellowship stronger than individualism?

And, finally, the challenge to welcome the stranger. The stranger can take any form, but this remains a challenge to say, “Welcome” to the people God has invited to come.

BT: What do you know now that you wish you had known earlier as a pastor?

From John Roy

Pastor, Pelham Road Baptist Church,
Greenville, S.C.

JR: Even for the pastor, “God’s grace is sufficient.”

BT: Are denominational identity and engagement important to you? To your congregation? How do you engage with other churches, and what value does that bring?

JR: Not as much as it once did. Congregations once found their identity in the denomination; it was a brand.

Now churches, no matter their size, can brand themselves; thus, denominations for the sake of identity are not as valuable to local congregations. However, denominations for fellowship or as spiritual think tanks remain relevant.

Our engagement with other congregations is limited to similar Baptists. We are reluctant to venture outside of our comfort zone.

BT: How do you keep a balanced life that allows for personal time and study while being accessible to your congregation?

JR: Ministry offers freedom not found in many professions. I don’t think in 20-plus years I have ever spoken with my congregation about the value of my time and lectured them on me having a day off.

Many in the congregation work hard for their money. Some in small businesses put in 60 hours or more a week. So it falls on deaf ears to say, “Please don’t call on Friday; that’s my day off.”

I suspect I have always communicated that God called me to this and I’d rather be

accountable to you than God, but I don’t have that option. The outcome of this is in any one week you are likely to find imbalance in my life: too much ministry or too much personal time.

A small business owner, a coach or a minister is not likely to have balance. In the absence of such I suggest you marry well.

BT: Every church member knows exactly the right time for scheduling worship and the proper format of the service. The problem, of course, is that these are as different as the people. How do you, as a pastoral leader, plan worship with such varied expectations?

JR: Planning worship is like planning a meal. You try to have a balance of vegetables, proteins and carbs. Hopefully if you have a balanced approach, everyone leaves with something that will stay with them.

When in doubt, always give cookies; it makes swallowing the vegetables easier. Keeping the service brief is the worship equivalent to cookies.

Brevity is underappreciated. I see some orders of worship that look like a political meeting where we are attempting to get everyone on stage to say a greeting and welcome. Meat, salad and potatoes, as far as I can tell, still work. Meaningful music, sacred readings and humble words in a brief fashion still move people.

BT: What keeps you coming back for more?

JR: People I love and respect. Being treated with respect. Laughter, forgiveness and hope. **BT**

—John Roy is the pastor of Pelham Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C. He and Jo Ann have two sons, Wesley and Taylor.

EDITOR’S NOTE:

In this series, experienced pastors are asked the same seven questions about the important and sometimes misunderstood work they provide in congregational leadership and care. The monthly feature is designed to help pastors learn from one another and to give others greater insight into the multi-faceted work of pastors in changing times.

BY JOHN PIERCE

A conversation with Ken Medema

Stop *the* Music

Photo courtesy of
Brier Patch Music



“Music has become so doggone important to us that we are willing to fight wars over it. I think it would be a good idea ... to stop making music for about three months and ... **let this whole music fetish simmer down.”**

MACON, Ga. — California-based, singer-songwriter Ken Medema brought his unique musical style to Georgia in August. A native of Michigan, Medema studied voice and keyboard at Michigan State University where he earned a degree in music therapy. After working in that field for a few years, he launched a full-time career in writing, recording and performing in 1973.

Ken, 68, is well traveled and known for improvising at the keyboard in response to sermons, program themes and personal testimonies. Most of all, he is known as a storyteller who conveys faith for the journey of life with great creativity.

Baptists Today editor John Pierce sat down with Medema at the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon for a conversation from which this interview is adapted.

BT: When and how did justice get your attention and become a major part of your music?

KM: I think it started in 1974. I was singing at a Baptist college and Jim Wallis was the preacher for the week. I heard his first lecture; it was based on his book *Agenda for Biblical People*.

I remember weeping because I thought, “Why did I never hear this before? Why is this so new and strange and wonderful?”

I was supposed to sing after he spoke, and I did an improvised response. And we sat down after the meeting was over for a very long time. That was my first exposure to *Sojourners* and Wallis and then Ron Sider. It wasn't long until I began going to simple-lifestyle conferences these guys put on.

Before long I found myself immersed; we were doing a lot of things with *Sojourners* and with Sider. I started to read [John Howard] Yoder and all of these people.

Then my wife started her M.Div. at Union Seminary, so she was doing New Testament with Walter Wink and Tom Driver and all of these people. Everything kind of came crashing in together to wake up my consciousness.

I grew up in Dutch Reformed culture and what I understood about justice was “what God did to bad people.” And to have a whole new understanding of what righteousness or justice was all about was just fabulous. So that is how it started.

BT: You've done thousands of concerts — and I've heard only a dozen or so of them — so I don't expect you to remember each one. But there was

a night at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., about 20 years ago, when Will Campbell read selections from his book, *Providence*, and you responded musically. I believe the Baptist Peace Fellowship sponsored the program. It seemed special to me. Do you remember that evening, and did it have any significance for you?

KM: It was an amazing night. I was so engaged in the Baptist Peace Fellowship, and I love Oakhurst Church. I had read all of Will's books, but we had not met before that night.

I found an absolutely kindred spirit. We could have talked all night — before the concert — and it would have been a thrill. But then to be able to dialogue back and forth with him was reminiscent for me of doing this with [John] Claypool at Texas Christian University for the Christian Life Commission. I got to do this with Jim Forbes, too.

But every time I get to be with those heroes of mine, it's like getting invited to the palace to talk with the king. So many things I felt connected to were all coming together that night.

I'd been to Baptist Peace Fellowship events. I loved Oakhurst; Nancy Sehested is one of my dearest friends. So for all of this to come together in one place at one time was like getting to have the Texas barbecue, the Blue Bell ice cream, and the strawberries and fresh-baked biscuits all at one time. It was just amazing.

BT: One consistent part of your long musical career has been the emphasis on telling stories. Why is storytelling so powerful?

