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taking new forms**

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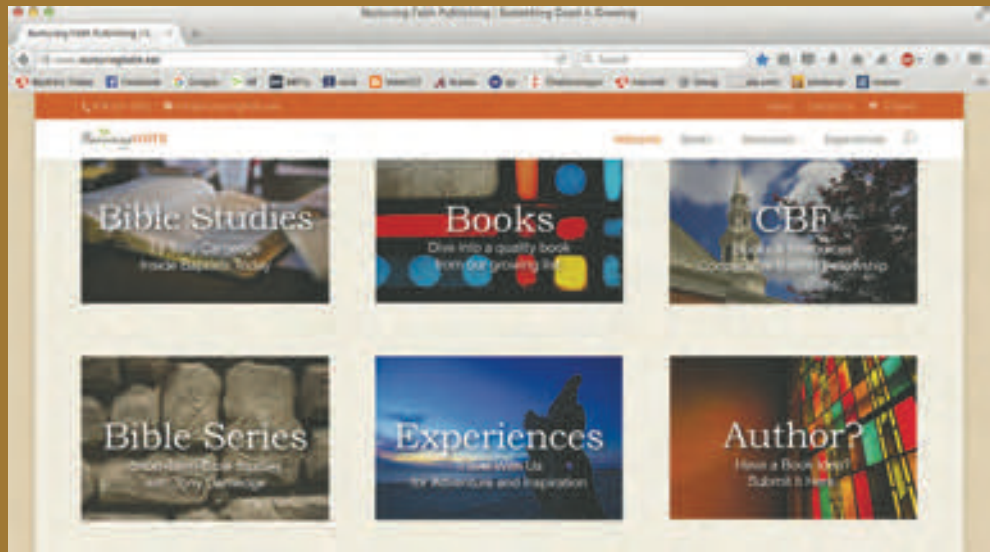
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COVER PHOTO BY JOHN PIERCE. What others casted aside, the late folk artist/preacher Howard Finster made into art that is scattered about Paradise Garden in Summerville, Ga. Story on page 4.

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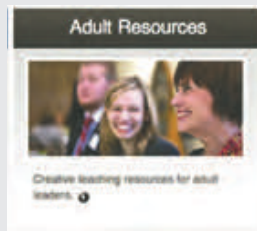
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Howard Finster was at heart a Baptist preacher whose messages were shared through a variety of artistic expressions. He was called “the grandfather of Southern folk art” and “the Andy Warhol of the South.”

Creative CHAOS

Preacher, folk artist Howard Finster left a large legacy

SUMMERVILLE, Ga. — Howard Finster was a Baptist preacher with a sixth-grade education and a folk artist whose fame took him to New York galleries and put him on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. Whether in a revival tent, on late night television with Johnny Carson, or painting out of divine inspiration, he was fully expressive.

Finster, who died in 2001, could turn anything into art — resulting in more than 46,000 pieces. Everything from hubcaps to bicycle parts to vending machines to the Cadillac he drove around Summerville (a gift from artist Victor Faccinto of Wake Forest University) was subject to the colorful messages he claimed as visions from God.

Rock band R.E.M. put his work on an album cover and filmed their music video *Radio Free Europe* in the artist’s sprawling, art-filled Paradise Garden in Northwest Georgia. He was both eccentric and eclectic.

SWAMP TO GARDEN

A non-profit organization has brought Paradise Garden to life again. Jordan Poole, executive director of the Paradise Garden Foundation, welcomes visitors to the same front porch where Finster greeted famed artists and musicians as well as anyone one else curious about his art.

“We get people from all around the world who come here,” Poole said of the “adaptive rehabilitation” of the buildings and grounds. A second phase will tackle Finster’s towering, odd-designed World’s Folk Art Church that Poole hopes to make into conference space.

The swampy land that Finster moved onto in the 1960s was drained through a series of canals that now allow water to flow freely. Walkways were not only practical but yet another canvas for Finster who embedded marbles, broken glass and other discarded items into the concrete to create a mosaic look.



(A section of one walkway is now on permanent display at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art.)

PRESERVATION

Finster’s life and work are well recorded, said Poole: “He did so many [photo] collages and told his own story.” And hardly a thought (or “vision”) went unexpressed.

There is nowhere at Paradise Garden to look without seeing some artistic expression by Finster or those influenced by his works. Nor is there a view without hand-painted renderings by the Baptist preacher of Bible verses.

Visitors seeking a resting space for reflection can stop in Finster’s open-air meditation chapel that he purchased with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Poole said that Finster was “nomadic”



The elevated Mirror House (upper left) at Paradise Garden shines among the plants and mosaic pathways where biblical messages abound.

and moved about the acreage to work rather than settle into one studio. And the foundation wants to preserve all of those spaces as much as possible.

“We want to maintain everything that has the artist’s hand on it,” he said.

Finster’s family, grateful for the preservation work, is “very much involved” in the effort, said Poole. “They are glad somebody is up to doing this.”

ODDITIES

Born in 1916 as the youngest of 13 children, Finster, an Alabama native who called himself



Jordan Poole, executive director of the Paradise Garden Foundation, welcomes visitors to the same front door where Howard Finster greeted famous musicians and artists along with anyone else interested in his work.

Howard Finster recorded much of his own history through collages of photos and articles. Right: Coke, said Jordan Poole, was Finster's "jet fuel" as well as a favored art subject.

Below: Everything was considered a waiting and willing canvas for Finster to share a message from his heart.



"Serpents of the Wilderness" is one of several Howard Finster sculptures featuring snakes. His serpent-themed work can be found on an R.E.M. album cover as well as on display at Atlanta's High Museum.

"a man of visions," was not afraid to stray from the mainstream of society. Through his art he shared prophetic warnings and even glimpses into the celestial world that he considered to be divine revelations.

Finster claimed to see spacecraft as well as angels, stars and mountains when he sat to paint. Locally, "Preacher Finster" was perceived as both an insider and someone a bit different, said Poole.

"He baptized or preached to most everyone in the county..." said Poole. "But he was a topic of conversation!"

Few artists fit into societal norms. So Finster's eccentricities were considered part of his personality, mission and genius.

"The people who loved to come to the garden most were the children, and the teenagers wanting to have their bicycles fixed," said Kathy Berry, administrator for the Paradise Garden Foundation. "If they didn't have the money, Howard would put them to work."

Finster's work as a preacher, repairman and artist often seemed inseparable. However, after a vision in 1976 (in which he saw a human face in a smudge on his finger while painting a bicycle), he set his tools in concrete as an expression of art and a clear commitment to producing "sacred art" in abundance.

Wasting little time, this "second Noah" churned out one piece after another — from renderings of George Washington, Elvis and Coke bottles to obscure fantasies, and lots and lots of scripture.



Howard Finster's World's Folk Art Church towers 40 feet and has an odd construction of four floors, 16 sides and a circular staircase — a plan the artist said came in a vision. Built as a place to “preach through my art,” the Paradise Garden Foundation is seeking funds to revitalize the unique building into “iconic conference space.”

ATTENTION

An elevated exhibition gallery is filled with many pieces of art gifted to Finster by those inspired by his works. Interspersed along the simple walls — lighted by occasional overhead bulbs and Gothic-style window openings — are more biblical messages.

“He was well known for inspiring other artists,” said Berry. Among those drawn to Finster were artists Keith Haring and Purvis Young.

In a documentary video that plays in the visitors' center, Finster said of his art: “I just started doing it and the people loved it.”

Finster's works caught the attention of the art world where he was heralded as a visual and environmental artist. His early exposure as an artist was shepherded by the University of Georgia art school.

The popularity of his art grew to include an album cover for Talking Heads that *Rolling Stone* deemed Record Album Cover of the Year, and a showing at the Phyllis Kind Gallery in New York City. He was labeled “the grandfather of Southern folk art” and “the Andy Warhol of the South.”

His 1983 appearance on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* revealed a man who

was as comfortable on a Hollywood set before a live audience and millions of viewers as in a hot summertime tent in the rural South preaching sin and salvation.

With banjo in hand he roamed the stage to Carson's wide-eyed wonder and sidekick Ed McMahon's signature laughter as Finster belted out the words to “Just a Little Tack in the Shingle of Your Roof.”

“He'd never had a guy like me on TV,” said Finster, in the documentary, of his memorable show-biz appearance, adding that Carson's “congregation just had a fit.”

TREASURES

Apparently, Finster threw away nothing. In fact, he gathered other people's castoffs as well. He was even known to visit the local dump in search of whatever might add to his artistic ways.

“If you didn't know what to do with something you'd give it to Howard,” said Berry with a smile.

Oddly, that included the unidentified remains of a teenaged girl found during a construction project in nearby Trion, Ga., a century after her death. Finster built a gypsum tomb and provided a place of rest.

By giving the body to Howard, said Berry, everyone knew it would be “cared for and watched over.”

Towers of hubcaps, rusted bicycle parts and other junk rise throughout the unique garden of art.

A metal, scaled-down church replica was made for children — as a place for them to write and mail letters to God.

Finster's wife, Pauline, who died in 2013 and with whom he had five children, once said of her husband: “He never ran out of words; he always had a message if he had a chance to preach.”

And preach he did — whether behind a pulpit or with paint on his hands. Not surprising, visitors sit in church pews to view the documentary at Paradise Garden — and to hear Finster proclaim: “When faith moves in, worry moves out!”

Of his own death, he assured that he was “dying to come alive again.” One can only imagine that Howard Finster is as colorful and comfortable in the afterlife as he was anywhere on this earth. **BT**

—Information on Paradise Gardens, which welcomes individuals and groups, may be found at paradisegardenfoundation.org.

quotation “ ” remarks

“It is always easier to blame the poor for their circumstances rather than appraising the systemic realities that make upward mobility nearly impossible. We prefer that they remain invisible, even in our churches... The biblical writers remind us that the poor have a claim upon the people of God and that our giving is determined more by their need than our desire to give.”

—President Molly T. Marshall of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan. (*EthicsDaily.com*)

“I was really surprised to see that they were so confident in their ability to talk about this area of clients’ lives, being able to integrate the clients’ beliefs into clinical practice.”

—Baylor University professor Holly Oxhandler, co-author of a study of 442 social workers that showed more than 60 percent expressed confidence in incorporating clients’ beliefs into treatment (*RNS*)

“I’d like the last Guinea worm to die before I do.”

—President Jimmy Carter, during an Aug. 20 press conference about his cancer diagnosis, referring to the eradication of Guinea worm disease that, thanks to Carter Center efforts, has fallen from 3.6 million cases to 11 cases “and we know where all of them are” (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)

“We need you. Muslim community leaders [are] struggling to have their voices heard against the overwhelming extremist and bigoted content currently surfacing the web.”

—An email from YouTube to American Muslim Aman Ali, offering to fly the digital products specialist and comedian from New York to Los Angeles to record a video as part of the company’s effort to drown out extremism with “reasonable, better messages” (*HuffPost*)

“I would have been so much nicer to everyone in my life if I’d known they were all coming back.”

—Comedian Tom Papa on the popularity of Facebook

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

—Author and minister G. Jeffrey MacDonald (*New York Times*)

“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will go forward as a chartering organization of BSA, and as in the past, will appoint Scout leaders and volunteers who uphold and exemplify church doctrine, values and standards.”

—A news release from the LDS governing First Presidency of Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, relieving some fears that the largest sponsor of Boy Scouts troops would form its own organization following BSA’s decision to allow gay leaders (*Salt Lake Tribune*)

“One of the worst things that has come out of ‘professional Christianity’ — whether it’s reality TV stars or celebrity pastors — is the narrative that forgiveness is the same thing as reconciliation... To forgive does not mean that you return to the same relationship you had with someone before they hurt you.”

—Blogger Laura Turner for Religion News Service

“When we set out to build the best new museum in the world, we knew the museum would be even better if we joined forces with some of the greatest collections anywhere.”

—Cary L. Summers, president of the under-construction Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., announcing a partnership with the Israel Antiquities Authority (*RNS*)

“Hopefully, they are basing their view of what is sin by what the Bible says.”

—Scott McConnell, vice president of LifeWay Research, on survey results showing that 43 percent of Protestants think it’s sinful for couples to split over a lack of love (*RNS*)

“It’s a decision taken by Rome city hall which is favorable to Catholics in that it’s in line with the path of dialogue started with the ecumenical council.”

—Ciro Benedettini, deputy director of the Vatican press office, on support for naming a hilltop square in Rome after church reformer Martin Luther who was excommunicated by the pope a half-century ago (*RNS*)

“We had the privilege of baptizing a bunch of football players and a coach on the field of Villa Rica High School! We did this right before practice!”

—From a video posted and then removed by First Baptist Church of Villa Rica, Ga., west of Atlanta, that caused a religious liberty-related investigation (*USA Today*)

By John Pierce

‘It’s what we do’

In writing the story that begins on page 32, about changes in funerals and burials, I recalled some of my personal experiences from a year ago when two of my three brothers died within a two-month span. While their services and final dispositions were different, the gatherings of family and friends were similar.

We grew up in a tight-knit community in Northwest Georgia that touches the Tennessee state line at Chattanooga. Greeting these friends and relatives (lots of cousins) was comforting at a time of shock and grief.

To each person individually, I would say, “Thanks for coming.”

One lifelong friend, Reece, responded: “It’s what we do.” His comment struck a chord with me that I continue to ponder.

Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith Board Chairman Don Brewer, after the death of his wife a few years ago, was asked about the service that would follow. His initial response, he said, was “Don’t think reading some Bible verses and

having a prayer is going to make me feel better.”

Later, after the moving memorial service, he said, “But it did.”

It also mattered that the church and community surrounded him in his pain and sorrow. It mattered to me as well, as it has to most if not all of us.

The church, for all its faults — and the Lord knows there are so many — is where we turn in such times.

Many individuals and organizations are helpful and supportive. Yet after the deaths of my brothers, I turned first to the congregation that gathers for worship, fellowship and service in the red brick, white steeple church where we had been nourished in faith.

They opened their doors, hearts and arms widely to us. We were cared for deeply and

practically — including the long-standing tradition of expressing sympathy through food when words are harder to produce.

Several years ago I made a commitment to express sympathy in person and attend memorial services for those whose lives have impacted mine whenever possible. It would be a priority though not always achieved.

Words are never fully adequate at a time of deep loss. But they matter.

And presence, more than anything else, reminds those who grieve that the rocky road is not traveled alone.

As indicated in the article, trends and traditions change. Funerals and burials take on new forms due to societal shifts.

Unchanged, however, is the human need for comfort and company in times of loss. We need to be there — wherever there may be — for one another.

Reece is right. “It’s what we do.” Or what we should do in times of grief. **BT**



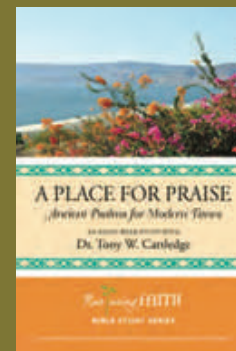
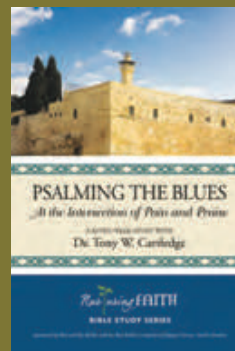
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EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fifth in a series of articles by historian Bruce Gourley on the religious faith of U.S. presidents. Gourley is online editor and contributing writer for Baptists Today and executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society. His latest book, Baptists and the American Civil War: Crucible of Faith and Freedom, a compilation of articles from the recent series on Baptists and the American Civil War, is now available from Nurturing Faith.

