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John D. Pierce
Executive Editor
editor@baptiststoday.org

Julie Steele
Chief Operations Officer
jsteele@baptiststoday.org

Jackie B. Riley
Managing Editor
jackie@baptiststoday.org

Tony W. Cartledge
Contributing Editor
cartledge@baptiststoday.org

Bruce T. Gourley
Online Editor/Contributing Writer
gourley@baptiststoday.org

David Cassidy
Church Resources Editor
david@thefaithlab.com

Vickie Frayne
Art Director

Jannie Lister
Customer Service Manager
jannie@baptiststoday.org

Lex Horton
Nurturing Faith Resources Manager
lex@nurturingfaith.net

Walker Knight, Publisher Emeritus

Jack U. Harwell, Editor Emeritus

DIRECTORS EMERITI

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R. Kirby Godsey
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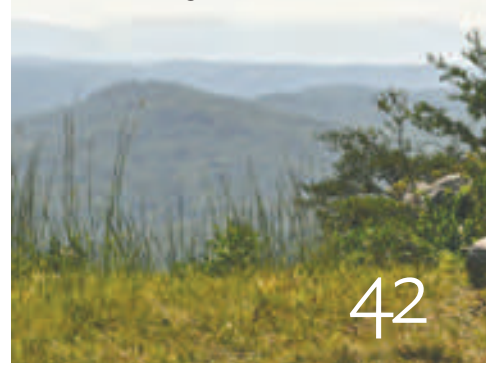
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COVER PHOTO BY SCOTT WILLIS. Stan Pethel leads worship music at a small, rural Baptist church on Sundays. Yet, with more than 1,200 published works, the longtime college professor's musical arrangements and compositions are a part of worship services across the nation. Story on page 4.

Reclamation

Lessons from Lula Lake



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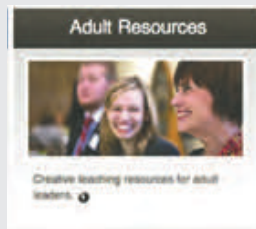
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Writing Submissions

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Contact Information

- 478-301-5655 / 1-877-752-5658
- info@baptiststoday.org
- *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318

Stan Pethel's Musical PRESENCE

Self-effacing music professor's arrangements and compositions heard widely

ROME, Ga. — His name appears in churches near and far each Sunday — wherever choral music still finds its rightful place in corporate worship. While Stan Pethel is not omnipresent, his good works seem to be.

More than 1,200 of his musical compositions and arrangements have now been published. They are played and/or sung with great regularity by church choirs, school choruses and other musicians including marching bands.

SELF-EFFACING

While a highly trained and accomplished musician who heads the fine arts department at Berry College in Northwest Georgia, where he has taught for 43 years, Stan is not snooty about it.

He'll jump into a bluegrass jam session, perform silly Ray Stevens songs with his son, or bang out a Southern gospel tune on the piano with the same excellence and enthusiasm.

And, come Sunday, while far-flung church choirs and instrumentalists make use of his many, beautiful arrangements and compositions, Stan leads the worship music at Everett Springs Baptist Church nestled in a scenic pastoral setting — beyond the reach of cell phone towers.

The small, rural congregation is several miles north of the bountiful 27,000-acre campus from which he will retire next spring. The church is one of several congregations over the years to benefit from Stan's willingness to serve with humility and giftedness.

EARLY START

Stan's special talent for trombone, among other instruments, is rooted in economics. As a youngster he wanted to play the saxophone, he said.

However, his father brought home the brass instrument with the slide, announcing: "The sax was too expensive." But Stan took to the trombone just fine.



Stan Pethel holds a doctorate of musical arts from the University of Kentucky and chairs the fine arts department at Berry College where he has taught music since 1973. Yet his family roots in gospel and bluegrass music remain strong.

Stan shared his gifts and story during a September dinner event at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., sponsored by the Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith Board of Directors.

The musical interview was conducted by Kathy Richardson, provost at Berry College and a Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith director. She is also a former member of one of Stan's church choirs.

Stan confessed to becoming "a band nerd" after a health issue kept him off the basketball court as a teen. But it did not keep him out of the action.

In the 10th grade he thought it would be cool to arrange the popular music of Herb Albert and the Tijuana Brass for his high school band. So he did.

Then at the University of Georgia he took a class in musical arrangement from band director Roger Dancz.

"He liked my work and after I finished his arranging class, he said, 'How about writing the shows for the next two years?'"

So for his junior and senior years at the University of Georgia, Stan wrote the halftime shows for the Redcoat Band.

CHURCH MUSIC

Stan's deepest musical roots, however, are in the church.

"I was always in church music," said the Gainesville, Ga., native who "grew up on the red hymnal."

And gospel music was in his blood.

"My dad was a gospel piano player," he said, "and I wanted to play like my dad."

Stan took piano lessons and discovered a gift for it. He was carrying on a family tradition traced back on his paternal grandmother's side.

"They were a bunch of pickers."

He was influenced as well by his uncle, James Pethel, who retired from Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, Tenn., after 37 years of teaching music and serving as distinguished composer-in-residence.

"He's 14 years older than me; he was a piano player," said Stan of his uncle. "So you can imagine when I was 6 and he was 20. I was so impressed when he was writing music on the piano. I thought that was pretty cool. He was my early role model."

WIDE RANGE

Pethel's love of music comes with a wide embrace of various styles.

"I'll do any form of music," he said, before adding one qualifier: "I won't do rap, hip-hop. But outside of that I'm good to go!"

Stan is best known for his choral pieces that church choirs often sing. This is his sweet spot. He beautifully arranged a hymn — on the spot — for his listening audience in Rome.

"Choral [arranging] is a lot easier. I was used to writing for bands — flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets, trombones — then if you throw in an orchestra — violins, violas, cellos, double bass, percussion — we're talking about a score with 30 lines," he explained.

"Now a church choral piece: soprano, alto (one line) then tenor, bass (another line), piano part — four lines. I could do one overnight. I can do one in two hours if I get started."

Of the hundreds of works, the best seller has been his composition "Come Down, Lord." He also has a collection of arrangements of "Great Hymns for Intermediate Piano," "Praise and Worship Hymn Solos" (for various instruments), "Celebrate Emmanuel: A Christmas Musical" and many, many more published pieces.

And he is readily available for writing commissioned pieces as well.

"I write choral stuff for various churches and for high schools," he said with a smile. "...Whatever you need, I'll write it for you."

He has written school fight songs — including both the fight song and the alma mater for local Rome High School.

Fight songs for churches? Not yet.

CHANGING TIMES

Church music has changed in recent years and "the market has gotten smaller," said Stan without expressed bitterness or judgment.

His first published piece appeared in *Gospel Choir* magazine from Broadman Press in 1976. He wrote and published heavily over the next 25 years or so including some popular choir cantatas.

"They were selling well and everything was going fine, but nothing stays the same," he said. "With the praise teams and praise bands, churches are losing their choirs. I don't think it's going away completely, but it's certainly smaller than it was."

What has not changed, however, as Stan eyes retirement from his academic position next spring, is his love of music, exceptional gifts and strong personal faith.

The published results of those talents and

commitments make worship more meaningful for many each Sunday — most of whom don't take note of the name "Pethel" listed again and again after an anthem or offertory music in the Order of Worship.

COURT TIME

Stan and his wife Jo Ann, an accomplished pianist and music teacher as well, continue to pass along the musical bloodline. All three of their children are educators, two of whom hold doctorates in music.

In fact, it might seem that music has consumed Stan's life as a teacher, department head, composer, arranger, choir leader and music minister. But not so.

Stan finds time for running up and down the basketball court now, as he was unable to do as a student. And he blows his whistle as well at volleyball players who foot foul, carry, double hit or get caught in the net.

He is a certified high school referee for those two sports. And he approaches his officiating tasks with the same intensity, excellence and good humor as his music.

"Hey ref! Is this your phone?" he laughingly quotes one of his heckles. "It's got four missed calls."

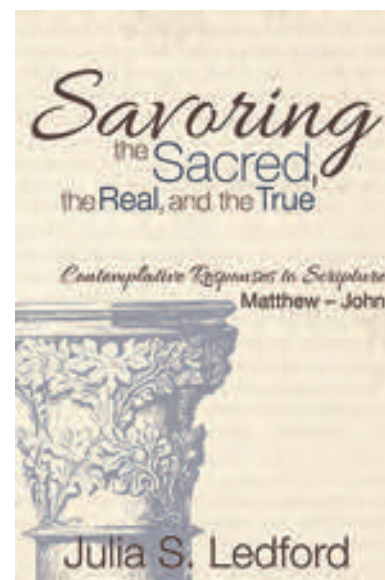
It is good exercise, discipline and lots of fun, he said. Call it revenge of the band nerd. **BT**

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quotation “ ” remarks

“How to describe her? Creative, redemptive, faithful, generous, healing, wise, compassionate, constructive and transformative.

—Editor *Marv Knox* of the *Baptist Standard* on *Diana Garland*, dean of the now-named *Diana R. Garland School of Social Work* at *Baylor University*, who died Sept. 21 at age 65 (BNG)

“She was in the best tradition of a Southern woman author who spun yarns, told tales and had a story that went with everything.”

—Theologian *Tony Jones* following the Sept. 22 death of his friend *Phyllis Tickle*, 81, who wrote extensively on American spirituality (*Huffington Post*)

“... [E]very religion has been so defensive of its beliefs that it has actually abandoned its beliefs at times.”

—Late Show host *Stephen Colbert*, a devout Catholic (*Daily Beast*)

“To raise doubts about the working of the Spirit, to give the impression that it cannot take place in those who are not ‘part of our group,’ who are not ‘like us,’ is a dangerous temptation. Not only does it block conversion to the faith; it is a perversion of faith!”

—Pope Francis, during a massive Mass in *Philadelphia* Sept 27 (RNS)

“Party politics have ruined this country. It’s time we got back to our history of ministers of the Gospel running for office without a party.”