KM: I have always loved stories. When I was a little kid, my mom bought 78rpm records. Some of them were music, and some of them were stories.

What I realize now is that, when I go back to my 7- and 8-year-old experiences with records, I loved the stories as much as I loved the music. So the musical became the perfect blend.

As I grew up, I became more and more attached to stories. In fact, there have been times in my life when I thought I was being unfaithful to my call as a musician because I enjoyed listening to and reading stories almost more than music.

In high school and college I loved reading novels. When I got married, my wife and I would read tons of novels together; Audible wasn't around yet.

We spent one entire vacation reading the Tolkien trilogy. We spent another reading the C.S. Lewis sci-fi trilogy and another entire vacation reading *The Silmarillion*. This is the way we spent weeks of free time.

So there was always this interest in stories for my own sake. I just gravitated toward stories. But then when I started doing concerts, I had been so affected by the C.S. Lewis stories and Tolkien that I started doing these long, extended concerts that were like one piece with all the biblical stories wrapped into one theme.

It would be a concert about a journey or visiting towns along the way — like *Pilgrim's Progress*. So I started doing these things just because I like the form.

Then one of the huge events in my life was a SCUP (Seminary Consortium for Urban Professionals) conference on story. They brought in Walter Wangerin and Phil Amerson, who is now the president of Garrett Seminary.

Walter Wangerin made a comment that ripped me apart and put me back together. With all the justice stuff I'd been doing and all that desire to be involved with the inner city and my fascination with Walter Wangerin and his inner-city church in Evansville, he made one comment that became for me a clarion call.

He said: "Story is the currency of the people of the street." I thought, "This has to be my calling."

Then when we were at Union Seminary we did some courses with Robert McAfee Brown in narrative theology. We spent some time with Rene Padilla when he was visiting Union. Every one of these people talked about how their work is so tied to story.

Paulo Freire — the whole idea of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* — that we learn about each other by telling our stories. And people who are oppressed learn how to write their own stories. Because when they can write their story, then they have some power.

Then things just kept building. I started learning about the whole idea of narrative therapy — how you can tell a story differently, retell a story out of the past. All of this stuff just became part of me. It was just building and building and building.

Little by little I began to incorporate more of this into my concerts. I would do these long shows that were a continuing story.

Then one night — I think it was '88 or '89 — I was in Santa Barbara, Calif., and I said to [traveling companion, sound person] Beverly [Vander Molen], who had come to work with me in 1987: "I am totally bored tonight; I don't know what to do. I have no music in me; I don't want to do this concert. I'm just bored silly. What do I do?"

And she said: "Get people to tell their stories and then sing their stories." And that was another Ah-hah moment. I thought: "What a brilliant idea."

I forgot what the theme was; it was something like "What's going on in your life right now?" The stories were so powerful and current. Some of them were tearjerkers, and some of them were funny.

I began singing these stories, and people

would come up to me and say things like: "I thought my story was insignificant, but when you put it to music I realized my story is important. What happens to me is important."

I bought that whole idea. So the more I do this, the more I realize it has become my crusade to say to people, "We learn about each other by telling stories."

The only way we are going to get beyond the wars we fight in the Christian world — the wars about gays, the wars about theological beliefs, all of these wars — is to tell our stories to each other and to empathize with each other based on the stories we tell. I've never found it to fail.

People start telling their stories to each other, and all of the sudden there is an openness and there's an, "Oh, I've been through that." There's a vulnerability, a fragility that we all discover.

I'm going to keep doing it because I can and it's effective and we need it.

BT: You were trained as a music therapist and worked in that capacity before going full time with your writing/recording/performing career. What did you learn as a music therapist that has influenced you as a writer and singer?

KM: The biggest thing I learned was when you go into an encounter with people, you want to be open to the unexpected. But also you want to have an idea of what you want to do and what you want people to do as a result of this encounter.

So it's two things: be open to the unexpected and have a goal. As a therapist, when I met a client we had set goals for this person — this is the behavior change we are looking for.

So when I do an event, I have an idea of what I want for people. It usually has something to do with how I want them to react to each other, connect with each other and learn from each other. By means of the interaction, how they might revision or re-imagine each other. That whole goal orientation was one of the biggest things I learned.

Another thing was to absolutely focus on interaction. You're always wanting the group to do the group work. So there's always interaction.

Leonard Sweet says, "Medema is not a performance artist; he is a participation artist."

In fact, Sweet loves to talk about worship as EPIC: experiential, participatory, inclusive and connective. Basically, I'm about all that stuff — about highly interactive, about giving people a chance to speak their peace.

Whether they tell stories or not, there is always going to be a thing where people talk and help write the songs. One of the big things I learned in therapy is that the group needs to take responsibility for its work. So I let people take responsibility for their work in my events.

I do imagine my events in the same way I'd imagine a therapy session. I don't call them that — but they really are. I learned a lot of skills as a therapist about encouraging people to get involved, how to wait for a response, how you evoke a response, all of that practical stuff.

I learned a good bit of psychology which I think has been useful to me in terms of structuring events and how to be inviting without being invasive, or how to be inclusive without being in-your-face, when to push and when not.

Also, I learned some important lessons about labels — and not using labels. As part of my clinical training in Topeka, Kansas, I got to be in a staff meeting with Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist.

Our team was doing a diagnosis session on a client and had put together this elaborate diagnosis complete with social history, psychological testing, reports from all the auxiliary therapies — music therapy, occupational therapy, drama therapy, recreational therapy — as well as reports from the ward nurse and the nurse's assistant, and then a very beautiful diagnosis by our psychiatric president.

We came up with the diagnosis and the treatment plan and presented all of this to Dr. Menninger. He sat back in his chair and said: "So, what's wrong with this person?"

And we all sat there with our mouths wide open. Then he said, "No, I mean, is she sad? Is she brokenhearted? Is she angry? Is she lonely?"

And we realized we had totally missed the

"I have so many friends on the road — people who are church to me."

mark. That was a lesson to me about labels and diagnoses and that whole idea that we categorize people. I categorize people in my audience, and I've learned more and more how not to do that — how to gently discover there is a whole lot more than a category there.

