

>> This is the **October 2014** issue containing the **November Bible Study Lessons**



*Baptists*  
**TODAY**  
NEWS JOURNAL



A conversation with  
**Eddie Hammett**

5

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**FARTHER,  
DEEPER**

*Participants find a nurturing  
experience in the West*

**38**

Mike Queen's personal, pastoral  
commentary on suicide **11**





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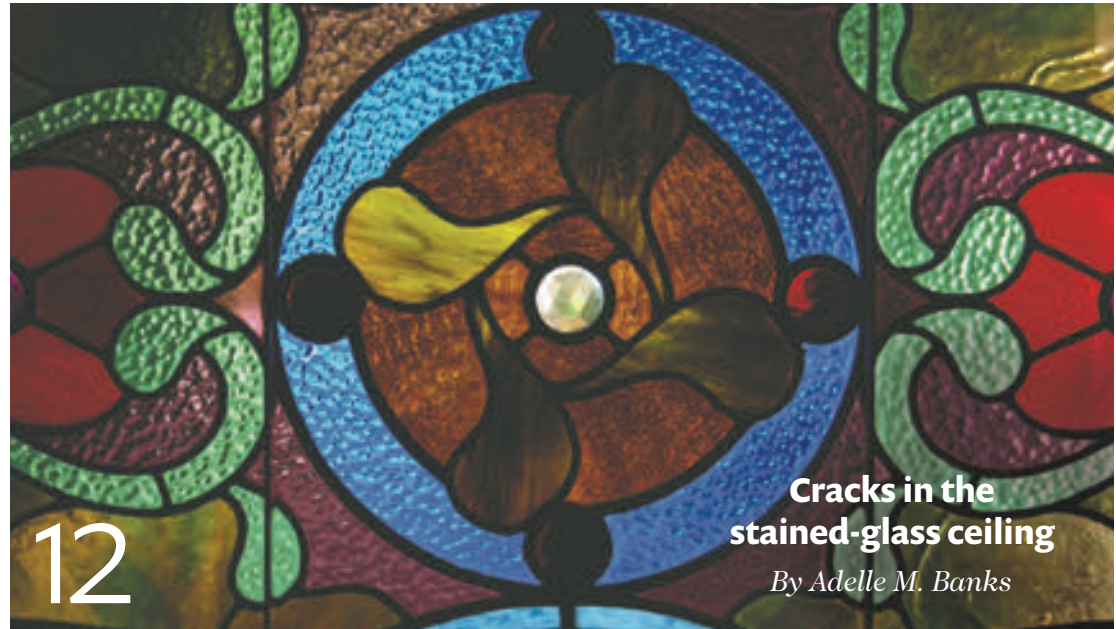
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12

**Cracks in the stained-glass ceiling**

*By Adelle M. Banks*

**PERSPECTIVES**

Confessing our practice of selective Christianity **9**

*By John Pierce*

Church's loss of credibility can contribute to increase in those with no religious affiliation **37**

*G. Todd Wilson*

**IN THE NEWS**

Suicide rates higher among Baby Boomer men **11**

Analysis: America's Christian conservatives ponder 'exile' **14**

Television evangelist gets a papal high-five **14**

Food banks serve one in seven Americans **15**



Political correctness may have led UK officials to ignore sex abuse **15**

**MEDIA**

**'Cultivating generosity'**

A constructive approach to discussing money

16



**FEATURES**

**BAPTIST THEOLOGY: Part 4 32**  
*By Fisher Humphreys*

100-year-old minister keeps focus off himself **34**  
*By Jack U. Harwell*

**ASK the THEOLOGIAN: Part 5 42**

Quotation Remarks	8
Editorial	9
Classifieds	30
In the Know	30
Lighter Side	31
Baptists and the Civil War	36

**Cover photo** by John Pierce. Jim and Susan McConnell of Shelby, N.C., hike through the aspen trees on a mountaine side near West Yellowstone, Mont., as part of the Nurturing Faith Experience in August. **Story on page 38**

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# In times of transition

A conversation with **Eddie Hammett** about ‘equipping the saints for the work of ministry’

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Eddie Hammett is church and clergy coach for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina and president of Transforming Solutions. *Baptists Today* editor John Pierce posed questions to him about his work and calling. This conversation is adapted from that interview.

**BT: May we talk first about your own journey of faith and ministry? Who and what were the major influences — and how have your personal faith and ministry evolved?**

**EH:** I have been extremely blessed through the years to be connected with people of all ages who have nurtured me in the faith and in my faith journey. My family faith roots grow deep and wide. My parents, siblings, extended family and grandparents have been and are involved in a variety of leadership positions in Baptist churches.

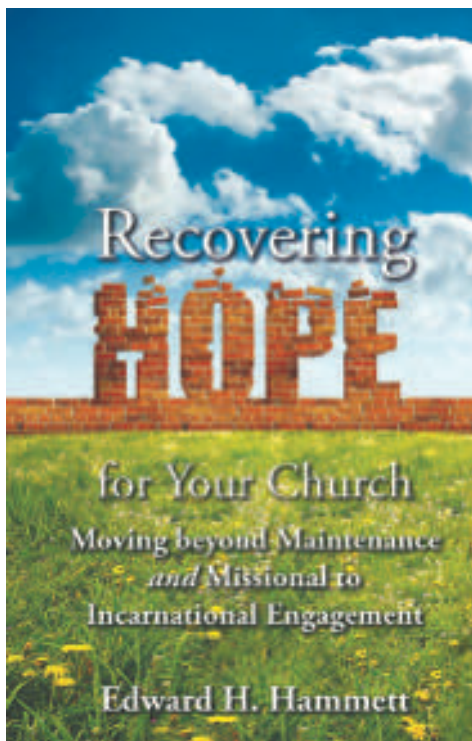
College and seminary introduced me to deeper mentoring relationships through professors and fellow students — as well as deepening pastor and denominational connections. Seminary gave me challenges to faith but also an anchoring relationship with Findley B. Edge, Gordon and Mary Cosby, Ken Smith, Reid Hardin and a host of others.

God has used these relationships to encourage, clarify, inspire and birth dreams and visions that allow me to live into God’s call on my life to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” *in, through and as* church — both inside and outside church walls and traditional programs.

My professional service in a variety of churches connected me with laypersons and clergy who shared my vision and were open to the equipping. We became fellows on similar journeys of faith.

During all these educational and equipping ventures, God sealed in my calling that I was to focus on helping existing churches (most that are struggling on many fronts) to develop vision, skills and ministries to ensure greater effectiveness in a rapidly changing culture.

Our world/culture is increasingly



unchurched, dechurched and the typical congregation has fallen into a “survival mode” as money, leadership and attendance decline, as buildings age and as their communities show decreasing interest in attending church as it is. So my writing journey began.

Then the door opened for me to move into denominational leadership in discipleship, leadership development and coaching for more than 23 years. Countless relationships and opportunities emerged and continued to challenge me and allowed me the opportunity to challenge and walk with other leaders and congregations all across the country.

Today I am highly honored to work with multiple denominational groups, as a result of my writing, coaching and coach training ministries that continue to be focused on “equipping the saints for the work of ministry.”

**BT: Explain “coaching” to us and why are you so committed to it as an approach to ministry?**

**EH:** The door to professional Christian coaching was opened for me, once again, through powerful mentoring and coaching relationships. While serving the Baptist State

Convention of North Carolina, Jane Creswell and Linda Miller — both committed Christian lay leaders and Master Certified Coaches (MCC) in their professional business roles with IBM and Ken Blanchard’s organization — invited me into the Christian coaching world.

These women not only coached me through some life challenges, but also invited me to become a licensed coach trainer and to help give visibility and life to Christian coaching. During those days I discovered personally the transformational power of the coach approach.

I also found a discipleship approach that proved over and over to bear fruit among the churched and unchurched relationships in my sphere of influence. Seeing and experiencing this transformation of heart, attitude and behaviors sold me on coaching.

My training and credentialing continued. And the more skills I refined, the more impact God allowed me to have with pastors, church staff and denominational leaders. Also, doors were opened for me to work with several coaches and mentor coaches to create faith-based companies to continue to serve as a Christian coach in ways I never even imagined.

My partnerships with the CBFNC, The Columbia Partnership and Coach Approach Ministries provide resource encouragement and support for the ministry through my own Transforming Solutions ministry. My commitment in writing, consulting, coaching or coach training is to create solutions that bring needed transformation to ensure greater effectiveness in Kingdom work.

Today I have the privilege of working with my individual, corporate and congregational clients to co-create a sacred and safe place to face the steep learning curves of life and to walk into the fears and challenges of leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Coaches provide that dedicated space to bring focus and clarity to the ambiguous times of life and to provide an environment of powerful coaching questions to help find and take the next steps forward in faith and function.

I feel more fruitful and less frustrated in ministry than any time in my life. I wish I’d had the coaching skills earlier in my professional career. I’m certain I would have been more fruitful, less frustrated and more fulfilled.



“The power of the coach approach is that **we work from the inside out**, not the outside in.”

**BT: How does your work with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina serve ministers and congregations?**

EH: CBFNC provides an anchor for continuing to live into my calling of equipping lay and clergy leaders in ways that bring forth a deeper faith, a transformed heart, and often a transformed pastoral and lay leadership style to create more effective and fruitful ministry.

I have been invited into many CBFNC churches, and churches outside of CBFNC life, to serve as a church and clergy coach to create an atmosphere for churches and leaders to move from where they are — often stuck — to where they sense God wanting them to be — on mission with God. I have also enjoyed working with the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to train coaches for the Dawnings process ([cbfdawnings.org](http://cbfdawnings.org)).

What fun! There are stories of transformational and community building in every situation. Many of these can be found on the website [TransformingSolutions.org](http://TransformingSolutions.org) and in my new book that captures best practices of the coach approach to congregational coaching, *Recovering Hope for Your Church*.

I serve as coach of peer learning groups for pastors, church and CBFNC staff, councils and leadership teams who are trying to find focus amid all the pressing demands and expectations.

Recently I served a group of nine CBFNC pastors who were seeking ways to thrive and not just survive in days of transition and change. What a great time it was as we watched focus emerge, best practices shared and community experienced.

I love to watch God do work only God can do — working in and through us. Coaching has helped my prayer life more than anything I've ever taught, preached or practiced.

The power of the coach approach is that we work from the inside out, not the outside in. The coach creates powerful questions and a sacred and safe place that creates “aha moments” for the person or church being coached.

Christian coaches do not offer counsel, advice or professional expertise unless invited to do so. Coaches are not prescriptive; we are

catalysts for exploration, discernment and discovery as paths to focus, deepening of ownership, and broadening leadership into new dreams and possibilities.

More information about the CBFNC Coaching Network and congregational coaching can be found at [cbfnc.org](http://cbfnc.org).

**BT: At the core of what you are saying and doing is the reality that change is both here and coming. How crucial is it for congregations not only to accept change but also to do something constructive in response?**

EH: Change is happening with us or without us. The wheels are already in motion due to the fast pace generated by decisions our society has made. We can fight it and lose energy, time and status or we can learn to take the Good News to a new world in ways that our current and future world can understand and embrace.

It seems to me this is a significant part of the incarnation. God tried in many ways to reach his people — priests, prophets, synagogues — and then his Son out of love to reach a straying people. It seems our responsibility and commission are no different.

The sad and clear reality — which many people do not want to see, accept or own — is that what we are now doing is not working very well to reach emerging generations. Our statistics and lack of transformation are the undisputable reality.

We are told that approximately 8,000 to 10,000 churches close their doors each year. I'm concerned about this and committed to being part of the solution, not the problem.

I'm not calling for change of the Gospel message. But I am calling for the church to discover ways of communicating this Good News so that the world hears and understands our Christian message as good news.

**BT: You wrote a book titled *Reaching People Under 40 While Keeping People Under 60*. That is quite a balancing act. Is it possible to take such an approach without failing?**

EH: This book has sold far more copies than any of us imagined. We are grateful. I'm in the process of updating the book for a new release with new information in spring of 2015.

Yes! It is possible to reach and be church for all generations.

There are stories of transformation all across the country of how God works in churches of all sizes and types. God takes these principles and, when people commit to embracing them and God's mission for their church, hearts shift, more effective structures emerge and people learn from people not in their age or peer group.

The challenge and key, more often than not, is a change in leadership style and focus. *Reaching People* is part one of two books. It focuses on eight basic principles and their applications for churches of all sizes.

*Making Shifts Without Making Waves* is the complementary book that frames the leadership shifts that facilitate these principles into action in a local church. Truly it is not an easy journey and it is a real balancing act, but it can and is being done.

The bottom line is this: How bad does a local church want to reach a new generation and leave a legacy so that it exists after the current aging membership dies?

**BT: The title of your latest book, *Recovering Hope for the Church*, contains what is perhaps the most important word in the world. Can you give us a word of hope for those seeking to live out the Gospel in modern times?**

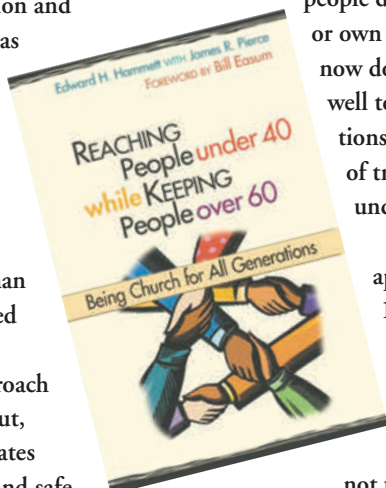
EH: I must confess, for a decade or so in my early ministry career I lost hope for the local church. I've been in and around dying churches most of my ministry career.

I have also been blessed to be part of churches that made shifts and where God showed up in some transforming ways that restored vitality of faith and work.

I'm more hopeful now about the future of the church than ever before in my ministry. I see God doing some amazing things in the lives of churches, church leaders and the next generation of believers.



Eddie Hammett





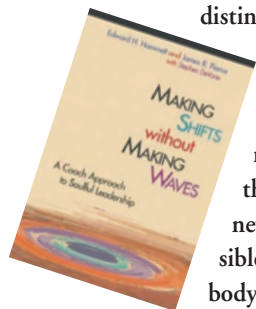
God's church and God's mission will always live, and God will see that his mission happens among obedient people. I also see churches of all faiths "going out of business" — having to sell their properties to become museums, restaurants or bookstores. Membership and financial decline no longer allows the church to meet in its buildings.

Local churches, however, have some challenging decisions to make if they want to be church in a growing and diverse culture.

The New Testament church was never created for those inside it. Persons of all ages have a right to have the Good News presented to them/us in ways that feed our soul, nurture our faith and equip us for the work of the ministry.

Learning styles and preferences differ, but the mission and the call of God are the same.

How we respond, hear and obey is usually distinctive — and that is OK!



I went through major open-heart surgery and a long, difficult recovery to learn some of the lessons found in this new book. Recovery is possible, but the disease in the body must be treated first and sometimes removed.

Jesus calls us to take up his cross daily and follow him. That is not an easy task, but one that brings great purpose, meaning and fulfillment. The recovery effort is worth it!

God has allowed me to be part of recovery on many levels and in many churches. I am not only more hope-filled about the church's future, but also am more fulfilled and fruit-bearing than any time I've known in my 35-plus years of professional ministry.

Hope pulls church leaders into heart shifts that bring forth much fruit when we commit to seeking and following the Holy Spirit.

*Recovering Hope for Your Church* is filled with stories of changed leaders, congregations and empowered members who discern and walk into God's future for their church. I have learned these best practices, in collaboration with congregations of all sizes and denominations, as I've served them as a congregational coach.

Now I am about multiplying these skills and recovery and transforming practices through a Congregational Coach Certification process for those leaders who want to help congregations move forward in faith and function to be more effective in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. For more details, go to [TransformingSolutions.org](http://TransformingSolutions.org). **BT**

# The American pastor who came to comfort Nazis

(RNS) — He was a minister to monsters.

That's what Tim Townsend writes of Henry Gerecke, the unassuming Lutheran pastor from Missouri who shepherded six of the most notorious Nazis to the gallows in *Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis*.

The book is one of a string of new titles that dust off a remote corner of World War II history — the role religion played both in and beyond the conflict.

"A large part was trying to figure out why did the Allies provide spiritual comfort for men who were on trial for what was ultimately called the Holocaust," said Townsend, a senior writer and editor for The Pew Research Center.

Townsend combed the National Archives for some piece of paper, some order that explained more deeply why the Allies felt those charged with the most horrendous crimes of the century needed — even deserved — a chaplain of their own, beyond the fact that the Geneva Conventions required it.

American culture has long accepted the idea of chaplains ministering to criminals from the common thief to the death row murderer. But what about genocidal killers overseas?

Townsend finds his answer in Gerecke, a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod pastor charged with caring for men such as Hermann Goering, Albert Speer and Wilhelm Keitel — men responsible for the mass-extermination of six million European Jews.

Gerecke volunteered in 1943, when the Army was desperate for chaplains. His unit was sent from England to Germany after the Germans surrendered in 1945.

There, he visited Dachau, where hundreds of thousands of Jews were gassed and cremated in ovens.

As the Nuremberg Trials began, higher-ups heard there was a German-speaking Army chaplain and asked Gerecke to take on the role of ministering to 21 high-ranking Nazis on trial for their lives.

In saying yes, Gerecke played one of the most puzzling and under-examined roles in what Townsend calls "the judicial improvisation we now call the Nuremberg trials."

"Gerecke was the perfect choice," Townsend said. "He was able to go in with his mind and his eyes wide open. He had seen

Dachau. He knew what these people were responsible for, but he was able to move past that in terms of his ability to relate to them."

Townsend thinks Gerecke looked beyond the terrible men imprisoned in front of him to the children they had once been. One of the most lovely — and chilling — pieces in the book comes when Gerecke accompanies Keitel up the 13 steps of the gallows and prays aloud with him a German prayer both were taught by their mothers.

"He knew that he needed to save the souls of as many of these men as he could before they were executed," Townsend said. "I think for him he thought it was a great gift he had been given."