—*Wiley Drake*, pastor of *First Southern Baptist Church* in *Buena Park, Calif.*, who in 2006 served his denomination as second vice president and in 2009 stated he was praying for God to kill President Obama, announcing his own candidacy for president of the United States (*Gospel Herald*)

“A lot of people want to classify the world in terms of left and right, but you could say there are people trying to engage with God from deep to shallow. I think the left-right conversation is shallow.”

—Author *Brian McLaren* (RNS)

“Faith journeys are always about growing up and maturing and seeing the world with new eyes ... it’s literally about having our hearts open toward where the sacred is present in the world.”

—*Diana Butler Bass*, author of *Grounded: Finding God in the World, a Spiritual Revolution* (RNS)

“I have great respect for each of the three heirs of this legacy. They are working diligently with me, and I believe we will be able to resolve these difficult disputes once and for all.”

—President *Jimmy Carter*, who is mediating a dispute among the children of *Martin Luther King Jr.*, over their famous father’s Bible and Nobel Peace Prize (*ABC News*)

“Christians love evangelism, as long as someone else is doing it.”

—*Ed Stetzer*, executive director of *LifeWay Research* (RNS)

“It has seen better days, but most of it is in remarkably good condition.”

—Vicar *Jason Bray* on the discovery of a first edition *King James Bible* from 1611 that had been stored away at *St. Giles Parish Church* in *Wrexham, Wales* (*BBC*)



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Hesitation and hope

Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith has a serious cash flow problem that must be addressed soon and well. I write this to our readership with hesitation and hope.

Hesitation comes from not being an alarmist. Yet the reality of our current financial condition needs to be communicated widely.

Hope comes from the repeated affirmation of those who deeply value this uniquely independent publishing ministry that seeks to provide an informative and inspiring news journal along with quality Bible studies and other resources for congregations.

It would be unfair to ask for your help without explaining the situation at hand and the intentional efforts to chart a healthy future.

We got behind in renewing and enlisting annual pledges that have been the lifeblood of this publication for many years. While many supporters have been very faithful and generous, the gifts received in recent months have not been enough to cover expenses. Therefore, we have depleted our reserves.

The Together Campaign, led ably by volunteers Drayton and Mary Etta Sanders, is producing much-needed pledges and promises of estate gifts that can ensure the future. However, immediate funding is needed to cover costs while the campaign continues to grow.

Directors and staff are facing this financial situation in forthright and responsible ways by their own sacrificial giving and by reducing operational costs to the bare minimum. Honestly, any further cuts would harm the quality of our work or the persons who do it.

Organizationally, we are lean, effective and held to high accountability — carrying out the best practices of a non-profit organization.

It is important to know that the expanding Nurturing Faith publishing ventures — Bible studies, books, resources and experiences — are assets, not liabilities. Revenues from this ministry expansion — often done in collaboration with other organizations or sponsors — are very helpful and continuing to grow.

Income from subscriptions and advertising and other sources does not cover all the expenses, even though Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith runs an efficient organization.

So what is needed to address our current operational needs and to ensure long-term viability?

We need:

- Immediate gifts (to relieve cash-flow concerns)
- 3-year pledges (to anticipate income while enlisting more supporters)
- Monthly contributors (to cover ongoing expenses on a regular basis)
- Estate gift planning (to grow the endowment to meet long-term needs).

Also, we need some heroes — individuals, organizations, foundations — who will make larger gifts to restore our reserve fund that enables us to deal with the operational ebb and flow.

Neither income nor expenses comes in at the same rate each month. We need to fill three buckets: our operational fund, reserve fund and endowment fund to empower and ensure our effectiveness.

Despite my own hesitation, and that of those who guide this ministry as directors, we are informing you of these needs — believing there are those who value this ministry and wish to be a part of its success.

In sharing this information informally, some faithful readers of the news journal and Nurturing Faith Bible Studies have said, “We didn’t know there was a real need.”

There is — and it must be addressed soon and well.

We have many faithful, generous (even sacrificial) friends. We need more.

Honestly, our circle of Baptists is not as large as those who have vacated historic Baptist understandings and practices of freedom. But that makes our cause even more important.



Be assured that, with your help, we are envisioning and planning for a bright future. Our ministry continues to evolve as times and technology change. We are hard at work in charting a course that is faithful and forward-looking.

Now you know of both my hesitation and my hope. If you share such hope for the good health and ongoing effectiveness of Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith, please express that hope in the form of practical help at this time.

Enclosed in this issue is a response card and envelope. If you have any questions or want to discuss ways to be supportive, please call us at (478) 301-5655. Or you may email me at editor@baptiststoday.org.

The future can and will be bright with more hands joining together in strengthening this work to which many of us are deeply committed. **BT**



END OF THE YEAR GIVING

Many of our faithful readers receive this news journal with the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies through church group subscriptions. Therefore, we do not have every reader’s address. So in order to reach more of our readers, we are enclosing within this issue an appeal for gifts and pledges — rather than our usual separate mailing. Please consider both a year-end gift and a pledge for ongoing support of this publishing ministry. We are very grateful for your support!



“...The notion of believers as CONSERVATIVE or LIBERAL in the absolute sense that these terms are being used today is a 21st-century innovation. What we are dealing with here is nothing less than a new kind of CHRISTIAN SELF-UNDERSTANDING unique to the contemporary era.”

—William E. Hull in his final book,
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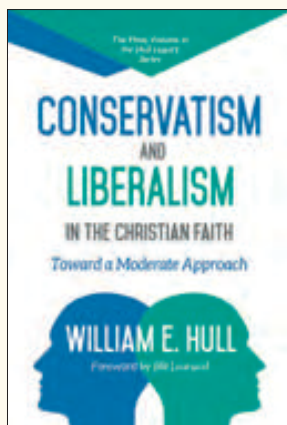
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—Novelist
WENDELL BERRY,
in a letter to David Hull

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by **BILL J. LEONARD**



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Directors remember James Dunn, elect leaders, address the future

ROME, Ga. — The Board of Directors of *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith* began their mid-September meeting by remembering longtime director James Dunn of Winston-Salem, N.C., who died July 4. Following testimonies of Dunn's influence, his fellow directors wrote notes of appreciation and concern that were delivered by director Charlotte Cook Smith to his wife Marilyn.

During business sessions held at Berry College the Board elected leadership, heard updates on the expanding publishing ministry, addressed financial needs and approved creating an envisioning committee to help chart the future.

Elected as new directors are Nannette Avery of Signal Mountain, Tenn., Kelly Belcher of Asheville, N.C., Wayne Glasgow of Macon, Ga., and Bill Ireland of Dalton, Ga.

The board re-elected Chairman Don Brewer of Gainesville, Ga., and Vice Chair Cathy Turner of Clemson, S.C., along with Jack Glasgow of Zebulon, N.C., who chairs the development/marketing committee. Edwin Boland of Johns Creek, Ga., now chairs the budget/finance committee.

At the closing session, held at the Winshape Retreat Center on Berry's mountain campus, outgoing directors Charles Schaible of Macon, Ga., and Vickie Willis of Murfreesboro, Tenn., were recognized for their service as well as Mary Jane Cardwell of Waycross, Ga., who could not attend the meeting.

Directors heard and discussed reports regarding budgeting and fundraising — and explored ways to reduce costs while increasing revenues. Commitments from directors to give more personally and to help seek new donors arose from the discussions.

Director Jack Glasgow made related motions, approved unanimously, that called for the Board to "affirm and pledge its active and immediate support for the capital campaign," that asked for clear communication of the financial needs to readership, and that created an ad hoc committee to envision the future of *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith*.

Those serving on the envisioning committee, appointed after the meeting by Chairman Don Brewer, are: Bill Neal, Kathy Richardson,



Editor John Pierce (left) recognized Ann Roebuck as director emerita of *Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith* during a dinner event in September at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga. Her husband, Floyd Roebuck (right) was a longtime pastor for the church and other congregations in the area. Ann, a lay leader and past chairperson, is the seventh former director to receive such honor.

Kelly Belcher, Frank Granger, Bill Ireland and Roger Paynter. The committee is exploring new ways to reduce costs, increase revenues and address future audiences.

A dinner event was held at First Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., featuring a musical interview with Stan Pethel conducted by Kathy Richardson (Story on page 4). Director Bob Cates, a member of the congregation, spoke to his fellow directors and friends at the dinner.

"The quality of the work at *Baptists Today* is remarkable," he said, urging support. "We are a voice that's reasonable and good."

Ann Roebuck, a longtime resident of Rome and influential lay leader, was recognized as director emerita for her instrumental service as chair of the *Baptists Today* board many years ago as the news journal was transitioning from coverage of a denominational crisis to serving a larger Baptist movement.

In appreciation she responded: "This was an unexpected honor. Thanks for remembering.



Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith directors began their two-day meeting in Rome, Ga., with a luncheon at the childhood home of Martha Berry who in the early 20th century provided educational and worship opportunities for mountain families in northwest Georgia. The stately house and gardens are familiar to many from the 2002 movie *Sweet Home Alabama*.

I look forward to *Baptists Today* every month and read every word. I am never disappointed. I really consider *Baptists Today* a miracle in print. Thank God for the miracle." **BT**

Religious or not, many Americans see a creator's hand

By Cathy Lynn Grossman
Religion News Service

You don't have to identify with any religion to see a creator's hand in human life and morality, suggests a new survey. LifeWay Research's finding — that most Americans believe there is a creator who designed the universe and defines human morality — is not surprising. After all, 3 in 4 U.S. adults identify with a religious denomination.

The surprise is that so many people who don't identify with a religion — so-called nones — agree.

The survey of 1,000 U.S. adults found that most Americans — 72 percent overall and 46 percent of nones — agree that: "Since the universe has organization, I think there is a creator who designed it."