BT: Sadly, I'm no longer the college student who first heard you at Ridgecrest about four decades ago — and you're not the dark-haired guy on the cover of your "SonShiny Day" album. How have your perspectives on life and faith — and, therefore, your music — evolved?

KM: I have been in the middle of so much of the battle that goes on not only in Baptist circles, but in every denomination where we have worked. It's one side railing against the other. It's the "liberals" against the "conservatives." Back 20 years ago it was the inerrantists against the non-inerrantists.

I've been stupid enough in my life to make some very categorical statements about what I believe and didn't believe, and who I thought was stupid and who I thought was smart. There was a time when I loved that fighting. I wanted to be in the thick of it.

It was sort of those angry young man years. I wanted to be in the place where I could rail against what I thought was ill-educated and unsophisticated biblical interpretation. I wanted to be right in the middle of all of that struggle.

I'm discovering that my new obsession is to try to figure out what it means to be a disciple. We could get into a long debate about, "Did Jesus really say this or did Jesus not?" I could go to the Jesus Seminar and look at all the studies — and I've done a good bit of that. "Did Jesus really say this, or did the New Testament church add it?" All of those questions.

But those questions to me are interesting, but my life doesn't hang on whether Jesus said this or whether he said that. My life hangs on, "How am I being responsible to what I know and how am I being a disciple of the Jesus,

granted I know only a limited amount about this Jesus?" But there are some things I know like: "Love your enemies. Don't get all excited about what you're going to eat, what you're going to drink, what you're going to put on. Go and sell all you have and give it to the poor."

When I start looking at those simple things, when I consider: "Look at the lilies in the fields. They do not toil, they do not spin." There's enough stuff that you could build a whole life on just figuring out what the heck it means to live like that and to do your daily life according to that stuff.

Now the rest of it is really interesting and I'm glad to be in discussion with people. Most people know I tend to not be the most conservative person. I tend to probably be a bit to the left. But I also find myself in a number of very conservative churches. My task is not to tout a certain set of beliefs. I just don't want to do that anymore; that is boring.

My task, if I understand it right, is to say to people, "I'm discovering there is enough stuff in Jesus' simple admonitions — 'This is my commandment that you love one another' — enough stuff there to build a life on. And that's what I intend to do."

The rest of it is interesting, but it is not worth fighting wars over. I've seen too many people get bruised and crushed. I just don't want to fight that battle any more.

BT: Where did you learn — and continue to learn — your theology?

KM: It started with my good Dutch Reformed background — the Christian Reformed Church that I grew up in Michigan.

We were so education-oriented. Even today, if you look at the schools that are a part of that Dutch Reformed heritage, they are really serious: Calvin College being perhaps the best example of that very serious education.

When I was in a church-related high school, I did a New Testament survey in 10th grade. I did the book of Romans in the 11th grade. I did Reformed doctrine as a senior.

I came out of high school knowing more Bible than a lot of seminary students that I have met in my career. So that's where it began.

The theological perspectives were basically quite orthodox — so fairly conservative, but definitely Calvinist.

So I went to college determined to get away from that heritage — determined to run from it because I had a music teacher in high school who was a member of a very liberal, quasi-Unitarian church. She began reading a lot of books to me. In fact, she actually set up an interview with her pastor who was a very liberal biblical scholar.

I told him I had all of these questions about the Bible and about theology. He said to me as a high school senior: "Never stop asking questions."

Well, I went to Michigan State determined to get away from all of this Dutch Reformed heritage, determined I was going to be an agnostic, maybe even an atheist — but at least an agnostic.

Then I ran into a Southern Baptist preacher's daughter who was a music student. She took piano from my same piano instructor at school. Her dad was campus minister for Baptists — at the time we called it BSU.

Truett Smith by name. He had gotten his Th.D. at Southwestern Seminary and had held the Bible chair at Texas Tech. He had gotten fired from his job when he started using the Revised Standard Version of the Bible in the '50s.

He was the pastor of a little Baptist church in East Lansing and the Baptist campus minister. I started hanging around with Jane's family.

I started hearing about Baptists — about Baptist history and the priesthood of the believer, about Baptists rejecting the state church and about that whole notion that no one tells a Baptist what to think or believe.

I'd gotten all excited about Students for a Democratic Society; I was an SDS member. But when I started hearing all of this perspective about Baptists — no synod that is going to tell you what to believe and Baptists

“When we can stand before the wonder of grace and say, **I don't begin to understand this; I just know there is enough in Jesus to build a life on,** then theological discovery becomes fun.”

interpreting the scripture as the Holy Spirit leads them — I thought: This is anarchy; I love this!

So I started hanging out with Jane in a Baptist church and came into that faith community as a college sophomore. Walked down a Baptist aisle to the tune of “Just As I Am,” mind you, the whole schmeer.

I said I’m giving my life back to Christ. If this freedom that I feel to be a Baptist, if this liberty I feel to interpret Scripture as the Holy Spirit leads me, and the churches come together only to cooperate in mission, if that’s really who you are, then that’s what I want to be a part of. It was so exciting to me. Three years later, Jane and I got married.

Then some other developments in my life: In the early ’70s I was very much a part of the sort of charismatic experience a lot of us were going through — total dependence on the presence of the Holy Spirit. I never did get into the speaking-in-tongues thing, but the whole idea of relying on the Spirit. Jack Taylor and all of those guys in the ’70s were so much a part of my learning.

Then we went to Union Seminary and came across this amazing cross-section of people. Evangelicals at Union: people who had come from Baptist and Methodist and Presbyterian worlds and charismatic worlds.

James Forbes, who was a full-blown charismatic who taught preaching at Union and had no conflict between relying on the Spirit and good scholarship. All of that stuff came together.

Then all of the justice books and later on the Karen Armstrong books and the Walter Wink stuff. I mean, it’s a growing thing. It’s always exciting to me.

The perspective for me has changed somewhat. For a while it was: “Either I have to believe this or I have to believe that. You either have to come to this conclusion or that conclusion.”