And not one he took lightly. Gerecke did not give Communion to any of the Nazis unless he believed they were truly penitent and made a profession of faith in Jesus. Only four of the 11 sentenced to hang met Gerecke's standard.

One who did not was Goering, who many historians credit with helping to create "the Final Solution," the genocide of the Jews. When he and Gerecke discussed the divinity of Jesus, Goering disparaged the idea.

"This Jesus you always speak of," he said to Gerecke, "to me he is just another smart Jew."

"You are not a Christian," Gerecke told Goering, "and as a Christian pastor I cannot commune you."

Within hours, Goering was dead, robbing the hangman by swallowing cyanide he had secreted in his cell.

After the war, Gerecke was criticized by some of his fellow pastors for not granting Goering Communion. And he was criticized for ministering to such monsters in the first place.

During the trials, a rumor spread among the Nazis that Gerecke would go home before the end. They wrote a letter to his wife, Alma, asking her to please let him stay. That letter, which Townsend first saw in a St. Louis exhibit, led him to the story.

"Our dear Chaplain Gerecke is necessary not only for us as a minister but also as the thoroughly good man that he is," the letter reads above the signatures of Goering, Keitel, Speer and others. Then it includes a word Townsend writes is not often associated with Nazis: "We simply have come to love him." **BT**



# quotation remarks

“One would think, of all the people in the world, that Christians would be able to accept imperfect goodness. Yet, it seems we are incapable of letting goodness be goodness. Instead, we critique every single good deed from a theological perspective because we are unable to just let it be.”

—Joe Kendrick, pastor of Bruington Baptist Church in Bruington, Va., on criticism of the popular ice bucket challenge that has raised millions of dollars to fight ALS (*EthicsDaily.com*)

“How have we, whose religious ancestors braved treacherous seas and hostile winters in search of religious freedom, become so myopic as to equate the Mystery we name as God with only one religious expression of faith? Where is the freedom in that? Is it faith in God, or just fear?”

—Russ Dean, co-pastor of Park Road Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C. (*ABP*)

“Above all we have to clarify that we are not misogynists; we don’t want to gobble up a woman a day!”

—Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, speaking to the Vatican’s semi-official newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* on his group’s renewed criticism of American nuns affiliated with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (*RNS*)

“The most powerful image of our way of life is Jesus taking the towel and washing his disciples’ feet... When the church lives in humility, we create space for

others to enter and abide with us and ultimately with Christ and in Christ.”

—Roy Medley, general secretary of American Baptist Churches, speaking to Argentine Baptist Association in Buenos Aires in August (*abc-usa.org*)

“I tell [colleagues], ‘You have to ask yourself from time to time whether you’ll become pastor of another church, or another pastor of your church. I’ve chosen the latter.’”

—George Mason, celebrating 25 years as pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas (*Dallas Morning News*)

“It’s hard to explain to someone in a free, Western culture where you can just say whatever you want, wherever you want, whenever you want.”

—Nell Green, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary who has worked in several Muslim nations, on the needed sensitivity in Middle Eastern cultures where religious liberty is not a shared value (*ABP*)

“These are big-hearted people around here. This is the kind of place you want to live.”

—Mayor Phillip Cagle of Pikeville, Tenn., after 60-member Lee Station Baptist Church turned a donated house into a ministry center with a clothes closet, a food pantry and an impromptu winter shelter (*Chattanooga Times Free Press*)

“What we often find when we thirst for retribution is that the pain of the

offended never fully quenches. We pant for more payment, more pain, more shame to satisfy our anger, hurt, disappointment. As the root of bitterness grows deep, its sour fruit hangs heavy.”

—Jonathan Merritt, a Southern Baptist minister, author and senior columnist for *Religion News Service*

“Insecure leaders allow the hyper-needy and disruptive to poison public conversations. The anxious treat basic facts of life such as change and diversity as dangerous intrusions.”

—*Religion News Service* columnist and church consultant Tom Ehrlich

“You think this is the first time tanks have been in a community? It’s not. You all think this was the first time tear gas was used? It was used on my daddy. In Selma. Tear gas, tanks. So, really, you’ve got to start thinking: ‘What is the vision you want to see come out of this?’ It’s got to be big. You’ve got to see well beyond this moment.”

—Bernice King, youngest child of Martin Luther King Jr., urging non-violence in Ferguson, Mo., where racial tension was high after a white police officer shot to death an unarmed black teen (*RNS*)

“When I first started preaching, my mother told me that if I hadn’t struck oil in 20 minutes to quit boring. I always did what my mother told me to do.”

—Retired Baptist minister Bob Ford of Jacksonville, Ala., quoted by columnist George Smith of *The Anniston Star*

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# Confessing our practice of selective Christianity

I practice selective Christianity. And so do you. And so do those who pretend they don't — acting as if they and God have all the same answers.

When threatened, we easily toss aside Jesus' teachings that do not fit our fears — as if we were given an exemption card to play at will.

When too many others are getting in line ahead of us for whatever we really desire, we excuse ourselves from the gospel notion that the first become last.

Perhaps one of the most needed confessions among modern American Christians is that we practice a pick-and-choose faith that resembles a food product stuffed with fillers and preservatives but mislabeled as 100 percent pure.

Such confessions keep us from wrongly assuming, and publicly presenting ourselves, to be fully representative of the faith we claim and even seek to live. Then when others see our shortsightedness and shortcomings, they will know that we see them too.

Nothing harms the public witness of the Christian faith more than arrogant claims of faithfulness that don't fully represent the Gospel. However, a humble confession of seeking to follow Jesus, while admitting that we have miles to go, better represents the available grace that we should both experience and extend.

The full demands of Jesus are more than I am willing to accept. So it is more constructive to my faith and the faith of others to admit such failings than to suggest that the Gospel is less than it is — reduced for my personal convenience.

Too often we — especially those given pulpits and amplified voices — believe that the

unconnected masses are seeking all the right answers when nothing is less attractive than one who thinks he or she (usually he) has all divine truth nicely packaged for easy distribution.

Grace is unnecessary if we have everything rightly ordered. It is our admittance of struggling and failing to follow the high, hard trail of Jesus that will appeal to others who know struggle and failure.



Such confession is not fatalistic, but hopeful — rooted in the honest need for grace for ALL of us — not just those poor souls unlike us who haven't figured everything out yet.

In a sermon I stated that being a faithful

Christian is hard, but not complicated. Several persons have brought those words back for further, helpful discussion.

Faithfulness is hard in that Jesus called his followers to do very difficult things such as loving enemies, responding to evil with good, walking second miles and giving away stuff.

Yet it is not complicated in that the call to Christian discipleship can be discerned and explained as modeled by Jesus. It is grace-driven, other-focused, community-rooted and hope-filled.

It is not a short course in discipleship or even a long educational experience that ends with a diploma to hang on a wall.

While the Bible can be mined for a lifetime, it really addresses but two subjects: how we relate to God and how we are to relate to

others. Although the literature can be complex, the larger messages are rather simple.

The hard part comes from actually loving God with all of our being and our neighbors as ourselves. Too much of our own stuff gets in the way.

Like those whom Jesus challenged, we get sidetracked by fear, personal desires, political agendas, narrow theological confines, and a sense of superiority.

When reading the Gospels, I often imagine a scene in which Jesus and the disciples are spending a night in the countryside. After a long day of walking, teaching and caring for the needs of others, they are exhausted.

Jesus rolls over with his back to the fire, and the others think he is asleep. One of them — probably Peter — whispers to the other: “What in the world was he talking about when he said...?”

A long discussion ensues about some metaphorical statement or a winding parable that was left unexplained. And I imagine Jesus remains still and quiet with a big smile on his face — thrilled they are wrestling with such divine ideas with heavy demands.

Reaching conclusions about what Jesus calls his followers to do is a minor challenge compared with faithfully doing some of the hard things he said and did.

Yes, living a faithful Christian life is hard, but it is not complicated. And, at best, we do so with great selectivity.

Therefore, one of the most faithful, hopeful acts of a disciple is to confess one's selectivity and then seek to move a step further down that hard, yet grace-filled, trail. **BT**



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By Mike Queen

# Questions without answers

A personal, pastoral perspective on suicide

With the recent death of actor/come-dian Robin Williams, it seems as though everyone is writing and talking about suicide. Many others have done so far more eloquently than I might, but I do have something to say about it.

Of all the ways people die, suicide is one of the saddest.

While playing golf with friends in a church tournament one afternoon, one of our deacons rode up on a cart to our foursome and asked if he could speak with me privately. It was then he shared with me that my only sibling, my sister Gail, had died.

As I questioned him for details, it soon became apparent that her death was the result of a suicide. Words fail when it comes to describing the shock that ricocheted through our family and through her community.

She was the twice-divorced mother of two daughters, ages 19 and 14. Her pastor described her as the finest outreach person he had ever known.

Her boss at the bank said people would line up at her window just so she could wait on them. She was always the life of the party. She could make everyone happy but herself.

At the time my parents lived in another state. I called their pastor and asked him to find them, tell them about Gail and then to have them call me. Those conversations were brutal.

Suicides require autopsies, which delay funerals and complicate planning. They only add to the tension already present.

I recall my dad's utter confusion and frustration when my sister's 14-year-old daughter wanted to go visit a friend. Dad did not understand why everyone did not feel what he was feeling at the time and in the manner he was feeling it.

We had to have a talk. I reminded him that not everyone grieves in the same way and

that we do not all grieve at the same time. But Dad was not the only one confused.

Among the first things a family does is to ask the question: "What could we have done to prevent this?"

Guilt is rampant. My sister's daughters recalled the times when they had frustrated her and she had to discipline or lecture them. My parents thought of times when she heard a rebuke when what she needed was a hug.

I remembered my last conversation with Gail and wished that I had been more sensitive to her struggle. Her friends could not believe they did not see the signs — signs that are so much easier to identify after the fact than in the moment.

We buried Gail on a Thursday, and I was to preach on Sunday, which I did. I stayed in my office as the service began, letting one of the other ministers, Jim Everette, lead the service that morning.

Jim explained that I was not up to greeting folks and such, but that I would be preaching as scheduled. As I made my way to the sanctuary at about 11:20, I prayed that God would carry me and that the Gospel would be proclaimed.

The text that morning, having been planned weeks earlier, was from Hebrews: "... For we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken." My world had been shaken, but not the kingdom.

The halls of the church were quiet when the service began. As I came around a corner, one of our members was sitting in a chair waiting for her son to pick her up after Sunday school. She immediately stood and began to express her sympathies regarding Gail's death.

The next words out of her mouth stunned me for a moment: "Mike, do you believe that people who commit suicide go to hell?"

I stood there for a moment saying nothing, then replied: "No. My sister's salvation was taken care of a long time ago. God's grace is enough."

People marveled that I could preach that Sunday. For me, it was better than not preaching.

The congregation did not really know how to minister to me in the wake of Gail's death because they did not know what to do with suicide. Years later when both of my parents and my wife's parents died, the church loved us through our grief and loss in such wonderful caring ways.

But suicide is different from other deaths, so we often struggle with what to say and what to do. On the surface, it seems as though a person has made a decision to end his or her life. But I think it is far more complicated and nuanced than that.

Some attribute suicide to mental illness. Some say it is a cry for help gone too far. But most experts say the pain of depression, whatever its source may be, is just too much for them to bear.

I don't know. As I learned the details surrounding Gail's death, I could not help but wonder what she was thinking in that moment and what confluence of factors had brought her to that moment.

I can recall three funerals that I conducted where the cause of death was suicide. All the families asked the same questions, the ones with no answers.

All the families experienced deep grief, the kind of grief that when coupled with guilt crushed their spirits. All the families wondered aloud, over and over again: "What could we have done differently?"

It has been 22 years since Gail died. Sometimes when I think about her, I just laugh recalling some crazy thing she did or some delightful thing she said. Her grammar was never the best, and it just made for some hilarious memories.

But sometimes I think of her and cry.





Often it is when I see her in the face of one of her daughters and am reminded of just how full of life she was.

But mostly I cry when I think about her pain and how no one or no thing could alleviate it for her. I don't know what that is like, and it breaks my heart.

Gail's death impacted my ministry as a pastor. After her death, I was a lot more sensitive to people with problems. Sometimes I thought they were making a bigger deal out of something than they should have, but you never know what it takes in a person's life to reach that tipping point.

So pay attention to your family, your friends, even your neighbors and co-workers. Listen to what they are saying. Telling them they ought not to feel like they feel simply doesn't help.

Let them know you love and care about them. Offer them words of encouragement. And if you sense that they are in danger of harming themselves, get them help. That is one thing you will never regret. **BT**

—Mike Queen, retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., is a consultant with the Center for Healthy Churches ([healthy-churches.org](http://healthy-churches.org)) and co-author of *Hopeful Imagination: Traditional Churches Finding God's Way in a Changing World* (Nurturing Faith Publishers).

## Suicide rates higher among Baby Boomer men

By Kathleen O'Brien  
*Religion News Service*

**B**aby Boomer men are 60 percent more likely to take their own life than their fathers' generation, according to a Rutgers University sociologist. The trend is particularly alarming because middle age is typically a time when suicide rates decline before rising again in old age.

Suicide usually rises drastically during adolescence and young adulthood, then typically levels off in middle age, according to Julie Phillips, a Rutgers sociology professor who researched the effect of unemployment and the Great Recession on suicide rates nationally. That plateau hasn't happened with today's Baby Boomer men.

"The rise we've seen in suicide rates since 1999 among boomers while in their 40s and 50s is unusual," Phillips said. Boomer men are now 60 percent more likely to take their own lives than men their age who were born in the 1930s — or roughly men of their fathers' generation.

"We're in a position now where suicide rates for middle-aged people are higher than those for the elderly," she said. "That hasn't happened before, at least not in the last century."

Phillips offered some reasons as to why Boomer men remain at risk for suicide even when they hit an age that has often brought more stability:

Boomer men lived through the jump in divorce rates, making them more likely to be living alone than previous men their age. All age groups also report being less religious than earlier generations. And studies indicate that Baby Boomers are not becoming more religious as they age, Phillips said. Their disinclination to go to church appears to be permanent.

The current elevated suicide rate in middle age doesn't bode well for the future.

"The concern is that as those middle-aged people move into old age, where suicide rates are typically higher for men at least, we may see them get higher still," Phillips said.

A double-whammy of health problems — chiefly obesity — combined with the Great Recession may have hit Boomer men hard, in part because such problems may have been unanticipated, she said.

Also alarming is that the younger generation, in their 20s and 30s, appears to be charting a course of higher suicides as well. "This is a troubling trend that we should continue to monitor," she said. **BT**

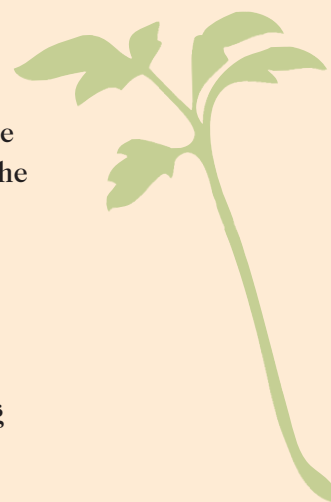
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# CRACKS in the 'stained-glass ceiling'

*Women are now reaching prominent pulpits*

**C**hicago. New York. Washington, D.C. In quick succession this year, three women have been chosen to lead historic tall-steeple churches in all these cities.

In May, Shannon Johnson Kershner became the first woman solo senior pastor at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church. In June, Amy Butler was elected senior pastor of New York City's Riverside Church. And finally, in July, Ginger Gaines-Cirelli began leading Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C.

## NEW ADVANCES

"For women to speak in those pulpits and speak boldly as public voices in these very public buildings is very powerful," said Serene Jones, president of Union Theological Seminary, who recently hosted a dinner party with some of New York's movers and shakers to welcome Butler to town.

It's been 40 years since the Episcopal Church first ordained women, and other denominations have long included women in their clergy ranks. But these new advances are occurring sooner in the lives of these three women than some of their older counterparts.

The Hartford Institute for Religion Research reports that women clergy are much more likely to serve in smaller congregations.

## TWO-EDGED SWORD?

Scholar Diana Butler Bass hailed the arrival of these women — all in their 40s and leading large, urban, neo-Gothic churches — but also wondered if they reflect the "General Motors phenomenon."

"Are women coming into leadership only as the institutions are collapsing?" asked Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion*.

"Now that they're in crisis, it's almost like the men are moving out and saying, 'Oh well, we'll just leave it to the women.' Then if the



Pastor Shannon Johnson Kershner leads children in a song at Fourth Presbyterian Church. Photo courtesy of Fourth Presbyterian Church. Photo courtesy of RNS.

church doesn't succeed, then it's the woman's fault. It's a kind of a double-edged sword."

However, Gaines-Cirelli, 44, doesn't view it that way.

"I think there are challenges and I think that we face them and I think that the fact that women are being counted among those who are capable of facing those challenges at the highest level is a very positive sign," said the native Oklahoman.

## JUMPING HURDLES

Sociologist of religion Cynthia Woolever said the movement of first-career women to these significant sanctuaries is occurring in the isolated realm of mainline Protestantism, where about 20 percent of congregations are led by clergywomen.

"If you look at conservative Protestant churches you find very few; in the Catholic

church: zero," said Woolever, editor of *The Parish Paper*, a newsletter for regional offices of mainline denominations.

"It's wonderful that women are being given those kinds of opportunities to serve in those very large churches, but it's a very small slice of the pie."

All three of the senior pastors have had to jump gender-specific hurdles.

In June, Butler used the hashtag "never-getsold" when she tweeted about how a funeral director didn't believe she was a minister.

She once had to get an emergency room security guard to log on to her former church's website to show him her photo there so she could pay a late-night visit to a sick congregant.

"Look, I know you're his girlfriend," the guard told her before she convinced him otherwise.



## FAIRNESS

Kershner said that early in her ministry when she was a hospital chaplain, she often entered rooms where she was rebuffed because she wasn't a "real minister."