Religion and the American Presidents

James Monroe (1817-1825)

Evidencing the national political dominance of the South at large and planters in particular, career politician James Monroe won the 1816 presidential election. The fifth American president, Monroe became the fourth Virginian to take up residency in the White House.

Monroe, born in 1758, was baptized as an infant in the state church, the Anglican Church. And like all four former occupants of the White House, Monroe soon rejected state-enforced religion and Christian orthodoxy. His disparate youthful religion and secular adulthood also shared a local common focal point: his home county of Westmoreland.

A son of privilege, James Monroe's baptism in the Washington Parish preceded his education in an academy operated by Rector Archibald Campbell of the Washington Parish. Enrollment at William and Mary, an Anglican school of higher education, came next. There he attended morning and evening chapel services and Sunday worship in a nearby parish, but was also exposed to deistic views.

Less than two years after enrolling, however, Monroe in 1776 dropped out of college to fight in the Revolutionary War. Serving under Gen. George Washington, in December he was wounded in the Battle of Trenton. Sent home, he recovered and in 1779 began studying law, including with Thomas Jefferson.

Prior to his military service, Monroe's educational pursuits dictated religious activities. Upon entering law studies, religion took a decided backseat to political ambition.

Jefferson's influence played a role in Monroe's election to the Continental Congress (now often referred to as the Congress of the Confederation) in Philadelphia in November 1783. Within months Jefferson introduced his up-and-coming former student to James Madison, then serving in the Virginia Assembly.

The two became friends and sometimes allies. In this context Madison in 1785 brought to Monroe's attention an important political

battle in their home state: the fervent struggle between establishment Christians and ascendant dissenters over the matter of religion.

The former, allied with Patrick Henry, insisted on maintaining some form of a state Christian religion. Dissenters demanded church-state separation. Others wavered in the middle, gauging which way the political winds might blow.

"The Episcopal clergy are generally for it," Madison wrote to Monroe of a bill authored by Henry to tax Virginians for the support of Christian ministers. "The Presbyterians seem as ready to set up an establishment which would take them in as they were to pull one down which shut them out. The Baptists, however, standing firm by their avowed principle of the complete separation of church and state, declared it to be 'repugnant to the spirit of the Gospel for the Legislature thus to proceed in matters of religion, that no human laws ought to be established for the purpose.'"

Whether or not Monroe was previously acquainted with the lowly Baptists of Virginia during his upbringing, he now heard much of their outspoken protests. In June 1785 Madison, with the wholehearted support of the Baptists of Virginia, of which the famous evangelist John Leland was second to none, introduced to the legislature his "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments."

Two months later the Baptist General Committee of Virginia called upon Baptists throughout the state to join Madison in petitioning against Henry's bill. By the thousands Baptists responded, including from Monroe's Westmoreland County, where in November a singular Baptist-authored petition demanding church-state separation garnered thousands of signatures. A young and ambitious Monroe could not have helped but take note of the furor on his home turf.

Perhaps it was about this time that Monroe, while formally retaining his association with (but refusing Confirmation in)

the Anglican/Episcopalian Church, wholly embraced the reason and rationalism of which he had imbued while at William and Mary.

Meanwhile, enthusiastic and widespread support from Baptists ensured the 1786 enactment of Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, separating church from state in Virginia. With momentum on their side, Baptists then sought federal legislation.

Three years later amid growing public discourse of a potential religious liberty amendment to the U.S. Constitution, Madison and Monroe squared off for a seat in the first U.S. Congress. Baptists remained uncertain of Monroe due to his endorsement by Henry.

Near the end of an intense campaign season, Virginia's Baptists ultimately threw their weight behind Madison, perceiving him to be the more publicly committed of the two in securing a religious liberty amendment. Heavy Baptist turnout at the voting booth provided Madison with a slim margin of victory.

Nonetheless, Monroe supported church-state separation. In a paper apparently drafted as a victory speech should he have defeated Madison, Monroe listed "liberty of conscience in matters of religious faith" among "the most important objects" in a proposed constitutional declaration of rights. Church-state separation would help render "impossible that government should ever degenerate into tyranny."

In 1791 the First Amendment enshrined religious liberty for all and church-state separation. Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Baptists and other religious dissenters were victorious.

Following terms of service as a U.S. senator, U.S. minister to France and Great Britain, governor of Virginia (twice), U.S. secretary of state and secretary of war, in 1816 Monroe easily won the presidency. Four years later voters returned him to office.

James Monroe's political career spanned more than four decades, including eight presidential years. As president, he consolidated America's land holdings, acquiring Florida from

the Spanish and securing America's northern border. Near the end of his presidency he issued what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, a foreign affairs policy opposing further European intervention in the Americas.

In return he pledged that the United States would not interfere with European colonies or intervene with internal European affairs. A lasting legacy, the Monroe Doctrine remained in effect for more than a century.

While securing domination of the American continent, Monroe as president remained silent regarding religious sentiments, as he did for the entirety of his political career. Infrequently he attended church. In neither public nor private life did he voice any indication of a personal religious faith. The scuttled 1789 congressional victory speech, a strong affirmation of church-state separation, was perhaps his most religious commentary.

The death of his young son at 16 months led him to write many letters, none mentioning religion. Likewise, the death of his wife evoked no religious response. As president, however, Monroe sometimes followed his predecessors in sprinkling deistic phraseology in formal speeches (including his two inaugural addresses) in discussing civic virtue, or what one might term inclusive civic religion. He also briefly affirmed church-state separation in his first inaugural speech.

Monroe left the presidency as the last of the Founding Fathers to occupy the White House. His terms led to the dissolution of the Federalists, the party of George Washington.

James Monroe died in 1831, leaving no deathbed statement. Eulogies spoke of his patriotism and statesmanship, but said nothing of religious faith.

Christian apologists upon George Washington's death crafted mythological literature in an attempt to Christianize the first president. Although Monroe's death occurred at the height of a vocal Christian nationalist movement determined to legislate Christianity as the nation's official faith, no one bothered to revise Monroe with a religious makeover.

Many Baptists, chief among dissenters in the colonial and revolutionary eras, perhaps also appreciated Monroe's career-long silence regarding religion. During his presidency and the decades following, scores of Baptist parents named their sons "James Monroe."

The religious legacy of James Monroe may thus best be thought of as a conspicuous silence that provided a flourishing space for America's founding principles of freedom of conscience, religious liberty for all and church state separation. **BT**



The poster features a photograph of two men playing djambanis in front of a church building. The text is arranged in a clean, modern layout with a color palette of olive green, purple, and white. At the top, the words "COLUMBIA" and "CONNECTS" are displayed in large, white, sans-serif font on a dark blue background. Below the photo, the event details are presented in a light green box. At the bottom, the "COLUMBIA THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY" logo is shown in a dark red box, accompanied by a QR code and social media icons for Facebook and Twitter.

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Larger black churches avoiding decline

ALLEXANDRIA, Va. — At Alfred Street Baptist Church, the pews start to fill more than half an hour before the service begins. White-uniformed ushers guide African Americans of all ages to their seats. Some stand and wave their hands in the air as the large, robed choir begins to sing.

In September, the church started its fourth weekend service. Church leaders are now asking people to limit their attendance to one service.

“Pick your service,” said Edward Y. Jackson, an assistant to the pastor, at the start of a recent service. “Come in, come early, get your parking space so we can all enjoy and worship God together.”

A recent Pew Research Center survey found that Christians are losing their share of the U.S. population, dropping to 71 percent in 2014, down from 78 percent in 2007, with young people leading the exodus. But historically black denominations have bucked that trend, holding on to a steady percent of members during that same period.

As significant, the share of millennial-generation African Americans who affiliate with historically black churches is similar to that of older churchgoers.

There are numerous reasons why some black churches retain their members, but, most prominently, the church has played a historic role in black life that has fostered a continuing strong black Protestant identity. Members and visitors at Alfred Street say the church’s holistic ministry — the preaching, the singing and the community outreach — are what draw them in and keep them there.

“I think black churches have always been very pivotal in social movements and outreach,” said Kelli Slater, 20, a Howard University student from Mississippi who was visiting Alfred Street at the invitation of her older sister. “I think black churches do a whole lot more than religion.”

In late July, the church held its annual “Brother’s Keeper” outreach project, in which it gave 2,000 low-income children backpacks and winter coats and provided health screenings for their families. In December, some members marched from the church to a local courthouse in support of the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

David Daniels III, a church history professor at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, said black churches are not universally



The pews and the choir loft are full at Alfred Street Baptist Church, a historic, predominantly black congregation in Alexandria, Va., on July 26, 2015. Religion News Service photo by Adelle M. Banks

successful in holding onto younger members, but in some places, mostly black megachurches are gaining adherents even as smaller, aging congregations have dwindling numbers in their pews.

“In some cities, there are some congregations, often with younger pastors, either millennials or Gen-Xers, who’ve been able to develop ministries that are able to attract in their cohort group,” said Daniels, a minister of the Church of God in Christ.

Howard-John Wesley, 43, has been pastor since 2008 of Alfred Street, which is affiliated with the historically black Progressive National Baptist Convention and National Baptist Convention, USA. He introduced a monthly “Come As You Are” Wednesday night service for millennials as well as “Hour of Power” summer Sunday services.

In the last seven years, he said, his church membership has grown from 2,300 to 7,100, and 80 percent of the new members have been in their mid-30s and low 40s. Total attendance on recent weekends has surpassed 3,000.

“We decided to be very concise with time,” said Wesley, who knows families need time for their kids’ sporting events and who watches a 60-minute clock placed strategically at the back of the sanctuary. “The No. 1 thing people ask when they’re invited to a church is ‘What time do you get out?’”

Kip Banks, interim general secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, said

societal issues such as police brutality as well as efforts to be relevant to millennials — from live-streamed services to marriage and mentoring ministries — continue to draw African Americans to black churches.

“The church has always spoken to these issues and the church is addressing these issues,” he said. “The black church is the place that’s always affirmed African-American life.”

But Banks and others say black churches are not immune to some of the declines experienced by Christianity in general.

“There are some of our churches that are doing extraordinarily well in terms of captivating and being able to minister to young people,” said Jerry Young, president of the National Baptist Convention, USA. “And then there are a number of our churches that also are suffering.”

Like the rest of the U.S. population, some African Americans are disaffiliating. The Pew survey found that 18 percent of African Americans describe their religious affiliation as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular,” compared with 12 percent in 2007. The share of U.S. blacks who fit in the “nones” category rose at about the same rate as the general population, said Greg Smith, associate director of research at Pew.

But Richard Wair of Springdale, Md., the patriarch of a family that has attended Alfred Street for more than a century, remains hopeful that the next generation of African Americans will continue the churchgoing tradition. **BT**

Enemy within

Israel's young militant settlers latest front in struggle against terrorism

AHIYA, West Bank (RNS) — Elhanan Shmidov views this illegal Jewish outpost, within earshot of the drumming ceremonies of nearby Palestinian villages, as the epitome of “self-sacrifice,” where “good Jews” like him carry out the holy mission of populating this contested land.

Shmidov, like many of his neighbors, said residents must defend their place in communities like his throughout “Judea and Samaria,” the biblical name referring to land that was once the domain of the ancient Jewish kingdom. He takes no responsibility for the Jewish extremists — whom he calls “wild weeds” within the pro-settler community — who carry out violence against Palestinians.

The increasingly radical Jewish militants who target Palestinians are the latest front in Israel's struggle against terrorism. Israeli security authorities estimate hundreds belong to the extremist groups, but only about 100 have been involved in the violent attacks.

A July 31 arson attack by suspected Jewish extremists in the Palestinian village of Duma left a toddler and his father dead and sparked nationwide soul-searching. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced the act of “Jewish terrorism” and launched a crackdown that included the arrest of a number of high-profile, ultra-nationalist activists.

Many of the extremists are associated with the so-called “price tag” movement, which vows to exact a “price” by attacking Palestinian properties or people whenever Israel attempts to curb Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

The origins for the movement date back 10 years, when large-scale Israeli evacuations of settlements from Gaza were perceived as a violation of both Jewish law and the peoples' prospects for redemption.

Palestinians and the Israeli settlers have disputed the ownership of the West Bank for four decades. Some settlers, so avid in their claims to the land, have defied the Israeli government's wishes by living in the contested zones.

Leaders among the settlers dismiss claims of terrorism by Jewish extremists as either unsubstantiated or overblown by what they call

the “leftist” Israeli press. Instead, they fume about the government's failure to keep them safe from Palestinian attacks.

“In Jerusalem, in Tel Aviv, in all of Israel's cities, there are tons of Arabs, walking around normally ... We're the ones who are afraid!” Shmidov said.

The settlement groups organize themselves through underground networks and are often made up of members who are social outcasts or recent immigrants, said Shlomo Fischer, an expert on Jewish extremism. They include both militant and non-militant members who share a conviction that only once the land of Israel — including the West Bank — gets rid of non-Jewish elements will the nation be able to usher in an era of a “true Jewish state,” according to right-wing activists' blogs.

Unlike previous generations, the more extreme members of the group don't look to local leaders for guidance in carrying out attacks. Instead, they only respect extremist interpretations of religious texts and act on their own accord, Fischer said.

Itamar Ben-Gvir, a lawyer who represents “price tag” and other ultra-nationalist activists in court says that while they face persecution by

a state that fails to recognize its lofty goals, they are fighting back.

“The government is trying to hurt us, but when you have faith, it's a different story, nothing deters you.”

One of the right-wing activists, Meir Ettinger, the grandson of the famed ultra-nationalist Rabbi Meir Kahane, was recently arrested and placed under administrative detention — a controversial policy that denies the right to a trial or knowing the evidence that led to the charges.

Ettinger, 24, wrote on his blog that rather than prosecute “Arab terrorists,” Israeli police busy themselves with groups such as the “hill-top youth,” young activist settlers who camp on hilltops in the West Bank, and “Lahava,” a youth organization that seeks to prevent intermingling between Arabs and Jews.

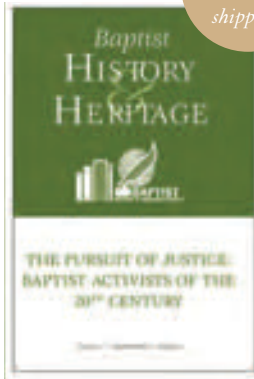
According to the Shin Bet — Israel's security agency — members of Ettinger's “price tag” offshoot movement called “the revolt” meet at night at different locations, share information on how to get Molotov cocktails and remain silent during police investigations, as well as plot schemes for creating anarchy and overthrowing the Israeli government in favor of a “Jewish kingdom.” **BT**



An Israeli soldier walks past a house that had been torched in a suspected attack by Jewish extremists killing an 18-month-old Palestinian child, injuring a four-year-old brother and both their parents at Kafr Duma village near the West Bank city of Nablus July 31, 2015. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Abed Omar Qusini

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The Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are unique in the scholarship of a consistent writer, the depth of lessons based on Lectionary texts, and the presentation of the lessons within the news journal along with abundant teaching resources (including video) online.