That perspective has changed because theology is a game. It is a discovery process, but when it comes right down to it, it is all an attempt to explain what is basically

unexplainable — what is beyond our understanding. When you try to figure out God, who dares?

Even being able to look at scripture and trying to figure out what it is saying is in some ways a preposterous undertaking. We’re human so we have to do it. We want to learn; we want to know; we want to discover.

But as long as we can continue to study and not take our conclusions too seriously and as long as we can stand before the wonder of grace and say, “I don’t begin to understand this; I just know there is enough in Jesus to build a life on,” then theological discovery becomes fun.

BT: What fuels your creativity? What do you do or where do you go to have your mind and heart expanded?

KM: Some of it is listening to good music and reading good books. I read at least six or seven books a month. Most of them are novels; I’m a sci-fi nut.

When I read a book or spend a day listening to really good music in all genres, I really do feel refreshed by that and getting away from the routine.

My wife is a wonderful catalyst for that. Jane is a thinker, a reader. We go home and have these long, sometimes torturous discussions about political stuff, about theological stuff. We can go on for two or three days just sort of carrying on. That’s great fun for me.

I have so many friends on the road — people who are church to me. We sit down for lunch or dinner or a cup of coffee and I discover what is happening with dear friends. That refreshes me.

Beverly, who is my sound person, co-worker, producer, is always running into stuff: “Did you see this? Did you see that movie? Did you hear about this on television?” Bringing stories and perspectives to me that fill me up.

I spend a fair amount of time being quiet. At home I do a lot of that. I’ll get up early and just go sit on the deck and be quiet. And I’m getting the chance to do that more now

because I’m leading a series of retreats for ministers of music in their mid-careers.

It’s called “Interlude,” and in that series we’re learning how these ministers of music desperately need to have their own lives refreshed — and in the process I’m being refreshed all over again. Those kinds of things are very useful.

Taking long walks. Being around people who turn me on to new music, new stories, new adventures and new discoveries.

BT: I know other musicians who seek to be faithful Christians but really tire of the stereotypes and assumptions tied to being a “Christian artist.” Has that ever been a concern of yours? How do you define yourself professionally — and your music?

KM: I was really fortunate in that I never got in the Nashville scene. I recorded with Word, but I didn’t get absorbed in that Nashville thing.

I suppose I separated myself from the Christian rock music, from what we call CCM (contemporary Christian music). Right from the very beginning I was fortunate enough to be in some pretty progressive circles.

One of the first big gigs I did was a thing that Word Music put together called “Meaning and Belonging: New Directions in the Church” with Claypool, Keith Miller, Bruce Larson and Lloyd Ogilvie.

Although I was right there at the beginning of [CCM] with Keith Green, Pat Terry, Second Chapter of Acts, I was always one or two arm’s length removed because I was as active in the traditional churches and mainline churches as I was in the contemporary scene.

They couldn’t categorize me as CCM because I’d do traditional stuff. I would do stuff that sounded classical. I was sort of in both worlds. So throughout my career I’ve probably spent more time in the mainline places than in the contemporary Christian world.

I did the Youth Specialties conferences with all the contemporary bands, and then I’d go sing at Riverside Church. I would sing at

“If this **freedom that I feel to be a Baptist**, ...
if that’s really who you are, then that’s what I want to be a part of.”

the Presbyterian church in Darien, Conn., and sing at Myers Park in Charlotte because I have this mainline, classical rootage.

So often what I'm doing is singing these improvised responses to sermons. So in the progressive Baptist world, and in my Lutheran world or whatever, those preachers have considered me their ally. That's really where we've had more of our association.

But when I presented *Word with Kingdom in the Streets* in 1981, which I thought was my best album, I thought: "This is really my theology because it was the whole justice thing. This is really my vision for the church, my dream for the church."

Kurt Kaiser was my producer, and he was really excited about it. He said, "Man, this is going to be a revolutionary thing."

We were both excited. Fletch Wiley had done some of the arranging on it. We had a good budget for it with a big orchestra. It was going to be a whole new day for Word Music.

Then the marketing VP sat Kurt and me down in his office and said: "It's a nice album but justice won't sell." That's the point when I said I was leaving. Kurt said, "Go. You need to do what you need to do."

BT: There is a lot of church talk about music today. Sadly, much of it sounds like "My style's better than your style." Is that your sense? If so, do you have any advice for worship leaders who must deal with this?

KM: Two things: One, church folk gather, I believe, to have a conversation — with their heritage, their present, the Divine, the world, with their joy and their pain. I think every group of people has to figure out what their congregational language is.

I see churches trying to import some other language that isn't natural for them. To me, it's like deciding because we live in California where there are a lot of Hispanics, then all of the sudden we are going to have all of our services in Spanish. That would be kind of

silly for a church composed primarily of Anglo-Saxon white people.

Every group has to discover what its congregational and conversational language is. I think that is a task a lot of our musicians are ill prepared for because we've grown up with either one or only a few styles. And we've grown up with the idea that somehow we have to have this big monolith that's called a musical style or whatever.

I feel like we need to drop some of this terminology and figure out that we're gathering together to have a conversation and whatever adds to or helps us with that conversation — whether it's something traditional or something we've always thought of as secular or whether it's something very modern or contemporary or whether it's something that our kids are loving or our old folks are loving, whatever helps us with that conversation — is what we need to be doing as we gather on a Sunday.

And that usually means we're going to have to be more eclectic and build our music based on who is in our church. We want people to be able to love God in their own mother tongue. But we also want them to be able to love God enjoying the mother tongues of other people who might be in this fellowship.

So preachers need to preach about it. We need to cultivate that attitude of mutual respect, mutual appreciation. The whole idea is that we have a conversation and whatever adds to that conversation we ought to do.

The second thing I'd say is there's much too much emphasis on music in most churches. And I say that as a musician. Music has become so doggone important to us that we are willing to fight wars over it.

I think it would be a good idea to stop singing, to stop making music for about three months and just talk — talk about Jesus, talk about discipleship, talk about how we live our lives and just let this whole music fetish simmer down.