In every place she's served as the first woman pastor, Gaines-Cirelli has heard a variation on this theme: "I was so worried that we were getting a woman, but I think that you're going to be just fine."

Comparable pay was yet another hurdle.

But both Butler and Len Leach, chair of Riverside's church council, said the pastor's base salary of \$250,000 is equivalent to that received by her predecessor, Brad Braxton.

"It is a big job and for me it's a big, wonderful opportunity and a big risk and so I think the Riverside Church has really stepped out here to set a great example for the rest of Christendom," said Butler, a native Hawaiian who will lead a majority black congregation.

Butler described her total package, including benefits, as "fair." Leach said Butler decided to give \$35,000 annually to the interdenominational church's general fund and an additional \$26,000 as a scholarship to pay the annual tuition of a student at the church's day school.

Kershner and Gaines-Cirelli also said they are paid fairly.

## 'ABOUT TIME'

All three women are not only leading congregations but staffs that include other female clergy. Riverside's staff has four other women clergy, Fourth Church has three female associate pastors, and Foundry has one female associate pastor as well as a woman executive pastor.

"The truth is that for years, it was all men; in some places it still is and nobody bats an eye," said Gaines-Cirelli. "So the fact that we are live-streaming to the world this other vision is kind of powerful."

Foundry member Leo Lawless agreed.

"It's about time, isn't it?" he said, noting that a recent worship service featured Gaines-Cirelli and two other women clergy, and two female acolytes as well as a laywoman who read the Scriptures.

The three senior clergywomen each say they look forward to the day when they're viewed simply as their congregation's pastor, rather than its woman pastor.

Said Kershner: "My hope is that little boys and little girls see me and the other clergy and think if that's something that they say and others think God's calling them to do, then they can do it." **BT**



New pastor Amy Butler greets congregants at New York City's Riverside Church during her candidacy week-end. Photo by Dave Cross Photography, courtesy of Riverside Church.

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# ANALYSIS: America's Christian conservatives ponder 'exile'

By David Gibson  
*Religion News Service*

From the moment they set foot on North American soil, the Puritans who came to the continent viewed their "errand into the wilderness" through a biblical lens, seeing themselves as modern-day Israelites building a New Jerusalem in the New World.

But today, the culture war descendants of those Puritans are feeling increasingly alienated in the society they once claimed as their own. They're shifting to another favorite image from Scripture — that of the Babylonian exile, preparing, as the ancient Judeans did, to preserve their faith in a hostile world.

"We live in a time of exile. At least those of us do who hold to traditional Christian beliefs," Carl Trueman, a professor of church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, wrote in the conservative journal *First Things*.

Rampant secularism and widespread acceptance of sexual mores once deemed taboo, Trueman said, mean that "the Western public square is no longer a place where Christians feel they belong with any degree of comfort."

Trueman was so convinced of that reality that he didn't argue whether internal exile was an option. Instead, he wondered which form of Christianity was best equipped to survive this inevitable relocation.

His answer, perhaps not surprisingly, was that his own Reformed Protestantism was superior. That prompted a number of well-known Christian commentators to weigh in and champion their particular denomination.

Rod Dreher at *The American Conservative* argued that his own Eastern Orthodox tradition was best suited to survive the "internal exile." That, in turn, prompted a post by Baylor University humanities professor (and Anglican) Alan Jacobs, who also dinged Trueman for encouraging sectarian "braggadocio."

Jacobs and *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat (a convert to Catholicism) then went back and forth on Twitter, and so it continued.

Leaving aside the confessional competition, the very premise of the exile narrative might be surprising to those who see Christian conservatives as driving the nation's political dynamics.

For liberals, the religious right is pushing the U.S. back to a cultural and religious Dark Age. For conservatives, on the other hand, the religious right holds the promise of restoring American society to a Golden Age that has been tarnished by years of Democratic malfeasance.

But there is another strain of culturally conservative Christianity that views the political path to renewal as putting, as the psalm says, too much trust in princes.

In fact, Christians in that tradition see that the electoral and cultural trends on issues such

as gay marriage are moving inexorably against their values. And they don't put much faith in the Republican Party to save them.

Hence the comparisons of American Christians today to ancient Israelites who were sent into exile in the sixth century B.C. by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, after his armies sacked Jerusalem.

Yet others see all this talk as indulging in what Alan Noble called the "Evangelical Persecution Complex." Writing in *The Atlantic*, Noble, an assistant professor of English at Oklahoma Baptist University, defined that complex as the temptation "to interpret personal experiences and news events as signs of oppression, which are ostensibly validations of our commitment to Christ."

In *The Christian Century*, Lutheran pastor Benjamin Dueholm echoed Noble's criticism and called the exile idea "a dubious and highly troubling premise" because it "trivializes" the experience of real exile, such as Christians and religious minorities who are suffering today in actual Babylon, or what we call Iraq.

"Nothing in the experience of white American Christianity bears the slightest resemblance (to that), and it is unlikely that anything will any time soon," said Dueholm. "We still enjoy a kind of wealth, prestige, institutional heft, political clout, and legal protection that would stupefy Jesus of Nazareth." **BT**

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## Television evangelist asks for, receives papal high-five

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey  
*Religion News Service*

What does it take to produce the first-ever papal high-five? A meeting with American televangelists, apparently.

The gesture came during a three-hour meeting of Pope Francis and Texas televangelists Kenneth Copeland and James Robison this summer, just weeks after the pontiff met with televangelist Joel Osteen and other religious leaders.

Robison said he was so moved by Pope Francis' message of the gospel that he asked the translator to ask Francis for a high-five. The pope obliged, raised his arm and the two men smacked hands.

The televangelists are among some wealthier U.S. evangelicals who have recently met with Francis, who has called for a focus

on the poor and a simple lifestyle for clergy. In March, the pope met with members of the Green family, the Oklahoma billionaires whose company, Hobby Lobby, won their challenge to President Obama's contraception coverage mandate at the Supreme Court.

Copeland and Osteen have been criticized by some as teaching "health and wealth" prosperity theology, the belief that faith can increase one's wealth. But from his humble shoes to his simple Fiat, Francis has set a decidedly un-extravagant example.

"The prosperity gospel seems to be fundamentally opposed to the message that Francis has been spreading. But he has shown that he's willing to meet with just about anyone," said



James Robison

Michael Peppard, a professor of theology at Fordham University.

Robison, a Texas televangelist with Baptist roots, was born into the Episcopal Church but didn't have a "born-again" conversion until later in life, the kind of story he sees among many Protestants and Catholics.

"There are a lot of evangelicals and Catholics who don't know Christ," he said.

While some praised Robison for going to Rome, others said Protestants and Catholics have too many differences, on issues that include the role of the Bible, saints, the status of the Virgin Mary and the nature of salvation.

But Robison said he and Pope Francis found common ground in caring for the poor.

"I don't see him as presenting himself as infallible," Robison said of Pope Francis. "He's been to confession. He asks for prayer. He's anxious to apologize on (behalf) of Catholic leadership." **BT**



# Food banks serve one in seven Americans

By Natalie Diblasio  
*Religion News Service*

LORTON, Va. — When Mary Smallenburg, 35, of Fort Belvoir, Va., opened a package from her mother to find cereal and ramen noodles, she burst into tears. Without it, she wouldn't be able to feed her four children.

"It got to the point where I opened my pantry and there was nothing. Nothing. What was I going to feed my kids?" Smallenburg said, adjusting a bag of fresh groceries on her arm.

Smallenburg's family is one of 50 military families that regularly visit the Lorton Community Action Center food bank. Volunteers wave a familiar hello as she walks in the door.

"None of what we have been through has been expected," Smallenburg said.

Three of her four children have special needs, and her husband is deployed in Korea. "The last few months, actually, coming here has been a godsend."

Nationwide, 25 percent of military families — 620,000 households — need help putting food on the table, according to a study by Feeding America, a network of 200 food banks.

"The results are alarming," said Bob Aiken, chief executive officer of Feeding America. "It means that people in America have to make trade-offs. They have to pick between buying food for their children or paying for utilities, rent and medicine."

One in seven Americans — 46 million people — rely on food pantries and meal



service programs to feed themselves and their families, the study found.

Linda Patterson, executive director of Lorton Community Action Center, said stereotypes of the people who need food assistance are misleading.

"The people who come here are hard workers. They are employed. They are the school bus drivers, the lab techs in doctors offices, receptionists, the janitors who clean the floor of your children's school," Patterson said. "They just can't make ends meet because some kind of crisis has hit them."

The Hunger in America study found that of people who use food banks:

- 26 percent are black, 20 percent are Hispanic, 43 percent are white and 11 percent are other.
- 33 percent of households have at least one family member with diabetes.
- 65 percent of households have a child under 18 or someone 60 or older.

The Lorton Community Action Center has seen an 18 percent increase in people who need food assistance since food stamp benefits

were cut in November 2013, Patterson said.

"Many of our families, if they don't come, will have to choose between paying rent or their kids eating that night," Patterson said. The median monthly household income of Feeding America network clients is \$927.

Sydni Marquesas, 47, of Lorton, works in merchandising. "It doesn't pay much and they limit your hours," she said. "Plus, Virginia just made it so hard to apply for SNAP."

SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, what food stamps are called now. Marquesas has used the food bank to get food for herself and her 14-year-old daughter for more than a year and a half.

Recently she started taking nutrition classes through the food bank. "The classes are great," she said. "I am learning about healthy eating on a budget."

In the past year, food banks have increased their focus on healthy foods. The study found that 79 percent of people who use food banks report purchasing inexpensive, unhealthy food just to have enough to feed their families.

"We are seeing a change. People are starting to understand the correlation between diet and illness," said Allison Majewski of the Capital Area Food Bank. "They want healthier food. They are asking for dairy, meats and fresh produce."

"The people who come to us for help are coming more regularly," Majewski said. "We aren't a one-time emergency stop anymore. We are a staple for them, so it's very important that we make these healthy foods available." **BT**

## Political correctness may have led UK officials to ignore sex abuse

By Trevor Grundy  
*Religion News Service*

CANTERBURY, England — Muslims have reacted with horror to a sensational report revealing that 1,400 children were subjected to rapes, abductions and beatings by gangs of men, mostly of Pakistani origin, in the northern English town of Rotherham.

In the report, "Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997-2013)," lead author Alexis Jay writes that police and government officials turned a blind eye to the horrifying reports reaching

them from abused children — almost all of them teenage girls — because of fear that, if widely known, they would stir up anti-Muslim feelings in Britain.

Muhbeen Hussain, founder of a British Muslim youth group in Rotherham, said the police and the town's social services "totally failed us" by not taking action against gang members.

"We want the investigations to go back to 1997, cases reopened and prosecutions made, because these people aren't convicted — they're still on the streets," he said.

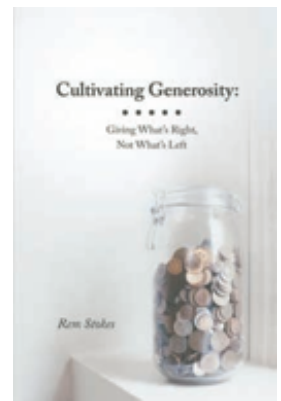
There are approximately 8,000 Muslims living in Rotherham (population 257,000) and 2.8 million Muslims in the U.K.

"It's definitely not racist to ask why the majority of Rotherham abusers were Asian men," said Sajid Javid, culture secretary in Prime Minister David Cameron's government. "How else will we learn from these awful crimes?"

An editorial in the conservative *Daily Mail* said the majority of British Asians are as horrified by the crimes committed in Rotherham as anyone else in Britain.

But it added: "But the inescapable conclusion is that the dictates of political correctness were placed above the duty to protect children against violent abuse. Could there be any more damning incitement of the warped priorities of British officialdom?" **BT**

A review by John Pierce



# ‘Cultivating generosity’

Author engineers a constructive approach to discussing money

Someday I hope to meet Rembrant (Rem) Stokes. I’ve learned a lot from him already.

One of his Clemson University classmates of old shared with me a copy of Rem’s book, *Cultivating Generosity: Giving What’s Right, Not What’s Left* (LifeRich Publishing, 2013).

His writing has the structure of an engineer and the content of one who’s grasped the joyful importance of generosity.

A mechanical engineer, Rem spent many years designing telephone apparatus for Ma Bell and then worked for Motorola. He holds 22 patents.

He also invented the laminated coinage that the U.S. Treasury adopted in 1964 to save silver. His larger mission, however, is “the ministry of money.”

“This ubiquitous thing called money is woven into almost every aspect of our lives,” he writes in the book’s introduction.

He challenges the notion that money is a subject not to be discussed. In fact, he says, the purpose of his writing is “to present a series of activities that will mellow the reluctance to discuss money, to help [church] members feel better about themselves and, ultimately, to cultivate generosity by indirection.”

Although I’ve led a non-profit organization for nearly 15 years, I confess to struggling at times to fully embrace the notion that asking for money for an important cause is not the same as asking for oneself. This book, which echoes the voices of others who have encouraged me through recent years, is most helpful.

This volume manifested itself over many decades — beginning in 1953 when Stokes, then 23, took part in his New Jersey congregation’s capital campaign.

“I learned in the anguished faces of hundreds of parishioners that it is a very unnatural

thing to give up one’s hard-earned money,” he writes.

Like many of us, he was taught from childhood that some subjects should not be widely discussed: sex, politics, religion and money. But he notes: “One taboo after another has fallen ... but not money!”

Good fund-raising strategies abound, he notes. However, success is more closely tied to “attitudes” than “mechanics.” Hence his willingness, even eagerness, to address in this book the importance of “cultivating a culture of generosity.”

His focus, therefore, is less on meeting organizational funding goals and more on helping individuals “come to grips with the psychological issues behind money behaviors.”

Stokes notes: “We are so willing to show off the trappings of money, but so reluctant to discuss it.” He digs into that reluctance.

He offers a three-part approach beginning with “Program Planning” — that helps members/participants to become more widely involved in the financial issues that are allocated to the various ministry programs.

The second part, “Gaining Control,” helps those who are willing to be more financially supportive but need to manage their money better.

“Overcoming Reluctance,” the third part, shifts the focus to attitudes about money. This is addressed through small group sessions.

Stokes explores the psychological dimensions of money that most persons have never considered. Money, he notes, is often tied to a sense of worth.

“Very few other values — like love, compassion, mercy and justice — can be quantified,” he writes. “While they are infinitely more important to the social fabric of life, they cannot be measured. So money creeps in as a substitute measure of human worth.”

Money, he notes, has taken on negative connotations of being dirty, filthy and materialistic. He calls for new language that affirms

its potential as “an agent of goodness.”

He makes this strong, good and challenging point: “If there is to be an approach to discussing money-related issues that is comfortable and constructive, it should come from the church ... and if there is to be a spiritual content to money that promotes community building rather than self-interest, it should come from the church.”

To avoid a discussion of money, Stokes points out, is to avoid the larger mission of the church.

“Can the church address the real needs of people without discussing money — when the real lives of the people are wrapped up so completely in money?” he asks, pointing out that family breakdowns and other social struggles are often tied to the misuse of money.

These are spiritual — not just money — issues, he notes.

His clear and applicable guidance can be constructive in various settings — with the help of a “spark plug who believes in the process and has the motivation to keep the energy level high,” or even better, more than one spark plug giving attention to different aspects of the program.

While lacking the knowledge and experience to fully evaluate the particular approaches suggested in this book, I do find the values and attitudes to be rightly placed and clearly needed.

“Somewhere we lost the cornerstone of our heritage,” Stokes writes. “The one that is chiseled with the words: ‘It is better to give than to receive.’”

Rem Stokes is helping us recover that cornerstone — words from none other than the one we claim to follow and seek to emulate.

I appreciate Rem’s good words — and his kind and generous friend (and mine), P.L. McCall Jr., for sharing this most helpful resource. *Cultivating Generosity* is available from [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com) and elsewhere. **BT**



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## November lessons in this issue

### Growing Pains

Nov. 2, 2014

Crossing the Jordan

*Joshua 3:7-17*

Nov. 9, 2014

Making Choices

*Joshua 24:1-25*

Nov. 16, 2014

What Women Can Do

*Judges 4:1-23*

Nov. 23, 2014

The Good Shepherd

*Ezekiel 34:1-31*

### Season of Advent

Nov. 30, 2014

The Cry of the Clay

*Isaiah 64:1-9*

Youth Lessons  
are on pages  
22-23.



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# Bible Study

Joshua 3:7-17

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 2, 2014

## Crossing the Jordan

**T**ransitions can be hard. When a longtime school principal or the founder of a business retires, for example, his or her successor can struggle to gain respect. The same is true when a beloved pastor leaves and a new leader takes the helm. If not handled well, the situation can get rocky.

When the Israelites arrived on the verge of the Promised Land, they had followed one leader for 40 years. Moses was not always popular, but he was always there, always calling Israel forward in obedience to God and in progress toward their future home.

As Moses prepared to exit the scene, he knew that a quick and effective transition to a new leader was essential. Israel did not need an interim guide to help them clarify their goals, but a permanent chief the people already knew and held in high regard. Thus, he commissioned Joshua, known to the Israelites since their days in Egypt, as his successor (Deuteronomy 31).

The first two chapters of the book bearing his name show how Joshua stepped into the role of leadership, apportioning land and making military preparations for the coming invasion of Canaan. Outside of the late Moses' testimony, however, Joshua did not yet have the kind of divine endorsement Israel had seen in the mighty works associated with Moses. Chapter 3 sets out to take care of that. 📖

### The affirmation of Joshua (vv. 7-8)

Today's text belongs within a larger

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



Joshua 3:7 –

"The LORD said to Joshua, 'This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.'"

unit extending from 3:1-5:1. Chapter 3 shows how God affirmed Joshua's leadership through blocking the waters of the Jordan River so Israel could cross. Chapter 4 describes the building of a 12-stone memorial as a monument to God's mighty act and a reminder for future generations.