This view is most strongly held by evangelicals and by older adults. And most Americans — 79 percent overall, and 43 percent of nones — say they agree that "The fact that we exist means someone created us."

The phone survey was conducted Sept. 26-Oct. 5, 2014. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points for overall findings. **BT**

Poll: 29 percent still think President Obama is Muslim

By David Jackson
USA Today

Despite a Hawaii birth certificate and repeated professions of his Christian faith, some Americans still believe President Obama is a Muslim born outside of the United States.

Eighty percent of Americans do believe Obama was born in the U.S., according to a new CNN/ORC poll, but 20 percent do not.

Of that total, 9 percent claim there is "solid evidence" Obama was born elsewhere, while another 11 percent said it is just their suspicion, CNN reported. The birth certificate released in 2011 says Obama was born Aug. 4, 1961, in Honolulu.

And while Obama has repeatedly said he is Christian, 29 percent of poll respondents said they still believe he is Muslim — including 43 percent of Republicans. **BT**

Evangelical leaders: No 'therapy,' but Jesus can change LGBT lives

By Cathy Lynn Grossman
Religion News Service

Evangelical leaders spoke out against "reparative" mental health therapy for LGBT people in October but still called on them to "change," saying that only through faith in Jesus could they find "wholeness and holiness."

The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors and the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood that met at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., had been under fire from LGBT activists for failing to condemn reparative therapy, sometimes also called "conversion" therapy.

Oregon, California, New Jersey and the District of Columbia prohibit licensed therapists from attempting to change the sexual orientation or gender identity of a minor. However, the Biblical Counselors group, as religious advisers, is not necessarily subject to those bans.

Dozens of activists from the Fairness Campaign, a Louisville LGBT advocacy group, demonstrated near the campus, saying reparative therapy increases the rate of depression and suicide in the LGBT community and objecting to religious calls to "change."

In a press conference, Albert Mohler, president of the seminary, and Heath

Lambert, ACBC executive director, said psychological therapy, including reparative therapy, is a "superficial" response to the "struggle" people face in dealing with same-sex attraction and transgender identity.

A joint statement later released by Mohler and Lambert still used the language of "change" and "repair" for LGBT people who, Mohler said, can only find "wholeness and holiness" through faith in Jesus.

In an interview, Mohler said: "We are not saying homosexuality can't change or shouldn't change. This is not something that can be reduced to deciding or choosing an object of sexual attraction. That's simplistic and a sin against those who are in the struggle (with sexual attraction and gender identity)."

Every person struggling with sin — whether it's pride or anger or sexual attraction — faces the same kind of battle, Mohler added. Only the gospel promises transformation because it can "make us desire things we have never desired before and it will give us progressively the ability to follow him in obedience."

He dismissed the argument by LGBT activists that they, too, can be faithful Christians.

Lambert told RNS before the conference, "We're in a culture where Christians are the only ones that can teach moral sanity in the midst of the moral craziness we're in." **BT**

Christian singer Sandi Patty to launch farewell tour

By Jonathan Merritt
Religion News Service

NEW YORK — Grammy-winning Christian singer Sandi Patty is singing her swan song.

In late September, a group of publicists, media moguls and celebrities gathered to hear the 59-year-old music great announce her retirement and farewell tour.

Patty's career has spanned some four decades, during which she accumulated five Grammy Awards, four Billboard Music Awards and 40 Dove Awards. She is one of only a few musicians to perform at three separate presidential inaugurations.

Born in Oklahoma City, Patty made her musical debut at age 2, singing "Jesus Loves Me" at her family's church. The balladeer's

official career, though, began during college when she was studying to become a teacher and accepted a gig singing backup vocals for the Bill Gaither Trio.

As her popularity grew, Patty became one of the first Christian artists to gain the attention of mainstream audiences, even making multiple appearances on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson.

While Patty's music has influenced millions, the market's demand for her musical style has waned. But rather than slip away quietly into the night, Patty wants to end her storied career on a high note. In February, she will launch "Forever Grateful," a yearlong farewell tour, which will include approximately 90 dates and a performance at Carnegie Hall. **BT**



Shabbat in Old City Jerusalem—Israel’s political leaders struggle to appease the minority but powerful ultra-Orthodox Jews who want restrictions on Shabbat activities and Israelis who want business owners and others to make their own choices about observing the Sabbath. Photo by John Pierce.

Ultra-Orthodox, secular Jews fight over shaping Jerusalem

JERUSALEM (RNS) — Yossi Cohen was shocked when city inspectors warned him to close his downtown convenience store during the Jewish Sabbath or else be socked with fines.

“For 20 years I’ve been open during Shabbat (the Hebrew for Sabbath) and suddenly the city decides I have to close,” said Cohen, one of eight convenience store owners ordered to shut down from sundown Friday until Saturday night.

“The message is clear: The municipality doesn’t want non-religious people in this city.”

The closure order was part of a compromise that Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat struck with ultra-Orthodox city council members who threatened to block a movie multiplex from opening on the Sabbath in a secular part of the city unless the convenience stores were shut on the Sabbath.

The mayor agreed to close the eight markets but allowed a dozen others in different Jewish neighborhoods to remain open on Saturdays. The mini-market standoff is the latest battle over the religious character of this city between the ultra-Orthodox and more secular Jews.

The 330,000 residents in West Jerusalem — which is overwhelmingly Jewish, unlike the mostly Arab eastern part of the city — have very different views on how to observe the Sabbath. Roughly half the people are ultra-Orthodox, while the other half range from moderately Orthodox to secular, along with a few thousand Muslims and Christians.

“What we’re seeing in Jerusalem is part of a national battle over the public domain and who owns it,” said Uri Regev, president of Hiddush, which promotes freedom of religion in Israel. “How does Israel balance between a Jewish state, a democratic state and a state for all its citizens?”

Haredi Jews, who hold more than a third of the city council seats and wield strong political clout in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s razor-thin coalition government, say being open on the Sabbath destroys the sanctity of the day of rest.

Over the years, thousands of Haredi men have clashed with police over such issues as where vehicles can drive on Saturdays to the opening of a municipal parking lot near the tourist-filled Old City. Now they are trying to halt plans for a rent-a-bike program unless the

bicycles stand idle on the Sabbath.

Einav Bar, a secular city councilwoman, said even the city’s secular residents savor the “quiet, family-centered atmosphere that envelops West Jerusalem on Friday afternoons,” when public transport and shops shut down before the start of the Sabbath.

But she fears the mayor’s crackdown “could drive non-religious residents and tourists from the city.”

Since Barkat, who is secular, became mayor in 2008, Bar said, “many more restaurants and entertainment spots have been open on Shabbat, and the exodus of non-religious residents has slowed. These strides won’t continue if people don’t feel welcome.”

In response, the city noted that current law allows restaurants, cinemas and entertainment spots to remain open on the Sabbath, and that will continue.

That is little comfort to Yinoun Elkayam, a mini-market owner threatened with closure.

“A third of my business occurs on Shabbat. If I can’t work on Shabbat my business won’t survive,” he said. “I let people live the way they want to. Why can’t they let me do the same?” **BT**

Right relationship

Nadia Bolz-Weber on why the church is for losers

Nadia Bolz-Weber is the kind of pastor who ends up doing funerals for an alcoholic stand-up comic and a transvestite. The founder of Denver's House for All Sinners and Saints, this tattooed Lutheran pastor wants nothing more than to tell it like it is.

Her newest book, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, expands on her trademark exploration of finding God in the unexpected.

"When it comes down to it," said Bolz-Weber, "the church is for losers. We connect to each other and to God through our shared brokenness, not through our personal victories and strengths and accomplishments. This is why it's hilarious to me when people sort of write me off as hipster Christianity. You have definitely not been to my congregation. It is not hip."

Bolz-Weber talked recently with Religion News Service about the book. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: In the book, one of your critiques of social justice goes like this: "Nobody gets to play Jesus."

A: People say, "I'm just a Jesus-follower. I want to be just like Jesus." No one's like Jesus, man. Jesus was Jesus. Jesus was God. You're not God. You're going to fail.

If we're trying to be forgiving people because that's the way Jesus was, and yet we're never willing to confess our sins and admit what we need forgiveness for, good luck with being a forgiving person.

Q: Everywhere you see people trying to better themselves, yet you write that, "We always love imperfectly. It is the nature of human love. And it is okay."

A: In conservative Christianity, there's this question, "How is your relationship with the Lord? Do you have a right relationship with God?"



Nadia Bolz-Weber says Christianity didn't start with religious authorities or those for whom life was easy, but with "rank fisherman, prostitutes and tax collectors."

I'm more and more convinced that right relationship with God is just standing naked in front of our Creator and receiving the love as broken people. Right relationship is confession and forgiveness.

That's right relationship. Allowing God to be the forgiving, redeeming God that God wants to be for us. Whereas we think that being in right relationship is not making any mistakes so we don't have to bother the guy. That's not a relationship, then.

Q: You wrote about a guy named Billy who struggled with heroin and booze, "sometimes played piano in his sister's dresses" and eventually took his own life. You say

he was "pretty much exactly the kind of person Jesus would hang out with." What do you mean?

A: I've just become more and more confused about how Christianity became what it is today, given how it started. It just keeps puzzling me.

It didn't start with the religious authorities. It didn't start with the people for whom life was easy. It didn't start with people who were nailing whatever purity system was being handed to them at the time.

It started with rank fishermen and prostitutes and tax collectors — people for whom life wasn't easy. And yet that's whom Jesus chose to surround himself with.

Q: Why do you write that we're punished by our sins and not for our sins?

A: Harboring resentment instead of forgiving someone — that's like drinking poison and hoping the other person dies. That's its own punishment, just like shopping at Wal-Mart is its own punishment.

Being punished for your sins implies that God's going to wreak havoc on you, God has this score sheet, and if you go over a certain number, then God's going to make some horrible thing happen to you.

God doesn't have to do that. We do it to ourselves. Good Lord! We create our own hell.