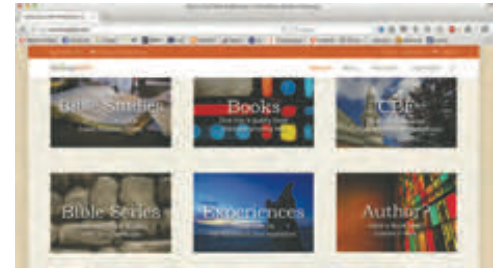
“Nurturing Faith” conveyed the intent of providing more-scholarly Bible study than most Sunday school materials yet also applicable to daily living. But the question was raised: “What other resources can add to that mission?”

A unique approach to book publishing soon emerged — along with the tag line: “Something Good Is Growing.” Indeed, Nurturing Faith continues to grow as an extension of the publishing ministry that began more than 30 years ago.

Nurturing Faith™ respects the intelligence of its readers and their commitments to growing in faith. Books and other resources are collaborative efforts with authors, sponsors and organizations with shared values.

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—Bruce T. Gourley, Ph.D., Executive Director,
Baptist History and Heritage Society

“Legacy and Loss: How the Civil War Still Impacts American Society”

—Bobby Lovett, Ph.D., Retired Senior Professor, Tennessee State University

Dialogue — Facilitated by John D. Pierce,
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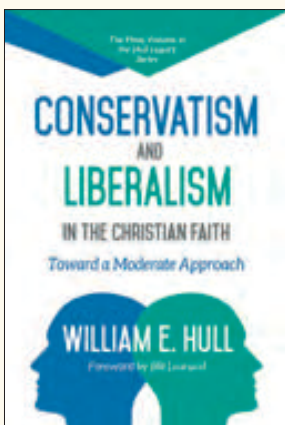
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—From Foreword
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The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by **Tony Cartledge** in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without "dumbing down" the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.



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November lessons in this issue

A Time for Gratitude: Stories of Thankful People

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You're All I Have

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An Odd Road to a Happy Ending

Ruth 3:1-4:21

Nov. 15, 2015

Transformational Tears

1 Samuel 1:1-28

Nov. 22, 2015

Thanks for the Promises

2 Samuel 23:1-7

Nov. 29, 2015

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1 Thessalonians 3:6-13



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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Ruth 1:1-2:23

Nov. 1, 2015

You're All I Have

Do you like happy endings? Most of us do. While movies or books that end tragically may receive critical acclaim, most of us prefer a tale in which the main characters overcome threats and trials to find happiness in the end.

That's one of the reasons the book of Ruth is one of the most popular stories in the Bible: it shares the typical features of a traditional folktale in which good people fall into trial and experience a major need that is ultimately fulfilled in surprising ways. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

Of family and famine (1:1-5)

The story begins with a happy family living in Judah. The father's name is Elimelech, which means "my God is king." His two sons have names that point ominously toward their fate.

"Mahlon" is from a root that means "to be sick" and "Chilion" could mean "frail." Why give children such names?

Infant mortality was high in ancient times, and the boys may have appeared sickly at birth. It's also possible that the narrator attributed nicknames to them as a harbinger of their early deaths. 🇺🇸

The mother's name is Naomi, which comes from an adjective that means "pleasant," and could be translated as "pleasant one." We soon learn that, though the book is named for her daughter-in-law, Naomi is the primary protagonist whose misfortunes drive the story.

We meet Naomi's family during a time of famine in their home village of Bethlehem – an ironic touch, since



Ruth 1:17 –
"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God."

"Bethlehem" means "House of Bread," but there was no bread. Elimelech chooses to go in search of better prospects, taking his wife and sons to live "as sojourners" or "foreigners" in the land of Moab. 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

Soon after relocating, Elimelech died of unstated causes, leaving Naomi to care for two sons (v. 3). She managed to arrange marriages for both of them, though with little to offer as a bride price, it is likely that they came from poor Moabite families (v. 4). The brides' names are also significant:

"Orpah" could be related to a word meaning "the back of the neck," so we are not surprised when she later turns away from Naomi. The name "Ruth," in contrast, is related to a word meaning "friendship" or "companion" – and she is the one who will faithfully stick with Naomi.

A decade later, both sons had died without siring children, leaving Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law as widows (v. 5). In short order, then, the plot is introduced. Naomi is stranded in a foreign land, saddled

with two daughters-in-law but no sons to provide for her in old age. Naomi's bereft situation quickly sets up the story so that we know what is necessary for a happy ending: she needs food, and she needs sons. Is there hope for Naomi? How will the crisis be resolved?

Of loyalty and lament (1:6-22)

When Naomi heard that "the LORD had considered his people and given them food," she determined to return to Bethlehem, where Elimelech had owned property and she might appeal to extended family members for help (vv. 6-7). Knowing that she had nothing to offer them, Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to return to their parents, take another husband, and find new happiness (vv. 8-9).

Both Orpah and Ruth demurred, but Naomi bitterly protested that she had no more sons for them to marry and felt cursed, for "the hand of the LORD has turned against me" (vv. 10-13). After some persuasion, Orpah agreed to stay behind and seek her future in Moab (v. 14). 🇺🇸 Ruth, however, elected to

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remain with Naomi, eloquently declaring her love and allegiance: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God” (v. 16).

Many couples choose to use these words in their wedding ceremonies, often unaware that the pledge was first spoken by a widowed woman to her mother-in-law! Ruth promised not only to remain with Naomi for life, but also to forsake her Moabite gods and follow the God of Israel. Leaving no doubt of her intentions, she concluded with an oath: “May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” (v. 17).

Seeing Ruth’s determination, Naomi said no more, but led the way to Bethlehem, where the local women cried out in joyful recognition of a friend they had not seen in 10 years: “Is this Naomi?” (v. 19). Naomi shared none of their joy, rejecting her old name (“pleasant one”) and insisting that they call her “Mara” (“bitter”) instead, “for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me” (v. 20). Blaming her troubles on God, Naomi complained that she had gone away full, but Yahweh had “dealt harshly,” “caused calamity,” and “brought me back empty” (v. 21).

But Naomi was not empty: Ruth was with her, and they had arrived “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (v. 22).

Of food and flirtation (2:1-23)

Chapter 2 is brilliantly written and designed to show how Ruth, a Moabite foreigner, became accepted as a part of the community and the clan. It begins with a digression in which the narrator introduces the reader to Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi’s husband Elimelech – and someone who had the ability to reverse the women’s negative circumstances (v. 1).

While Naomi remained self-absorbed and apparently inactive, Ruth took the initiative. She offered to go and glean barley in the fields outside of Bethlehem, a practice that Israel’s law afforded to foreigners as well as the

poor (Lev. 19:9-10, 23:22; Deut. 24:19-21). Notably, Ruth set out not only to glean, but also to seek “someone in whose sight I may find favor” (v. 2).

As the story is told, Ruth just happened to choose a field belonging to the aforementioned Boaz (meaning “in him is strength”), and Boaz just happened to arrive in time to see her there (vv. 3-4). While their meeting appears to be by chance, there is little doubt that the narrator sees providence at work.

Intrigued by Ruth’s appearance, Boaz asked the supervisor of his workers to whom the young woman “belonged” (v. 5) – in patriarchal culture, a married woman “belonged” to her husband and a single woman to her father. Boaz’s main concern was to know if Ruth had any family connections.

The foreman identified Ruth as the young Moabite woman who had returned with Naomi, noting her polite manners and her strong work ethic: “She has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment” (vv. 6-7).

The remainder of the chapter portrays a delightful and flirtatious interplay between Boaz and Ruth. Boaz spoke to Ruth as “my daughter” and urged her to stay in his fields with the young women of his household. He assured her safety, having instructed the young men not to molest her, and encouraged her to share in water breaks with the others (vv. 8-9). ⚡

Ruth’s response was dramatic and attention getting. She fell prostrate before Boaz and asked “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” (v. 10 – recall Ruth’s interest in finding someone who would show her favor, v. 2).

Boaz acknowledged that he had heard of how Ruth had shown such loyalty to Naomi by leaving her own

family to care for her mother-in-law. Clearly impressed, he wished her God’s blessing (vv. 11-12). ⚡

Ruth maintained her submissive approach, referring to Boaz as “my lord,” hoping to continue “to find favor in your sight,” and speaking of herself as his maidservant (*shifkha*), “even though I am not one of your servants” (v. 13).

The term *shifkha* was used of household servants who were considered part of the extended family, so Ruth’s word choice was a subtle request to be recognized as a member of Boaz’s clan. Boaz’s insistence that she remain in his fields, along with his continued show of hospitality, suggest that he did so.

At mealtime, Boaz invited Ruth to come and sit with the household. He personally “heaped up” for her so much parched grain that she ate her fill and saved the rest for Naomi. Boaz then instructed the harvesters to allow Ruth to glean even among the stacked bundles of grain where the pickings were best, and to intentionally leave handfuls of grain in her path (vv. 14-16). Boaz appeared to be as interested in seeking Ruth’s favor as she was in his.

With Boaz’s intervention, Ruth worked all day, beat out the grain, and returned to Naomi with leftovers from lunch and “about an ephah of barley” – probably 30-50 pounds of grain (v. 18). Naomi’s delight in learning where Ruth had been gleaning led her to speak more kindly of God: she intoned a word of blessing on Boaz “by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead” (v. 20). ⚡

After explaining that Boaz was a kinsman, Naomi insisted that Ruth continue to glean in his fields rather than any other, and she did so, “gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests” – time enough to amass a considerable quantity of grain (vv. 21-13).

With the end of chapter 2, the first element of Naomi’s need has been met: she has food. But how will the second need be fulfilled? Naomi still has no sons to care for her in old age.

Fortunately, the book has two chapters yet to come. **BT**

Bible Study

Ruth 3:1-4:21

with Tony W. Cartledge

Nov. 8, 2015

An Odd Road to a Happy Ending

Has your life worked out exactly as you planned or hoped when you were younger? Most of us experience unexpected twists and turns in life. Divorce happens. Jobs are eliminated. Loved ones die. Times change. Love grows – or doesn't. We may all have some concept of a dream life, but rarely does it work out as we had planned.

Sometimes life turns out to be less than we had hoped for, but often it becomes more. We learn that, though all things are not good, God is able to work with us to bring something good even from trials, and often in unexpected ways.

A daring plan for Ruth (3:1-18)

Such was the case for a woman named Naomi. After traveling to Moab during a time of famine, Naomi's husband died. Her two sons married Moabite women but died childless, leaving Naomi bereft and fearful of a future with no family to support her.

Hope revived after she returned to Bethlehem along with Ruth, the widow of her son Mahlon. Ruth gleaned in the fields of a man named Boaz, who took a strong liking to her. Weeks of gleaning provided needed food, but Naomi still lacked descendants to ensure her social standing and future security.

How could that be rectified? Knowing that Boaz was related to her husband and having noticed the sparks between him and Ruth, Naomi hatched an audacious plan. As a kinsman, Boaz



Ruth 4:14 –
"Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel!'"

could buy the property that had belonged to her deceased husband Elimelech and provide financial security. If he also married Ruth, he could conceive children to preserve Elimelech's posterity and Naomi's future.

With the harvest season ended, farmers turned their thoughts to winnowing the barley and wheat that had been stacked up in their fields. During that hectic time, it was not unusual for the workers to camp out by the threshing floor, both for convenience and to protect the hard-won bounty of grain.

Naomi plotted to use this unusual sleeping situation to force Boaz's hand. Naomi instructed her daughter-in-law to bathe, put on perfume, and dress in her best clothes (3:1-3a). She was not sending Ruth to a party, but to the pallet where Boaz was sleeping in the field. Flirtation and sexual tension had begun to emerge in the previous chapter. Now it comes front and center.

Naomi instructed Ruth to go to the place where Boaz and his workers were threshing barley, but remain hidden until she saw that Boaz had eaten and drunk his fill before turning in for the

night. After observing where Boaz was sleeping, Naomi had told her: "Go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do" (3:4b).

What? Was Naomi really sending Ruth to sneak into bed with Boaz? *Exactly* – though just how far under the covers is unclear. Naomi told Ruth to "uncover his feet and lie down," presumably beside his bare feet, while waiting for Boaz to awaken and tell her what to do next.

The erotic *frisson* grows with an awareness that the word translated "uncover" was typically used with regard to uncovering one's nakedness, often in illicit situations. Moreover, in biblical Hebrew as well as the ancient Near East, "feet" was a common euphemism for genitalia (Exod. 4:25, Judg. 3:24, 1 Sam. 24:3).¹

Ruth followed Naomi's plan, presumably waiting until all were asleep and then quietly cozying up to Boaz (3:6-7). Should we be surprised that Boaz was startled when he woke up around midnight to find a warm and sweet-smelling woman sharing his bedroll (3:8)?

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In the darkness, he croaked: “*Who are you?*” Ruth replied, as Naomi had taught her: “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin” (3:9).

The word translated “servant” (better, “handmaiden”) indicates a higher status than “maidservant,” which Ruth had called herself on their first meeting. A handmaiden was eligible for marriage: Ruth was in essence proposing that Boaz marry her and act as *go’el*, or “redeemer,” for Naomi.

In Israel, when a man died, his closest kin had the responsibility of being a “redeemer” by purchasing his land – and by accepting responsibility for the dead man’s family. To marry Ruth, Boaz must also act as *go’el*. In that way, Ruth could maintain her relationship with Naomi, whose future would be secured.

Boaz responded with relief and delight that Ruth had chosen him over one of the younger men who might have competed for her affections (3:10-11).^U Boaz knew, however, that one obstacle remained: Another man in town was closer kin to Elimelech than he, and he would have first right of refusal (3:12).

Boaz told Ruth to stay with him through the night but move to a different place before dawn, lest anyone see them in a compromising position (3:13). Before Ruth departed the next morning, Boaz filled her cloak with six measures of barley for Naomi, who assured Ruth that Boaz would settle the matter by day’s end (3:14-18).^U

A bold gamble for Boaz (4:1-12)

Boaz went without apparent delay to the gate, where elders gathered and business was transacted before witnesses.^U To no one’s surprise, the narrator says the nearer kinsman just happened to be walking by as Boaz arrived.

Boaz invited the unnamed kinsman to have a seat, called together the 10 elders necessary to witness legal matters, and explained that the late Elimelech’s land was available for purchase (4:1-3).^U

Boaz reminded the man that he had

first option to buy the land, and could do so by declaring his intent before the witnesses. When the other kinsman expressed a desire to do so, Boaz reminded him that Ruth came with the property: He would also be expected to marry her and produce a son who would later inherit the same land in the name of his deceased father, Elimelech’s son Mahlon (4:5).^U

Boaz was gambling that the man would not want to add another wife and divide his inheritance, and he wagered wisely. When the man declined to exercise his option – making it official through the custom of giving Boaz one of his sandals in the presence of witnesses – the way was clear for Boaz to declare his intention to acquire the land and to marry Ruth before the same witnesses (4:6-10).