A careful reader will note that the text seems repetitive and sometimes jumbled. Instructions for the priests to lead out with the Ark are repeated several times. A representative from each tribe is chosen in 3:12, but given no task until 4:1-7, when the command is repeated and the representatives are ordered to take one large stone each from the riverbed and carry it across the Jordan. 📖

The stones were used to build a memorial at Gilgal on the far side of the river, but 4:9 says that Joshua also set up a cairn of 12 stones in the middle of the Jordan where the priests had stood.

It is possible that two traditions have been combined, one emphasizing how Joshua had become the new Moses

by leading the people through threatening waters on dry land, and another drawing attention to cultic sanctity and the importance of the Ark for Israel's religious life.

Evidence of editing – as opposed to a singular inspired writing – should not threaten our appreciation for the scripture. These stories come to us as part of the larger story of Israel's tenuous but ongoing efforts to live into the calling of God. Modern believers are a part of that same story. Though we do not live under God's covenant with Israel, we worship the same God and can learn from others who have gone before us.

With 3:7, we are told point blank that God's intention was to "exalt" Joshua in a way that would prove to Israel that God was leading and working through him as surely as God had been present with Moses. As Moses had stood and stretched out his hand over the sea to make the waters part and return (Exod. 14:21-29), so Joshua would give the order for the priests to



carry the Ark of the Covenant into the Jordan and stand still while God did the heavy lifting.

### The proof of the presence (vv. 9-13)

Following instructions, Joshua confidently called the people to “Draw near and hear the words of the LORD your God” (v. 9). Both he and God had something to prove, and they were about to do it.

“By this you shall know,” Joshua said, “that among you is the living God . . .” (v. 10a). The expression “living God” is uncommon, though it also appears in Hos. 2:1; Pss. 42:3 and 84:3; and in a slightly different form in 1 Sam. 17:26; 2 Kgs. 19:4, 26; Jer. 10:10, 23:36; and Dan. 6:21, 27. Other cultures may worship gods that they believe to be living, but only Yahweh is truly alive and active and at work in the world.

It is one thing to claim to be alive, and quite another to demonstrate one’s vitality through action. As their parents or grandparents had witnessed the proof of God’s presence through the plagues sent against Egypt and the crossing of the sea, so they would see a glimpse of God’s power in cutting off the waters of the flooded Jordan River, which could be crossed in no other way. ⬇

Crossing the Jordan would be just the beginning of a protracted campaign to find a home in Canaan, but because of what they saw in crossing the Jordan, Joshua said, Israel could also trust Yahweh to give them victory over the inhabitants of the land. ⬇

Can you think of obstacles you have needed to cross in times past – boundaries that may have seemed insurmountable – and yet, with God’s help, you made it across? Completing a college or graduate degree might have felt that way, or making a difficult decision regarding marriage or children, or meeting the requirements for a new job.

Is there a river before you now, one that you need to cross, but fear it? Can the past experience of God’s presence provide encouragement for present challenges?

### Resources to teach adult and youth classes

are available at  
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### The power of God (vv. 14-17)

While Israel’s crossing of the Jordan reflected the familiar theme of crossing the sea, something is new. With this story, the Ark of the Covenant emerges as a tangible talisman of divine power.

The Ark, whose construction was defined and described in Exod. 25:10-22 and 37:1-9, became the primary symbol of Yahweh’s presence with Israel. It consisted of a rectangular wooden box, plated with gold, about four feet long and a bit more than two feet wide and high. Rings on each side of the Ark allowed suitably sanctified persons to carry it without touching it, using gold-covered poles inserted through the rings. The cover of the Ark, called the “mercy seat,” featured two golden cherubs that faced each other. God’s very presence was thought to dwell above the mercy seat, making the Ark a powerful symbol of God’s nearness and the holiest relic that Israel possessed.

Later religious processions and temple liturgies would also focus on the Ark. The powerful holiness of the Ark, and the care taken to assure that its handlers were ritually pure, was a reminder to all that God’s people were called to personal consecration and holiness.

Ancient peoples identified the uncontrollable sea with chaos, and they believed that rivers, floods, and rains shared in that unruly power. God’s ability to part the sea upon Israel’s exit from Egypt and to dam the Jordan for Israel’s entry to Canaan showed Yahweh’s power over water in all of its chaotic forms.

Thus, “when the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the edge of the water, the waters flowing from above stood still, rising up in a single heap far off . . .” (vv. 15-16). ⬇

The image of water from a raging river standing up in an ever-growing pile could be even more cinematic

than the famous sea-parting scene from Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 movie *The Ten Commandments*, but it would have taken place well upriver from the Israelites, so the primary image in their mind would be a broad expanse of mud, rocks, and sand where the water had drained away.

The people then crossed over – thousands upon thousands of them – while the priests bearing the Ark of the Covenant remained standing in the middle of the dry riverbed. Once they had crossed, 12 men were chosen – one from each tribe – to venture back into the riverbed to choose a heavy rock and carry it to the new campground to be built into a memorial (see 4:1-8). ⬇

The theme of Yahweh’s affirmation of Joshua (3:7) comes full circle with the statement that “On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they stood in awe of him, as they had stood in awe of Moses, all the days of his life” (4:14).

Are there people in your life who command a similar respect? Unfortunately, we’re more likely to stand in awe of movie stars, sports heroes, or other celebrities than of those in whom God’s Spirit is manifest. Persons who are particularly close to God are typically humble and not desirous of hero worship, but worthy of admiration nonetheless.

All of us, whether consciously or not, are influenced by role models, by people we respect. Think about the people whose examples have shaped you: parents, teachers, coaches, co-workers, military officers, peers, and many others offer models for emulation. Who is it that you admire now?

Perhaps more importantly, who might be looking to you as a role model? We don’t have to inspire awe as Joshua did to provide a positive example of character, courage, integrity, and enduring faith.

Whether we lead or follow, the same God who brought Israel across the Jordan can help us surmount obstacles with confidence, move forward into the promised hope that lies ahead, and help others to find it, too. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 9, 2014

## Making Choices

Choices are important: they determine what we do, influence where we go, and shape who we are. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Albus Dumbledore tells Harry: “It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities.” In writing those words, J. K. Rowling could have been paraphrasing philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, who said “We are our choices” (*Nausea*, 1938).

Consider the significance of personal decision-making. Choices related to career, relationships, values, and faith all give shape to our lives. Smaller choices seen in our everyday behavior reflect our commitment to major decisions.

Making choices is not necessarily a once-for-all enterprise, however. We may realize that earlier choices were not wise, and change course by making new and better choices. Conversely, we may be tempted to forsake good choices and stray onto troublesome paths.

### Looking back (vv. 1-13)

No one knew the importance of making choices – and standing by them – better than Joshua, the man who succeeded Moses and led the people of Israel into Canaan, the land God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. ⚓

Joshua understood that the promise was good only so long as the people were faithful. The story of his leadership opens with a miraculous crossing of the flooded Jordan River (chs. 3-4), after which Joshua led the people in a covenant renewal ceremony at Gilgal

Joshua 24:15 –  
“Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

(ch. 4). Israel’s entry into the land, described as a rapid series of conquests of people and their cities, follows in chs. 6-11, followed by a lengthy accounting of how the land was distributed among the tribes (chs. 12-21).

After an account of a religious conflict between the tribes east and west of the Jordan (ch. 22), the narrative fast-forwards to a time when Joshua has grown old and knows that his time is short. Like Moses before him, he called representatives of the people to gather so he could deliver a farewell message designed to remind them of God’s past blessings, and to encourage future faithfulness. ⚓

Joshua’s speech amounts to a summary review of the theology propounded most clearly in Deuteronomy, a straightforward belief that Yahweh would bless Israel so long as the people remained faithful, but would punish them if they turned to other gods. ⚓

Today’s text assumes a second major gathering of leaders from the tribes, who would then be responsible for persuading the people they represented to adhere

faithfully to any commitments made by the assembly. Some, we suspect, would be more successful than others. ⚓

Joshua called the leaders to gather at the ancient sanctuary city of Shechem, located in the central hill country about halfway between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. Shechem, near the site of modern Nablus, was situated on a lower shoulder of Mt. Ebal (*shechem* means “shoulder”), just across a narrow valley from Mt. Gerizim. Located at the junction of important roadways leading from the Jordan River and through the mountains, it was an important city long before the Israelites arrived, and remained so through much of Israel’s history.

The area had a deep sacred history: Abraham had built an altar there after his arrival in Canaan, according to Gen. 12:6-7, and Jacob purchased land near the city before his sons committed bloody treachery, forcing them to flee (Gen. 34:1-31). Excavations at Shechem have uncovered what may be a sacred area with a standing stone dating to the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.

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





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Joshua's purpose was to lead a covenant renewal ceremony that would remind the people of their ongoing obligations if they wished to remain in a positive relationship with God. Careful readers will note that Joshua had previously led the people in a similar covenant ceremony in the same sacred area between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Josh. 8:30-35). Some scholars believe chapter 24 is a retelling of the same event, while others see them as distinct occasions.

Like many other Old Testament covenants, the ceremony in Joshua 24 bears a strong similarity in form to ancient Near Eastern treaties commonly struck between conquering kings and their new vassals.

In these treaties, known best from Hittite records, the triumphant king set the conditions for future peace between himself and his subjects. His vassals could choose to accept the conditions and live in peace, or to reject them and run the risk of further humiliation.

Such treaties had six typical elements:

1. The ruling king is identified by name.
2. The king's "gracious acts" to the conquered are recited.
3. The vassal's covenant obligations are enumerated.
4. The document is placed in a public sanctuary with instructions for periodic reading.
5. The gods of the parties involved are invoked as witnesses.
6. Blessings are promised for obedience to the treaty, while penalties are listed for those who rebel.

Since this was a covenant between God and a nation called by grace (not conquered), and since Israel's monotheistic faith believed in only one god, obvious adaptations had to be made, but the underlying structure is still apparent.

Joshua first identified the LORD (Yahweh) as the ruling power in v. 2, and recited God's previous acts of redemption and grace: God's kindness to the patriarchs (vv. 2-4), deliverance of Israel from Egypt (vv. 5-7), sustaining care in the Transjordan area (vv. 8-10), and

divine aid in the conquest of Canaan (vv. 11-13) are all remembered. The result was this: "I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant" (v. 13).

### Looking forward (vv. 14-25)

Because of this, Israel was called to serve Yahweh alone (vv. 14, 23). As ancient treaties named covenant obligations, Joshua called the Israelites to revere Yahweh, to serve with sincerity and faithfulness, and to forsake all other gods.

The covenant ceremony at Shechem may also have served to incorporate other people groups who had allied themselves with Israel (cf. the Gibeonites, 9:1-27), as well as any conquered peoples who may have wished to identify with the newly ascendant nation. If this was the case, then Joshua was calling upon not only "old" Israel, but also potentially new Israelites, to pledge their loyalty to Yahweh.

The heart of the challenge is found in v. 15, where Joshua called on the tribal leaders to choose which god they would serve, once and for all. Idolatry, as evidenced throughout Israel's history, was a constant temptation. Would the people follow the elaborate rites of their Mesopotamian forefathers ("the region beyond the River")? Would they worship the gods of their new neighbors (here designated as "Amorites")? Or would they put away other gods and trust solely in Yahweh?


Try to imagine old Joshua, struggling to his feet and shouting as loudly as his voice would allow: "Choose this day whom you will serve! ... as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD!" (v. 16).

The people responded positively (vv. 16-18), but Joshua remained skeptical. He had seen too many failures and

too much backsliding to accept their initial pledge at face value, so he played devil's advocate. He accused them of being so incapable of faithful service that they would inevitably turn to other gods and draw Yahweh's wrath (vv. 19-20).

The tribal leaders reiterated their promise to serve, however (v. 21), and Joshua moved on to complete the covenant ceremony.

Since other gods could not be invoked as witnesses (as in the typical treaty formula), Joshua called the people of Israel themselves as witnesses that they had pledged sole loyalty to Yahweh, and demanded that they begin afresh by putting away all evidence of worship of other gods. This would include destroying the small figurines of personal gods that are commonly found in excavations, even during periods of Israelite occupation (v. 22-23).

Once again, the leaders avowed their commitment to serve Yahweh alone (v. 24). Joshua then reminded the leaders of the "statutes and ordinances" they were committed to obey, recorded them for future reference in "the book of the law of God," and marked a standing stone beneath a sacred tree "in the sanctuary of Yahweh" as a perpetual reminder and witness of Israel's pledge (vv. 25-27). 

Let's return to a question asked earlier in this lesson. What important choices and commitments have we made that bear review? Have we been faithful to promises made with regard to relationships with others, or with God?

As Joshua used the symbols of stone and tree to remind Israel of their covenant obligations, we may wear a wedding ring or a cross as daily witnesses of commitments we have made. While symbols may be helpful reminders, the intent of our hearts is what really matters.

Making choices and keeping promises require us to reflect on past, present, and future dimensions of our lives. When faced with the challenge to "choose this day whom you will serve," what is our response? **BT**

# Youth

November 2 — November 30, 2014

Youth Lessons by  
**David Cassidy**  
and online youth  
teaching resources  
(at nurturingfaith.  
net) by **Jeremy  
Colliver** build off



of the Bible lessons by Tony Cartledge.

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

## NOVEMBER 2

### Look Up!

Joshua 3:7-17

**F**ormer NBA star and current basketball analyst Charles Barkley once said "I am not a role model" as part of a Nike Air commercial. Talk shows and newspapers were abuzz with comments after the commercial aired. Some of the commentators bashed Barkley for his statement, and others criticized Nike for creating the commercial because he was in the public eye and their kids looked up to him. Other commentators praised Barkley and Nike for the second half of the commercial: "Parents should be role models... Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids."

Whichever side you favor in this discussion, a worthwhile topic was being discussed: Who should be our role models?

After the death of Moses the people

needed a leader. Joshua had been chosen but didn't have the full faith of the people. In Joshua 3:7 we learn that Joshua would get the ultimate endorsement, however: God would exalt Joshua as the new leader of the Israelites. Joshua wanted the people to know that he was endorsed by God, so he gathered everyone together and told them to listen to what God had instructed them to do.

The people of Israel were to cross the Jordan River with the help of God. Twelve men, one from each tribe, would carry the Ark of the Covenant to the Jordan. When their feet touched the water, the waters would part and the people could walk across. This act would not only promote Joshua as the new leader, but it would also prove that God was a "living God." The people of Israel would again have a leader in whom they believed.

### Think About It:

*The people of Israel had a huge obstacle in their way (the Jordan River), and it was God who helped them overcome it. What obstacles do you have in your life that God can help you overcome?*

### Make a Choice:

*We all have role models, and we are each a role model for someone else. What do your actions reveal about yourself? How might you choose to live differently knowing you are someone's role model?*

### Pray:

*Dear God, we give thanks for the people you place in our lives who show us your love.*

## NOVEMBER 9

### Choices

Joshua 24:1-25

**T**he act of flipping a coin, shaking a Magic 8-Ball, drawing a slip of paper out of a hat, playing "Eeny, meeny, miny, moe" ... These are all things we might do to avoid making a decision. We don't always use these devices to choose. Sometimes we use them just for fun, but at other times we use them because we don't want to make the decision for ourselves. We have to make choices every day, and, not only what we choose, but why we choose, says a lot about who we are.

Joshua had to make a lot of decisions, and the decisions he made would impact not only him, but also the people of Israel.

Joshua had made a lot of decisions in his time as the leader of the people of

Israel. He had crossed the Jordan River, there had been numerous takeovers of cities and their peoples, and he had distributed the lands among the tribes. Joshua knew he was about to die, so he brought the people together to help them realize that they now had to continue on in faith to keep their covenant with God without his leadership. The covenant wasn't between the people and Joshua, but between God and the people.

Joshua recounted all that God had done for the people and what God would do if they did not keep their part of the covenant. The people heard all of this and proclaimed their service to God. Joshua reminded them that they had not always been faithful, calling them to "Choose this day whom you will serve."

### Think About It:

*Why you choose to do something means as much as what you choose. Take time this week to be intentional in thinking about why you do what you do.*

### Make a Choice:

*We make hundreds of choices every day. Some of them are out of habit; others we have to think about. How does God want you to make choices?*

### Pray:

*May our actions show whom we have chosen to follow and serve.*



## Women Rise Up

*Judges 4:1-23*

The people of Israel were again "doing what was evil in the sight of the LORD." This time it was because they were leaderless after the death of Ehud, their third judge.

Because of their evil, God allowed Jabin, the Canaanite king, to conquer them. Judges 4 picks up here to tell the rest of the story.

Jabin had ruled the people of Israel

for 20 years when we are introduced to Deborah. She was a prophetess and "judged Israel" and was respected by the people.

Deborah was in such a place of leadership that she called on Barak to gather an army of 10,000 to fight against Sisera and his Canaanite army. Barak agreed but only if Deborah would go with him. The victory was a success — killing all of the Canaanite army. Their leader Sisera was killed by a woman named Jael.

### Think About It:

*What does Deborah leading in a traditionally male-led society say about the role of female leadership?*

### Make a Choice:

*We often fail in our commitments to God. Will you choose to renew your commitment to God, or choose to follow your own path?*

### Pray:

*God, may we follow leaders who follow your will.*

## The Shepherd

*Ezekiel 34:1-31*

Jesus is called "the good shepherd" in the New Testament. After reading Ezekiel 34, you will have a better understanding why this phrase was used.

If you only read the first 10 verses of the chapter, however, you won't quite get the meaning of the name for Jesus: Ezekiel spends the first 10 verses calling out the "bad shepherds" — those who had not been protecting the sheep, but rather using them for their own gain.

In the next six verses, Ezekiel contrasts the "bad shepherds" of Israel with the ultimate shepherd in Yahweh. As you can imagine, Yahweh does the opposite of what the "bad shepherds" are accused of.

Ezekiel doesn't put all the blame on the bad shepherds and turns his attention to the sheep themselves. The "rams and goats" who were selfish would also be punished, and Ezekiel promised that a single shepherd would rescue and care for the good sheep. Ezekiel named this shepherd "David," but we know him as Jesus.