Q: Do you think God punishes?

A: All I can say is, I certainly hope not because I'd be screwed. All I can say is, I think if God punishes, then I don't understand Jesus on the cross saying, "Forgive them, for they know not what they're doing."

If God was that sort of punishing God, then I can't think of a better situation than striking down all the people who crucified Jesus. I mean, that's what I'd do. That's why I need a God who's not like me to save me.

Q: What do you mean by God's saying "yes" to humanity, instead of "maybe"?

A: I've been taught that God says, "Well, we'll see how good you are." That's the maybe. I think there's a way in which there's this sort of yes from God that we reject all the time.

We'd rather have the ball in our own court. So God says: "The game's over. You don't have to compete anymore." I'm like, "Yeah, but I feel like if I compete, then I'm in control."

Grace actually feels like I'm totally powerless. I have no power. I have no agency. And that feels terrible to us, and we reject it over and over and instead go: "You know, I'm working on my own redemption project over here. I'm going to see how that pans out."

Q: At the end of *Accidental Saints*, you rewrite Jesus' Sermon on the Mount with alternate "saints" — for example, "Blessed are the agnostics." How is doubt saintly?

A: Doubt's not the opposite of faith to me at all. I think certainty is the opposite of faith. Doubt means you're in an active, dynamic relationship to an idea. Certainty means you're done thinking about it.

I think there's something really sacred about doubt. It's part and parcel of faith to

'We connect to each other and to God through our shared brokenness, not through our personal victories and strengths and accomplishments.'

me. That's why I go on to say something like, "Blessed are they who aren't so sure they've figured it out that they stop taking in new information."

Q: Also making the list are hospital orderlies, NFL players and their fundraising trophy-wives. There's something very physical about all these examples, and you say God is "blessing all human flesh." What does God care about flesh? Isn't God concerned with the soul?

A: I think a physical life is a spiritual life. God chose to have of all things a human body. God didn't spare God the indignity of having things like the hiccups. God chose to have a body. What does that mean about all human bodies?

Q: You've got a whole chapter about King Herod's slaughtering of the innocents and the Sandy Hook shooting. Why do you think it's important to remember Herod in the Christmas story?

A: When we're talking about Christmas, one of the important things we have to look at is, what kind of world did God choose to enter? What was going on in the world at this point? And how did God choose to enter it?

God chose to enter a world as violent and faithless as our own. I feel like that's an important thing to know about God.

How do we reflect theologically about what's going on now? Political tyranny, or in the case of Christmastime 2012, when a bunch of kids are slaughtered in their schoolroom.

This is what Christmas is about. I don't want to put Herod on wrapping paper, necessarily. But Herod has to be part of the Christmas story. He just has to be.

I can't stand that blend of sentimentality and religion that we're seeing in cultural Christianity. I don't think it's in any way helping us make sense of the world as it actually exists. **BT**

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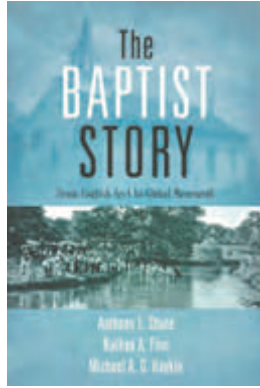
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Inspired Creativity

Baptist history for wide theological audience has bright spots but overstates readership

Writing a comprehensive history of a tradition as diverse as the Baptist tradition is no easy task, yet such is the assignment of Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn and Michael A.G. Haykin in their recently published work, *The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement* (B&H Publishing, 2015).



The Baptist Story: From English Sect to Global Movement by Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin (B&H Publishing, 2015)

While I think it is fair to say that these authors approach the subject of Baptist history from a solidly conservative perspective, they should be commended for their attempt to write a comprehensive history of the Baptist people that does justice to a multiplicity of perspectives.

Three primary sections of content comprise the overall body of the work, with a few concluding pages on Baptists beliefs and distinctives.

Haykin writes the first section on 17th- and 18th-century Baptist life. Chute writes the second section on the 19th century, and Finn concludes the historical discussion with content from the 20th and 21st centuries.

The book's strength lies in the authors' commitment to presenting historical data in a clear and concise fashion. Sprinkled throughout the work are photographs along with breaks in the narrative for selections from church minutes, letters, hymnals, books and other primary source documents. Concluding each chapter is a list of further suggested readings and a sampling

of discussion questions.

There are many bright points that should be noted within the work. In his discussion of "Baptist Beginnings," Haykin nimbly treads the confusing waters of Baptist origins amid England's tumultuous 17th century.

Chute's chapter, "Transitions and Trends," serves as a particularly articulate section that addresses Baptists toward the end of the 19th century. Likewise, Finn walks a fine tightrope in his discussion of the Southern Baptist controversy.

Unfortunately, by marketing the work as "ideally suited for graduate and undergraduate courses, as well as group study in the local church," B&H Publishing has detracted from the work's identity as chiefly, in my opinion, an undergraduate textbook.

If the publisher wanted a graduate textbook, it should have insisted and made accommodation for footnotes. And if the

publisher wanted a work for group study, it should have published the book at a cheaper cost. Few textbooks, if any, are capable of the readership that B&H anticipates.

Even as an undergraduate textbook, the work does have shortcomings aside from my own historical grumblings and nitpickings. Specifically, I would have liked to see the authors work a little harder to incorporate global material into the dominant Euro-American narrative that runs throughout the book.

The title makes the claim that the Baptist tradition historically evolved from an English sect into a global movement, but I am not sure the book supports this most basic of claims. Each author loses sight of this central thesis at various points in the work, which leaves readers often unaware of where the narrative is taking them.

Even so, I commend Chute, Finn and Haykin for their work on this text. All in all, I am confident in saying these authors succeed in writing a Baptist history intended for a broad theological audience. The clear prose as well as the inclusion of discussion questions and primary source material make this work ideally suited for an undergraduate classroom. **BT**

—Andrew Gardner is a doctoral student in American religious history at Florida State University, and a graduate of Wake Forest University School of Divinity and The College of William and Mary. His work, *Reimagining Zion: A History of the Alliance of Baptists*, will be published by Nurturing Faith later this year.

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Healthy Church

Pastors serving in tandem

By Mike Massar

It all began not so much as a novel idea but a fresh answer to a question that was burdening the faculty at Truett Seminary: "Why is it that so many of our recent graduates seem to leave the seminary, go to their first church, and then leave the ministry?"

One answer could be to admit that the decline of Protestant churches has exerted more and more stress on the church and its ministers. Sociologically speaking, life in the local parish has become much more difficult.

I don't know of any of my colleagues who would say that ministry has gotten easier over the years. In fact, it's just the opposite. Church life is growing increasingly demanding with new technologies, new theologies and new ecclesiology.

In short, ministers these days face what all ministers have faced over the years: the expectation of having gifts for every ministry and even nuance of ministry in the church — only in exponential ways.

The electronic church has not only made critics of its members but has also overwhelmed the unique voice of the pastor with blaring sounds of cultural Christianity. We're in a time where confusion of calling runs rampant in local congregations and its ministers.

Perhaps it's that confusion that led Griff Martin and me to respond to the seminary with the idea of a co-pastorate model, where a young minister could be paired with an older minister to work side-by-side, in tandem.

The professors were enthusiastically affirming. After all, one of the innovative strategies of Jesus was to send out his disciples in pairs. He seemed to realize that having a comrade in the faith would bolster each disciple's

confidence and courage.

The early church picked up on that philosophy: When they sent out missionaries, they did so in pairs (or more), and a good deal of the early missionaries' success came from the fact that the disciples had a distinct synergy in working in twosomes. Individual gifts appeared to complement each other (e.g., Paul and Barnabas, Simon Peter and John Mark, Priscilla and Aquila), expanding perspectives and ministries.

Therefore, it is a bit ironic that such a model of ministry has not been employed more often in the 21st-century church. And that is a shame, because the concept of a co-pastorate has myriad advantages, especially if the two pastors are different ages.

For instance, pulpits and committees deal with a dilemma that may have always been an issue but is most acute in our time: that is the question of opting for someone young who can attract young families versus an older leader who has the wisdom garnered by experience. In the co-pastorate, this question is dealt with in ways that address both needs.

In addition, this model bears fruit that benefits pastors and congregation alike. Better sermons, lessons and lectures are possible, because more time is afforded for preparation. Better pastoral care and spiritual direction can be carried out, because the personal time necessary for quality ministry is available.

What's more, administration and communication benefit from the proverbial *two heads* being better than *one*. In short, a co-pastorate allows more creativity, more energy, more enthusiasm, and a wider variety of ideas and insights.

This model naturally increases giftedness, while at the same time decreasing the

loneliness and stress that plague the ministries of so many pastors. In addition, the co-pastorate fosters the spiritual discipline of humility. It calls for placing ego aside by genuinely praying for one another and celebrating the successes of one's colleague.

I became aware of the advantages of such a ministry when I observed Hardy Clemons and John Claypool as co-pastors of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock, Texas. Here were two incredibly gifted ministers, both effective communicators and leaders.

In working together they were able to give Second Baptist diverse opportunities for spiritual growth and discipleship. Their collegiality encouraged one another and inspired so many ministers who watched them.

In our own context Griff Martin and I have been serving together for more than four years. Griff is one of the brightest ministers I know. He is intelligent, enthusiastic and deeply committed to Christian community. I have so much enjoyed his theological inquisitiveness and engaging personality.

What's more, he is a voracious reader, always sharing new thoughts and new reads. The result is that I have broadened my reading discipline to discover all kinds of new worlds. Hopefully, I have returned the favor. (Of course, both of our libraries have expanded to the point of spousal concern at home and the office!)

Sharing ministry with Griff has made me a better minister. He has made me more attentive to the world around me as well as to the still small voice that beckons me.

To share in such a calling makes ministry all the more meaningful. My sense is that the co-pastorate not only encourages longevity in a pastorate but also a living model of how the Gospel works its way out in our day and time. **BT**

—Mike Massar is co-pastor of University Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, La.