This proved to be a most popular move, as “all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders” affirmed the decision and spoke words of blessing to Boaz, expressing their hopes that the union would be fruitful in producing children, so that his house would be like the house of Perez (4:11-12 – see “The Hardest Question” online for more about Perez).

A new son for Naomi (4:13-22)

Now we’re ready for the happy ending, and the narrator relates it in short order. In the space of one verse we learn that Boaz and Ruth were married, she conceived, and a son was born (4:13). That is no surprise, but what comes next may catch the reader off guard:

“Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne

him’” (4:14-15).

The women did not congratulate Ruth, but *Naomi*. What is more, the storyteller says “Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse” (4:16). This does not necessarily mean that the aging Naomi became his wet nurse, but that she cared for the boy faithfully.

Note that Ruth has faded into the background, a reminder that Naomi is the central protagonist of the story: The women declared “A son has been born to *Naomi*” (4:17). And it was the joyful women of the town, the narrator says, not Ruth or Boaz or even Naomi, who named the child Obed, meaning “one who serves” – a sign that the child would serve to preserve her status in the community and care for her in old age, so she might live happily ever after.

With v. 17 we discover the primary reason this charming story was included in the scriptures: Ruth’s son Obed would become the father of Jesse, who would become the father of David, Israel’s most significant and memorable king.

While the story concludes with the requisite happy ending, it also bears an important reminder that God is able to use unlikely people to accomplish great things. Elimelech’s ancestor Perez had also been born under unlikely circumstances to a non-Israelite – a woman of Canaanite origin. Now we learn that Ruth, a Moabite woman, was David’s great-grandmother.

While the story itself emphasizes Naomi as the central character, it is the foreigner Ruth who does the work of adopting and then adapting to a new family, a new culture, and a new religion. As Ruth succeeds in proving her faithfulness and her value at every step, it is a story that could have had a very strong message in a setting – such as postexilic Israel – in which the Hebrews had become antagonistic toward immigrant peoples, refusing to welcome or integrate them into the community.

Given the less-than-welcoming attitude of many Americans toward immigrants in these difficult times, there might be a message here for us as well. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Samuel 1:1-28

Nov. 15, 2015

Transformational Tears

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you would sacrifice anything to obtain it – even the thing itself? That sort of bargain may sound crazy, but there could be a time and a place for it. One of those times was the early 11th century, BCE. The place was Shiloh, a temple town in the hill country of Judah, about 20 miles north of Jerusalem. The object of desire was a baby boy. His name was Samuel. 🇺

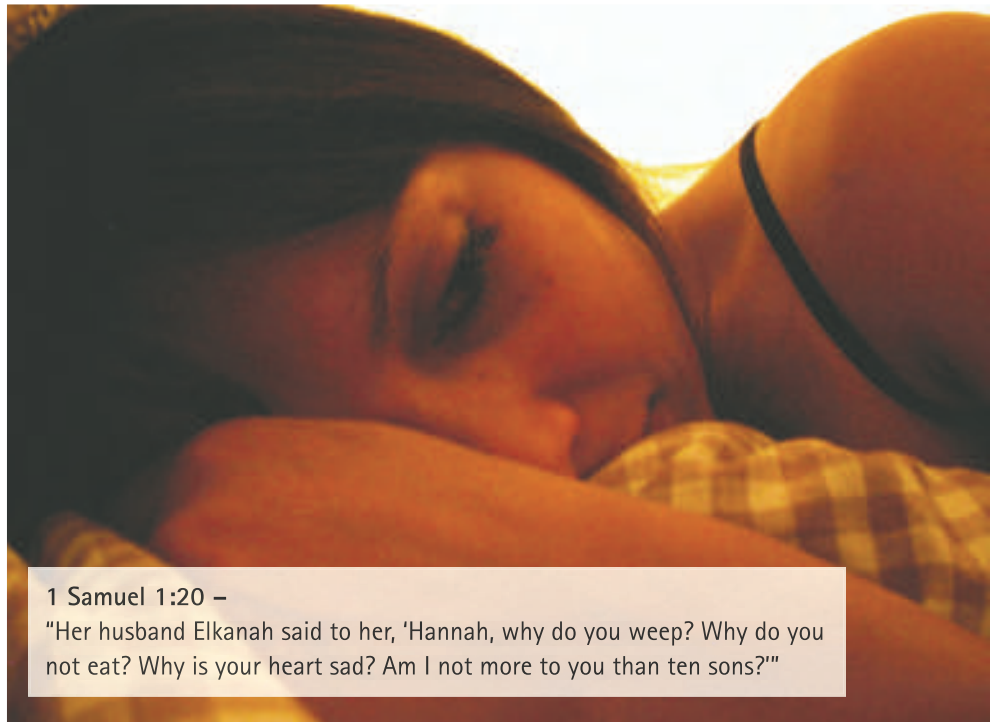
One man and two women (vv. 1-8)

The text begins like a typical folk story: “There once was a man . . .” The story, however, is about a woman. The man’s name was Elkanah (v. 1). He is important only as the husband of Hannah. Unfortunately, the picture includes another wife, too.

Hannah’s name means “Grace,” so we might expect her to be a kind and happy woman, but she lived in misery. Hannah was Elkanah’s first and favorite wife, but as the years of their marriage passed she had produced no children. Seeking to preserve both his lineage and his property, Elkanah had followed custom and married a second wife, named Peninnah (v. 2). 🇺

Elkanah apparently thought it seemed simple enough that Peninnah could be a utilitarian wife who supplied him with sons, while Hannah provided him with love and companionship. You might think that it was Elkanah who was simple.

The complicated marriage was no fairer to Peninnah than it was to



1 Samuel 1:20 –

“Her husband Elkanah said to her, ‘Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?’”

Hannah. She successfully produced offspring, including sons, but could see that her children did not win Elkanah’s love: she would always be in second place. Not surprisingly, Peninnah dealt with her wounded self-esteem by taunting her childless rival.

Hannah could not escape Peninnah’s insults, even on the normally happy days when they went up to Shiloh for the harvest feast, when Hebrews from the surrounding area came to pay their tithes, offer sacrifices, and enjoy a “dinner on the grounds” that lasted for several days. 🇺 For most people, it was a joyous time of year, but not for Hannah, whose infertility had left her feeling alienated and isolated, an island of grief in the midst of a party.

Elkanah tried to help. When carving meat for the sacrificial meal, he would give portions to Peninnah for herself and each of her children. To show his favor, he always gave Hannah twice the normal portion for one, but it still paled beside Peninnah’s platter (vv. 3-5), and Hannah’s prolific rival never let her forget it: Her constant and bitter

provocations “went on year after year.” Peninnah’s gloating was so upsetting that Hannah could not eat, despite the choice cuts Elkanah gave to her. 🇺

Even the obtuse Elkanah eventually took note of Hannah’s sorrow, and he would ask: “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you so downhearted? *Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?*” (v. 8). It is just as well that Hannah’s reply to Elkanah was not recorded.

One woman and a priest (vv. 9-17)

Hannah knew that her ultimate business was not with Elkanah, but with God. The Hebrews believed that Yahweh was responsible for opening or closing the womb. In her misery, Hannah left the feasting behind and went tearfully to the very door of the temple, where she fell prostrate to the earth and cried out to God “*in bitterness of soul*” (v. 10).

Weary of waiting and weeping, Hannah turned her wounded soul to God and committed herself to a last, desperate act: She made a sacred vow

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



to Yahweh. Hannah pleaded with God to give her a son, and promised with all her heart that if her prayer was granted, she would give to God the most precious thing she could imagine: that same longed-for child. 📖

Reading Hannah's tearful, face-to-the-ground prayer in v. 11, we can imagine that she may have repeated her vow again and again, with eyes dripping tears and her nose running so that her face would have become smudged with dirt when she wiped it. Is it any wonder that Eli thought she was drunk?

Did Hannah even realize that the old priest was sitting in the shadows of the doorway? Eli's hearing and eyesight were both fading, so he probably had not understood the choked words of her prayer. When he looked at the disheveled woman lying in the dirt with her mouth moving but her voice inaudible, he concluded that she had drunk to excess, as others commonly did during the feast (vv. 12-13).

"How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?" he charged. "Put away your wine!" (v. 14). Perhaps he hoped that she would also put herself out of the temple precincts, but Hannah remained. She spoke plainly to Eli, insisting that if she was drunk, it was from sorrow, not wine or beer. The excess she had experienced was of anguish and vexation as she poured out her soul before God (vv. 15-16).

Gradually, Eli came to understand Hannah's sorrow, and he wanted to comfort her. He had no certain word from God and thus could make no promises, but he offered her a wish and a blessing: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (v. 17).

Those simple words, in the aftermath of her vow, changed Hannah's life. She might have understood his ambiguous words to mean "God will grant your wish," or she may simply have been consoled by the knowledge that the priest had given his blessing. In any event, Hannah felt hopeful for the first time in years. Perhaps God finally had something good in store for her.

A promise and a fulfillment (vv. 19-28)

Hannah's newly hopeful outlook revived her appetite as well as her spirits: "Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast" (v. 18). Hannah's prayer had not yet been answered and she had no certainty that it *would* be answered, but she had hope, and hope was enough.

The family worshiped again the next morning before returning home. Perhaps Hannah was able to ignore Peninnah's jibes by drawing closer to Elkanah. God had heard Hannah's prayer and granted her request. Soon she conceived and gave birth to a son. Not surprisingly, she named him Samuel, which means "heard by God." 📖

Hannah remembered that Samuel was a gift from God, and she remembered her promise. When Samuel had been fully weaned – probably at about three years old in those days – she took him to the temple. Whether old Eli remembered the promise she had made, and how he felt about taking on the care of a child, is not stated. He could hardly refuse, however, when she reminded him of her promise, and said: "So now I give him to the LORD, for his whole life will be given over to the LORD" (see vv. 26-28).

Through her vow of faith and its fulfillment, Hannah became a heroine of Israel, a model of both hope and faithfulness.

But what if her vow had not resulted in a child? We cannot know, for the scripture doesn't address it, but I suspect she would have remained faithful and at peace. Through her vow, Hannah came to an understanding with the God she believed was responsible for children, and surrendered her will to the divine will. If God answered her prayer and granted a son, she would accept the cost of surrendering him to God's service at the temple and be

satisfied to visit him there, as she did.

If God had not granted her prayer, it is likely that she would have accepted this fate with the peace of knowing that she had done all she could. Hannah and her husband Elkanah had a history of being faithful to God in their worship and their tithes, and no doubt would have continued their practice.

In some ways, the cost of having her prayer answered with a child was greater than if she had remained barren: She gained the joy of motherhood, but also the pain of giving Samuel up. Still Hannah did so, because she had promised. She recognized Samuel as a gift, cherished the time she had with him, and then lovingly gave him up. It was the right thing to do.

Hannah's story challenges us on several levels. First, it offers a lesson in hope. We may also have known the misery of lacking what we want most, being taunted by others because of our shortcomings, or berating ourselves for not accomplishing all we had hoped to do. Both hope and peace grow from doing what we can do and then trusting to God what we cannot do.

The example of Hannah and Elkanah also speaks to us of giving. Some may find it a struggle to write a check to the church every week or month. We can easily think of other things to do with the money, and may not believe we can afford to tithe or give a generous offering. Today's text reminds us that our giving to God grows from understanding that all blessings come from God. We are stewards of God's gifts, and returning to God a meaningful portion of our income is an appropriate expression of worship.

Finally, Hannah's experience summons us to consider what promises we have made to God, and whether we have kept them. For those of us who read the Bible from the perspective of the New Testament, it also reminds us to consider the gospel story of how God also gave up a son in order to save us from our sins and ourselves. It was the right thing to do. What is the right thing for us? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

2 Samuel 23:1-7

Nov. 22, 2015

Thanks for the Promises

In the late 1950s and 60s, there was a popular TV game show called “Queen for a Day.” Host Jack Bailey would begin each program by asking the largely female studio audience: “Would *you* like to be queen for a day?”

He would then interview pre-selected contestants about their lives, gently prodding the women to reveal financial difficulties, recent tragedies, or problems with their children’s health. As the women would weep while telling about the wreck that put their husband out of work or the tornado that damaged the house or the special brace that little Johnny needed for his leg, sympathetic audience response would be measured on an “applause meter.”

The woman receiving the greatest response would be wrapped in a velvet robe, crowned “Queen for a Day,” and ushered to a throne to be showered with gifts, usually beginning with the focus of her particular need and then extending to luxury items such as a vacation or night on the town.

Would *you* like to be queen for a day? Or king?

We typically visualize royalty as people with enormous wealth who live posh and easy lives, appearing at the occasional state function while servants take care of the castle, prepare gourmet cuisine, and maintain the fleet of Bentleys.

Being a king or queen is surely more difficult than that. Even in countries where the office is a formality, royals have many civic responsibilities. Israelite kings such as David had it much harder. They were not only



2 Samuel 23:3b-4 –
“One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning, like the sun rising a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.”

expected to provide economic and civil direction to the country, but also to lead the army into battle. When the elders first asked Samuel to appoint a king over Israel, he discouraged them, but they insisted “No! But we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:20). Being king over Israel was a tough job – and some kings weren’t very good at it. For the most part, David was the exception.

A prophetic king (v. 1-3a)

Today’s text is found within an appendix of sorts attached to the end of 1-2 Samuel, for the primary narrative ends with 2 Samuel 20 and picks up again with 1 Kings 1. ⚡

An editorial introduction to the text purports it to be “the last words of David,” but it is unlikely that these truly mark comments from his deathbed. ⚡ The content of the words suggests that

they would have been written at an earlier time in David’s reign, perhaps in conjunction with the “everlasting covenant” (v. 5) that recalls God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7, even though the promise came through the prophet Nathan rather than as a direct word to David.

The heart of the text is twice named an “oracle.” This is a bit surprising: the word *ne’um* (“utterance,” or “oracle”) is generally limited to the speeches of prophets who have received a direct word from God. ⚡ Today’s text is the earliest scriptural reference to David as a prophet, a tradition that gained momentum late in Israel’s history, when many of the psalms were attributed to David and also read as having prophetic significance. By the New Testament period, it was common to think of David as a prophet. Peter, for example, used a very loose quotation of Ps. 16:10 to claim that David had predicted Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:31). ⚡

The introduction consists of four parallel lines containing descriptive

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titles for David (v. 1b). The first and most obvious identifies him as the son of Jesse, his human father. The last three refer to his relationship with God as a divine favorite. The text is difficult and some of the titles can be translated in different ways, but they are impressive in every case.

The NRSV says he is “the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the favorite of the Strong One of Israel.” This is quite different from the KJV, which calls David “the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel.” The NIV11 is similar, except it refers to David as “the hero of Israel’s songs.”

Verse 2 claims direct inspiration: “The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue.”^U In the books of Samuel “the Spirit of Yahweh” inspired Saul to go into an ecstatic trance (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 16:13) or to become a charismatic battle leader (1 Sam. 11:6). This is the only place in the books of Samuel that it refers to the giving of prophecy, as it did in other texts such as 1 Kgs. 18:12, 22:24; 1 Chron. 12:18; Isa. 61:1; Ezek. 11:5; and Mic. 3:8.