It's gotten so important to us that we've forgotten that song is the music of the heart. It's become the music of our warfare.

I was at a Mennonite funeral a few years ago. After we had gotten through with all the good words, we all felt we hadn't gotten there yet — we hadn't gotten where we needed to go.

So the leader got up, gave a number and gave a pitch, and we started singing *a capella*. We sang for about half an hour, just one hymn after another. It was the catharsis we needed.

But we've decided we have to have music because it is going to bring in the people or it's going to do this or that. That's a lot of nonsense. Maybe people will be brought in by the music, but they'll leave just as quickly out the backdoor.

What really brings people to the gathering is knowing that they've been heard, knowing that people are concerned about their spiritual lives.

So I think we just need to let music be a little less important until we stop this fetish over what kind of music we do — until we can bring music back into its place as the expressions of our hearts and let our congregation discover what its own music will be. Then maybe we'll get over these wars.

BT: One last question: If you were elected the first pope of modern American Christianity, what would be your first decree?

KM: For my first decree, I'd mandate a short course in church history because we fight the same wars over and over again. We fight them in every era. And you can bet your shoe leather that when we get done fighting these wars, they are going to come up again.

Second, I would mandate, in every church, that one characteristic of our new liturgy — maybe it would come right after the *Gloria* or *Kyrie* — be that at least once a week we have a personal testimony given by one of our people about the work that the Spirit is doing in his or her own life this week.

If we did those two things, have a course in church history and learn from our mistakes, and if we could have one personal, experiential story each week, we'd go far. **BT**

"I'm discovering that my new obsession is to try to figure out **what it means to be a disciple.**"

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

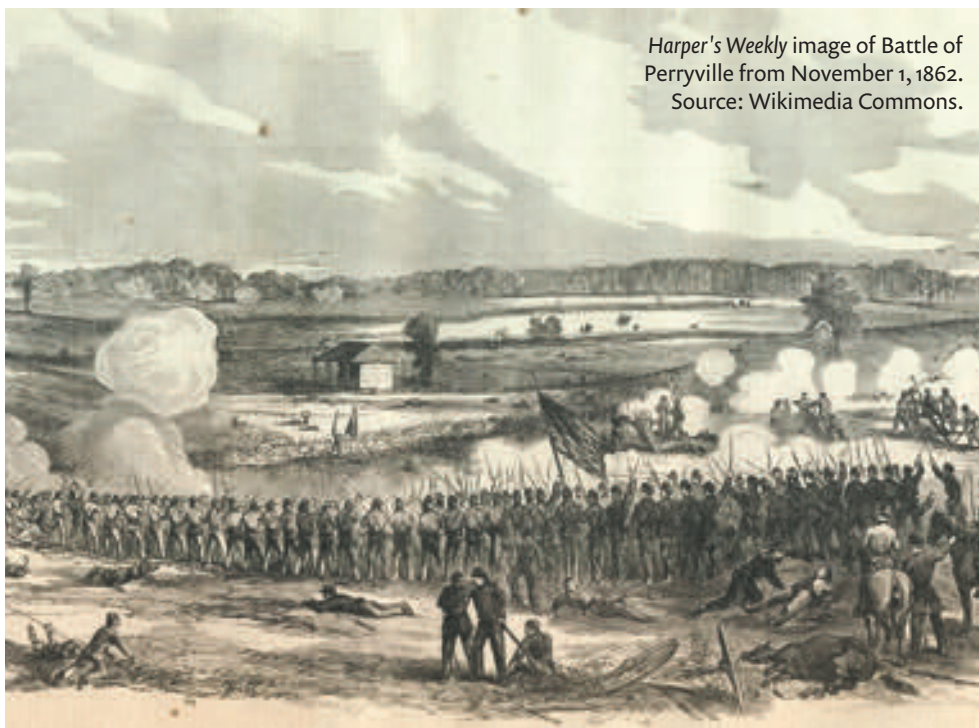
As the weather cools and the leaves turn color, the war grinds on.

Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia, following an unsuccessful invasion of Maryland last month, have retreated to the South. This month's primary battlefield action does not involve Lee.

The United States wins the Battle of Corinth (Mississippi) in the western theater and achieves a strategic victory in the Battle of Perryville in Kentucky (the largest battle fought in the state), and thus control of the border state. Bringing cheer to the South, the Confederate Army wins several small skirmishes on their home turf, while Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart pulls off a daring and successful, albeit brief, cavalry raid into Maryland and Pennsylvania. Neither the North nor the South can claim a clear upper hand over the other.

While the war is far from over, the dynamics of African slavery — the cause of the great conflict — are even now dramatically changing. Maryland, while a slave state, emphatically rejected Lee's overtures during the recent invasion, despite strong pro-slavery Southern Baptist influence in Baltimore (Richard Fuller, pastor of the city's Seventh Baptist Church, is president of the Southern Baptist Convention). Robert Smalls, a former Southern slave who five months ago captured a Confederate gunboat and became a hero to the North, is now touring New York, speaking to large crowds and raising support for the Union; Smalls is a lay member of the First African Baptist Church of Union-controlled Beaufort, South Carolina. Another former slave, Sandy Alexander from Virginia, D.C., this month establishes the First Baptist Church of Georgetown (D.C.), not far from the former (and infamous) slave auction district in the nation's capital.

While the march to formal emancipation of all slaves is now underway, Northern white Baptists on the home front do their part to support the United States Army. This



Harper's Weekly image of Battle of Perryville from November 1, 1862. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

150 YEARS AGO

October 1862

month in Maine, Portland's Free Street Baptist Church, following the leadership of two widows, establishes the Maine Camp Hospital Association. Harriet Eaton and Elizabeth Fogg become part of a 21,000 force of Northern women — including many Baptists — who assist in the domestic and administrative work of Union military hospitals throughout the remainder of the war.