By Brett Younger

How can we keep from singing?

The persistent demand throughout the Bible that people of faith sing loud may seem cruel to those whose musical gifts do not fill the buckets in which we cannot carry a tune. “Come Christians, Join to Sing” would be less threatening if it was “Come Christians, Join to Talk.” “Come Christians, Join to Eat” would be nice.

When we sing “When in Our Music God Is Glorified,” some of us assume God is more glorified by the people singing around us. The cacophonous among us have learned to sing off-key at a volume that does not draw attention, with a rhythm that only we recognize.

Fortunately for the disharmonious, singing — at least the kind of singing described in scripture — has little to do with quality of voice and everything to do with openness of spirit. The tone-deaf in Colossae were glad to hear Paul say that their singing of “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” was to take place “in your hearts.” Some of us find it comforting that singing is not about what gets to the ear, so much as it is about what penetrates our souls. Maybe every now and then pastors should sing solos just to make that clear.

We become too sensible to sing. We admire efficiency over spirit. We are preoccupied with what seems useful. Without a song in our hearts we become dull people. We baptize our grouchiness and call it maturity. The opposite of singing is not silence, but critical restraint.

God, deliver us from being rigid, clenched-teeth people who try to be more earnest than God. Faith gives us a lightness of spirit. Have

you heard how it is that angels fly? G.K. Chesterton said, “Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly.” Conversely, someone suggested that Satan fell to hell by the sheer weight of gravity. He took himself so seriously.

If there is no music bursting within us, then we need to open ourselves to the joy God has offered. When you open the Bible, you hear music:

... the prophet Miriam, tambourine in hand, singing at the Exodus

... King David auditioning musicians to lead in worship

... psalmists writing symphonies for harps, lyres, trumpets, timbrels, strings, pipes and loud clashing cymbals (never a mention of quiet, soothing cellos)

The hymns of the early church are sprinkled through the New Testament. At the annunciation Mary bursts into the “Magnificat.” At Jesus’ birth a choir of angels breaks into song. Paul and Silas have favorite hymn night in prison. In Revelation the “Hallelujah Chorus” ushers in the kingdom of God. On virtually every page we hear the music of the holy that transcends what is expected.

A theology student went to the philosopher Paul Tillich with nagging questions about faith. Tillich responded to this young person by playing a recording of “Credo” (“I Believe”) from Bach’s B Minor Mass. “Credo” does not explain the Nicene Creed, but surrounds it with violins, trumpets, flutes, oboes and voices. Tillich realized that the most satisfactory answers to that student’s questions were more likely to be found in music than in sharper reasoning.

Some people sing life — 4-year-olds on their good days, poor people who do not

consider themselves poor, truly funny comedians, the best writers, genuine Christians, the ones who sing alleluia for the good they have been given. We have a song that we need to sing.

In the early 1960s, when racial conflict was first erupting in the Deep South, a Southern white person went to where the trouble was hottest to see for himself what was going on. He watched African Americans asking for their rights and watched them being beaten back. He returned home and a friend asked about what he had seen.

He said, “It looks bad. The culture’s against them. The laws are against them. The FBI is against them.”

His friend asked, “Do you think they’re going to lose?”

“No, I think they’re going to win.”

“You just said the laws are against them, the FBI is against them, and the whole culture is against them. Why do you think they’ll win?”

“They have this song.”

We have a song born within us each time we open our hearts to God’s presence. We have the song of God’s goodness, the hymn of the Almighty’s grace, the melody of the Creator’s mercy, the psalm of the Spirit’s love. How can we keep from singing? **BT**

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

Some people sing life — 4-year-olds on their good days, poor people who do not consider themselves poor, truly funny comedians, the best writers, genuine Christians, the ones who sing alleluia for the good they have been given.





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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Luke 1:68-79

Dec. 6, 2015

A Time for Praise

Have you ever heard news so good that you were dumbstruck, unable to speak? A whole genre of television “reality programs” are based on helping a needy family by renovating an inadequate home or building a new one, then capturing their response at a big “reveal.” The happy recipients are often at a loss for words, dissolving into happy tears before calming down enough to speak.

A man named Zechariah once received the best news of his life: that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a long-desired son despite their advanced age. He was also dumbstruck, not from joy but as punishment for not believing the news. In today’s text, Zechariah finds his voice again.

A backstory

Here’s the backstory. After a short preamble (1:1-4), Luke recounts the story of how the angel Gabriel visited an elderly priest named Zechariah, whose wife Elizabeth was also from a priestly family. The couple had longed for a child, but “Elizabeth was barren.” Like the patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah, they were past the normal age of childbearing.

Jews from priestly families far outnumbered positions in the temple, so priests served two-week stints on a rotating basis. Even then, priests were so abundant that they had to draw straws for the honor of taking incense into the temple, where it would simmer over charcoal on a small altar just outside the Holy of Holies.


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



Luke 1:76-77 –

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.”



Zechariah may have been waiting for that honor as long as he had dreamed of fatherhood, but his turn finally came (vv. 8-9). As the old priest approached the altar, though, the incense was forgotten: the angel Gabriel appeared, leaving the old priest terrified and overwhelmed with fear (vv. 11-12). 

The angel told Zechariah not to fear, and announced that he and Elizabeth would have a son, who should be named John and taught never to drink any wine or strong drink, after the fashion of the Nazirites. John would be a great man, the angel said, filled with the Holy Spirit and destined to become like the great prophet Elijah, calling many to repent “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (vv. 13-17).


Zechariah was dumfounded, though not yet dumbstruck. Struggling to believe, he reminded the angel that he and Elizabeth were *old*, and asked how he could know the angel was telling the truth (v. 18).

What greater sign could one have than a personal visit from an angel in the heart of the temple? Gabriel

reminded him who was speaking: he stood in the presence of God and had been sent from God with the message. Because of Zechariah’s unbelief, the angel said, he would be unable to say another word until all had been fulfilled (vv. 19-20).

Can you imagine how frustrating that must have been? In today’s text, the aged but happy father, silent for many months, finally gets his chance to speak.

A present story (vv. 68-75)

Elizabeth became pregnant, as the angel had predicted. Meanwhile, Gabriel also visited Mary, who happened to be related to Elizabeth. Mary responded with a song of praise that has become known as “the Magnificat” (vv. 46-55), in which she spoke of her child as the coming savior of the world. 

After Elizabeth gave birth, neighbors and relatives gathered for his ceremonial circumcision on the eighth day. They called for the baby to be named for his father, but Elizabeth insisted that his name would be John.

When they turned to Zechariah for his opinion, he took a tablet and wrote “His name is John” (vv. 59-63).

Immediately, Luke says, Zechariah’s “mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God” (v. 64). While the neighbors were filled with consternation and questions (vv. 65-66), Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and launched into a song of praise that has become known as “the Benedictus” (vv. 67-75).

Zechariah spoke as a prophet would, interpreting present events with an eye toward their future unfolding. He began by blessing God in words familiar from the Old Testament: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel” (v. 68a, compare 1 Sam. 25:32, 1 Kgs. 1:48, and Ps. 41:13, among others).

He then cited reasons why God should be so blessed: “for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (vv. 68b-71). 🇺🇸 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

Through John’s birth and Mary’s pregnancy, God had set in motion the long-awaited promise of deliverance through a savior born from the house of David. Here Zechariah seems to be speaking of Mary’s son, who had yet to be born. Since Mary had spent three months in Elizabeth and Zechariah’s home (vv. 39-46), Luke assumes that Zechariah would have heard about the angel’s annunciation to Mary and the predictions that accompanied it.

The belief that a ruler would arise from the house of David goes back to 2 Samuel 7 and the story of how David sought to build a house for God, but God promised instead to build a house (in the sense of a dynasty) for David, pledging that a descendant of David would rule forever. David’s earthly kingdom lasted only a few hundred years, but after the kingdom was destroyed, Israel’s prophets reinterpreted the promise to predict the

coming of a messiah anointed by God to deliver his people. 🇺🇸

The Jews had longed for a messiah who would rise up to lead Israel to vanquish their enemies and set up a new kingdom on earth, and many were disappointed to discover that Jesus had a different agenda. Zechariah spoke of how the savior would come to save Israel “from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (v. 71), but said nothing about how such deliverance would take place.

When Zechariah spoke of “we” and “us” as the objects of God’s beneficence, he probably had in mind the Hebrew people and the promises made to the ancestors (v. 72). Zechariah did not yet understand that the messiah’s mission would be to all people, but he did recognize that God’s salvation had a deeper purpose than allowing the Jews to run their own country. What is unsaid can be as significant as what is said: Zechariah mentioned the promises to Abraham, but said nothing about Israel being a great nation or controlling the land. He spoke of a descendant of David, but said nothing about the messiah ruling over anyone.

Rather, Zechariah seems to perceive a more spiritual purpose for Israel: God’s deliverance would come so “that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (vv. 74-75). 🇺🇸

A future story (vv. 76-79)

With v. 76, Zechariah turns from the promise of salvation through the messiah and addresses his own baby boy, who would have his own role to play in the drama of redemption. 🇺🇸 “And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High,” the proud prophet/father proclaimed, “for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by

the forgiveness of their sins” (vv. 76-77).

Readers who know the gospel story might interpret “the Lord” as Jesus, as John later spoke of himself as coming “to prepare the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4). Both John and his father, however, were quoting from Isa. 40:3, where the word “LORD” is Yahweh, the personal name God had revealed to Israel. Later followers of Jesus would refer to him as “lord,” but Zechariah had not taken that step. Neither he nor Mary could have fully understood the cryptic messages they had received or the specific roles their children would play.