### Think About It:

*Ezekiel names several different groups of shepherds and sheep in this passage. Which one best describes you?*

### Make a Choice:

*How will you choose to stand up to the "rams and goats" and protect the weaker "sheep"?*

### Pray:

*Good Shepherd, may we continue to be good shepherds to all of your flock.*

## Where are you?

*Isaiah 64:1-9*

When the people of Israel finally returned to Jerusalem after being exiled, it was not what they expected.

There were many different opinions as to why, but the majority of people thought it was because God no longer loved them. The people wanted to know where God was, so Isaiah asked for them.

He pled that God would again claim them as God's chosen people. Referencing

the past, present and future, Isaiah asked for what God had done before, acknowledged that the people had sinned because God did not seem to be with them, and then asked God to be merciful and to return to the people.

Isaiah cried out to God that the people were ready for God. To prove his point, he used the metaphor of the potter and clay. The people of Israel wanted to be molded again by God. They were ready to see God. Maybe that is what they needed all along.

### Think About It:

*Could it be that God is present and we only need to open our eyes to find God?*

### Make a Choice:

*God is always present among us. Will you choose to look for God, or will you wait for God to be revealed to you?*

### Pray:

*May we seek to find you in all that we do and wherever we are.*

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Judges 4:1-23

Nov. 16, 2014

## What Women Can Do

**W**omen can run the show. In fields of business, politics, medicine, missions, education, and public service, we can see both men and women directing big organizations, making new discoveries, or doing heroic work. This does not mean we have true gender equality, however. Women are often paid less than their male counterparts for the same job, and they struggle for respect in some circles.

One would expect Christian people to be in the forefront of any struggle for fairness, but many conservative believers still hold to literalist interpretations of a few biblical passages that reflect customs of a different culture and time, and claim that their gender alone disqualifies women from certain leadership positions.

An insistence on the claims of “inerrancy” and the failure to acknowledge that some biblical teachings were culturally conditioned contribute to this unfortunate view.

It’s true that men are often dominant in biblical stories, but the scriptures also include stories of authoritative women, and they should not be overlooked.

Two of those women were Deborah and Jael (*ya-’ayl*), who are among a number of Old Testament women you wouldn’t want to mess with: they knew how to do what needed to be done, and weren’t afraid to do it. ⚓

### The people’s need (vv. 1-3)

The story of Deborah and Jael is delightful for any number of reasons.

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



Jael and Sisera by James Northcote, 1787

Judges 4:9 –  
“And she (Deborah) said, ‘I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.’”

First, we note that it is told twice, first as a prose narrative (ch. 4) and secondly as a poetic account that is probably the older of the two and may well have been composed by a woman (ch. 5). ⚓

The story begins with crime and punishment, the first two stages in a repetitive cycle of sin, punishment, repentance, and deliverance that runs throughout the book of Judges. ⚓ Both Moses and Joshua had sought repeatedly to encourage commitment to God’s covenant with Israel, but the temptation to follow local gods was persistent.

The story begins with the death of Ehud, the third “judge,” who had led Israel to victory over the Moabites and presided over an 80-year period of “rest” for the land. After his demise, however, “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (v. 1). In keeping with the familiar pattern, God allowed the Canaanite king Jabin (*ya-bîn*), who ruled from Hazor (*ha-tsôr*), to conquer them (v. 2). When the people repented (v. 3), God raised up a new leader to get them back on track.

Does that sound like a familiar

story? How often have we fallen short of our commitments to God (or to others), and found ourselves in a miserable state? How often have we repented and renewed our commitment, only to fail again? How many times can we expect God (or persons we have wronged) to forgive the same failures?

### God’s provision (vv. 4-16)

Jabin oppressed the Israelites for 20 years, according to the text, probably by requiring heavy taxes or tribute. With 900 “chariots of iron” at his command, he was thought to be virtually invincible. ⚓

In v. 4, where we might expect to meet the man God would raise up to deliver Israel, we are introduced instead to Deborah, who was already regarded as a leader among the people.

The first thing we learn about Deborah, whose name means “bee,” is that she was a prophet. While most translations describe her as a “prophetess,” the Hebrew avoids any misunderstanding by stating literally



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that she was “a woman (who was) a prophet.” She is further identified as “the wife of Lappidoth” (who has no other role in the story) and as the one who “was judging Israel at that time.”

Deborah is the only one among the judges whose daily work is described. According to v. 5, “she used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came to her for judgment.”

Deborah, then, was respected as a wise woman with authority to lead. People trusted her wisdom and prophetic connection with God to decide disputes. The text offers no apology or explanation for why a woman was in this influential position: the author assumes that it was perfectly acceptable for a woman to lead. Those who claim the Bible teaches that women should not be in positions of authority over men would do well to read the story of Deborah, whose leadership included military as well as judicial matters.

Deborah was powerful enough to summon an influential man named Barak, who lived at some distance away, and expect him to come to her. When he did, she gave him instructions with divine authority: “The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you ...” (v. 6).

The command was that Barak should go and raise an army of 10,000 men from the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali, those who lived closest to Hazor and the ones who would have suffered most under Jabin’s rule. Barak was then to lead his troops into battle against the Canaanite army and its feared leader, Sisera.

Deborah’s instructions included the battle plan: Barak and his troops were to take positions on Mount Tabor, at a considerable distance south of Hazor. Deborah promised that Yahweh would “draw out” Sisera with his massive army and his fearsome chariots, and deliver them into Israel’s hand by the Wadi Kishon, a usually-dry gully near the foot of Mount Tabor. ↓

Despite Deborah’s prophetic assurance, Barak was either unconvinced or

simply afraid to take on the assignment, at least on his own. “If you will go with me I will go,” he said, “but if you will not go with me, I will not go” (v. 8).

Can you imagine? A military commander who can call out 10,000 troops, but won’t lead them into battle unless the country’s leader – who happens to be a woman – goes with him?

Deborah agreed to go, but predicted that Barak would get no glory from the battle. The enemy commander would not be his prize, she said, but would fall at the hands of a woman. Would that woman be Deborah?

To begin with, the strategy unfolded as predicted. With Deborah at his side, Barak traveled north and recruited 10,000 men (v. 10). When Sisera learned that Barak’s forces had gathered at Mount Tabor, he called out his army, including the formidable chariots, and led them into position (vv. 12-13). At Deborah’s order, Barak led his farmer-soldiers into a battle they shouldn’t have won, but “the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and all his army into a panic before Barak,” with the result that Sisera fled on foot as his army fell to Israel’s swords (vv. 14-16). ↓

### A woman’s hand (vv. 17-27)

The text claims that every Canaanite soldier was killed (v. 16), but what of Sisera, the general who ran while his soldiers died?

A brief aside in v. 11 had briefly introduced Heber the Kenite, a descendant of Hobab (also known as Jethro and Reuel), Moses’ father-in-law. He had moved away from his relatives to the south and settled near Kedesh (4:11, cf. Num. 10:29, Judg. 1:16), and apparently was on good terms with the Canaanites. ↓

As Barak’s troops routed Sisera’s soldiers, the enemy general ran to Heber’s camp, which he apparently

regarded as neutral or safe territory. There he met Jael, Heber’s wife, who was watching outside her tent (it was common for men and their wives to have separate quarters).

Recognizing Sisera’s extremity and her own opportunity, Jael brazenly invited the harried general into her tent and covered him with a rug. When he asked for water, she gave him milk to drink, then agreed to stand watch and pretend he wasn’t there if any pursuers should come looking.

Confident that that he was safe with Jael, the Canaanite commander fell into an exhausted sleep. That was a bad move on his part, for Jael soon took a hammer in her hand and drove a tent peg through his head, nailing him to the ground (4:17-21). With a powerful soldier entering a woman’s tent, readers might have expected a story of rape, but the tables were turned.

We don’t know anything else about Jael or why she chose to side with the Israelites when Sisera thought of her family as allies. Having administered the *coup de grâce*, however, Jael fulfilled Deborah’s prophecy that “the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman” (v. 9). Both Deborah and Jael were willing to take matters into their own hands and do what needed to be done.

Have you known women like that? When you were a child, if you went to church, chances are that your Sunday school teachers were mostly women. If your church has a missions program now, women are probably at the forefront of it. Take a look at the choir or congregation of most churches, and most of them are likely to be women.

Whether it’s supporting the church, raising children, helping friends, earning needed income, or being involved in public life, women are often in the lead, both willing and able to do what needs to be done. This does not take away from the role of men, who can also be self-sacrificial leaders, but it serves as an important reminder that even in a patriarchal setting, women could take the lead – and they still can. **BT**

# Bible Study

Ezekiel 34:1-31

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 23, 2014

## The Good Shepherd

Have you ever longed for the life of a sheep under the care of a good shepherd? Idyllic texts such as Psalm 23 suggest lazy days of foraging in green pastures and lounging by gurgling streams while a tender shepherd rubs our ears and doctors our bug bites.

What the psalm does not mention is that shepherds don't keep sheep to make their fields more aesthetically pleasing, but so they can shear their fleece for wool, use their milk for cheese, sell them for money, or eat them for dinner.

Most of us wouldn't want to be a literal sheep, even under the best of circumstances – but the metaphor of leaders as caring shepherds who look after their sheep has had a long appeal, and is at the heart of today's text. 🇺🇸

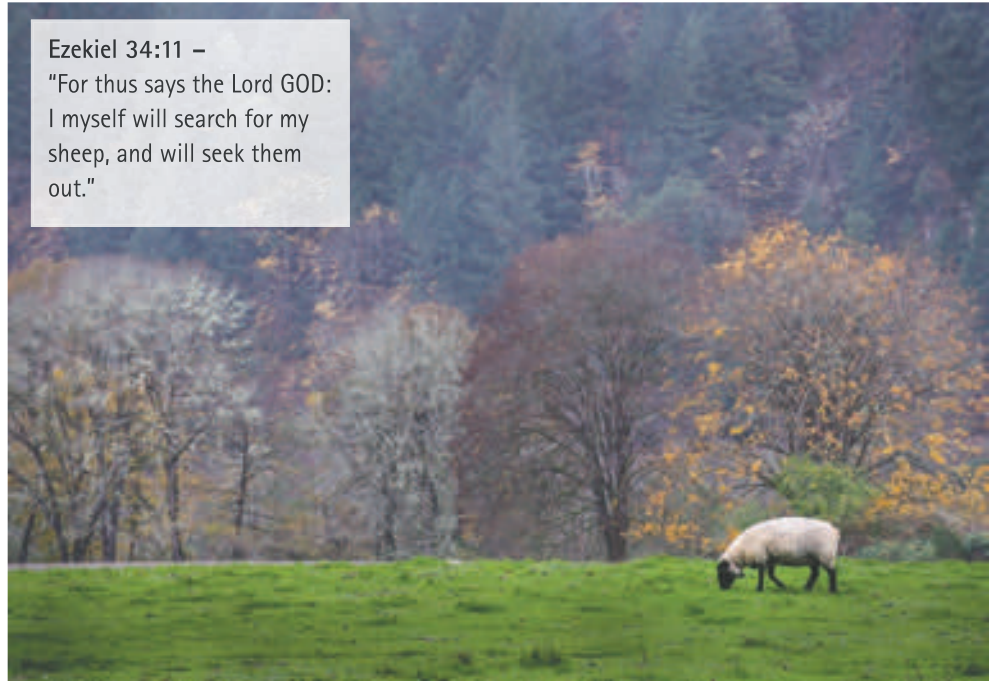
## Bad shepherds (vv. 1-10)

The prophet/priest Ezekiel was quite at home with metaphors, utilizing them through both words and actions. 🇺🇸 In ch. 34, which begins a section of the book promising restoration for Israel, he drew on the familiar image of Israel's people as sheep under the care of shepherds – but they were poor keepers.

Ezekiel railed against the wicked “shepherds of Israel” who had been looking after themselves rather than the sheep (vv. 1-2). Indeed, instead of feeding the sheep, they had been eating them (v. 3)!

The prophet enumerated the shepherd's failures in caring for the flock: “You have not strengthened the weak,

Ezekiel 34:11 –  
“For thus says the Lord GOD:  
I myself will search for my  
sheep, and will seek them  
out.”



you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them” (v. 4).

Kings of the ancient world often described themselves as shepherds precisely because they claimed to promote justice and to help all people prosper. The early Babylonian king Hammurabi, for example, claimed that the gods had appointed him to be shepherd of the people. He wrote of providing water and grain to his subjects, and based his famous law code on the responsibility of a shepherd-king to ensure that “The strong may not oppress the weak, in order to give justice to the orphan and the widow.” 🇺🇸

But the “shepherds” of Israel had fattened themselves, mistreating the sheep while serving their own interests. They had allowed the sheep to become scattered, Ezekiel said, wandering in constant danger with no one to protect them or even to seek them out (vv. 5-6). Ezekiel insisted that God would not allow such conditions to continue, but would rescue the sheep from the

deprivations of their heartless shepherds (vv. 7-10).

Who were these self-serving shepherds? Some think Ezekiel was critiquing wealthy Israelite families as low-level shepherds who had exploited their fellow Hebrews. Others think he was pointing the finger at foreign kings who had oppressed Israel as a whole.

Fortunately, we don't have to solve that puzzle to appreciate the passage, which leads us to ask if there are “shepherds” in our society who fatten themselves at the expense of others. America can make no real claim to be a Christian nation, but our founding principles call for us to be a “united” nation where everyone has the opportunity to prosper and all contribute to the common good.

We have become, however, a divided nation in which powerful elites grow ever richer and more isolated from the poor. An entrenched economic system stacks the deck in favor of the wealthy as CEOs rake in millions while many of their employees struggle to survive on an inadequate minimum wage.

Would Ezekiel have something to

Additional background information  
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say to today's "shepherds" who have the resources and responsibility to treat others justly, but fleece the sheep in order to line their own pockets?

### A good shepherd (vv. 11-16)

Ezekiel's condemnation of callous human shepherds in vv. 1-10 gives way in vv. 11-16 to a hopeful assertion that Yahweh, the ultimate shepherd, will search out the lost and scattered sheep of Israel, bringing them home "into their own land." With imagery reminiscent of Psalm 23, Ezekiel declares that God will provide good pasture and fresh water on the safe mountain heights of Israel (v. 14).

Speaking in God's behalf, Ezekiel declared "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down" (v. 15). In contrast to the shepherds who had ignored the lost, the injured, and the weak, God would care for them while culling out those who had become strong and fat by bullying the weak and hogging the resources.

Few biblical images – if any – are more popular than that expressed in Psalm 23 and reflected here. We love the thought of having God as a loving shepherd who seeks and forgives us when we stray, comforts our wounded hearts, and keeps us secure.

We are not mindless sheep, however, constantly dependent and never contributing. God is not only our shepherd, but also our judge. Ezekiel spoke for God, saying "I will feed them with justice" (v. 16b). Do we really want God's justice, especially if we find ourselves among what Ezekiel called "the fat and the strong"? 

### Judging sheep (vv. 17-24)

With v. 17, Ezekiel's message shifts its point of view from the shepherds to the sheep. While the shepherds who oversee the flock have primary responsibility – including the ongoing task of managing aggressive sheep and making sure that every animal gets to the water – the

sheep themselves also have personalities and relationships.

Ancient shepherds typically kept mixed flocks of sheep and goats who shared scarce resources. When clumps of grass or edible bushes are scattered, as is often the case in the Middle East, every blade of grass or green leaf counts. When streams are few and water is hard to find, it must be treated carefully lest it become too muddy to drink.

Ezekiel spoke of "rams and goats" as bullies who would shoulder other animals out of the way or butt them with their horns, leaving them bruised and frightened as well as hungry and thirsty. They not only monopolized the best pasture and water, but also damaged or polluted what was left for the others.

"Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture," God asked, "but you must tread down with your feet the rest of your pasture? When you drink of clear water, must you foul the rest with your feet?" (v. 18).

Ezekiel promised judgment, not only for shepherds who treated the flock with contempt rather than care, but also for the dominant "rams and goats" who thought only of themselves and added to the misery of weaker animals.

God would rescue the scattered flock, Ezekiel said, and entrust them to the care of a single shepherd who would care for them rightly. Ezekiel called the shepherd "David," remembering God's promise that David's descendants would rule over Israel "forever," even though sin could lead to temporary punishment along the way (2 Samuel 7).

Descendants of David did rule in Judah until the exile, when king Jehoiachin was deported to Babylon. Prophecies such as this one gave rise to a hope that God would restore Israel to its home under the leadership of a Davidic descendant who would rule as a new David.

Ezekiel did not expect David to return from the grave, but trusted that God would raise up one of his descendants to usher in a new age of prosperity and peace where the people would live as happy sheep in a protected land of green meadows and clear waters where the rains never failed (vv. 25-29).

While God's promise of a new David was symbolic, the more important pledge was the assurance of a new covenant and a restored relationship with God. "I, the LORD, will be their God ... I will make with them a covenant of peace" (vv. 24, 25). God would so care for them that "They shall know that I, the LORD their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord GOD. You are my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, and I am your God ..." (vv. 30-31).

Christians don't have to look hard to find echoes of Ezekiel in the New Testament. Jesus came as the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hope, a son of David who would introduce a new covenant and rule forever – not over an earthly kingdom, but in the kingdom of God.

During his ministry, Jesus told a story of God's desire to search out every lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7) and referred to himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10:10, 14) who cared so much that he was willing to give his life for the sheep. Jesus also spoke of a coming judgment, however, in which God would separate the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:32-33).

Where do you find yourself in this story? Could it be in the role of a shepherd who exploits the sheep for personal advantage, or of a strong ram that insists on being first to the water? At your place in life, do you feel more like one of those sick or injured sheep so badly in need of a good shepherd's care?

It is possible that we could find ourselves taking on different roles as life circumstances change. Could the prospect of accountability for our actions affect how we treat other people this next week? **BT**

# Bible Study

Isaiah 64:1-9

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 30, 2014

## The Cry of the Clay

**W**aiting is hard. When I was a student in grammar school, it seemed that time actually slowed down every afternoon as I watched the hands on the clock creep along and prayed for the bell that would deliver me from school. When I later became a teacher, I was quite certain that the time between two and three o'clock was the longest hour of the day.