Within the Confederacy, some white Southern Baptist elites now find themselves in disagreement over laws prohibiting slaves from reading. While the evil writings of abolitionists Harriet Beecher Stowe and Horace Greeley sometimes yet crop up in the South, access to the Bible, these Baptists of the South argue, is a God-given right. Just as importantly, reading God's Word would help African slaves understand that bondage is God's will for the black race, thus making life easier for slave owners by instilling happiness, morality, industriousness and "soul" eternity among the South's "servile class." These unrealistic assumptions ignore the biblical underpinnings of the abolitionist movement, while overlooking thousands of

slave desertions in Union-controlled areas of the Confederacy. That no former slave wishes to return to a life of bondage is an unspoken reality.

Meanwhile, common white home-front Baptists of the South live with anxiety and worry. Savannah's First Baptist Church hosts the Ladies Christian Association for a day of knitting clothes for "our suffering army." Ebenezer Association Baptists of Georgia lament the lack of "religious influence" and prevalence of "vice" within the Confederate Army, echoing a common theme among home-front Southern Baptists. Baptists of Alabama's Cahaba Association spend time "in prayer to Almighty God in behalf of the Army of the Confederate States of America ... praying to our Father in Heaven in behalf of our bleeding country."

As the month of October ebbs, the future of the two nations is far from clear. The only clarity in the 18-month-old Civil War thus far is the overwhelming desire of African slaves for freedom, a point recognized by the North and denied by the South. These conflicting narratives of freedom will prove keys to the distant ending of the war between the United States and the upstart Confederacy. **BT**

—Daily entries and source materials cited at civilwarbaptists.com.

Letting off steam

By John Pierce

My colleague Bruce Gourley owns the popular website yellowstone.net. He makes regular visits into Yellowstone National Park from his home in Bozeman, Montana.

While visiting with Bruce in late August, he walked me along (and sometime off) some of the many trails there. It was impressive in every way — and different from a simple driving tour.

The park has some 10,000 thermal features, Bruce told me. (I think he only took me to see about 9,000 of them.) Some are well known, like Old Faithful geyser and Mammoth Hot Springs.

Others are large and small, along roadsides and in the backcountry where few see them. Some fire steam and water into the atmosphere (faithfully or infrequently), while others burp mud. Colorful pools of scalding water abound — and one feature looks like a cave and sounds like a dragon's roar.

The variety of thermal features in the park is great, but one characteristic is shared in

common: they all let off steam.

Geologists point to a major volcanic eruption that occurred about two million years ago (give or take a few weeks) that set in motion much of what visitors experience today in this remarkable environment. Walking across such a lively surface brings out both wonder and caution.

And spending a little time exploring some of these wonders brought about another realization: I noticed some pressure venting of my own. My shoulders became more relaxed. I felt less rushed, and my perspective on life seemed bigger and clearer.

Returning to routines and responsibilities, I was determined to not leave the lessons of thermal features behind. But the challenge is to find that right balance in being responsible and productive while finding needed reflection and relief from the pressures of daily living.

Spiritual disciplines are given for such purposes — for eruptions are more impressive to watch in a national park than to experience within one's own life. **BT**



Losing a giant

By Tony Cartledge

A Baptist giant died Sept. 5. The shame of it is, most Baptists didn't know him. Walter Harrelson was born in Winnabow, N.C., between Wilmington and Southport, in 1919. He studied at Mars Hill College when it was a junior college, served in the Navy from 1941-45, and graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1947.

He then went on to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he earned a three-year Master of Divinity in two years, followed by a Th.D.

Harrelson loved the Bible and all the languages that might help him to understand it better, devoting untold hours to Greek, Hebrew, Akkadian, Ugaritic, Ethiopic, and any other ancient or modern language that might help him get to a better biblical translation.

His expertise was so widely recognized



that he chaired the Old Testament committee of scholars working on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, and later served as general editor of the New Interpreter's Bible commentary series, in addition to producing several significant books of his own, including *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* and his classic *Interpreting the Old Testament*.

Harrelson taught first at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary before becoming dean of the Chicago Divinity School at the age of 35. Being dean took him away from research and teaching, though, so he remained only five years before going to Vanderbilt's divinity school, where he taught

for many years and served a stint as dean — with the understanding that his teaching and research came first.

He officially retired in 1990, but helped get the new divinity school at Wake Forest University off the ground in 1995.

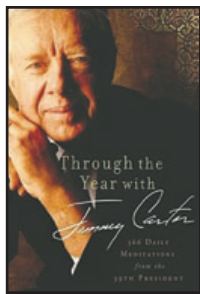
Harrelson was a giant of a scholar who earned great respect in the academic world. Yet, though he remained an active Baptist all of his life, few Baptists outside academia knew him. That was, in part, because his impeccable scholarship was laced with a serious and gentle humility. More than once, he was a quiet encourager to me, as he was to many others.

About 10 years ago I was invited to preach at Southport Baptist Church, where he attended and served as a deacon. It was Prof. Harrelson who met me and escorted me from place to place. After the worship service I stayed to visit with him on the way out, but it took a while — it was his turn to lock up the building, and he attended to that task with the same care he applied to his scholarship.

He was that kind of man, and Baptists are poorer for his loss. **BT**



Gift of Peace
The Jimmy Carter Story
By Elizabeth Raum



Through the Year with Jimmy Carter
366 Daily Meditations
from the 39th President

Review by Jackie Riley

Books by and about former president focus on peace, growing faith

As a young Christian in the 1960s, I remember the impact of reading Charles Sheldon's best-selling 1897 classic, *In His Steps*, about Henry Maxwell who challenged his congregation – and himself: “Do not do anything without first asking, ‘What would Jesus do?’”

For almost nine decades this question seems to have been a guiding force in the work of the man we know simply as Jimmy Carter.

Zondervan makes the story of the South Georgia peanut farmer who became president come alive in two recent publications, *Gift of Peace: The Jimmy Carter Story* and *Through the Year with Jimmy Carter: 366 Daily Meditations from the 39th President*.

Gift of Peace is written for children ages 9-12, but is very inviting and informative for adults too. Author Elizabeth Raum, a former teacher and librarian, has written dozens of books for young readers.