Zechariah believed that John would do important preparatory work in the fulfillment of God’s emerging plan of redemption. Significantly, he understood this plan to be motivated “by the tender mercy of our God,” leading to a day of fulfillment when “the dawn from on high will break upon us” (v. 78). 🇺🇸

Again, Zechariah’s prophetic benediction avoids any language of conquest or an Israelite hegemony. The dawn he foresees will “give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,” and “guide our feet into the way of peace” (v. 79). John’s work would not prepare the way for a conquering king, but for the Prince of Peace.

The story of John’s birth and Zechariah’s “Benedictus” may be entertaining or informative, but what might it say to modern readers? How might we respond to this story?

First, Zechariah’s experience challenges us to listen for guidance God may send our way. Angelic visitations are not required: if we are attentive, the reading of scripture, the pastor’s preaching, or a faithful friend’s advice may bring the words we need to hear

Zechariah’s prediction also reminds us that God’s ultimate work is not one of conquest – even in the realms of culture or civil law – but of peace. How have we experienced peace through knowing Christ, and in what ways do we follow his observation that peacemakers are those who “will be called children of God”? (Matt. 5:9). **BT**

Bible Study

Zephaniah 3:14-20

with Tony W. Cartledge

Dec. 13, 2015

When God Sings


We live in changing times. Climate change has global temperatures rising, glaciers melting, and super-storms brewing. While those who own beachfront property are getting nervous as sea levels rise, island nations such as Kiribati, the Maldives, and Micronesia are in danger of disappearing altogether.

Political turmoil and power-grabbing activities by ISIS and other groups have wrecked formerly stable countries, brutally murdered thousands, destroyed cultural heritage sites, and sparked an immigration crisis that threatens to overwhelm Europe.

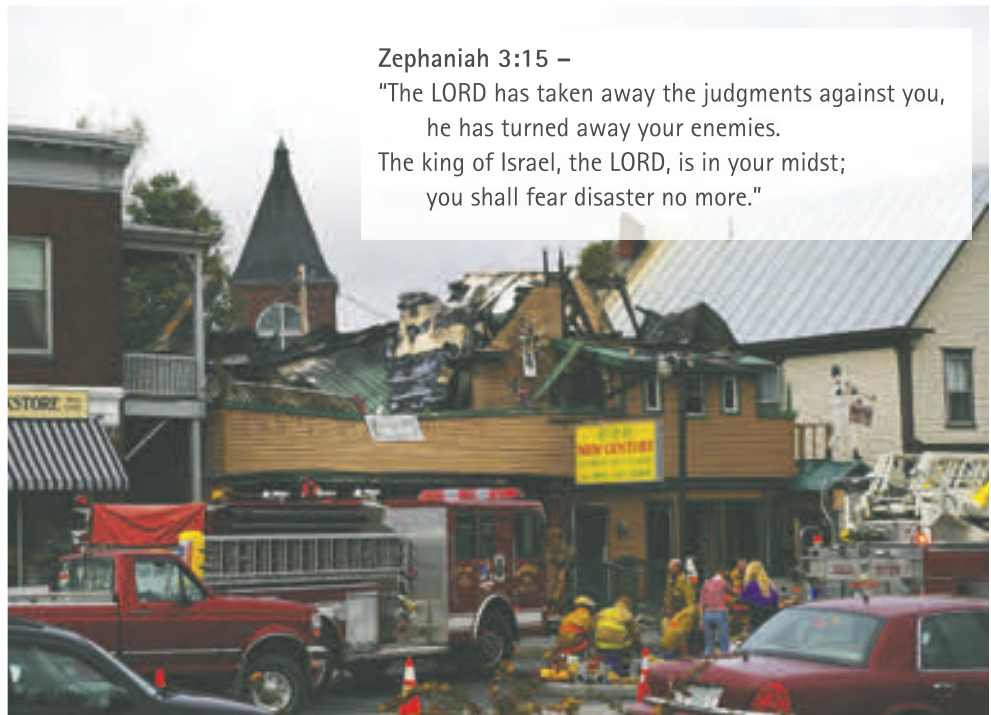
Times are changing, but we are not the first people to experience cultural shifts and political upheavals. Our text today derives from a period in Israel's history when times were about to change in a major way – both for bad and for good.

A “minor” prophet

Zephaniah is one of those prophets you may never have heard of unless you memorize the books of the Bible. We may think of him as being obscure, but Zephaniah's book suggests that he played a living and vital role in Israel's history.



The final form of Zephaniah is almost certainly postexilic, but the superscription identifies the prophet as having been active during the reign of King Josiah (640-609 BCE). 

Zephaniah's genealogy is traced back four generations (more than any other prophet) to Hezekiah. If this refers



Zephaniah 3:15 –

“The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.”


to the famous *King Hezekiah* (715-687 BCE), then Zephaniah was also the great-great grandson of another illustrious king.   A careful reading of the book shows that Zephaniah criticized the royal house, but never the king himself.

King Josiah is best remembered for having instigated a religious revival in Judah. He renovated the temple, ordered the destruction of altars to other gods, and instituted the book of Deuteronomy – purported to having been found during temple restorations – as the law of the land. Since part of Zephaniah's preaching was sharply critical of Judah's cultural and religious life, his activity, along with that of Jeremiah, may have helped to spark Josiah's revival.

A major message

There are two important aspects to Zephaniah's prophecy. The first part of his book is devoted to a scathing criticism of sinful people everywhere, starting with other nations and concluding God's people who lived in Judah. They had failed to follow God's

way, he believed, in thinking that they could worship both Baal and Yahweh. Zephaniah saw disaster looming on the horizon, and he insisted that it was well deserved.

Zephaniah's prophetic message of doom reminds me of an old song written by Terri Sharp and recorded by Don McLean: “When the gates are all down, and the signal light's flashing, and the whistle is screamin' in vain – and you stay on the track, ignoring the facts, well, you can't blame the wreck on the train.” 

The prophets sometimes described that coming train as an imminent invasion of a particular nation, such as Babylonia or Assyria. Zephaniah may have had a particular enemy in mind, but he believed Israel's greatest fear should be a coming day of divine judgment, which he referred to as the “Day of Yahweh” (1:7, 14). People in Israel traditionally looked forward to a “Day of the LORD” as a time of deliverance and vindication, but the prophets were convinced it would not be a day of good news for everyone. If Yahweh was

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



coming to punish the wicked, liberate the oppressed, and vindicate the righteous, should that not affect the wicked in Israel, as well?

Like Amos (5:18, 20), Ezekiel (30:3), Joel (1:15; 2:11, 31), and other prophets, Zephaniah saw God's impending judgment as a train wreck waiting to happen. Zephaniah's prophetic warning bell rang clearly: If the people of Judah did not recognize the peril of their wicked path and get off the tracks, they would be destroyed. If any survived to think about it, they would know that "you can't blame the wreck on the train."

That sentiment remains true. How easy it is to find ourselves loitering on the train tracks of life, neglecting God's way and courting danger by insisting on our own way. We hurt other people, we abuse our own bodies, we focus on our own needs to the neglect of others who need us, we engage in risky behaviors.


When we live like that, we are a train wreck waiting to happen: waiting to contract a preventable disease, waiting to crash while drinking or texting, waiting to wreck a marriage. Zephaniah's warning is a clanging bell, a flashing light, and a lowered gate to warn us of impending danger. But if we ignore the warning, when trouble comes, we can't blame the wreck on the train.

A joyful song (vv. 14-20)

Zephaniah saw a coming day of disaster for those who have rejected God's way, but he also saw beyond the train wreck to the possibility of a new day of life and hope. A transition comes in 3:9-13, as the prophet looks to a day when God would reverse the multilingual curse of Genesis 11 and all peoples would share the same speech (literally, "a pure lip"). A poor and humble remnant of Israel would return, he declared, minus the proud and haughty.

Zephaniah was not the only prophet to include both words of dizzying doom and glorious hope. Amos (9:11-15) and Zechariah (ch. 14) also preached judgment along with encouraging words of hope, as did Isaiah (chs. 40-55) and

Hosea (ch. 11). Zephaniah declared that a time would come when Israel's present danger and future judgment would come to an end. He saw a new day when God's people would again put their trust in God and populate Jerusalem in a sublime new age not unlike the New Testament image of a new heaven and a new earth.

That good news would call for joyful song on the part of God's people, and that's what we find in today's text, as Zephaniah looked to a day of celebration: "Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem!" (3:14). 

Zephaniah exulted in Israel's cause for celebration: the Lord would reverse the judgments that the people deserved, turn away Israel's enemies, and dwell in Israel's midst as king, so there would be no need to fear any future disaster (3:15-18).

Speaking for God in words that recall Mic. 4:6-7, Zephaniah declared: "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD" (vv. 19-20).


These verses seem to be directed to Israel in exile, as a promise that a purified remnant of the Jews would return from Babylon and live an idyllic and peaceful life in the land of promise. As such, they may have been proclaimed by a later prophet, one who expected the turnaround to occur soon: it would happen "before your eyes."


The promise was not fulfilled in the initial return from exile, however, which turned out to be a quite depressing affair. It would have to look to a new future in a new age. Micah (4:1-4)

and Isaiah (2:1-4, ch. 11) had also spoken of the eschatological age as a time when all would live in harmony and no one would have cause to fear.

You may notice that several themes in this passage sound a lot like the New Testament. Zephaniah's insistence that God would take away judgments that Israel deserved helped prepare the way for the New Testament concept of salvation by grace. The Gospel writers and Paul declared that Christ came precisely to take the judgment of God's people upon himself, so that we might be forgiven of our sin and made right with God (John 1:29, 1 Cor. 15:3, 2 Cor. 5:21).

Zephaniah's idyllic picture of God dwelling as king in Israel's midst is reflected in Jesus' persistent announcement that the kingdom of God had come near – that the rule of God was present in Christ's own ministry (Mark 1:15, Matt. 4:23; Luke 10:9, 11).

Look back for a moment. Zephaniah's happy oracle began with a call for the people to sing praise for the Lord's steadfast love (v. 14), but in v. 17 he declares that *God* will sing for joy in celebration of the prospect of dwelling among a faithful people. 