Verse 3 provides yet another introduction to the oracle, as David reportedly claims “The God of Israel spoke, the Rock of Israel said to me . . .”^U

A just king (vv. 3b-4)

With David’s oracle having been introduced multiple times, the reader is more than ready to hear what God reportedly said to David, but perhaps disappointed to learn that it doesn’t sound like an oracle at all, but like a typical *mashal*, or wisdom saying, such as those found in the book of Proverbs.^U The teaching consists of a proverb describing the ideal king (vv. 3b-4), an assertion that David’s rule was exemplary (v. 5a), and a contrasting observation concerning what fates righteous and wicked rulers might expect (vv. 5b-7).

The oracle begins with a description of what a king’s reign should be like:

“When one rules over people in righteousness, when he rules in the fear of God . . .” (v. 3b).

The word for “righteousness” can describe an individual’s moral character, but in the public arena carried the sense of doing what is right and just. A good king should be just in his dealings, so that good laws to protect human rights are in place, and all people are treated fairly.

Justice, like wisdom, has its roots in “the fear of God,” an attitude of reverence and respect for God that leads one to rule in keeping with divine principles such as those found in the Ten Commandments. We must keep in mind that this oracle was written in the context of a national entity whose identity was bound up in a unitary covenant with God: while it was appropriate for Israel, it is not intended as a guide for modern governments in pluralistic societies. Even so, basic principles of justice are both evident and applicable to any governmental system.

The wonder of a truly just leader is expressed in an appealing metaphor drawn from nature. The translation is difficult because there are no verbs in the entire verse, so they must be supplied. Here’s my attempt at a straightforward translation: (He is) like the light of morning at sunrise, a cloudless morning, like the brightness after rain, (that brings) grass from the earth.

What can be more refreshing than a bright morning when the sky is clear, the air is tinged with the scent of rain, and the world is green with new growth?

A contrasting king (vv. 5-7)

The prevalence of politicians or government officials who are polarized, ineffective, or corrupt makes it hard to imagine a leader so just and effective that we would compare his or her term

in office to a bright new morning.

Nevertheless, David claimed that his rule had met the standard: “Is not my house like this with God?” (v. 5aa). As evidence of his just rule, David cited the divine promise recorded in 2 Samuel 7. When David had sought to build a house for Yahweh, the prophet Nathan relayed a message that God would instead build for David a house in the sense of a dynasty, in which one of his descendants would rule over Israel forever. “For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,” David said, “ordered in all things and secure” (v. 5ab).

Israel’s covenant theology taught that human obedience would lead to divine blessing, so that a righteous king could expect to have a successful rule: “Will he not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?” (v. 5b).^U

We noted above that the “last words of David,” though called an oracle, take the form of a wisdom saying that contrasts the fate of the righteous and the wicked. Having declared his own rule to be just and therefore worthy of reward, David compared it to the destiny of those who do not fear God or lead rightly. “The godless are all like thorns that are thrown away,” he said, thorns so sharp and injurious that they must be piled up for burning with a spear shaft or iron bar rather than by hand (vv. 6-7). The text uses an emphatic verbal construction to stress their utter destruction: literally, “with burning fire they are burned on the spot.”

This judgment, like the positive one afforded David, is oversimplified: wicked leaders do not spontaneously combust. Nevertheless, the principle is that good leaders who practice justice bring order, beauty, and prosperity to their people, while evil or selfish leaders bring ruin to their countries and ultimately, to themselves.

Few of us will have the opportunity to lead a country, or even a county, but we do have the opportunity to vote for leaders whom we believe come closest to the biblical ideal of promoting a just society that cares for all of its citizens. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Nov. 29, 2015

A Time for Anticipation

As we enter the season of Advent, we are reminded to look forward to the coming of Christ, but we know it is also a time of looking forward to reunions with friends and family. Many people have blessed us and loved us through the years, and we have loved them in return. There's nothing inherently Christmas-like about family gatherings, but they often happen during this season. Any opportunity to visit with people of our hearts has an inherently spiritual feeling about it.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the church in Thessalonica (today called Thessaloniki), he was feeling that same mix of love and joy and spiritual blessing.

A happy report (vv. 6-8)

Paul had first come to know and love the people of Thessalonica while engaged in what is popularly known as his second missionary journey. Along with Silas and Timothy, Paul had passed through northern Asia (now Turkey), and was led by a vision to set sail from Troas, where Luke joined them on the way to Macedonia (Acts 16:1-10). They landed at Neapolis and made their way inland to Philippi, where they experienced a tumultuous ministry before moving on.

When the party arrived in Thessalonica, Paul preached in the local synagogue for three weeks, but was thrown out after he had convinced "a great multitude of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading



1 Thessalonians 3:12 –
"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."

women" to follow Jesus (Acts 17:4).

After they began to meet at the home of a man named Jason, angry synagogue leaders instigated a mob that stormed Jason's home. When they could not find Paul and Silas, they hauled Jason and some other new believers before the authorities on charges of harboring treasonous troublemakers (Acts 17:5-9). Friends spirited Paul and Silas out of town in the dark of night and the missionaries moved on to Berea, then to Athens, but Paul did not forget the young believers in Thessalonica.

While in Athens, the companions decided to send Timothy back for a quiet visit, concerned that the young church might have floundered in the face of persecution (1 Thess. 2:17-3:5). Timothy returned with a glowing report that the church was not fizzling, but sizzling, and Paul expressed his delight by sending the letter we now call 1 Thessalonians. In today's text, Paul speaks of his longing to visit the young believers again and to encourage them in their continued growth and progress.

Thus, Paul rejoices that Timothy had just arrived with "the good news of your faith and love," and had affirmed their longing for Paul to visit again (v. 6).

If someone should visit your church and return to tell others about the experience, what terms would they use to describe it? Would they describe your congregation as cold or warm? Dull or vibrant? Engaged or apathetic?

Timothy had told Paul that the Thessalonians were known for their faith and their love. In his opening prayer of thanks, Paul had expressed gratitude for the church's work of faith, labor of love, and steadfastness of hope (1:3). Now he reiterates his joy that they were steadfast in their commitment to God, and acted on their faith through showing love to one another.

Isn't that what we would want others to say of our church? Not that we bicker over non-essentials or isolate ourselves from society, but that we focus on a common faith and live out a common love? Attracting more people to our congregation is not a matter of

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flashy advertising campaigns or technological wizardry. People longing for connection with God and others will naturally gravitate toward a church that is truly faithful and loving.

Paul knew what it was like to face struggles, but found it easier to deal with when he knew that his work had borne fruit and his friends were doing well: “During all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith” (v. 7). We can experience similar encouragement.

This is one of the primary reasons why belonging to a community of faith and attending worship is so beneficial. Even when we’re facing difficult or doubting days, the faith and love of others can lift us up.

Recognizing this helps us to interpret v. 8, which seems a bit strange if read on the surface only: “For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord.” Paul was not saying that his literal life depends on the Thessalonians’ continued faithfulness, but there was a connection between them. The good news of their persistent faith and love had been renewing and life-giving. **U**

A thankful prayer (vv. 9-10)

Paul’s consolation gave rise to thanksgiving: “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?” (v. 9). Paul’s prior concern and present prayer might lead us to ask whether we share a similar concern for our own friends in the faith, or whether we have tended to live in a bubble of self-absorption, feeling neither anxiety over others’ stumbles in the faith nor joy when we see growth and progress.

Paul’s concern is a reminder that we need each other. If we are to grow in faith, we need a community of mutual care and concern where brothers and sisters pray for each other, reach out in times of trial, and rejoice over spiritual progress.

This is why Paul went on to say: “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and

restore whatever is lacking in your faith” (v. 10). Paul’s relationship with the people of Thessalonica did not end when he left the city. His prayers for them continued, and he longed to see them again. **U**

The word for “restore” should not be read to suggest that the Thessalonians had possessed some elements of faith but had lost them, like bricks falling from a wall. The verb could be better translated “to make adequate” or “to make complete.” If we think of the Thessalonians’ faith as a wall, it had not tumbled down, but was unfinished. The believers had a firm foundation, but there were things they still needed to learn about being faithful believers who honor God and live in harmony.

A joyful hope (vv. 11-13)

Whether a visit was likely or not, Paul still longed to see his friends in Thessalonica, and prayed “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you” (v. 11). **U**

Paul’s wishful prayer in vv. 11-13 marks a significant turning point in the letter. From 1:1-3:10, Paul has gushed over the Thessalonians as if they were a model church in every way, praising their faith, their love, their perseverance in hope, and their exemplary behavior in difficult days. One of the few hints that there might be shadows in the church is found in 3:10, where Paul longed for a face-to-face meeting so he could “make up whatever is lacking in your faith” (v. 10, NET).

Paul’s prayer in 3:11-13 serves as a bridge between his warm words of praise and friendship in 1:1-3:10, and his sterner words of instruction in chapters 4-5. He eases into the coming sermon on ethics and the end times by praying that they might continue to grow in love and in holiness.

Paul had previously praised the believers’ faithful love (1:3, 3:6), but he knew that true love never stops growing. Thus Paul went on to pray “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you” (v. 12). Paul’s upcoming words of instruction would be offered in love, and he hoped they would be received in a similar spirit.

Paul wanted the best for his friends in Thessalonica, and there were ethical issues he wanted to address. As a gentle segue to that topic, he prayed that Christ would “so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (v. 13).

This written prayer accomplishes at least three things. First, it draws attention to the church members’ need for greater holiness. Second, it subtly reminds them of a future judgment, where he hopes they will appear “blameless.” Finally, it is a prelude to his upcoming teaching about the fate of the dead and the second coming of Christ – all areas in which Paul hoped to fill in gaps to complete their understanding of the faith.

Have you had – or do you still have – a “Paul” in your life? Someone who wants the best for you, who prays for you, who encourages you, and who may occasionally offer words of advice whether you want them or not?

We should be grateful to have such people in our lives, but it’s easy to become a bit resentful of them, even as Paul feared the Thessalonians would resent him. The measure of our resentment is usually proportional to the state of our faith: If we’ve been wandering from the fold, as it were, we may take exception to someone calling us back, however gentle their words may be.

Perhaps Paul’s heartfelt care for the Thessalonians can remind us to be more appreciative of those who pray for us and encourage us along the way. The times we resent it most could well be the times we are most in need of their care. **BT**

Classifieds

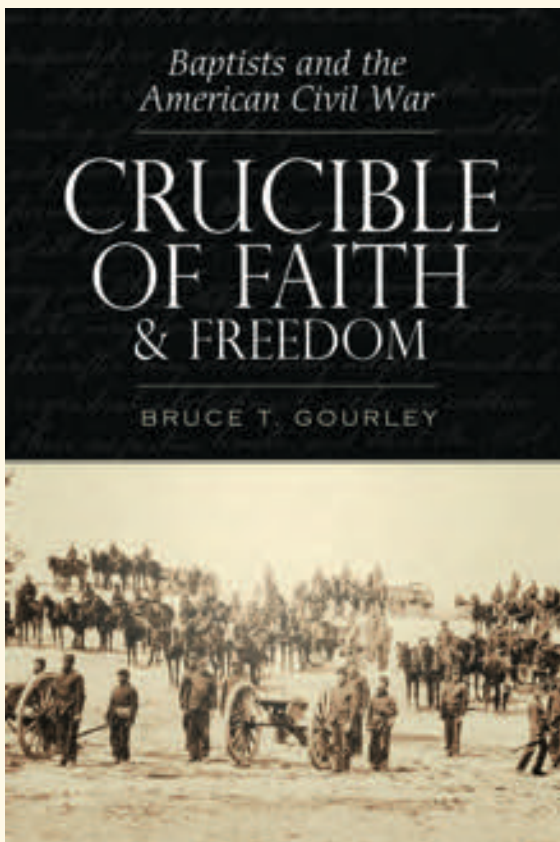
Pastor: Lillington Baptist Church, Lillington, N.C., seeks a full-time pastor to lead our church into a new chapter in our history. We are a Baptist congregation committed to Baptist distinctives, focusing on the inspirational worship of God and applying the Bible to all areas of life. Our congregation is mission minded with a good history of cooperative and hands-on missions. We affirm both men and women to serve as deacons in the church. We desire a pastor who has strong preaching skills, is a leader in guiding and directing the church spiritually and administratively, and has a servant's heart. The successful candidate will have a strong calling to the pastoral ministry, hold an accredited seminary or divinity school degree, and possess some years of experience in congregational ministry. Interested candidates are encouraged to submit résumés by Nov. 15 to Pastor Search Committee, P.O. Box 160, Lillington, NC 27546 or to pastorsearch@lillingtonbaptist.com.

Associate Pastor: Trinity Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn., a suburb of Memphis, is seeking an associate pastor with excellent relationship skills, a proven track record of creative outreach to diverse communities, and the ability to strengthen our educational programs (Sunday school and small groups). Our associate pastor

will minister in a healthy work environment with a team approach to vision and ministry. Trinity is a diverse, loving community of faith recognized for its emphasis on local and global missions. The church recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, with an expanded and renovated sanctuary and second-floor education space. Our members are young and old, rich and poor, from the city and suburbs, and with backgrounds in SBC, CBF and other denominational affiliations. Job applicants should email their résumé and a cover letter to info@trinitybaptistchurch.org.

Minister to Students: Trinity Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn., a suburb of Memphis, is seeking a minister to students to work alongside a gifted, quality staff with a team approach to vision and ministry. Trinity has a history of quality youth ministry, highlighted by excellent parental involvement and financial support. The church recently celebrated its 20th anniversary, with an expanded and renovated sanctuary and second-floor education space used exclusively for youth and college. Our members are young and old, rich and poor, from the city and suburbs, and with backgrounds in SBC, CBF and other denominational affiliations. Job applicants should email their résumé and a cover letter to info@trinitybaptistchurch.org.

Minister of Missions: First Baptist Church (at the Singing Bridge) of Frankfort, Ky., is seeking a full-time minister of missions to work alongside a quality staff with a team approach to vision and ministry. FBC is actively affiliated with the CBF and Kentucky Baptist Fellowship. The minister of missions will serve as the director of the Mission Frankfort Clinic; will supervise the mission leader of the Emma Quire Mission Center (in Owsley County); will oversee community mission projects such as the clothes closet, benevolence fund, and specific congregation projects (such as the Morocco Partnership and Soup Kitchen), as well as being involved in the life and work of the congregation. A successful candidate must have an M. Div. degree, with the M.S.W. dual degree preferred. The minister of missions should possess exceptional people skills, have the ability to work with diverse populations, have experience and proven success with obtaining grants, and possess excellent organizational and supervisory skills. Spanish language skills would be an asset. More information on the church and ministries can be found at fbcfankfort.org. Interested applicants should email their résumés to FBCMissions15@gmail.com or to Minister of Missions Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 201 St. Clair St., Frankfort, KY 40601.

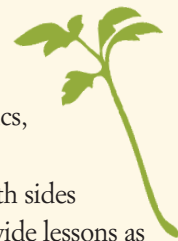


A recent release

The 150th anniversary of the American Civil War provides a grand opportunity to consider precisely what Baptists — North and South — were saying from their pulpits, in the press, and through official resolutions from that time. Bruce Gourley brings such perspectives to life by making good use of careful and significant research, creatively taking a chronological approach using primary sources.