Waiting is especially hard when we're trying to hold on through a difficult, unpleasant, or painful period of life. You may know the struggle of waiting until your military hitch is up, or until you've recovered from your surgery, or until your broken heart finds solace.

Today's lesson reflects the beginning of Advent, the great season of anticipation in which the church awaits the coming of Christ. While we "await" Jesus' birth in retrospect, already knowing the end of the story, the prophet Isaiah lived among a people who had grown tired of waiting. They had hoped for much but found only disappointment. Perhaps the prophet's prayer can speak to our longings, too.

### Longing for God's presence (vv. 1-4)

Isaiah 64 comes from the third main section of the book of Isaiah (chs. 56-66), and was probably written during the very difficult days after the Israelites who had been exiled to Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E. were allowed to return to Jerusalem and live there as a small sub-province under Persian rule. 🇺

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



Isaiah 64:8 –  
"Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand."



Israel's return to Jerusalem was one of the great disappointments of all time. An earlier prophet, often called "Second Isaiah," had promised the exiles that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and enriched by the wealth of the nations (see 44:28, 45:14). His visionary oracles declared that Jerusalem would become so prosperous that the borders of the city would have to be expanded (49:22-23, 54:1-3).

Prophecies such as those led many Hebrews to expect happy days when they returned, but they were bitterly disappointed. Instead of a land flowing with milk and honey and foreign aid, they found a devastated city in the midst of a desolate countryside. Officials from neighboring provinces opposed their efforts to rebuild and threatened the city (Ezra 4:1-5). The returnees faced years of famine and drought (Hag. 1:6, 9-11; 2:16-17), barely surviving while trying to rebuild and paying heavy taxes to support government officials and provide tribute to Persia (Neh. 5:15).

In the face of such hardship, many of the people concluded that God no longer loved them and that temple worship was a waste of time (Mal. 1:2a;

3:14). How could God's spokesperson deal with a people such as this? Isaiah chose to pray for them.

Today's text is part of an intercessory prayer that begins at Isaiah 63:7 and goes through 64:12. In behalf of the people, the prophet boldly expressed their pain, asked their questions, and pleaded their case. 🇺 Afterward, he declared to them God's mind-blowing response (65:1-25).

We also know what it is to face major disappointments. We place high hopes on life experiences such as marriage, parenting, careers, and even church. The higher our hopes, the greater the potential for disappointment if things don't work out as expected. Times of disillusionment may leave us crying out to God as Israel did.

Isaiah's prayer did not begin with the complaint we might expect, but with a burst of praise recounting of God's great deeds in the past (63:7-14). Praise soon gave way, however, to the charge that God had abandoned Israel and intentionally hardened the people's hearts (63:15-19, see "The Hardest Question" online for more on this). 🇺



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Reflecting their despair, the prophet prayed for God to stop hiding in the distant heavens and show up on earth: “Oh, that you would tear open the heavens and come down!” (64:1a). The prophet’s challenge for God to *look down* and see Israel’s trouble (63:15) becomes a plea for God to *come down* in person and reclaim them as chosen people.

The images in 64:1-2 are typical of a theophany, a physical manifestation of God’s presence. The quaking of mountains, the presence of fire, and the awe-inspiring power of thunder and lightning were all typically associated with God putting in a personal appearance (Exod. 19:16-25; Deut. 32:22; Judg. 5:4-5; Mic. 1:3-4; Nah. 1:4-6; Ps. 18:8-16).

Israel’s traditional memory held that God had appeared in power before (v. 3), and no one had ever seen anything like it (v. 4). The prophet’s prayer asks God to intervene for the returning Babylonian exiles with the same power that delivered their ancestor-exiles from Egypt. Doing so, Isaiah declared, would reveal God’s might to Israel’s adversaries.

Have you ever wished that God would show up in some physical way and pull you out of emotional, financial, or physical stress? How would you hope for God to appear – in fire and thunder, or a friendlier form?

### Fearing God’s anger (vv. 5-7)

Humans have a natural tendency to blame others for our own failures, and Isaiah’s prayer continues the brash theme of blaming God for contributing to the people’s sin. Normally, one thinks of God becoming angry in response to human sin, but Isaiah’s prayer reversed the order: “But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed” (v. 5b).

What? The people sinned because God was hiding from them?

The prophet who spoke these words probably lived more than 150 years

after the original Isaiah died, but as a disciple of his teachings he would have remembered how God instructed Isaiah to “Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed” (Isa. 6:10).

It seems counterintuitive that God would not want the people to come under conviction and repent, so how are we to understand this? Perhaps Isaiah understood the message as temporary, and as the only condition under which the promised discipline could take place. God had promised to bless Israel when the people repented and lived justly, but if they turned wholeheartedly back to God as soon as the exile began, the punishment would be short-circuited. ⚡

By the time the exiles returned, the prophet believed enough was enough. The people had spent 40 to 50 years or more in Babylon as punishment for their ancestors’ sins, and had returned to Jerusalem with great hope, but it seemed that God was still angry and the discipline continued: “There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity” (v. 7). ⚡

Surely the time for punishment must be over, Isaiah thought, and he prayed for God to stop hiding and reveal to Israel the divine face of power, grace, and deliverance.

### Pleading for God’s mercy (vv. 8-9)

Returning to the parental theme of 63:16, the prophet grasped the legitimate claim of a child to his or her father’s attention. Combining images of God as both father and creator, he pleaded “Yet, O LORD, you are our

Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand” (v. 8).

We are familiar with the image of God as potter from Jeremiah’s analogy of God as an artisan who could break down a flawed pot and remake it (Jer. 18:1-11). The prophet behind Isaiah 64 may have known it, too. Seeing the divine potter as the father-creator of Israel, he pleaded for Yahweh to move past anger over Israel’s sin to a place of grace and restoration. “Now consider,” he implored, “we are your people” (v. 9).

The prophet’s pleas on behalf of the people continue in a similar vein through v. 12, but come up short against the divine claim that God had been there all along, waiting and “ready to be sought out by those who did not ask, to be found by those who did not seek me. I said ‘Here I am, here I am,’ to a nation that did not call on my name” (65:1).

Here is a quandary: The people accused God of remaining angry and hidden lest they repent and be forgiven, while God’s position was “I’ve been calling you all along, but you ignored me and continued to follow your sinful ways” (see 65:2-5).

Could it be that we have sometimes accused God of disregarding our plight, when the truth is we are the ones who have been spurning God?

The intense longing for a revelation from God that we find in this text is an appropriate theme for the beginning of the Advent season. As we recall the anxious period of hope for a long-awaited messiah, we also yearn for Christ to be reborn with power in our own lives. The strong symbols of the Advent and Christmas seasons remind us year after year that God has not forgotten.

Believers old and new can easily fall into the trap of looking for God only in the wind and the fire, the loud and the obvious. Perhaps that is why we often fail to hear the quiet voice of God’s daily presence saying “Here I am, here I am.” As we await the annual reminder of Christ’s birth, may we do so with ears attuned to the Spirit. **BT**

# Classifieds

**Senior Pastor:** First Baptist Church of New Bern, N.C., is seeking a senior pastor. We are a 200-plus-year-old church located in Eastern North Carolina, with more than 700 members of diverse ages and backgrounds. We are a moderate, traditional Baptist fellowship currently aligned at the state and national levels with the CBF. Our next minister should have strong preaching skills and provide great pastoral care. Our preferred qualifications include a degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school and a minimum of 8 years pastoral experience. For more information about our church, including our church profile, please see fbchurch.com. Interested persons should submit a résumé or other contact information to fbcnbpastorsearch@gmail.com or to Pastor Search Committee, 4813 Briarhill Rd., New Bern, NC 28562. Responses are due by Oct. 15.

**Senior Pastor:** Crossroads Church of Kansas City, Mo., a welcoming and affirming, progressive, justice-focused, congregationally collaborative church, is seeking an experienced and inspirational pastor. For details, see crossroadschurchkc.org/pastor-search/. Send letter and résumé to searchcall2@crossroadschurchkc.org by Oct. 31.

**Minister of Congregational Life:** Wieuca Road Baptist Church in Atlanta, Ga., is seeking a minister of congregational life who will be primarily responsible for planning, promoting, implementing, and evaluating the spiritual education and formation ministries of the church. This minister will supervise the professional and

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# In the Know

**R. Alan Culpepper** will end his 20-year service as the founding dean of Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology at the end of the 2014-2015 academic year. After a sabbatical, the New Testament scholar will join the school's faculty.

**Keith Herron** is pastor of St. Lucas United Church of Christ in St. Louis after a 13-year pastorate of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo. He served as moderator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 2012-2013.

**David Hull** of Watkinsville, Ga., is coordinator for the Center for Healthy Churches-Southeast. He recently retired as pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala.

**David Platt** is the new president of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, succeeding retiring president Tom Eliff. Platt, 36, came from the pastorate of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Ala.

**Jerry Young** is president of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc., succeeding Julius Scruggs. Young is pastor of First Missionary Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala.

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# Blood, sweat and shears

This is no place for a shampoo. No gels. No mousse. No hairspray. No blow dryers. Just real razors and serious scissors.

I got this from Google translate: *Yo no hablo mucho español. Quiero un corte de pelo. Yo quiero que se vea como el mismo. No corte mas.* (I do not speak much Spanish. I want a haircut. I want it to look about the same. Don't cut much.)

But apparently I inadvertently said:

*Yo no hablo mucho español. Quiero un corte de pelo. Quiero ver como un niño de nueve años de edad. Piensa Beaver Cleaver. Por favor, use tijeras oxidadas. También me gustaría que ocupe algodón con alcohol para que me arda la cara como un fuego.* (I do not speak much Spanish. I want a haircut. I want to look like a 9-year-old boy. Think Beaver Cleaver. Please use rusty scissors. I would also like for you to use cotton balls to dab on alcohol that burns like fire.)

We were the only two people in the barber shop — which makes sense now — so I decided to practice my Spanish.

Me: *¿Cuántos años un barbero?*  
(How many years a barber?)

Barber: Long, meandering, incomprehensible to me, five-minute answer that ended with *cincuenta anos*.

Me: *Cincuenta anos. Muy bien. ¿Vive en Santiago toda su vida?* I had been working on “Have you lived in Santiago all your life?” for the last four minutes of his answer.

Barber: *No. Yo vivía en el norte.* This was followed by an extensive, circuitous response that I did not understand at all.

Me: *Si. El norte. ¿Tiene una familia?* I had been waiting with “Do you have a family?” for some time.

The Barber: *No. No familia.* Then he spent a significant amount of time explaining why. I'm not sure what he said. As best I could make out, he was married when he lived up north. They moved to Santiago or she may have left him to come to Santiago. They split up or he killed her. I realize how that sounds, but I thought I heard a wistful *Yo la maté*. I recognize that he could have just as easily been talking about a bush (*mata*) or check mate in a chess match (*mate*). Perhaps I missed him telling me about his time as a matador. He was talking pretty fast.

If this were a movie, the big confession would make sense. Maybe he's been carrying around this horrible truth for *cincuenta anos*. He's never told anyone. Then this gringo with a severely limited vocabulary wanders in.

My barber realizes he can say anything and I won't have a clue what's going on.



Even if by some unlikely accident I hear “I killed her” and by some bigger fluke I tell *la policia*, who would take my word over his — especially since I clearly don't understand 90 percent of his words?

He could say, *El americano tonto me malentendio. Lo que dije fue, mi vida ha estado vacía desde que ella murió. Ella era mi todo.* (The silly American misunderstood. What I said was:

“My life has been empty since she died. She was my everything.”)

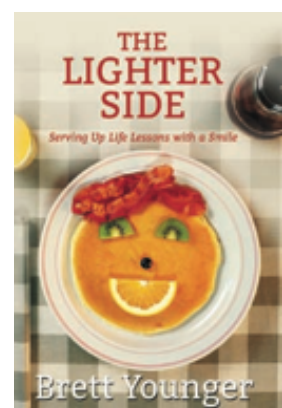
I would believe him.

After he either confessed to a terrible crime or told me how much he missed his wife we didn't talk much more, but he seemed lighter and relieved.

Which makes me wonder again if he really did confess something. Maybe during the final, protracted response I missed him saying, “I got married when I was 19. She was kind and, in a curious sort of way, quite beautiful, but I wanted to be successful so I went to work early and stayed late. I watched every penny, so she went without a lot of things she should have had. We stopped really talking. After awhile we might as well have been speaking different languages. She hung in there a long time, but after a while she got tired of living alone. I should have been a better husband. She died a few years ago. I went to the funeral and sat in the back. No one recognized me.”

I may go back in a month and tell my new barber about how I could be a better husband. I can be stingy. I don't say what's most important. I don't listen as carefully I should. Confessing could be good for my soul, too. **BT**

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



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# Baptist theology

PART  
4

This is the fourth in a series of six articles about academic theology written since 1950 by Baptists. In this article we will survey six theological conversations and controversies in which Baptists engaged in the 1950s and 1960s.

## Three Options in Protestant Theology (1950s)

In 1959 Westminster Press published three books, each of which represented one of the three principal options in Protestant theology at the time: conservatism, neo-orthodoxy, and liberalism.

The volume on conservatism was written by Edward John Carnell, a Baptist who served as president of Fuller Theological Seminary. Titled *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, it included both a summary of Reformed Baptist theology and a running criticism of Fundamentalism as a cultic expression of orthodoxy.

Carnell argued that the main principle for interpreting the Bible is the principle of justification by grace through faith. The authors of the other volumes were not Baptists, but there were Baptists who embraced those options.

## Baptist Sacramentalism

In 1950 Baptists were already engaged in a controversy concerning sacramentalism that is still underway.

The controversy was centered in England, but two of the important early books were written by a German Baptist, Johannes Schneider, dean of the theology faculty at the University of Berlin.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century most Baptist writing about baptism had been in defense of restricting the candidates for baptism to believers and of restricting the mode of baptism to immersion. Understandably this could lead to the neglect of the theological meaning of baptism.

It is not surprising, therefore, that today many Baptists assume that their church membership commits them to a memorialist-only understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

The sacramentalism controversy was intensified by the fact that in ecumenical circles many non-Baptists, including Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, were expressing appreciation for

the Baptist affirmation of believer's baptism. (In 2008 the Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright expressed this by saying, "The Baptists have won.")

The sacramentalism controversy was carried forward by the scholarly writing of several Baptists who endorsed a sacramental understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper. An outstanding example is George Beasley-Murray's 1962 book *Baptism in the New Testament*.

Baptist sacramentalists such as Beasley-Murray affirm that Christ is present in baptism and the Lord's Supper, and that Christ uses these rites to give grace to participants. They understand grace not as a mystical, spiritual substance, but as the presence and help of the loving God.

They do not think the church controls or dispenses grace. God gives God's loving presence through the sacraments. In that sense the sacraments are means of grace.

Baptists find it easier to affirm this about the Lord's Supper than about baptism. They know that the Lord uses many means to help them in their lives as Christians, so it isn't difficult to think of the Lord's Supper as one of those.

But, whereas the Lord's Supper speaks of help for a continuing life with Christ, baptism speaks of a single, initial, saving encounter with Christ. Can baptism have a role to play in that encounter?

One reason that many Baptists in America find it difficult to answer this question affirmatively is that, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American conversation about baptism has been heavily influenced by claims of the Churches of Christ who insist that baptism is essential for salvation.

This seems to leave just two alternatives: Either baptism is essential for salvation, or it is not.

In Great Britain it was easier for Baptists to recognize that there is a third alternative: namely, that baptism is a means that God ordinarily uses to effect salvation. It isn't essential for salvation; God is free to save unbaptized persons. But neither is baptism divorced from the conversion experience.

This was the view of Beasley-Murray. What led him to this view is not that he

was a crypto-Catholic or a liberal. He was emphatically neither. He affirmed a sacramental understanding of baptism because of passages in the New Testament such as Romans 6.

Baptist sacramentalism has continued to develop since Beasley-Murray's epochal book. An important step was taken by Paul Fiddes in an article titled "*Ex Opere Operato*: Re-thinking a Historic Baptist Rejection," published in the collection of essays *Baptist Sacramentalism 2*.

Fiddes affirmed the ancient principle that the gift of sacramental grace is not dependent on the character of those who participate in the sacraments but only on "the performance of the act" (*ex opere operato*). He said this does not mean the faith of recipients is irrelevant, but that it is because of the performance of the act, not because of the faith or sincerity or character of the participants in the act, that Christ comes with grace to help.

Fiddes points out that Baptists "have held a virtually *ex opere operato* view of Christian proclamation." They believe God's Word will not return unto God void.

*Ex opere operato* does not involve presuming on God's presence. It is no more presumptuous to trust that God is present and active in the sacraments than to trust that God keeps God's other promises.

Of course, Baptists resist the ancient churches' claims that it is only when the rites are performed by *their* properly authorized clergy that Christ is present and active.

In my judgment, Schneider, Beasley-Murray, Fiddes, and other Baptist sacramentalists have shown that a carefully nuanced sacramental understanding of the two ordinances is biblical and that it was not unknown to earlier Baptists.

## Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Renewal

Demographer David Barrett estimates that there are more than 600 million Pentecostal and charismatic Christians in the world today. The Pentecostal movement that emerged in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has experienced numerical growth at a pace unparalleled in any other religious movement in world history.

For the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Pentecostal movement tended to exist either in



holiness churches that accepted its message or in new denominations. In the 1950s it moved out into virtually all churches, where it is sometimes called the charismatic renewal.

In the 1970s a third wave of expansion began with the work of John Wimber and others. The third wave differs from the two earlier phases in that its leaders do not believe everyone who experiences baptism in the Spirit will speak in tongues.

In Baptist life the third wave seems to have been the most influential. What spoke to Baptists was not so much theological writing such as Clark Pinnock's *Flame of Love*, as it was the introduction of charismatic practices into Baptist life. The practices include speaking in tongues, healing, and performing exorcisms, and worship practices such as raising hands, clapping, and singing praise songs.