Part of the Zonderkids biography series, *Gift of Peace* highlights Carter's humanitarian deeds while also teaching about history and politics. Readers will find interesting tidbits of information in the sidebars: for example, Carter was the first U.S. president to be born in a hospital and also the first to walk in an inaugural parade. The glossary, timeline, list of places and websites to visit, and references

enhance the educational dimension of the book.

With its warm presentation, readers will feel as though they're listening to the former president reminiscing about his past and teaching them lessons about goal setting, dealing with failure and treating people as important individuals.

They will hear how a young boy observed the positive attributes displayed by his parents: his mother's giving spirit and his father's strong work ethic, their strong devotion to family and support of education, their respect for persons of all races, and their dependence on God's guidance.

The strong role models he saw in his parents no doubt greatly influenced Jimmy Carter's later commitment to promoting peace and equality.

Carter worked from the bottom up politically, starting with service on the local school board and then working against segregation and voter fraud in the Deep South. When he moved into state and then national politics, he campaigned with a grassroots approach that focused on persons and not the masses.

Gift of Peace concludes with an emphasis on the work of the Carter Center, to which all royalties of the book will be donated. The Center is a nongovernmental, nonprofit

organization that advances human rights and alleviates human suffering in 75 countries worldwide. The book fittingly ends by explaining to readers how they can participate in the compassionate work of the Center.

Through the Year with Jimmy Carter provides another glimpse into the former president's life. A unique daily devotional book, it contains lessons Carter learned through teaching Sunday school classes at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga., and at First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., from 1977-2011.

The four sections focus on: the foundations of the Christian faith, learning how to bless others, enlarging the Kingdom of God, and maturing as Christ-followers.

Each one-page devotional begins with the date that the Sunday school lesson was taught, followed by the scripture for that day and a personal story or historic event or simple application of a biblical principle, and ends with a prayer.

A lifelong student of the Bible and promoter of learning, Carter seeks to move his readers past “hearing” to his recurring theme of being “doers of the Word.” His goal for the book, he writes in the introduction, is “to promote fresh thinking that moves both our hearts and minds closer to the Savior.” **BT**



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SPREADING OUT: Report shows 5,000+ multisite churches

The number of congregations that host worship services at more than one physical location has grown to more than 5,000 in the last decade, according to a new report.

Researchers say these “multisite” churches, which may share worshippers across town or many miles apart, are growing at a much larger pace than traditional megachurches.

Without the burden of additional expensive buildings, congregations find they grow faster in new places, said Warren Bird, research director of Leadership Network, who announced his conclusions Aug. 21.

“It’s a combination of both evangelism and saying, ‘People may not come to this particular building. How can we take where we are to where they are?’” he told Religion News Service.

Bird, the author of books on the multisite trend, has tracked the number of churches meeting in more than one place for his Dallas-based church think tank; he combined his findings with Faith Communities Today surveys.

Multisite churches have grown from fewer than 200 in 2001 to 1,500 in 2006 to an estimated 3,000 in 2009 to more than 5,000 today. In comparison, U.S. megachurches have grown from about 50 in 1970 to about 1,650 in 2012 in North America.

Multisite comes in all kinds of models: Some congregations speak different languages at different locations; some hear from different “campus pastors” onsite and others are preached to by a senior pastor who speaks live or via video.

“The more campuses you have, the more likely you are to use video teaching,” said Bird.

Sergio De La Mora, senior pastor of Cornerstone Church of San Diego, preaches



A church service at one of the campuses of Community Christian Church in the Chicago area. RNS photo courtesy Pastor Dave Ferguson

five times every Sunday on its main campus in National City, Calif. — with one service in Spanish and another translated into Japanese. After morning services, he hops in his car and drives to the La Jolla campus for a 5 p.m. service before returning to National City for its last service at 6:30 p.m.

Meanwhile, videos of his 8:30 a.m. sermon are played in satellite campuses in Escondido, Calif., and across the border in Tijuana and Mexico City. A campus pastor runs the service at a location in Tucson, Ariz.

So, is one of the disadvantages of multiple sites an exhausted pastor?

“You got to remember we’re born to do this,” said De La Mora, comparing his leadership of his “franchised” church to an Apple

store manager who works from opening until 10 p.m. “This is the new generation of preachers. People are in transit so they want options when they come to church.”

In all, his nondenominational evangelical church is attended by about 6,500 people.

“Our philosophy is I do the speaking but my campus pastor, with his leaders, they do the reaching into the community,” De La Rosa said.

At Community Christian Church in the Chicago area, Pastor Dave Ferguson has taken a different approach with its dozen sites.

“I can only be at one location at a time,” he said.

Each week he gathers in a room with a team of campus pastors to develop a “big idea” into a sermon. A video featuring one of them is created, but the pastors can choose whether to speak from the original manuscript, a version of it they edited or show the video.

In the end, the general message reaches about 10,000 people worshipping at sites that include a community center, a college theater, reopened churches and office parks.

While the vast majority of multisite churches are on the other side of town or at least in the same region, there are exceptions. The Bridge Community Church, a congregation based in rural Indiana, has campuses in Anderson, Decatur and Muncie but also has one in Bihar, India.

Bird said churches that total at least 500 people tend to be the ones that start a second campus, but smaller churches have also created additional sites.

“It was the megachurches that pioneered it and because megachurches tend to be ones people glean ideas from, pretty soon churches said, ‘Why couldn’t we do that? You don’t have to be really big to do that,’” Bird said. **BT**

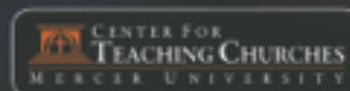
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Lunch provided for first 175 persons who contact us at 678.547.6479 or grizzle_rh@mercer.edu.

Afternoon Session (1:30 to 3 p.m.) focusing on “Re-Centering Your Ministry”.
Featuring Dr. Keith, Dr. Daniel Vestal, and Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes.



Wary of warehousing

Missionaries urge shift in orphan care for Third World children

After a mission trip to Ethiopia in 2007, a group of Baptist pastors from East Texas launched a multi-church mission effort dedicated to everything from digging wells and latrines to working in schools and churches to train local leaders. But there's one type of work the dozen or so churches, including one in Missouri, avoid.