He highlights the role of various kinds of Baptists, for example: Robert Smalls, Thomas Hill Watts, Basil Manly Sr., Gov. Joseph Brown, Gov. Sam Houston, Isaac Taylor Tichenor, Crawford H. Toy, and Frank and Jesse James — most of whom went on to great prominence in politics, religion or education.

Gourley's firsthand accounts of how Baptists on both sides sought and claimed divine favor and righteousness provide lessons as plentiful as the statues and markers that dot the many battlefields where the devastation has given way to peaceful fields and quiet woodlands.



nurturingfaith.net

Better than the Grand Slam Breakfast

He slips in just as the organist is beginning the prelude and glances at his watch. Why couldn't they start at 10:45? If they had a head start, they could beat the Methodists to Applebee's.

He likes the chiming of the hour; he thinks of it as the tardy bell. The organ is OK, but he frequently wishes they had more saxophones in worship.

He is not a fan of passing the peace. He finds it awkward guessing who shakes hands and who hugs, and, according to what he was taught, you are supposed to say, "The peace of Christ be with you" and respond "And also with you." What do you do when someone goes off script and opens with "How are you?" He is sure people are not supposed to be talking to each other.

He has never cared for the candles. They are a little Catholic for his taste. He yawns during the reading of the Psalm.

When the friendship register is passed, he writes other people's names. Over the last three Sundays he has written Donald Trump, Lily Tomlin and Taylor Swift. Someone has to notice eventually.

The first hymn seems like a "high church" hymn. That is why they have Episcopal churches. The second hymn sounds "low church." That is why they have country churches. During the children's sermon he hopes some child will say something the pastor does not want to hear. It does not happen nearly often enough.

He has never been big on litanies. He does not come to worship to participate, although the Lord's Prayer is not bad. He is used to mumbling it. The anthem is a winner, but the scripture reading goes on too long.

The sermon starts slow and drags in the middle, but he likes it when the introduction and conclusion are close together. He is sure the closing hymn is somebody's grandmother's favorite, but it is not his. He looks at his watch and then around to see if anyone is going to join. He hopes any new members will wait a week, because kickoff is at one o'clock.

When the offering plate is passed, he gives money that he will not miss. He likes the

"Doxology" because it is short, and the benediction because it means the service is almost done. He leaves the sanctuary thinking, "It could have been worse."

Somehow he has gotten the mistaken impression that worship is a spectator sport. He has never understood that attending a worship service and worshipping are not the same. If you asked him why he comes, he would have to think about it for a second. If it is to be entertained, it is not much of a show. If he wants to learn something, a book is easier. If he wants to feel comforted, then the Grand Slam Breakfast at Denny's might be a better choice. The truth is, more than anything else, he comes out of habit.

Too much of what passes for worship is superficial: hugs that would bring sexual harassment charges in other settings, applause that seems to suggest that the true audience is not God but the congregation, the feeling that nothing mysterious is going on, that what is happening is a gathering of nice people enjoying one another's presence.

Those who lead worship are told to keep it simple. Do not ask soul-wrenching questions. Avoid anything that is offensive. Offer sweetness rather than the hard thinking that the Christian faith requires.

Lots of people get just enough dumbed-down worship to inoculate them from experiencing the real thing. Consumer-driven worship leads people to the misunderstanding that worship is about our likes and dislikes and not about our commitment to God. Worship is not supposed to be easy. If worship was easy, everyone would worship.

She has had a hard week. She comes to worship to experience the love of God that makes her whole again. At the chiming of the hour she looks at the cross at the front of the sanctuary and thinks about God's love.

She looks forward to the passing of the peace. She loves the words, "The peace of Christ be with you." She likes it when people smile and hug.

As the candles are lit, she asks God to help her worship. She listens intently as the Psalm is read. During the invocation she closes her eyes, listens for God and opens her heart.

She feels the hymns all the way down to her toes. The litany makes her think about the greatness of God. When she prays the Lord's Prayer, there is a lump in her throat on "forgive us our trespasses." As she listens to the sermon, she wonders what holds her back from a greater commitment. What does it cost to truly worship God?

When the offering plate is passed, she gives more than her CPA wants her to, because she knows she is not just giving money but is sharing herself. She stands and praises "Father, Son and Holy Ghost."

She is grateful for the benediction because it keeps her from hurrying back to life outside of worship. She lives differently because she has worshipped, because she has given herself to God. **BT**

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



Healthy Church

Don't expect millennials to carry on parents' traditions

By Bob Ballance

During the most recent economic downturn, millennials — young adults born between 1980 and 2000 — returned home to live with their parents in record numbers. As they did, they and their parents felt confident this would be a temporary thing.

But while the economy is much better now, even so, according to a new Pew Research Center report released in July, 25 percent of millennials *still* live at home with their parents and have no plans of moving on.

Why? Those studying this age group found that many young adults carry huge student loan debts (the average is about \$30,000), with interest rates that are less than favorable. This means they have a large monthly payment to make, which is often as much as they might expect to pay in rent or for a mortgage.

Consequently, many are not buying homes, which is part of the reason the housing market in some parts of the country has still not recovered. Many millennials also are not buying new vehicles because they don't want the monthly expense of owning one, so they take mass transit, borrow one from their parents or a friend, or drive an older vehicle they own.

But another reason Pew researchers found that millennials are still living at home is because their parents simply like having their young adult children around, so there's been no pressure to move on. This works out well for both and means that millennials are relieved from the high costs of independent living. In many cases, too, these "re-nesters" are assisting their parents with household errands and even chipping in to cover monthly utilities or helping out with groceries.

This trend, though, points to a shift in values from that of previous generations in several ways: 1) Most middle class young adults in earlier generations couldn't wait to be on their

own, and their parents were eager for the same. 2) Most young adults from previous generations couldn't wait to own their own home. 3) An increasing number of young adults likely won't enjoy the level of income their parents had.

But another huge shift in values has to do with religion. When it comes to matters of faith, while a huge percentage of millennials returned home during hard times, many divorced themselves from their parents' religion. Why are millennials walking to such a different drum when it comes to religious faith?

Here are some possibilities based on recent observations. These won't fit all circumstances, of course:

First, we live in a time of rapid change with knowledge doubling every 12 months. Many mainline congregations have shunned change, however, so governance, worship and programming have remained virtually *unchanged*.

This is true in both white and African-American churches, and both have seen millennials disappear in great numbers. Also, a growing number of rabbis report the same is true in their congregations. And while some millennials embraced the megachurch, which *is* quite different than what they knew as children, a larger percentage seem content as "nones" — those who now say they now have no use for organized religion.

Second, the church of today has failed miserably in the area of hermeneutics. While Hebrew and Christian scriptures are thousands of years old, the church has consistently failed to offer meaningful interpretations for these

postmodern pilgrims. So while millennials embrace technology that changes daily, they find God and the Bible still being presented as rigidly *unchanging* by older laity and clergy, causing a quickly increasing number of young adults to find traditional beliefs, ordinary faith and traditional worship to be irrelevant.

And while the issues of homosexuality and transexuality are in the news constantly these days, these topics are rarely discussed in a congregational setting of any sort. Additionally, though the environment is increasingly important to 20- and 30-somethings, an older generation often scoffs at calls for recycling and making greater use of renewable sources of energy. Millennials lament the absence of meaningful discussion about these types of issues that are so central to their own concerns, so they feel no interest in embracing what they feel are outdated modes of belief or attending worship where their parents do.

Third, we live in a time when community and commitment are less important to all Americans, regardless of age and stage of life. Radical individualism seems to be replacing a long-held American tradition of belonging to something larger than oneself, which often included religious affiliation. Since that's especially true of millennials, more and more are stepping away from the level of commitment to church modeled for them by their parents.

These are quickly changing times for all ages. Such times, while frustrating for many, can provide an opportunity for evaluation and taking up new ways of worship, serving, and being together that could help resolve the divide that exists between young adults and traditional church. **BT**



—Bob Ballance is pastor of Pine Street Church in Boulder, Colo.

Sunrises and sunsets

By John Pierce

Perhaps “glory” is an overused word — though not as much as “awesome.” Yet it conveys a sense of magnificence beyond measure or definition.

Glory has a spiritual dimension. It’s a biblical word.

Hymn writers often use it — almost always rhyming it with “story.” (Gospel singers prefer a long-O sound for both words.)

Over the years I’ve come to quietly revel (if that’s possible) in glorious sunrises and sunsets — sometimes making special efforts to be in a particular place to marvel at the twice-daily shows that are never duplicated exactly.

My friend, colleague and photography mentor Bruce Gourley and I have made such efforts from the Sea of Galilee to Jekyll Island to Rocky Mountain lakes. The reward is greater than a treasured snapshot.

It is the chance to focus on something that is brief but beautiful — and always with an element of surprise. The shows are not reruns, although they appear daily. The presence and/or positioning of clouds play a starring guest role.

And, often, what a show! To watch the darkness slowly evolve into spectacles of color and light — or to witness the dimming sun disappear behind the horizon while offering a parting gift of orange spray upon the clouds.

Recently my daughter Abigail and I were having dinner in the Georgia mountains after a day of hiking. Late afternoon rain had set in.

As we left a comfort-food diner, however, some light appeared to our west. The movement of clouds suggested a sunset show in production.

Without a plan or much local knowledge, I drove until a hilltop development appeared on our left. We headed up a rising, curving road where new homes were being constructed — and bingo!

A vacant lot near the top offered a spectacular view of the setting sun bouncing its rays off the clouds, mountains and valleys. We soaked it all in until dark. We were at peace.

My daughter recalled the psalmist’s words: “From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised” (Ps. 113:3).

Perhaps such an experience — or viewing a star-filled sky — led the psalmist to proclaim:



A golden sunset along Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier National Park. Photo by John Pierce

“The heavens declare the glory of God...” Such “handiwork” leads to wonder — though I’ve never felt the need to try to explain it too much.

In fact, if we understood it all, it would not be so marvelous. Mystery and wonder are to be experienced, not solved.

My beloved Berry College professor Jorge Gonzalez put it all in the right perspective for me long ago: Science tells us how the world was created; the Bible tells us who did it and why.

Call it what you wish: beauty, grandeur, splendor or glory. Or don’t say anything at all; just marvel in it.

Time is a gift — and it’s offered up in fleeting moments as each day emerges and departs. **BT**

Deer, deer ...

By Tony W. Cartledge

Given that my wife and I were gone from home for a month this summer, I didn’t really expect a lot from the tomatoes, bell peppers and squash we planted in April. The squash plants bombed on their own, though I suspect a vole had something to do with it.

Tomatoes and bell peppers usually thrive in the garden boxes, however. They usually thrive, that is, if something doesn’t eat them first.

A neighbor across the cul-de-sac has been putting out corn for a deer family that makes early morning rounds through the woods around our subdivision, and apparently they grew accustomed to crossing

the street to wash it down with some fresh greenery.

In the past my biggest problem with deer has been their propensity to take a single bite from the prettiest and juiciest of the tomatoes, but this year there were no tomatoes to bite, because the deer ate the vines down to a stub and did the same to the bell pepper plants.

Normally we have peppers to eat, to freeze and to give away, but one small green pepper is the sum total of our crop for the year.

I don’t know if the deer’s tastes have changed or if food is so scarce that they’re desperate for roughage. In any case, after pulling up what was left of the tomatoes and reworking the soil to plant a fall crop of cabbage,

collards and cauliflower, we decided to take no chances with establishing a salad buffet.

My bad hip relegated me to watching, but Susan carefully covered the lot with wire cages turned sideways, with a layer of open-weave burlap or plastic netting over the plants. We’re hoping that will at least give the plants a safe start, and with the addition of a few malodorous substances around the perimeter, perhaps our nimble grazers will find other breakfast options before they discover that the figs are getting ripe.

It’s hard to be mad at the deer, because they (or their ancestors) were here long before we humans moved into their habitat. Even so, I’m hoping for an abundance of tasty acorns and hickory nuts this fall, so there can be happy meals for all. **BT**



Columbaria, such as this one at First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., are becoming more common for congregations as members increasingly choose cremation over traditional cemetery burials.

RITE OF PASSAGE

Funerals, burials are taking on new forms

“More personalization.” That was the quick response of Kevin Wetzel, president of Memorial Park Funeral Home & Cemetery in Gainesville, Ga., to the question of how the industry has changed in recent years.

Funerals and burials, he said, can even be thematic — showing the deceased person’s favored hobby such as golf or a casket in the colors of a sports team.

And there are other changes, he added. For example, many families seem more comfortable than in the past in admitting the lack of any church connection.

“People are more likely to tell us, ‘We don’t go to church.’”

For those open to spiritual support, however, Wetzel said funeral homes connect the families with local ministers.

“Most people’s hearts are more open at

the reality of death,” he said. “People are more receptive to ministry.”

TRADITIONS

Food is still a big way of expressing sympathy and sharing grief, at least in Northeast Georgia, said Wetzel.

“We had a family here recently — they could have fed 500 people,” he said. “It’s a way of saying, ‘I’m sorry.’ It’s the same way with flowers.”

While floral arrangements still play a major role in many funerals, he added that it is more common now for announcements

to include a request that “in lieu of flowers” a donation be made to a particular charity in memory of the deceased.

Danny Faulkner, director of sales for the funeral home who has been in the industry for 35 years, said he has noticed a change in the way the memorial services are conducted now. “There’s more of a celebration of life; it’s more uplifting.”

While these two longtime professionals have seen changes over the years, they said it is still common for families to request traditional funerals and burials — though an increasing number turns to cremation.

Ministers echo that as the most noticeable shift in the funerals they conduct.

COLUMBARIA

It is no longer unusual to find a columbarium in a courtyard outside a Baptist church. It’s the modern-day version of the church

cemetery — requiring much less acreage and maintenance.

Yet it provides a memorial space for families and friends to remember and celebrate the lives of those they love.

“If a church is going to get into the cemetery business,” Faulkner advised, “a columbarium is the way to go.”

It can be relocated along with the church, he said, should that ever happen.

Decades ago, when Faulker got into the business, cremation was almost “non-existent,” he said.

“It was thought of as a poor person’s alternative,” he said. “Now it’s a preferred choice for some people.”

While some request the scattering of ashes in the ocean or woods, many families want a more specific place of remembrance and a record of the person’s life. A columbarium provides such space — as do cremation benches and “scattering gardens” in a cemetery, said Faulkner.

CREMATION

“There’s a definite trend from our largely English-speaking members to have cremation rather than burial,” said Don Ng, pastor of First Chinese Baptist Church of San Francisco. “Some of this is based on cost-saving, but I think there’s a greater understanding that in God’s wondrous grace and power the promise of bodily resurrection can still happen in cremation.”

The shift from traditional burials to cremation allows families more flexibility in scheduling memorial services, said Jason Coker, pastor of Wilton Baptist Church in Wilton, Conn.

“I think cremation has become more popular because of the transient nature of our society,” he said. “Fewer people stay in the towns and cities in which they were raised. In many ways, this is changing the nature of home and belonging and even origin.”

Cremation doesn’t necessitate a final place of burial, he added, which gives the family options for a future resting place.