Can you draw that picture in your head? Can you hear that sound? Can you imagine the voice of God, like a great waterfall with rhythm, singing with joy?  Zephaniah saw a day when God would go looking for his people, would bring them home, and sing for joy over the reunion. Just imagine!

Have you known the joy of being found by God – saved from your lost condition, forgiven by divine grace, born anew and wrapped warmly in the swaddling clothes of eternal love? It's no accident that this text is read during the Advent season.

When the angels sang for the shepherds in those ringing voices that declared glory to God and peace on earth, it was just a prelude to the day when God's people will gather home, the day when the great God of the universe will sing for joy in a way that echoes even now in the hearts and souls of those who love him. **BT**

Bible Study

Micah 5:1-5a

with Tony W. Cartledge

Dec. 20, 2015

Small Town, Big Hope

Have you ever said something that you intended to be understood one way, but someone took it another way, and by the time a few others had taken it up, it became something different altogether?

It's easy for that to happen, and not only because people may have misheard or misreported what they heard. Sometimes we fail to communicate clearly. If I should say "I saw a boy with a telescope," would you assume that it was I or the boy who was equipped for distance viewing? Imagine this ad: "Wanted: sitter for a baby about 18 years old." Would job-hunters assume that the task involves an overaged baby, or that applicants should be 18 to apply?

Meaning may also rest with the hearer. We all live within our own contexts, with our own perspectives, and may hear the same words but interpret them in different ways. A young man may intend nothing but admiration by telling a classmate "Wow, you're pretty *and* smart," but she could easily take the remark as sexually demeaning, as if women were not normally capable of being both attractive and intelligent.

A pre-exilic prophet

We find something similar with today's text. It is found in a book attributed to a prophet from the eighth century BCE, but it seems to reflect a sixth-century context, and it was later given a messianic interpretation.

The prophet in question is Micah, who lived and worked in and about Jerusalem "in the days of Kings Jotham,



Micah 5:2 –

"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Ahaz, and Hezekiah" (1:1), which would have been the latter half of the eighth century BCE. 📌 Micah was probably born about 760 BCE, so he would have been alive when Jotham and Ahaz ruled, but his prophecies appear to date from the reign of Hezekiah. 📌

Micah hailed from Moresheth, a village not far from the Philistine city of Gath, in an area of fair and fertile hills about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem. 📌 Micah had a keen social conscience and was a champion of the peasantry. He promoted ethical living and forcefully condemned the injustice, greed, and decadence of the controlling aristocracy who lived in the cities.

Micah's name is probably a contraction of *micaiah*, meaning "Who is like Yahweh?" Micah was a gifted prophet who apparently had some influence, at least on Hezekiah. He is, in fact, the only prophet whose work is quoted by name in the Old Testament. In Jer. 26:18-19, certain elders of the land quoted Micah's prophecy that Jerusalem would become "a plowed

field" and noted that King Hezekiah responded by entreating God's favor, so that destruction was withheld. 📌

A post-exilic message

Micah's preaching in chs. 1-3 is almost uniformly critical of Judah and Israel, predicting doom and gloom as a result of the peoples' sins. His oracles that can be linked to historical connections are almost inevitably pessimistic. There are, however, some elements of hope scattered within the book, especially in chs. 4-5.

The oracles of hope in chs. 4-7 seem out of sync with the Micah of chs. 1-3. Just as the book of Isaiah switches gears (and centuries) between chs. 39 and 40, ch. 4 of Micah appears to shift from an eighth-century to a sixth-century audience. This has led most critical scholars to speculate that these oracles derive from a later hand, an admirer of Micah who sought to apply his teaching to a new day by showing that the doom predicted in Micah 1-3 had served an educational purpose, preparing a

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remnant to find hope for a new and better day. 🇺🇸

Lectionary readings typically begin with the address to Bethlehem in 5:2, but we shouldn't ignore the context of conflict set by 5:1, where the prophet says "Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek." The verb translated by the NRSV as "walled around" could also be rendered as "slash yourselves" (NET, HCSB) or "gather your troops" (NAS95, NIV11).

What is clear is that Jerusalem is portrayed as being under siege. Gathering troops would be an appropriate response to a siege, but it's quite possible that the prophet was criticizing those who expressed their fear and panic by cutting themselves with knives, a practice more in keeping with the worship of Baal (cf. 1 Kgs. 18:28), but forbidden for the Israelites (Deut. 14:1).

To underscore the nation's humiliation, Micah declared that the enemy was striking Israel's ruler on the cheek with a rod (or scepter), a royal slap in the face that emphasized the people's impotence before the enemy.

The foe responsible for the siege is not identified. 🇺🇸 This is probably intentional: by leaving the enemy unnamed, Mic. 5:1 allows later readers to imagine themselves in the prophet's picture, not just to relive the nation's shameful ignominy, but also to claim the hope that follows.

While Jerusalem sat under siege with its king being slapped around, the prophet anticipated the birth of a new king who would arise to set things right. He looked south of the powerful city to the village of Bethlehem, the birthplace of David, and declared "Bethlehem Ephrathah, you are small among the clans of Judah; One will come from you to be ruler over Israel for Me" (v. 2). The verse goes on to indicate that the coming ruler would be "from antiquity, from eternity" (NRSV), perhaps better read as "from the distant past" (NET).

The clear inference is that the coming ruler would be a virtual second coming of David, still remembered as

Israel's greatest king and the first to truly unite the country.

The interpretation of v. 3 is difficult because its verbs and pronouns don't have clear antecedents. A common reading is that God is the subject of "give them up," meaning God would leave the people of Israel to their enemies until "she who is in labor" – the mother of the ruler to be born in Bethlehem – had given birth. Afterward, "the rest of his brothers" (the king's countrymen) would return to the people of Israel.

The new king would arise to shepherd the people of Israel "in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God" (v. 4a: note that LORD translates the divine name Yahweh). The new leader with the old heritage would bring a new era of security and peace to the people (v. 4b-5a). This promise could bring hope to Israelites facing a crisis, whether it was caused by Assyria, Babylon, or the Roman Empire.

A messianic interpretation

History tells us that this promise was not fulfilled, at least not in the expected way. No king born in Bethlehem arose to deliver Israel from the Assyrians or the Babylonians. Although the Persian king Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home, they functioned as a sub-province of Persia with appointed governors. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah had hopes that governor Zerubbabel, a descendant of David born in Babylon, would lead Israel to new heights, but it didn't happen.

How, then, could the prophecy be fulfilled?

As the Jews suffered under many rulers, prophecies such as this one (along with several from Isaiah and certain of the psalms) came to be interpreted as predictions of a messiah who would yet arise to lead Israel into a new day as a nation of righteous people who

would become the envy of the world.

After the life and ministry of Jesus, the early church reinterpreted these same prophecies as pointers to Christ, a different kind of messiah who would reinvent Israel as a people of God composed of believers from all nations.

Thus, it's not surprising that Matthew's story of the wise men's search for a baby king has the paranoid King Herod calling on Judaism's most prominent scribes to ascertain whether the scriptures had predicted the birth of a new king, and where. They responded by quoting Micah's assertion that a ruler would arise from Bethlehem of Judah (Matt. 2:4-6, see "The Hardest Question" online for more about this quotation).

Both Matthew and Luke are careful to locate the place of Jesus' birth as Bethlehem, even though his childhood was spent in Nazareth. They also pointedly identify Jesus as a descendant of David, the very "shoot from Jesse" (David's father) that Isaiah had predicted (Isa. 11:1, 10), the David redivivus of whom Jeremiah spoke (Jer. 30:9), the shepherd-king David promised by Ezekiel (34:23-24, 37:24-25).

But the early church understood Jesus to be more than the second coming of David, however idealized the ancient king was. The kingdom Jesus ruled would not be a worldly empire, but a community of faith with roots in the earth and its branches in eternity.

How ironic it is that Bethlehem today has become a walled city, fenced in by an Israeli government so concerned about security that Jerusalem's Palestinian neighbors in the town of Jesus' birth are kept behind razor wire and not allowed to leave without a special permit.

The ancient Jews were not the only people to live in a world torn by dissension. As they longed for a "second coming" of David, so today we look with anticipation to Christ's return and a day when the Bethlehem-born shepherd-king brings security and peace to all. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Samuel 2:12-26

Dec. 27, 2015

A Time for Growth

Have you ever noticed that most action-adventure films have the same basic plot? Everything seems to be going fine until some bad guys come on the scene, mess things up, and threaten the future. Good guys arise to save the day, but run into all kinds of trouble and almost fail before finally pulling it out in the end. Movies with more of an artsy or postmodern twist often have more complicated characters: good guys who have a dark side, or bad guys who find redemption.