## Ecumenism

Like Pentecostalism, the modern ecumenical movement originated among Protestants in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ecumenical movement has led many Baptist theologians to affirm that a visible unity of Christians is necessary to the Christian mission.

In Baptist life three excellent books display the impulse toward visible unity. In 1966 William Estep wrote *Baptists and Christian Unity* in which he carefully described movements for Christian unity but then expressed serious reservations about some of them.

His book differs noticeably from two recent books written by Steve Harmon, *Towards a Baptist Catholicity* and *Ecumenism Means You, Too*, in which the author urges his readers to carry forward the quest for a visible unity of all Christians.

## The Death of God Theology (1960s)

The 1960s witnessed the emergence of perhaps the most radical theological movement in the history of the church: the death of God movement. One of the principal theologians of the movement was an American Baptist, William Hamilton.

Hamilton was the co-author with Thomas Altizer of a 1966 book titled *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. When these authors said

God is dead, they did not mean only that many modern people find it difficult to believe in God — everyone already knew that — but that there is no longer a transcendent, personal, creator God.

Yet Hamilton continued to think of himself as a Christian. He was committed to trying to live the way Jesus had taught, even though he no longer shared Jesus' belief in God.

He famously said, "We needed to redefine Christianity as a possibility without the presence of God."

Many people associate Baptist Harvey Cox's 1965 book *The Secular City* with the death of God movement, but the association seems to owe more to the book's title than to its content. If Cox intended to affirm the secularism hypothesis — that people inevitably become less religious as they become more modern — he was mistaken.

But *The Secular City* can be read as an account of the Christian church in the West losing the cultural hegemony it had enjoyed for centuries. Cox argued persuasively that Christians should welcome rather than resist many aspects of the resulting secularity.

## The Theology of Hope (1960s)

The 1960s also saw the emergence in Europe of a new theological emphasis: the theology of hope. The principal author, Jürgen Moltmann, was not a Baptist, but many Baptist theologians recognized the truth of his argument that theologians had been less attentive to hope than to faith and love.

Moltmann may have helped some Baptist theologians who previously had embraced C.H. Dodd's realized eschatology to recognize that the Christian message has something to say about the future.

Of course, all Baptist theologians had not neglected the future. One has only to mention the name of G.E. Ladd to know how seriously some Baptist theologians had taken that subject. **BT**

—Fisher Humphreys is professor of divinity, emeritus, of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. This series is a revision of part of a longer article titled "Baptist Theology since 1950," published in *Baptist History and Heritage* (Fall 2013) and used by permission.

"Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century the American conversation about baptism has been heavily influenced by claims of the Churches of Christ who insist that baptism is essential for salvation. This seems to leave just two alternatives..."

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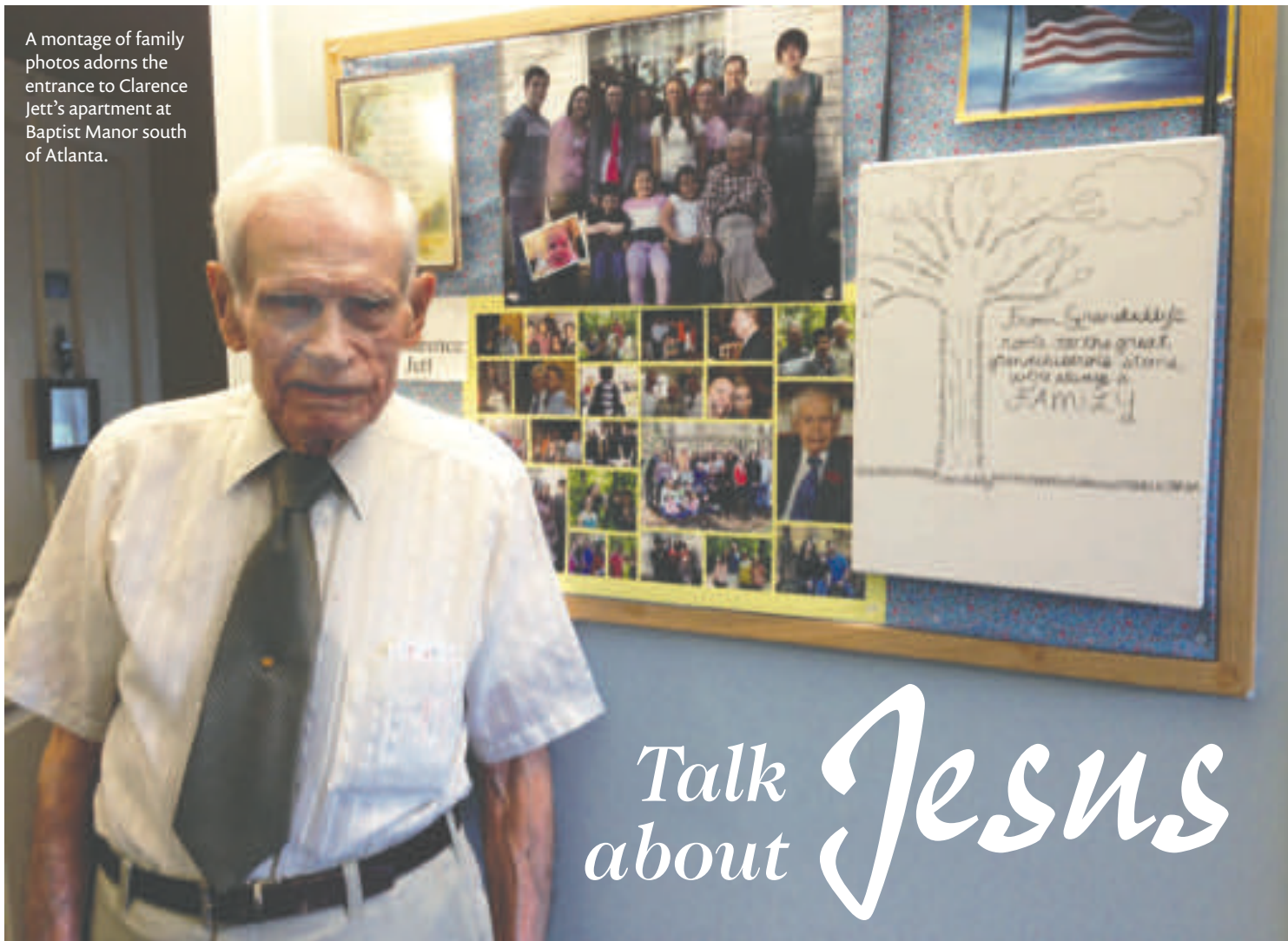
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A montage of family photos adorns the entrance to Clarence Jett's apartment at Baptist Manor south of Atlanta.



## Talk about Jesus

# Century-old preacher keeps focus off of himself

**M**ORROW, Ga. — Ask 100-year-old preacher Clarence Jett to summarize what he has learned about God and the ministry in a century of living and he quickly answers: “Don’t talk about Jett; talk about Jesus!”

That humble response given at First Baptist Church of Morrow, Ga., just after his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, embodies Clarence’s long-held philosophy. He calls himself “a number-two servant of God who has never aspired to be number one.”

### FULFILLMENT

“I’m just an insignificant man from the hills of Tennessee who God got a hold of, and he never let me go,” he told the church’s senior adult group this summer.

“The way God worked in my life taught me beyond the shadow of doubt that the most important thing I learned about my Heavenly Father is he never gives up on his children,” he added.

One of the most moving articles I ever

published as editor of *The Christian Index* was an unsolicited personal testimony from Clarence in 1971.

He wrote about the “sublime spiritual fulfillment of being a number-two church staff member who had no ambition to compete with the pastor for the number-one position.”

### ON TRACK

Jett, who now lives in Palmetto, Ga., on the south side of Atlanta, was born into a “railroading family” in Knoxville, Tenn., on July 5, 1914. Both of his grandfathers, his father and three of his uncles worked for Southern Railway Co. in Knoxville all of their professional lives.

He was the only son — with two younger sisters — and joyfully looked forward to being a railroad man himself.

“I barely finished high school, but that didn’t matter to me,” he said with a grin. “I had a job waiting for me at the railroad station.”

That same year, “the most miraculous thing that ever happened to me took place.

Heaven came down and I accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior,” he said. “Knowing that Jesus would die for a little guy like me was an absolute miracle in my mind.”

Clarence was baptized at Gillespie Avenue Baptist Church in Knoxville, a church his grandfather helped to start.

“I knew when I was saved that God had a special purpose for my life, but I had no idea what it was,” he said. “But railroading was in my blood and I started working for the railroad at age 19. I had a good career ahead of me, but I still felt God had something special for me to do.”

### A CALL

At age 22, Clarence married Mariah Lennon of Knoxville. They both worked faithfully in Gillespie Avenue Baptist Church and Mariah gave birth to two children, Rebecca and Steve.

At age 36, after 19 years with the railroad and having become a conductor, Clarence felt a call to ministry.



“I fell to my knees right in the middle of the railroad yard and promised God to be the best possible minister I could be.”

“But I had a big problem,” he continued. “I had a wife and two children and no seminary training whatever.”

He feared the response from his family.

“But when I told her, Mariah threw her hands into the air and said, ‘Hallelujah! I have been praying for years for that to happen.’ That was all I needed to validate God’s claim on my life.”

## PREPARATION

Southern Railway allowed Clarence to work the graveyard shift while taking day classes at the University of Tennessee to earn his college degree. Also, he served as part-time minister of music at Lincoln Park Baptist Church in Knoxville.

Then he entered Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth to study music and religious education — cramming many classes into a hard year of study. But financial strains and a call from his beloved mentor and friend Roy Hinchey changed his plans.

Hinchey had moved from Knoxville to become pastor of Jefferson Avenue Baptist Church in East Point, Ga. He wanted Clarence to be his minister of education and music.

Clarence stayed at Jefferson Avenue for five years while completing his seminary work in absentia.

## TRANSITIONS

In 1964, pastor Ralph Langley of Willow Meadows Baptist Church in Houston invited Clarence to become his associate pastor in music and education. The two developed a deep and continuing bond.

Langley later became pastor of First Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala., and Roy Hinchey asked Clarence to re-join his staff at Jefferson Avenue Baptist Church.

He held four staff positions at the Atlanta-area church — minister of music, minister of education, church administrator and associate pastor — for 10 years.

“That decade at Jefferson Avenue Church was one of the most glorious decades of my life,” recalled Clarence. “Our Sunday school attendance grew from 500 to 1,000. We had one evangelistic meeting when more than 100 people accepted Christ as Savior.”

The evangelist, he observed, was O.M. Cates, who directed evangelism programs for the Georgia Baptist Convention.

## RIGHT ROLES

Clarence said he and Hinchey “never had one cross word or disagreement.” However, his pastoral colleague joined the Georgia Baptist Convention staff in 1974.

When that happened, Clarence was called as director of missions for the Knox County Baptist Association back in Tennessee — with more than 150 member churches. He held that post until retiring in 1984.

Clarence and Mariah’s children — plus five grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren — lived in the Metro Atlanta area. So Clarence and Mariah rejoined Jefferson Avenue Baptist Church in East Point during retirement.

Soon the church named Clarence pastor emeritus. And every year that congregation observes Clarence Jett Day on or near his birthday and invites him to preach.

In 1989 Clarence was called to be minister to senior adults at New Hope Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ga., where he stayed 10 years. He also has held several interim pastorates on the south side of Atlanta.

## UNOFFICIAL CHAPLAIN

“Some folks call me a freak,” said Clarence with a chuckle. “I don’t wear eyeglasses or hearing aids and I have no false teeth — and I take only one pill a day. The Holy Spirit, Mariah and my children have taken good care of me.”

When Mariah’s health began to deteriorate, she and Clarence moved into Baptist Manor — a senior adult home on the campus of Georgia Baptist Children’s Home — in Palmetto in 2005. Mariah died in 2008.



100-year-old Clarence Jett of Palmetto, Ga., spends many hours reading his Bible for personal spiritual growth and to prepare for teaching Sunday school each week to fellow residents at Baptist Manor.

Clarence’s ministry has continued, however — serving as an unofficial chaplain for the Manor. He teaches Sunday school to about 40 residents each week and conducts communion services quarterly.

Almost every Sunday night his daughter Rebecca takes him to worship at Jefferson Avenue church, about 30 miles away.

His son, Steve, has been minister of music at First Baptist Church in Powder Springs, Ga., for 27 years. He will retire in December.

## LONGEVITY’S REWARDS

Golf-loving Clarence did not give up his favorite game until health limitation forced him out at age 96. But from age 83 until 95, he amazingly shot his age.

In 2013 he spoke to the Morrow church seniors on “What I have learned about God and Baptists in 99 years of living.” He received a standing ovation.

One typically cynical man responded: “That was the finest statement about the essence of true Christianity I have ever heard from a Baptist pulpit. Invite Clarence to come back when he is 100!”

So we did.

After a century of living, his stories are plentiful — including the time he went alone to play golf at a course in Black Mountain, N.C. The club pro told him that a threesome was on the first tee, waiting for a single golfer to join them.

“When I got to that first tee I discovered that one of my all-time spiritual heroes, Billy Graham, and two of his associate evangelists — Grady and T.W. Wilson — were that threesome. What a blessing that was! I have never met a more gracious and humble Christian gentleman than Billy Graham was to me that day.”

There are many from over his long life and ministry who would say the same about Clarence Jett — who still seeks to grow his faith.

“Every night at Baptist Manor I kneel by my bed and talk honestly to my Heavenly Father,” he said. “I tell him I am on the way home and I am ready to see Jesus and Mariah.”

And he added that he sometimes makes one more request — asking God to arrange another round of golf with Billy Graham.

“I think there must be golf courses in heaven with no water hazards, no sand traps and no doglegs,” he said with a smile. “All the fairways will be straight and all the greens level.” **BT**

—Jack U. Harwell, editor emeritus of *Baptists Today*, lives in Stone Mountain, Ga.

# BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

With the United States Army now in control of the southern city of Atlanta, Confederate forces led by Gen. John Bell Hood vainly try to disrupt Union supply lines. Failing, Hood attempts to lure Union Gen. William T. Sherman out of Atlanta to Alabama on terrain favorable to the Rebels.

Undeterred, Sherman is busy devising a large scale march to the Georgia coast and then northward. The general is ready for “hard war,” the kind that will demoralize home-front southerners and pressure remaining Confederate armies.

While Sherman plots and the Confederacy loses numerous small battles, Mary Beckley Bristow, a Kentucky Baptist laywoman, laments the war’s effects upon her life. She yet wants to believe that the Confederacy will somehow prevail.

*I have spent a great deal of my life and all of my money raising negroes for old Lincoln to take from me at his pleasure. But the truth is, and I know it is strange but true, that although I and two of my brothers will be left dependent or nearly so if our negroes are taken, yet I cannot care about it. The idea of losing our independence as a nation and having the Abolitionists to lord it over us is what seems unbearable and causes a perfect writhing of my heart strings. I am certain the Lord will let our enemies go so far and no farther than he pleases.*

The institution of black slavery, however, remains the declared will of God. Throughout the Confederacy, many white Baptists are certain that personal sins are responsible for the ill fortunes of their beloved nation. The South will yet be saved if white citizens evidence more piety, repent of greed or attend the Sabbath regularly.

Evidencing a small dose of humanity toward slaves, the Georgia Baptist Association meets and passes a resolution of protest against state laws that prohibit slave marriages. Other Baptist associations in Georgia also adopt the resolution.

Not so fast, say Baptists of the North. Neither personal religion nor petitions to allow slaves to marry will suffice. Slavery is



New Manchester Mill,  
Douglas County, Georgia

inherently sinful and must be abolished. As have countless northern Baptists previously, the Philadelphia Baptist Association blames slavery as the cause of the war:

*... slavery (never to be justified by the mild, temporary, patriarchal servitude of the Old Testament), the enormity and brutality of which has few parallels in the history of ages, lies at the basis of the wicked attempt to overthrow the Government, is responsible for the bloodshed and crime of the past three years, and should be held accountable before God and man for every life sacrificed and every drop of blood shed ... no permanent peace, no lasting Union, and no public safety can be expected while slavery exists; and as an outlaw upon civilization, a pirate on human rights, the foe of God and man, alike the enemy of the white and black, it should be utterly, immediately, unconditionally and eternally blotted out, as one of the foulest stains that ever rested upon any civilized land ... the only road to peace, and the only hope of Union, lie in the subjugation of the rebellion, the extermination of its cause, and the overthrow of its supporters; and therefore, until the necessity ceases, we should welcome taxation, sacrifice,*

150 YEARS AGO

October 1864

*and if needful, universal conscription — our motto being “First Christ’s, then our country’s!”*

Philadelphia Baptists, voicing their “unswerving loyalty” to the United States government, condemn the treasonous South and pledge to “crush the rebellion and restore the unity of the States.” Should the Confederacy perish, “their blood will be upon their own heads.”

Despite having conquered Atlanta, wresting the “foulest stain” of black slavery from the clutches of the South’s biblically-certain white supremacists, and thus bringing an end to the war, remains a daunting task that may require the extreme sacrifices noted by Philadelphia Baptists. Yet one giant hurdle must first be surmounted: Abraham Lincoln, the one U.S. presidential candidate firmly committed to ending slavery at all costs, must first be re-elected in November.

The outcome of the looming presidential election, however, is far from assured. **BT**

*—Bruce Gourley is executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society. For a daily log of “This Day in Civil War History,” see [civilwarbaptists.com](http://civilwarbaptists.com).*



By G. Todd Wilson

# Church's loss of credibility can contribute to increase in those with no religious affiliation

Several recent reports have focused on the changing dynamics of religion in America. The backdrop comes from a major study by the Pew Research Center that revealed a sharp increase in the number of Americans who identify themselves as “non-affiliated.”

This category includes self-described atheists, agnostics and those who simply don't see themselves as affiliated with a religious community. The number of “nones” has risen from 15 percent in 2007 to 20 percent in 2012 — an increase of 33 percent, making them the largest growing religious segment of our population.