“Cremation has become the norm during my 30 years of pastoral ministry in the southeast,” said Bob Setzer, who served churches in Virginia and Georgia before going to Knollwood Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., which has a memorial garden for cremains.

Setzer said the sacred space allows bereaved families a place for grieving, reflecting, remembering and thanksgiving.

“It’s a sort of urban version of having the cemetery near the church, long the norm in rural settings,” he said. “I find having the departed faithful interred nearby keeps their memory and influence alive in the congregation in a way a distant cemetery cannot.”

TRENDS

There are other trends ministers have noticed about the funerals they conduct.

Craig Sherouse, pastor of Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Va., said technology — such as video and PowerPoint — is being used more widely now to commemorate someone’s life during the visitation or reception.

When it comes to funerals, however, the spoken word has not given way, he added. There is a trend, he said, toward “much longer and multiple eulogies” — with the “eulogy becoming more important than a sermon witness to the resurrection.”

Another trend has to do with scheduling times for the family to receive guests.

“The pattern of having a separate visitation the night before the funeral seldom takes place,” said pastor Dennis Johnson of Charleston Baptist Temple in West Virginia, who retires Nov. 1 after 43 years of pastoral ministry and hundreds of funerals. “Much earlier the visitation may have been two nights.”

Funerals he has conducted in recent years, he added, are more often scheduled on Saturday rather than a weekday and are more likely held at the church than in a funeral home.

Sarah Jackson Shelton, pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham, Ala., has observed another shift as well.

“One of the things our families like to do is have the graveside service first,” she said. “We gather at the grave and hear words of hope. Then we come to the church for a meal and walk into the sanctuary for a memorial service. This allows the family to leave having been surrounded by their family of faith and with the praise of God in their hearts.”

CELEBRATIONS

“Our funeral services are designed for the living to celebrate a deceased loved one who has made a difference in our lives and in the world,” said Don Ng of his Asian-American congregation that dates back to 1880. “We sing hymns of joy, show slideshows, and I always strive to put the loved ones as participants in God’s overall plan for us, even with those who are not necessarily professed Christians. God’s work is beyond even our own understanding.”

Food always is an important part of the grieving, celebrating experience, he said.

“After a funeral, it’s always a tradition to have a memorial meal at a Chinese restaurant to continue remembering the deceased, but it is more of a gathering of reminiscing with old friends and family members,” he said. “It’s a proper way of affirming the truth that life is still before us as we grieve over a loved one.”

In a Chinese-American funeral, he added, the family prepares two kinds of small packages or envelopes. One is white and contains a piece of hard candy and a coin (25 cents). The other is red with another coin.

“The white one symbolizes that one has come to a bitter event and the family is blessing the visitor at the end of the service with something sweet to remind them that life is good,” said Ng. “The red one symbolizes good fortune and happiness for the visitor’s life. It’s traditional that one takes these coins to purchase something to eat on the way home.”

MINISTRY

Sarah Jackson Shelton said the intensity of death allows for ministers to build trust with those who grieve. As a result, “often family ‘secrets’ are told that bring insight a pastor would never have otherwise.”

These revelations, she said, “open opportunities for storytelling and remembering with humor.”

Bob Setzer agrees: “One of the amazing things about meeting with a family to plan for a funeral is hearing all the wonderful stories that pour out, if the minister simply creates the space for the telling and hearing of such stories.”

Helping church members plan their funerals in advance — “as a reflection of their faith and last wishes for the celebration of their life” — is a ministry privilege, said Dennis Johnson.

And ministry to non-church members opens as well when a loved one dies, said Don Ng.

“People may never step over the church’s threshold for Sunday worship but they would come for a funeral or a memorial,” said Ng. “This is an opportunity to proclaim God’s love and power and not a time to scold or pass down judgment.”

In a large city such as San Francisco, he added, the minister is not seen as “the village parson” as in some small towns.

“But he or she can still become in the eyes of people a spiritual leader,” said Ng. “And in times of crisis, everyone believes in God!”

PRESENCE

A minister's caring presence, more than well-crafted words, provides the best ministry, said Jason Coker. He learned that lesson long ago.

"When I was a college student and felt like God was calling me into the ministry, a leading church member died," he recalled. "I went with our pastor to the family's home.

"When we arrived I asked, 'Brother Bob, what do you do? What do you say?' Brother Bob gently patted me on my shoulder and just told me to watch him. We both knew and loved this family.

"Brother Bob walked into the house, walked over to the widow, and hugged her. They both cried a little. I think he said a short prayer. Then he walked over to the sink and began to wash the dishes. In times of crisis, a helpful non-anxious presence can sustain a family in mourning."

Craig Sherouse shares that perspective on the pastor's primary role at such a time.

"Pastors have the incarnational opportunity to walk with families through the valley of the shadow of death," he said. "We are there to be the presence of Christ, to weep and laugh and remember together. We are to be a non-anxious presence amid some of a family's greatest anxieties."

That ministry presence can continue, he said, by staying in contact with and sending grief materials to the bereaved throughout the year following a death.

STORIES

While funerals are serious business, they do bring out the oddities of human behavior. Therefore, ministers and funeral professionals have their memorable stories — some they are willing to share.

Dennis Johnson, a flatlander from Chicago, conducted one of his first funerals after moving to West Virginia that required traveling a winding mountain road and then physically hauling the casket up a muddy hillside to the burial site.

One family member, he noted, asked that the casket be opened for a final photo. The new pastor seemed to be the only one who found this strange.

When the body was finally interred and the slippery climb down the hill began, there was repeated gunshot nearby.

"Is it hunting season?" Johnson asked the funeral director. "No," he replied.

"I thought, 'Lord, where have you brought me?' Welcome to wild, wonderful West Virginia!"

Sarah Jackson Shelton always stands at the church door following a memorial service to offer condolences to those who attended. She asks how they knew the deceased or the deceased's family.

One man responded that he did not know anyone involved in the funeral.

"He had just heard that I did a nice funeral and he came to hear me," she said. "As if this wasn't strange enough ... another person said the same thing!"

CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU

Kevin Wetzel said funeral directors get all kinds of requests. He's seen a person buried in a mink coat and with thousands of dollars worth of jewelry.

He's also had staff dig up a casket because the family decided some valuable jewelry should have been removed.

Then there was the family dilemma caused by a wealthy man's request that he be buried with \$10,000 in his casket. Going against his wishes as well as burying such a large amount of money seemed unwise to his relatives.

A solution was finally determined: They buried the man with \$10,000 as he requested. All he has to do now is cash that check. **BT**

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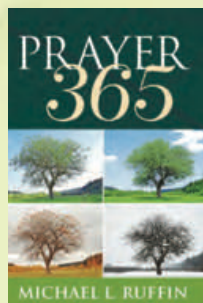
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PRAYER 365

By Michael Ruffin

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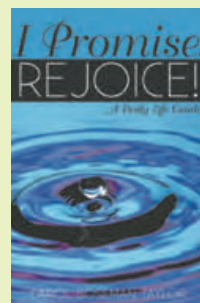
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‘Mission tourism’

Critics say popular approach to short-term trips doesn’t meet needs

Parachute missions. Poverty tourism. Vacationary. These descriptors are frequently invoked to characterize and critique a misguided (western) approach to missions — an approach that many say encourages an unhealthy dependency and paternalism.

“Contrary to popular belief, most missions trips and service projects do not: empower those being served, engender healthy cross-cultural relationships, improve quality of life, relieve poverty, change the lives of participants [or] increase support for long-term missions work,” Robert Lupton wrote in his 2011 book *Toxic Charity*.

When it comes to most popular approaches to short-term missions, Chris Ellis agrees.

Ellis, who serves as minister of mission and outreach at Second Baptist Church in downtown Little Rock, Ark., has lived and studied the subject extensively as a key leader in and co-founder of the South Africa Ministry Network. It is a consortium of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregations launched in 2009 to work with and support CBF field personnel who serve and partner with local ministries in South Africa.

“Short-term missions often do more harm than good, especially when the primary purpose of the trip is the fulfillment of the trip itself,” Ellis said.

With more than 1.6 million Americans 18 and older going on a short-term mission trip each year, Ellis, whose recent doctoral dissertation is titled “Short-Term Missions — Long Term Change,” wishes to see the practice made as “missiologically sound” as possible for both participants and those receiving teams.

“As STM (short-term mission) trips are

currently being implemented, they often do not lead to changed lives,” Ellis explained. “Research suggests that participants do not sense increased vocational calling, increased connection to mission at one’s home or increased connection to the global missions movement. This lack of ‘changed life’ is often connected to three main factors: lack of in-depth training of participants, learning transfer or the incongruity of the international STM experience with one’s home life and a lack of skilled STM facilitators.

“Grounding the [short-term mission] trip in a correct understanding of the *Missio Dei* — the mission of God — poverty and power as well as global Christianity changes the narrative of the trip and forces participants to put the trip into proper perspective, allowing it to shape their lives when they arrive home,” he said. “Focusing on the practical cross-cultural aspects decreases the likelihood that participants will do irreparable harm to local ministries and can give proper perspective on one’s home culture and how to engage it appropriately.”

Be aware of limitations

Together, Ellis and the leaders of the South Africa Ministry Network are offering a reimagined model for short-term missions.

“The South Africa Ministry Network is trying to embed the short-term mission trip in a much larger narrative,” Ellis said. “We’re not

“We are pilgrims and we assume a ‘pilgrim posture’ as we approach these experiences. The pilgrim is one who is ready to be present, who is ready to listen and who is ready to notice where, how and with whom God is working.”

—STEPHEN COOK

going to South Africa this year, Peru next year and somewhere else the year after that and the year after that. We’re going back to the same place over and over and over again, seeing and creating relationships with folks who are on the ground and sharing life with them as much as we can.”

The idea is to make a real difference.

“We tell our congregations that short-term mission is not about creating change. It’s not about saving the world. It’s not about a whole bunch of these narratives that we like to use to drive the mission movement,” he said. “Rather, a short-term mission is a moment in time that we are privileged to have that forces us to ask the question: ‘How is it that we can truly help both make a difference in the places that we’re partnering as well as learn from what our South African friends have to teach us?’”

To prepare his church members for a trip, Ellis leads a five-session discussion and study on the mission of God, global Christianity, the history of South Africa and the current challenges that the post-apartheid “Rainbow Nation” faces. Participants also spend time getting an advance glimpse of the work being done by the network’s partners in South Africa and receiving a devotional guide that begins a week prior to their departure. While on the trip, participants take part in nightly debriefings — opportunities to reflect on God’s work in the world and their place in it.

Stephen Cook, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., a member congregation of the network, says the consortium of CBF churches knows its role is to take part together in the renewal of God’s world.

“We know we are not going to ‘fix’ anything,” he said. “We are going [on these short-term trips] to come alongside of and be involved with what God is doing in that part of the world.”

It’s just as important to know what is and isn’t possible on such trips.

“We know our limitations and that we cannot and should not be responsible for determining outcomes,” he said. “We invest the time, resources and energy we do in order

“As Christians we have a responsibility to demonstrate that our mission activity isn’t just for our own (western) kicks that works for our convenience and purposes.”

— RYAN CLARK

to participate in that which is larger than ourselves.”

Doing good work

Cook has embraced the call of South African theologian and pastor Trevor Hudson to make “pilgrimages of pain and hope.”

“The essence of these pilgrimages of pain and hope is that we are not tourists who set out to see the sights of the places we visit,” Cook said. “Instead, we are pilgrims and we assume a ‘pilgrim posture’ as we approach these experiences. The pilgrim is one who is ready to be present, who is ready to listen and who is ready to notice where, how and with whom God is working.”

CBF Moderator Matt Cook, who serves as pastor of First Baptist Church in Wilmington, N.C., another network member, said short-term missions offer great potential.

“We all think that short-term missions are something that God can use to create a two-fold blessing for those in South Africa and for those travelling to South Africa,” Cook said. “But it could easily be mission tourism if we didn’t work hard at keeping our focus on how to make it at least as much of a net positive for the South Africans as it is for the Americans.” To keep this intentional focus, he notes that the network strives to offer care for the caregivers.

“We can’t really change the world in a week and we know that,” said Cook, who helped launch the network alongside Ellis in 2009 while senior pastor of Little Rock’s Second Baptist Church. “What we can do is try to be a strong wind in the sails of the very impressive human beings who are doing hard and good work.”

Now in its sixth year, the network has helped provide financial support for four partner-funded CBF field personnel and made significant investments in the ministries of the Refilwe Community Project, a Christian organization in Johannesburg that provides a home for orphaned and neglected children as well as a baby house for abandoned infants. Refilwe

also hosts a medical clinic, preschool, kids club and after-school programs for its impoverished community.

The network led a group of more than 70 Baptists in July on a week-long mission experience in Johannesburg as well as at mission sites 250 miles southeast in the Winterton area of the KwaZulu-Natal province, a rural region heavily impacted by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The hands-on trip culminated with the group taking part in the 21st Baptist World Congress in Durban, South Africa, the global gathering of the Baptist World Alliance.

Avoiding convenience

The network also looks for opportunities to convert mission trip dollars to ongoing support, Matt Cook said, noting that the network sets aside a portion of trip costs to help pay for the salaries of part-time care workers of the Bophelo Medical Clinic at Refilwe.

“We’ve found that when our members go on these trips they make a connection that leads to ongoing support,” he added. “Over and above the trip costs, we’ve had countless individuals make additional financial contributions to local partners and to CBF field personnel located in South Africa. Going promotes giving.”

Ryan Clark, church engagement manager for CBF Global Missions, said the missing ingredient in many short-term missions has been the relationship — and not the kind of relationships where one person or group makes all the decisions.

“What CBF churches in the South Africa Ministry Network have discovered is a beautiful balance of power and resources with an eye on the long-term transformation of communities,” Clark said.

“As Christians we have a responsibility to demonstrate that our mission activity isn’t just for our own (western) kicks that works for our convenience and purposes,” he said. **BT**

— Aaron Weaver is communications manager for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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Inspired Creativity

By Jonathan Merritt, Religion News Service

Conservative Christians' new scare word

In the fight over gay rights, conservative Christians have a new enemy. No, it isn't a politician or activist or organization. It isn't a noun at all, but rather a verb: normalize.

In Albert Mohler's forthcoming book, *We Cannot Be Silent: Speaking Truth to a Culture Redefining Sex, Marriage, & the Very Meaning of Right & Wrong*, the president of the flagship Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., discusses the normalization of same-sex relationships a whopping 39 times.

"The normalization of homosexual relationships and the legalization of same-sex marriage" is, in Mohler's words, "the debate of greatest intensity of our time."

He is not the only one calling Christians to fight against the normalization of same-sex relationships — not by a long shot.

An article by the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission calls believers to "consider what is at stake in the movement afoot to normalize homosexuality."

The Family Research Council's senior vice president argued that the movement of "evangelical advocates" who want to normalize same-sex attraction is an "offense to God and the Gospel."

Pastor and best-selling author John Piper called the trend "the new calamity" in America.

But where did these Christians get this idea? Even if one believes that same-sex relationships do not align with God's design for human beings, it does not necessarily follow that one must work to dispose of those who engage in it.