"We don't do orphanages," said Jim Palmer, strategy coordinator for The Ethiopia Aid Mission Network, or TEAM, and a member of First Baptist Church in Athens, Texas.

Members of the network say they've realized what many full-time international missionaries have known for years: That in many cases the world's 150 million Third World orphans are better served by their own families and communities than by orphanages.

And now those missionaries are trying to convince denominations, churches and individuals to shift their focus from supporting orphan homes in Africa and other war- and disease-torn regions to addressing the social, medical and economic conditions that leave millions of children vulnerable to homelessness and death.

"The primary thrust is to strengthen families and communities," said John Derrick, a former Cooperative Baptist field missionary and facilitator of the CBF's newly launched Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Network.

Derrick and other leaders of the movement admit it won't be easy convincing some to embrace the new focus because so many have "fallen in love" with the children they've helped during orphanage mission trips. The key to change will be re-educating Western Christians about what it means — and doesn't mean — to be long- or short-term missionaries, he said.

"It's not about us sweeping in and being the answer to all their problems," he said. "It's about walking alongside and serving with the local leadership who understand what the need is."

There are cases when orphanages are needed, such as when vast numbers of children in a particular area are left without security and housing, Derrick said. But research and experience show that many of those children have at least one living parent or other family

member who either does not know where the child is or cannot afford to provide care.

It's also common that Third World communities are willing to care for orphaned children if they could only afford to do so, Derrick said.

"Most people are shocked to learn that it is primarily poverty and life circumstances that keep kids from being put in a family context," he said.

Also, children placed in orphanages usually are left to survive on their own when they reach their upper teens, and often fall prey to human traffickers and warlords.

Churches do not have to figure out on their own how to redirect their mission energies, said Kathleen Riordan, project coordinator, for the Better Care Network. The network is a coalition of major governmental and non-governmental agencies, including UNICEF, Save the Children and US Agency for International Development, seeking to address the medical, social and economic conditions that cause children to become orphaned.

Its faith-based component is called the Faith to Action Initiative, which educates churches and other religious groups about best practices in dealing with vulnerable children. The initiative provides a number of written resources churches and denominations can use to join the "community care" effort, said Derrick, who is a core member of the initiative and co-author of its instructional materials.



CBF is cooperating with the initiative through the Orphaned and Vulnerable Children Network it launched at the General Assembly in June.

The Better Care Network and Faith to Action operate on the idea that Westerners cannot know what is best for African or other local populations, Riordan said. Instead, the goal is to connect churches and other groups in the U.S. with churches and other groups in Africa.

Jon Singletary, a social work professor at Baylor University, has been sharing that concept with students for several years. He calls it "kinship care" because that puts the emphasis on supporting families and communities rather than orphanages.

Effective methods include Sunday school classes in America adopting Sunday school classes overseas, and likewise for congregations and groups of congregations, he said. In this way, water and sanitation projects and feeding and medical missions can be seen as tools for reducing poverty and disease in the long term, he said.

"It's preventative because it keeps kids out of orphanages by strengthening local churches," he said.

Because the approach relies on local church and other community leaders in the areas being helped, American churches avoid being scammed or wasting money on unnecessary projects, said Jay Abernathy, pastor of First Baptist Church of Palestine, Texas, and one of the original members of the East Texas-based Ethiopian aid network.

"We seek to partner with local Ethiopian organizations as well as doctors and pastors," Abernathy said. "And we work with the families in the local schools — we come alongside and partner."

Another participant said the East Texas effort, done in cooperation with Buckner International, isn't about quick successes, but about long-term change.

"Our strategy isn't just handouts and money, but to be intimately involved with the churches there in efforts that will last for our lifetimes," said Kyle Henderson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Athens, Texas. **BT**

Report highlights Islam's shared beliefs, varying perspectives

WASHINGTON — Nearly all Muslims can agree on the basic beliefs of Islam: There is one God, Muhammad is God's prophet, Muslims should fast during the holy month of Ramadan and give alms to the poor.

Yet beyond these central pillars of the faith, Muslims worldwide vastly differ as religious convictions are shaped by cultural and social contexts, according to a new report by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

"The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity" draws on 38,000 face-to-face interviews in 39 countries, and finds that Muslims differ sharply over questions of faith such as who counts as a Muslim and what spiritual practices are acceptable.

With 1.6 billion adherents, Islam is the world's second-largest religion, behind Christianity, and accounts for one-quarter of the world's population.

"There isn't one single Muslim world. There are many Muslims around the world that share beliefs, but there are differences as well," said James Bell, director of international survey

Younger Muslims were less religiously committed than older Muslims.

research at the Pew Forum.

Though broad, the report is not comprehensive. "Political sensitivities" and "security concerns" kept researchers out of some countries with significant Muslim populations, including China, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Muslims are united by the "shahada," the declaration of faith that there is only one God and Muhammad is his messenger, as well as specific religious practices and belief in angels, Judgment Day, and fate. But they differ significantly by country and region in levels of religious commitment, openness to multiple interpretations of faith and the Sunni/Shia divide.

For instance, 95 percent of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa said religion is "very important" to them. Solid majorities agreed in the Middle East, North Africa and the United States.

Meanwhile, the atheist strain within communism continues to reverberate through

former Soviet states such as Russia and Kazakhstan, where much lower percentages of people (44 percent and 18 percent, respectively) say religion is "very important."

Generally, men and women worldwide held similar religious commitments. However, they differed greatly in mosque attendance, especially in Central Asia and South Asia, which is probably due to local or cultural norms, Bell said.

Younger Muslims worldwide were less religiously committed than older Muslims, with the biggest differences seen in the Middle East and North Africa.

The report also found a striking difference between Muslims worldwide and U.S. Muslims. Basic practices such as daily prayer and weekly mosque attendance, as well as the importance of religion in daily life, were lower for American Muslims.

Americans also showed a greater acceptance of denominational differences. Whereas 63 percent of Muslims worldwide believe Islam has only one interpretation, only 37 percent of American Muslims believe this. **BT**

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