Conservative religious groups lament that this is simply due to the increasing secularism of our society. While that has an element of truth, I am convinced, after some 50 years in ministry, that the primary reason is the credibility of the church's witness that has significantly contributed to the rising secularism.

I first encountered the lack of credibility early in my career with the civil rights struggle in our country. While people of faith led the struggle for racial equality, many institutional churches were among the last to accept the change.

The same was true in the battle for gender equality. Now churches are demonizing gay people and crusading against immigrants, refusing to see them as children of God.

The thing that got Jesus into the most trouble was his mixing with and including those that society and the religious community excluded because they were considered sinful or inferior. Despite his teaching and example, many churches still reflect their fears and prejudices rather than God's love.

Jesus was emphatic that money and possessions are the chief rivals to God, and he called for economic justice and generosity. Standing in the Old Testament prophetic

tradition, he knew the dangers of wealth, inequality, and economic and political power. He was particularly concerned with the poor and those unable to provide for themselves.

Yet often in today's churches we hear a prosperity gospel aimed at getting more and support for a system that increases the inequality divide between rich and poor. Many seem to confuse the gospel of greed with the American Dream.

Jesus called his followers to be peacemakers and to treat our enemies as God treats us — with love. By loving enemies, Christian disciples reflect the character of God and are sons and daughters of God.

Renouncing violence as a way of promoting God's kingdom, Jesus showed the way in his own death. Yet today's evangelical church supports war more than the general public.

Often the church at large operates according to the old Burger King slogan: “Have it your way.” Many think that has to do with the so-called “worship wars,” but those merely have to do with style. The issue is not worship style but substance and action.

Too many people are looking for churches



that meet their desires and require very little of them. So churches develop marketing strategies to find out what people want and try to give it to them rather than the message of Jesus that is demanding — requiring commitment and sacrifice that shape our desires.

For too long many people went to church because it was the popular and culturally accepted thing to do. As a result, their nominal faith is little more than a combination of select things in the Bible and the generally accepted standards of the culture.

Rather than transforming the culture, the resulting “civil religion” merely reflects the culture's way of thinking and acting. Thus, studies indicate that there is little difference in the core values and ethics of churchgoers and non-churchgoers.


When churches dare to follow the “Jesus Way,” they will probably lose a sizeable number of their members who will find it too demanding. But they just might pick up some of the “nones” who genuinely seek a faith that gives them meaning and purpose.

In any case, while the church will likely be leaner, it will have an impact far greater than its numbers. **BT**

—Todd Wilson, retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Clemson, S.C., lives in Seneca, S.C.

“For too long many people went to church because it was the popular and culturally accepted thing to do.”

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# FARTHER, DEEPER

Participants find a nurturing experience in the West

**W**EST YELLOWSTONE, Mont. — The first Nurturing Faith Experience, to scenic Montana and Wyoming, could be described as an adventure, retreat or educational experience. Or, more accurately, it was a combination of the three.

Sponsored by *Baptists Today*, the Baptist History and Heritage Society and the Pittman Center of Gardner-Webb University, the experience allowed participants to encounter the grandeur of nature, dig into the Gospel of Luke, learn about ministry in a unique Western setting and choose from a variety of activities from sitting quietly on a cabin porch to riding horses along a mountain trail.

## SPONTANEITY, LEARNING

“I am a little bit of a lone ranger and had never gone on a trip with any tour group,” said Don Brewer, a lay leader in First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., and chair of the *Baptists Today* board. “However, this was an excellent experience

for me and one that I will always treasure.”

Scheduled sessions as well as “spontaneous discussions” that arose were very beneficial, said Brewer.

A highlight, he added, was hearing pastor Benny McCracken tell of his personal approach to ministry in the uniquely cold and transitional town of West Yellowstone.

And Jim McConnell, who teaches Greek and New Testament studies at Gardner-Webb University’s School of Divinity, led evening sessions on Christian discipleship as found in Luke/Acts.

## GOOD MIX

“Making new friends is a nurturing experience,” said John Roy, pastor of Pelham Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., of the dozen participants who shared drive times, picnics and hikes in national parks as well as in-depth, nighttime conversations.

Bill Coates, pastor of First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., concurred.

“The best part of the week was not the bison and the waterfalls and geysers, though all of those were terrific; it was not the food, though each morning I had the best blueberry pancakes ever in my life; and it was not the horseback riding, though I sure hope to get to do that again,” he said. “The most rewarding experiences were all about really getting to know the others on the retreat — some I have known at a distance for years and others I had never met before.”

“I carry from the retreat new and enriching relationships and memories of great discussions of the Gospel of Luke led each evening by Jim McConnell and the unforgettable closing conversation with Benny McCracken and the daily inspirations from Bruce Gourley,” he added.

**ABOVE:** Benny McCracken (left), pastor of First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone, and Bruce Gourley of Bozeman enjoy — and enjoy sharing about — the unique opportunities for ministry in Montana.



## AN ESCAPE

“Christian nurture is not simply more time in prayer or Bible study; the experience you provided respected that nurture happens in spontaneous conversations, in long car rides, walks in the woods, and in practicing a cherished hobby like photography,” John Roy added. “Yet, the guided study Jim [McConnell] provided was an important element of grounding our week in the life of Jesus.”

After a night in Bozeman, Mont., the group spent two days touring Yellowstone National Park under the guidance of Bruce Gourley who owns the popular website, [yellowstone.net](http://yellowstone.net).

That was followed by three nights in rustic cabins at a guest ranch in West Yellowstone where the days were filled with as much or as little activity as each participant desired.

“It was a bit unexpected, but I found the sabbatical from technology nurturing,” said Roy. “Limited cell phone service and no news or television encouraged more conversation, and in my case serious reflection on my faith and calling.”

## MINISTRY IN MONTANA

Gourley, online editor for *Baptists Today* and executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, lives in Bozeman, Mont. The Georgia native, who has spent a total of two decades in the West, shared his unique perspective.

“It’s so easy to get caught up in the universe of Baptists, especially if you’re in ministry,” he said of being in the Bible Belt. “I wanted to live in Bozeman for a long time.”

He described the high-tech, scenic college town as diverse and popular with young professionals that he often encounters at coffee shops and civic gatherings. He wrote a history of the community where he now lives and served on the regional tourism board.

“I moved to Bozeman not as a minister in the community,” he said. “But I’ve gotten to know all kinds of people.”

He began hosting a weekly morning gathering at a coffee shop for those interested in discussing faith. “Some were Christians; some were not.”

Bruce said he also has had the chance to undo some notions people had about Baptists.

“We Baptists are branded nationwide by people we’d rather not be branded by,” he shared with the group. “But there’s more freedom here than in the Bible Belt to be a Baptist.”

Having clergy and lay leaders from places where Baptists are strong to come out West

where church life is less dominant is important, said Bruce.

“Montana is what the Bible Belt is going to become.”

## ‘EVERYBODY KNOWS BENNY’

A scenic drive (everything is scenic out here) 90 miles south of Bozeman leads to the touristy but quaint town of West Yellowstone. Gourley makes the drive frequently to Yellowstone Park’s western entrance and to visit his friend, Benny.

“Ninety miles is nothing in Montana,” said Bruce of the drive.

“We go to Bozeman for dinner sometimes,” agreed McCracken, pastor of First Baptist Church of West Yellowstone.

“Everybody knows Benny around town,” said Bruce. “You don’t even have to mention his last name.”

Legally blind, McCracken cannot drive but is often seen riding his bright red bicycle with his long white beard flowing in the breeze.

In 2002, when the Olympic torch traveling from Atlanta to Salt Lake City passed through West Yellowstone, it was Benny who was chosen by the community to carry it on their behalf.

The Arkansas native and former prison chaplain moved to West Yellowstone in 1998, having to look up the location on a map. While few who relocate here last more than two years in the geographically unique spot that often sets record-low temperatures for the continental U.S., Benny has endured and enjoyed

“16 winters,” and considers West Yellowstone to be his home.

## FREEDOM FOUND

“I’ve found a freedom in Montana, especially in West Yellowstone, to be me,” he said. “And I’ve had the freedom to create ‘Baptist’ in West Yellowstone.”

Benny has done that by welcoming people from a variety of faith traditions into the church and reaching out broadly to the community — as chaplain for the emergency medical and police forces, and working as a volunteer interpretive ranger for the national park.

His congregation also hosts college students who provide ministries to the hordes of tourists coming to town each summer. And he takes them on ventures into the great outdoors that have included encounters with grizzlies.

“It keeps life interesting,” he said with a smile.

West Yellowstone is known as a place where people often come to start over from a difficult past. Benny said he’s learned to care for people without being too nosy.

The town has five churches, with Mormons being the strongest, he said. He maintains friendly and helpful relationships, rather than being competitive, with each of them.

When the local Latter Day Saints ward experienced some suicides, they asked Benny, who has training and experience in pastoral care, for help.

“We work together, not against each other, for the community,” he added.



During a hike into the park’s deep canyon, these participants in the first Nurturing Faith Experience see how Yellowstone got its name. Left to right: Susan McConnell, Don Brewer, Drayton Sanders, Bill Coates, Bruce Gourley, Jim McConnell and John Roy.

## REFRESHING

“Every Sunday we have people from around the world,” said Benny of summer church attendance.

While visitors flock to West Yellowstone and the church during the warmer months, the long, cold winters retain only the bravest year-round residents, along with those who come to ride snowmobiles across the frozen landscape.

Benny puts studded snow tires on his bike and keeps going, even when the temperature dips to minus-50 degrees. He faithfully provides worship for the brave few.

“We’ve never called off a service due to weather,” he added.

Many who say they are relocating to West Yellowstone for the long haul often move on during their second long winter, he said. But not Benny and his wife, Juanita.

“It’s a refreshing place to be a Christian,” he said. “People want to talk — and they have good questions.”

“It’s a fun place — and it’s a challenging place,” he added.

## LOOKING DEEPER

“It was an adventure for me, as I have been in that part of the world only once before, never to Montana or Wyoming,” said Mary Etta Sanders, a lay leader in First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga., reflecting on the Nurturing Faith Experience.

“I could say many things about the great group ... and about the great fun we had ... or my admiration of Benny and what he accomplishes with such Christian class,” she said. “But what captured my mind while there and has stayed with me is a quote from Robert Frost about people at the seashore: ‘They cannot look out far. They cannot look in deep.’ I think Jim and Bruce helped us to look farther and deeper into both God’s word and God’s world. And I am really appreciative.”

Her husband Drayton Sanders, a retired physician, added: “It was a perfect match of people with just the right touch of spiritual reflection, rest, nature and good humor.”

Jackie Riley, who serves as managing editor for *Baptists Today* and office manager for the Baptist History and Heritage Society, said she was pleased by how quickly the group “jelled.”

**TOP:** Al and Brenda Sholar of Creedmoor, N.C., and Mary Etta Sanders (right) of Dalton, Ga., await the dinner bell at Parade Rest Guest Ranch, a home base in West Yellowstone, Mont., for the Nurturing Faith Experience. **BOTTOM:** Bruce Gourley explains the unique geography of Yellowstone National Park with more than 10,000 thermal features.

“We began by asking the usual surface-level questions and inquiring about persons we knew in common,” she noted, “but progressed naturally into sharing our personal stories and building trust with each other.”

## NEW AWARENESS

Seeing the grandeur of nature, and the many tourists from around the world who come to Yellowstone, gave her a new awareness “of God’s presence in all things and in all people,” Jackie said.

“While viewing the various hot pots and mini-geysers and the colors they created — and hearing the gasps and chatter in various languages — I found myself asking ‘How could anyone see this and not believe in God?’” she said, “and wondering what our friends from non-Judeo-Christian backgrounds were thinking about the marvelous works of creation; it seemed almost like Pentecost.”

Her most memorable experience, she said, came after a tiring but delightful day of hiking

in Yellowstone.

“Jim and Susan McConnell and I were sitting on benches in front of Old Faithful, eating ice cream and watching a summer storm roll in while trying to keep warm in a climate about 40-50 degrees cooler than in our home states,” she recalled. “Then at 8:55, exactly as predicted, the geyser shot off in glorious style against a dark and stormy backdrop.”

“Although tiring to my body, the trip was incredibly restful to my mind,” she added. “In fact, my mind has been so clear that I’ve actually enjoyed reading for pleasure and working crossword puzzles — something I never do!”

Participants agreed that the first Nurturing Faith Experience — with its mixture of retreat, touring, adventure, education and renewal — was uniquely enjoyable and beneficial.

The next Nurturing Faith Experience is set for Israel in November. Future experiences, coordinated by *Baptists Today* in collaboration with others, will be announced soon. **BT**





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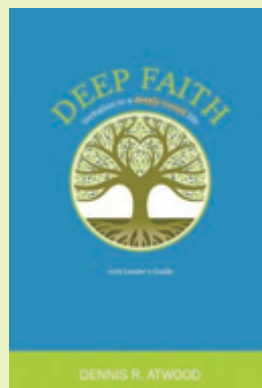


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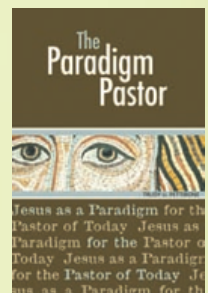


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# Ask the Theologian: Part 5

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. — At the April meeting of the Board of Directors of *Baptists Today*, editor John Pierce posed questions to theologian Fisher Humphreys during a session titled “Ask the theologian.” Questions were submitted by those who serve on the board with Humphreys. His responses appear here in print (as the fourth entry in a series) as well as in full on video at [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org).

## **QUESTION from Roger Paynter, pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas:**

*Is the church, the community of believers, essential to our salvation? If so, how?*

FH: God alone can save us, and God has done this in Christ. Salvation comes from God.

Salvation comes to people through the gospel. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. The gospel is the story of historical events in the life of Jesus.

There are just two ways to learn about historical events. One is to observe them yourself. The other is to hear a report about them from those who observed them.

It was followers of Jesus who observed his crucifixion and resurrection and who told people about these things. Since that first generation, it has been the church that proclaims the gospel and so makes salvation possible. In this sense, God’s salvation comes through the church.

We Americans are very individualistic. Some American Christians say things like this: “Well, I read a Gideon Bible in my motel room and received the gift of salvation all by myself.” But that’s not true.

The message still came through the church, through the Gideons. And behind the Gideons there are those in the church who wrote the New Testament, and those in the church who copied it for more than a thousand years, and those in the church who translated it into English. Apart from the church and its witness to the gospel, no one today would ever know about Jesus.

## **QUESTION from David Turner, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Richmond, Va.:**

*What is the future of the church?*

FH: I think it is almost certain that the church will change. God doesn’t change, but God’s people do. We must adapt to a changing world

in order to carry out the mission God has given us.

In the churches today we see things that none of the earliest churches had: buildings, church rolls, Christian college and encampments and denominations, publishing houses and seminaries and divinity schools. The first churches did not even have New Testaments. They did pretty well without any of these things.

I suspect we have needed to have all of these in order to do well. Whether we will always need them or not, I’m not sure. In other words, I’m not sure just how the church will change.

What I am sure about is that the church will endure. Already it is the oldest existing institution in the western world. It has endured failures within and challenges from without.

The Reformer Theodore Beza commented that the church is an anvil that has worn out many hammers. But there is an older metaphor for this: “The gates of hell will never prevail against it.”

## **QUESTION from Vickie Willis, lay leader in First Baptist Church of Murfreesboro, Tenn.:**

*How best can a Christian speak with honesty and love to someone who doesn’t accept the Bible as a book that reveals spiritual truth?*

FH: I think the best way is to tell the story about what Jesus has done for us. People love stories, and if we tell our stories well, people will listen. They are interested in what Jesus means to us and in how he has given us meaning for our lives and hope for our future.

A second way is to construct arguments about God and Jesus. This is an ancient practice, known formally as apologetics. Some Christians are opposed to it. Others love it.

Paul seems to have done something like apologetics at Lystra when he argued that even before he arrived, God had already provided a witness to the people there (Acts 14:8-18). Peter urged his readers to be ready to give a reason for



the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15).

There is another option that can be helpful for people who would like to believe in God and Christ but who are finding it difficult to do that. Jesus talked about this option when he said: “Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own” (John 7:17).

He was effectively offering an invitation: If you can’t decide whether or not to believe in what I say, try putting what I say into practice, and eventually you’ll come to believe.”

I think it’s appropriate to invite wistful atheists and reluctant agnostics to try to put Jesus’ teachings into practice. For example, when you’re planning a short-term medical mission trip, feel free to take along health care providers who are not sure about the Christian faith.

## **QUESTION from Vickie Willis:**

*Growing up Southern Baptist in every way, I heard a lot more emphasis on believing in Jesus than following his words. How can Baptists today remain true to the life and teachings of Jesus?*

FH: The first thing to notice is that this isn’t a new problem. Jesus talked about people who called him “Lord, Lord” but didn’t do the things he taught (Luke 6:46).

I do not think the right solution is to stop inviting people to believe in Jesus. It is not a matter of trust *or* obey. It’s a matter of trust *and* obey.

In Baptist life we use a lot of generic talk about following Jesus, being committed to him, dedicating our lives to him, being his disciples, doing God’s will, and so on. This is all fine, but if we are to remain true to Jesus’ teachings, we need to be specific about those teachings. Here are eight of his teachings:

- Put the Kingdom of God first.
- Help people; don't dominate them.
- Hunger and thirst for justice.
- Be merciful as God is merciful.
- Be a peacemaker, not a troublemaker.
- Visit people who are in prison.
- Show hospitality to foreigners.
- Forgive those who hurt you.

We can talk about what these teachings mean to us at multiple levels. One is the individual level: For example, do I forgive the people who hurt me?

The second is the church: Is our church showing hospitality to immigrants?

The third is society: Is it good public policy to execute people when society would be just as safe if we showed mercy and imprisoned people for life? **BT**

—*Fisher Humphreys of Birmingham, Ala., has written several books on theology including Thinking About God: And Introduction to Christian Theology, The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means To Us All, Fundamentalism (with Philip Wise) and God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism (with Paul Robertson).*

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