To normalize means to accept something or someone as usual or normal. The word is a cousin to the word tolerate. So these Christians believe that anything that might communicate that homosexuality is normal is wrong or evil. Anything that would increase tolerance of homosexual relationships should be resisted.

Many of these Christians root their thinking in the belief that the Apostle Paul called same-sex relations "unnatural" in his epistle to the Romans. Whatever Paul means to communicate with that word, he is not instructing

Christians to band together and work to exclude anyone from social structures and institutions. Unlike Paul, when conservative Christians speak of normalizing LGBT people and relationships, they are using it in a social rather than theological sense.

Consider the recent decision by the Boy Scouts of America to allow gay troop leaders. In 2013, when the BSA was considering the change, the Ohio Christian Alliance sent an email to 40,000 subscribers claiming that pressure was coming from LGBT activists who "want society to normalize and affirm their behavior."

Originally, conservative Christians cast gay people as sexual predators and argued that allowing them to be troop leaders would endanger children. But as the public began to see such arguments for what they were — specious and hurtful — Christian activists started invoking the scary "normalize" instead.

Their fear was not that the existence of LGBT troop leaders would force conservative Christians to change their theology, but rather that the shift would cause society to see gay persons as respectable. Boy Scouts troop leaders are seen as upstanding civic leaders, and this is a thought that many Christians cannot stand.

The same is true regarding the decision to eliminate the "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy. Conservatives first argued that allowing LGBT persons to serve in the U.S. Army would make soldiers feel uncomfortable and make servicemen and women less effective.

When the military studied the issue and demonstrated this was not a risk, these individuals reverted to their favorite scare word. Again, their fear was not theological, but social. Military people are given respect, and this is something that conservative Christians do not want bestowed on people they consider to be abominations before God.



Asking the faithful to resist the normalization of homosexuality is a command framed in the negative. It only communicates what one does not want to occur. What about the positive? If one is resisting normalization, then what is one supporting?

The opposite of normalizing is marginalizing. It is maligning. It is sidelining. It is ostracizing. It is banishing. It is shunning.

Make no mistake that this is what is being called for. To resist the normalization of LGBT couples means working to push them to the margins, outside of circles of respectability.

Is this how we wish to be known — as a community that forced another community to the margins? This is the kind of goal at which if you succeed, you also fail.

And besides, this behavior is painfully shortsighted given the waning influence of Christians in America. If believers think they are becoming a minority group, it does not seem prudent to set a precedent that it is OK to socially marginalize minority groups.

But, of course, Christians need to ask themselves not only whether this way of treating people is prudent, but also whether it is biblical.

I've tried to imagine Jesus approving of such tactics. Jesus is a man who offers his disciples a glimmering gold standard for relating to others: "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them."

The most rigid religious leaders in Jesus' day, like those in ours, complained that offering outsiders a seat at the table somehow legitimized them. But Jesus didn't seem to care. He kept welcoming them to the table anyway.

Those the religious leaders rejected, Jesus received. Those whom the religious leaders pushed to the margins, Jesus welcomed to the center. Jesus was focused on building bridges while the religious leaders were focused on building barriers.

Some things never change. It is time for the faithful to set aside the scare words, take the long view, look our neighbors in the eye and walk the way of Jesus. **BT**

By Tom Krattenmaker, Religion News Service

How to win gay rights with patience and grace

The gay rights movement and those of us who support it have a decision to make now that the Supreme Court has ruled and same-sex marriage is the law of the land.

One possible course of action: a mop-up operation whereby the victorious forces seek out and eliminate the holdouts, such as conservative Christian bakers who refuse to bake for wedding-bound gay people. Another course of action — call it “live and let live” — suggests a more finessed approach, one by which same-sex couples take their business elsewhere when that is a practical option, as it so often is.

Here’s a vote for the latter.

It’s entirely understandable if some lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and their supporters are not ready for the more peaceable route. Given the treatment LGBT folks have received from some conservative Christians over the decades, retribution might be too tantalizing to resist.

So, too, must we acknowledge the importance of the principle of non-discrimination. Laws and policies that militate against unequal treatment of people on the basis of gender and sexual identity should, if anything, be strengthened. In a similar vein, the instruments of law and government, such as county clerks in the position to dispense marriage licenses, should not be allowed to say “no” to a couple because they disapprove. Religious freedom goes far in this country, but not that far.

And even as Christians complain about

restrictions on their rights as bakers or photographers or whatever, a few Christians working in government continue to defy the law. Two clerks in Kentucky are resisting the Supreme Court ruling, and similar efforts are ongoing in Alabama and Tennessee.

These are matters of law and policy. Everyday decisions and conduct are another matter — an area where a little finesse might sometimes be advisable. Unless the no-gays florists are the only game in town, which they might be in smaller or more conservative communities, it is more sensible for multiple reasons to find another service provider — a business that would be delighted to have the opportunity and is worthy of the fee.



C.J. Prince, executive director of North Jersey Pride, has stated that she would welcome the posting of signs in the windows of businesses that have a “no gays” preference — so she can shop at their competitors “and proudly put my money where my allies are.” She goes on to argue in her much-discussed Huffington Post piece, “I do not want to order a wedding cake from a bakery owned by a guy who thinks I’m going to hell. I have no desire to purchase bouquets from a florist who pickets pride parades.”

Window signs are not the way to accomplish this. They evoke too much painful history, and there are other, less crude ways by which people in a given community develop a sense of who’s in and who’s out when it comes to serving LGBT customers.

But Prince makes a valid point about the

good sense in spending one’s money at businesses run by people of a non-discriminatory bent — businesses that deserve the opportunity to serve and profit.

Sarah Warbelow, legal director of the Human Rights Campaign, told me that her organization does not support the practice — one that is actually rare, she said — of targeting businesses that oppose gay marriage for the sake of making a point and pressing the principle.

“We are not in favor of baiting,” Warbelow said. “I think our society is in a moment of change. There’s something to be said for having patience and grace with one another.” That doesn’t mean we don’t need laws against discrimination, Warbelow said. But it does argue against “going in just to mess with someone.”

In his dissent in the same-sex marriage decision, Chief Justice John Roberts warns that hard questions lie ahead in the aftermath of the court’s ruling. Yes, they do. But let’s not make this situation harder than it needs to be.

In the many instances where the no-gay die-hards are not the only game in town, steer clear is the way to go. Whether it is done out of spite or crazy kindness, as an informal boycott or an extension of grace, the way to treat them may be as simple as:

Leave them alone. **BT**

—Tom Krattenmaker is a writer specializing in religion in public life, a member of the USA Today Board of Contributors, and communications director at Yale Divinity School.

His most recent book is *The Evangelicals You Don’t Know: Introducing the Next Generation of Christians*. This column first appeared in USA Today.

“There’s something to be said for having patience and grace with one another.”

‘Why do you ask for financial support?’

By John Pierce,
Executive Editor

Baptists Today seeks ongoing financial support from those who value its publishing ministry. Occasionally, someone will ask why.

The short answer is that **generous giving is essential** — without which we could not continue this mission.

It's a matter of math tied to the autonomy of this non-profit venture begun more than 30 years ago by those committed to the publication of news, opinions, features and resources not inhibited by denominational structures. That is, the **freedom** to fulfill our mission is also what makes us **fragile** without the generous support of our friends.

Unlike denomination-owned publications, this autonomous publishing ministry is not underwritten with large mission gifts. In fact, revenues from subscription and advertising, along with much-appreciated partnership funding, cover about half of the cost of operations — although the organization is lean and efficient.

Gifts from friends are not mere icing on the cake — they are the batter that matters. Without generous support from individuals and churches we simply could not carry out this mission alone.

So a big THANKS! to those who share in this ministry ... and a sincere appeal to others to join us in this venture through regular gifts to *Baptists Today*.

My preference is to work with words rather than numbers. But recently a friend showed how the ministry of *Baptists Today* could become very stable if just 250 of its thousands of faithful readers would make consistent gifts — monthly or annually.

The form across the page is a good starting place. Or email me at jpierce@baptiststoday.org or call me at (478) 301-5655 to discuss how your support can make a vital difference in this important work. Thank you!



I always enjoy reading *Baptists Today*, and hang on to [the issues] for Bible study ideas and for personal devotion. The stories are wonderful and informative, and I use the magazine for spiritual growth and discipleship ideas as I serve at BUA and my church.

—René Maciel
President, Baptist University of the Americas
San Antonio, Texas

Dear friends:

Income from subscriptions and advertisements is not sufficient to keep a quality journal such as *Baptists Today* going. We also need financial contributions from individuals, churches and organizations who understand the important role *Baptists Today* plays in upholding the Baptist witness.



We are grateful for those who already contribute, but to keep that witness strong and viable, we need more. So, I'm boldly asking you to partner with us by making regular contributions to *Baptists Today*.

You can make your gifts by check, or give online, or set up a recurring donation.

I've set up a monthly contribution using my credit card. It feels good to know that while I'm supporting a resource I believe in I'm picking up some airline miles to boot!

Will you consider making faithful gifts as well? Your generosity would make an amazing difference as we seek to provide the kind of quality publication that Baptists need and deserve. Thank you!

—Tony Cartledge
Contributing Editor and Bible Study Writer
cartledge@baptiststoday.org

Dear readers:

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In addition to regular operating funds, we are seeking in the TOGETHER Campaign to establish a reserve fund and to substantially increase the endowment. We have written letters, made phone calls and traveled widely.

The great reward for us has been the opportunity to meet many extraordinary people who read and contribute to *Baptists Today*.

Some of you get your monthly copy at church through bulk mailing and may not realize the needs. Please carefully consider the great value of *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith* and know that we need your pledges and gifts. Thank you!

—Mary Etta and Drayton Sanders
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Straightening Randall Lolley

Every other day or so I have to straighten out Randall Lolley.

Last May, on “Heritage Sunday,” we relocated and re-opened our Pastors’ Gallery outside the pastor’s study. The gallery features portraits of the five pastors who have served First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C., over the last century.

I don’t know if it’s something about the hardware on the frame, or if it’s the location of the air conditioner, or if it’s some tireless prankster who sneaks into the church overnight, but several times a week as I walk to and from my office I notice that Randall — or his portrait, I should say — is just a bit crooked.

So it has become a regular practice for me to straighten Dr. Lolley’s portrait.

This occasional chore has become something of a ritual. It reminds me of one who has lived so faithfully — following in the way of Christ with such integrity and grace.

Having only known him by reputation and legacy before coming to First Baptist, it has been my pleasure to come to know Dr. Lolley as a friend and encourager over the last two years. On our first meeting at his home in Raleigh, he lovingly grasped my arm and held it at the moment we met, and I could sense the warmth and pastoral presence that had been described so glowingly. As we have spoken further, I’ve also benefited from the wisdom that exists in his deep well about faith, church and the community.

After a successful career that included the presidency of Southeastern Seminary, Dr. Lolley closed his full-time ministry with a six-year tenure at First Baptist. The church needed his wisdom, his leadership and the warmth that grabs hold of you from the moment you meet him.

It was all the more powerful that such critical leadership came from one who had

started his career decades earlier as a recent seminary graduate serving as a two-year assistant pastor at First Baptist, while living in church housing — a program that served as a foundation for the pastoral residency



begun recently in our church.

Appreciation for Dr. Lolley is widespread and we have an opportunity to pay tribute to his leadership and preaching, while also supporting two organizations close to his heart and the heart of our church: *Baptists Today* and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

A forthcoming volume of sermons that Dr. Lolley preached at First Baptist will benefit both *Baptists Today* and CBFNC’s Lolley Fund for Theological Education. I hope you will support the publication of this book.

The film, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, tells the story of Vernon Tyson — another legendary North Carolina minister — who served as a pastor in Oxford, N.C., in the midst of racial tension in the 1970s. At the start of the film, a young Tyson is moving his family to Oxford.

He parks the station wagon at the parsonage, where members of the church have gathered to welcome the family. After exchanging greetings, he says good-bye to his family and, giddy with excitement, he rushes across the street to scope out his new church.

The very first place he goes is to the wall of pastor portraits. He pauses. You can imagine his thoughts as he examines closely all those who have gone before him and feels the inspiration of their legacy.

In his preaching, leadership and care for so many, Dr. Lolley cemented a lasting legacy that extends to this day. He was a pastor who walked beside more than ahead and sought to encourage the church to see itself the way he could see it.

As he said toward the end of his tenure, “Lay-led congregations, in my judgment, are always stronger. I just don’t buy into pastoral authority. I don’t think it’s right. The last time Jesus was seen, he was a shepherd of sheep, not a cowboy rounding up cattle” (from *In Every Good Work* by Scott Culclasure).

I hope the portrait stays crooked. Because his is a spirit and style I need to come face-to-face with again and again. **BT**

—Alan Sherouse is pastor of First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C. This column he wrote for the church newsletter is reprinted with permission.

Persons making sponsoring gifts of \$100 (received by Oct. 15) will be listed in the book and receive a copy upon publication by *Nurturing Faith*. Gifts made be made by check to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 or online at baptiststoday.org/donate. Please indicate the gift is for the “Lolley book” and give the name(s) as you wish it/them to be listed in the book.

History provides a lens for Baptists to view issues today

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. — “If you wanted to visit the Baptist preacher in Colonial Williamsburg, this is where you came. We jailed those people!”

So said the period-dressed interpreter who showed us the jail cells where Baptist preachers such as Lewis Craig and Benjamin Waller were interred because they were not officially licensed by the Anglican Church. There they preached through the cell window grates for 43 days until their release.

Many Baptists have forgotten, or have never been taught, that their heritage includes a foundational belief in the strict separation of the institutions of church and state.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina made an effort to remind Baptists of their roots through the first “Baptist Ideals Tour” to Colonial Williamsburg in August.

Participants commented: “This is a very timely topic in light of today’s politics.” “Many folks have no concept of this or simply consider it a side item.” “Knowing the history gives us a lens to filter issues we face today.”

At Williamsburg Baptist Church we walked through a timeline of Baptists in Virginia from 1689 to 1789. Each morning began with a



Colonial Williamsburg provides an opportunity to learn about early life in America, including the struggles of Baptists and others to ensure religious liberty for all.

three-hour privately guided tour focused on the religious life of the Colonial era.

After a tavern lunch, the group heard an interpreter perform Gowan Pamphlet, a slave who became the second pastor of the African Baptist Church (later renamed First Baptist Church of Williamsburg).

One afternoon Jennifer Hawks, staff counsel with the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, presented the results of the latest Supreme Court cases regarding church-state separation. Lay members of First Baptist

Many Baptists have forgotten, or have never been taught, that their heritage includes a foundational belief in the strict separation of the institutions of church and state.

Church, founded in 1776, led a tour of their building.

Participants were confronted with the personal challenges faced by 17th and 18th century Baptists in America.

“While we are all taught history, the stories made the struggles personal,” said Brenda Sholar from Open Arms Fellowship in Creedmore, N.C.

Gail Coulter of Providence Baptist in Hendersonville, N.C., said the tour was “a rich opportunity to explore the meaning and value of religious liberty that has come even freshly to us today and do it in a vibrant, relational location and experience.”

Indeed the Baptists of the past have important lessons for Baptists today. **BT**

—Rick Jordan is church resources coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

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