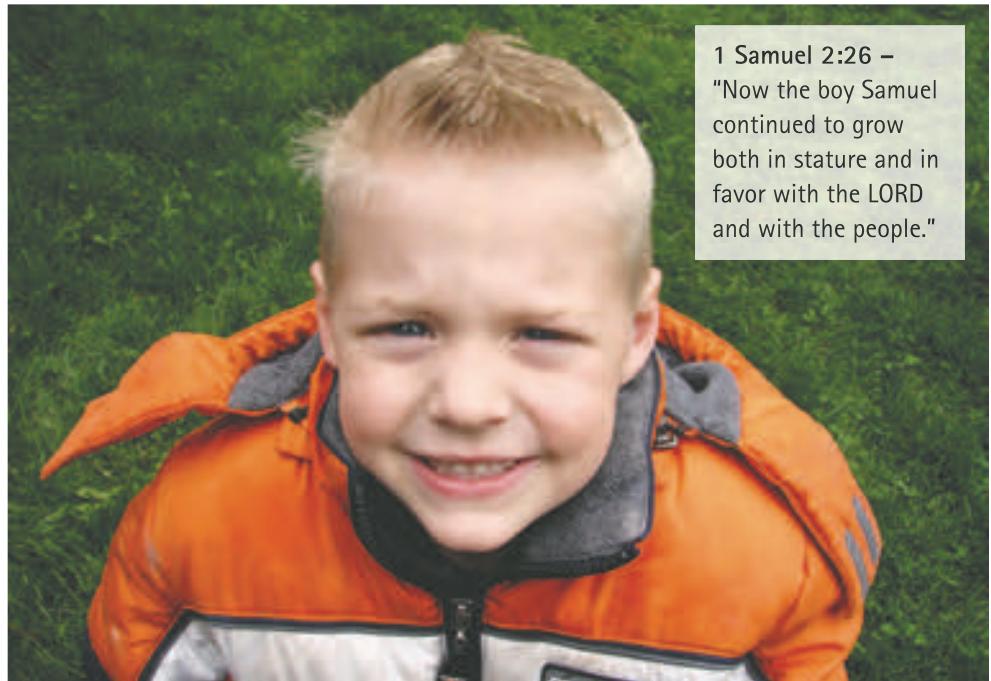
Stories featuring good-versus-evil characters are as old as storytelling. The Bible, for example, is full of both villains and heroes. Some of them are also complex people: David, for example, was mainly a hero, but capable of villainy.

The characters in today's text are more clearly drawn. There are two bad guys, and one good one. Let's take a closer look. 🛠

Two worthless sons (vv. 12-17, 22-25)

Two of the most dastardly characters in all of scripture are men we don't hear much about. They are the dissolute sons of Eli, who succeeded him as priests in the temple at Shiloh. If Daffy Duck were describing them, he'd say they were *dethhhhhpicable*.

When Hannah first came to the temple and prayed for a child (1 Samuel 1), elderly Eli was still the chief priest, but his two grown sons carried out most of the priestly functions (1:3). The sons have surprising names: Hophni is an Egyptian word meaning "toad." His



1 Samuel 2:26 –
"Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people."

younger brother was named Phinehas, which is Hebrew – but it means "brass lips."

Priests generally gave their children theophoric names, incorporating one or more references to God. Later on, for example, Samuel would name his two sons Joel ("Yahweh is God") and Abijah ("my father is Yahweh"). 🛠 It's likely that Eli would have given his children similar names, and that the author has adopted or supplied unflattering nicknames to reflect their unbecoming "service" as priests.

Despite having grown up in the temple at Shiloh, raised by a priest, Hophni and Phinehas turned out to be shysters of the first order, lacking respect for either God or God's people. Unfortunately, like most sons in ancient Israel, they were expected to take over their father's business, and they had no business doing that.

The text flatly states that "Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD" (v. 12). The word "scoundrels" translates the phrase "sons of belial." The word "belial" means "worthlessness" or "wickedness," and

was such a strong word that the Qumran community used it as their primary word for the devil.

The author's word choice is significant: when Hannah had come to the temple and made a solemn vow in asking for a son, old Eli had thought she was drunk. Hannah responded "don't take me for a wicked woman!" Literally, "don't take me for a daughter of belial!" Hannah was not the one who was wicked. That honor belonged to Eli's sons.

Now, the worst thing about the contemptible pair is that, though they served as priests, "they had no regard for Yahweh" – or more literally: "they did not know Yahweh." The Hebrew word "to know" suggests an intimate relationship based on personal experience: not just knowing *about* someone, but knowing them personally. Hophni and Phinehas grew up in church, as it were, but they did not know the Lord. It is possible.

The narrator catalogs some of their reprehensible practices: they took more than their share of boiled meat from the people's sacrificial offerings

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(vv. 13-14), and they demanded additional meat raw with the fat untrimmed – a clear violation of the law (vv. 15-16). They threatened violence if the people did not comply. 📖 📖

The scripture's judgment is, "This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt" (v. 17). They had no regard for the Lord who gave them life. They led services of worship, but they themselves did not worship. They knew all the rituals and how to use them to their advantage, but they did not know the Lord. They treated God's special gifts with contempt, and violated their sacred trust with God's people.

And that was not the end of it: v. 22 claims that the two married men also used the women who served at the temple gate for their sexual pleasure. Given their forceful means of obtaining meat, the women's participation in the illicit liaisons may not have been voluntary.

Eli tried to straighten out his bull-headed sons, according to vv. 23-25, but it was too late. They dismissed him as a senile old man, refused to listen, and did as they pleased. Ultimately, they became the death of Eli, and of themselves (1 Sam. 4:1-18). The narrator's lack of sympathy for them is evident: he declares "it was the will of the LORD to kill them" (v. 25, see "The Hardest Question" online for more on this).

Is it any wonder that the writer calls them scoundrels?

One worthy lad (vv. 18-21, 26)

The family of Eli was hopeless, and his future was nonexistent (2:27-36, 3:11-18), but that does not mean that the temple was doomed, or that God's work was ended. Intertwined with the sordid story of two sorry sons is a ray of hope in the form of another son, a boy who serves the Lord with innocence and obedience.

Samuel had been born as a result of his mother's vow, and brought to the temple when he was probably no more than three years old. We don't know how

long he had been there when the narrator described him as "ministering before the LORD" (v. 18), and we don't know what type of ministry he was performing: the word was a technical term used for priestly service, but such service could take many forms. Samuel's priestly status was also indicated by the linen ephod the narrator says he wore. 📖 We presume that Samuel was still a growing boy, for each year his mother Hannah "made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice" (v. 19).

Eli blessed Hannah, we are told, and prayed that God would give her another child to replace Samuel. In time, we read, she bore three more sons and two daughters (vv. 19-20), but the focus remains on Samuel, who "grew up in the presence of the LORD" (v. 21). Samuel's growth did not stop there. After reminding us again of how wicked Eli's sons were, the narrator tells us that "the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people" (v. 26). 📖

Even so, though Samuel grew up "in the presence of the LORD" and "in favor with the LORD," the story of Samuel's call in the following chapter tells us that prior to that nighttime encounter, "Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him" (3:7).

Even for a good, well-trained, and cooperative boy like Samuel, there is a difference between knowing *about* God and knowing God through personal experience.

Samuel's growth in faith was a progressive thing. He was a boy who ministered, like a young acolyte who proudly adorns an alb and lights the candles on Sunday morning. He grew in the presence of the Lord, like a child faithfully brought to Sunday school and worship. He grew in favor with the Lord, like a teenager who begins

to integrate childhood faith with daily experience and comes to a personal encounter with God.

But growth continues: later on, the narrator points to yet another stage in Samuel's development. After he responded to God's prophetic call on his life, we read, "As Samuel grew up, the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the LORD" (3:19-20).

A host of questions

None of us are born fully formed, either as human people or as Christian believers. We all must go through stages of growth and increasing maturity, but it is not automatic. We may have loving parents who take us to church and caring friends who do their best to bring us to God, but every person must make his or her own choices.

We've all read or heard horror stories of priests, pastors, or youth ministers who used their position of influence to abuse children or young people. We've all known people who grew up in church but abandoned their faith. We are familiar with our own struggle to grow in faith that sometime feels like two steps forward and three steps back.

Samuel's experience – especially as compared to that of Hophni and Phinehas – reminds us that we can choose to mature in faith or to disown it. We can choose positive paths or negative ones. We can become people who bless the world, or people who honor ourselves alone. 📖

Eli's sons "had no regard for the LORD," while Samuel "ministered before the LORD." Eli's sons were great sinners "in the sight of the LORD," while Samuel grew "in favor with the LORD and with the people." How much of Hophni and Phinehas lives in us? How much of Samuel?

With a new year approaching, this story of two bad boys and a good one offers us important food for thought. Going forward, what path will we take? **BT**

Readers' Responses

Safer, more wholesome America

EDITOR: While the opinions of John Pierce in the September issue ("Wholesomeness for some is not liberty for all," page 32) are valid and valuable, I believe he fails to understand the perspective of J. Robert White when he found himself "longing for the United States of America in which I grew up."

I, too, grew up in that place and at that time and my memories are also of a safer, more wholesome America. But these memories are not, as Pierce suggests, greatly romanticized. They are real. Not because they were universal, but because they were the experiences of *children*.

One of the prevailing theories of parenting at that time seems to have been protecting children from the problems of grown-ups. A favorite sentence when adult issues arose was, "Okay, you kids go outside and play now."

Over the years I've met men and women our age from all parts of the country, from other races, and from a wide range of economic circumstances who remember that time as White and I do. Most of us were neither wealthy nor insensitive. We were children, and we grew up soon enough. As adults, we became active in the attack on the problems from which we had been sheltered for a brief, innocent but authentic time.

Patricia A. Kerley
Gainesville, Ga.

Religion controversies among Christians

Controversies come from statements by humans starting with Bible records. Humans fail to seek the meaning of life from the purposes of God and the patterns of God's activity. As a retired computer professional, I am

very aware of the natural patterns of nature that recent technology has allowed mankind to forecast weather, climate change, space activities and other things that God established in the beginning but better understand today with modern technology. Since God established the patterns and purposes for everything, why are there controversies?

Three messages in God's Word help me answer this question:

Genesis 1:27 — *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

The purpose for mankind was to have freedom to choose activity but to live by the purposes and pattern of God. The freedom of choice allowed mankind to do activities not consistent with the purposes of God and the patterns of God's activity.

God then gave mankind rules for behavior that would help mankind to understand the purposes of God and the patterns of God's activity. These rules led mankind to believe that following the rules is all that God desired. Of course, people did not all agree on the details in following the rules for behavior.

John 3:3 — *Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

This is how God answered the question regarding mankind being rewarded because mankind followed the behavior rules. Of course, to be born again raised questions.

Matthew 22:37-40 — *Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*

Here God explains the rules for behavior. When mankind follows this statement

In the Know

Ardmore Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., has called the following ministry staff: Ellen Price, minister of invitation and hospitality; Mike Nuckolls, minister of missional engagement; Jim Davidson, music and arts educator; and Julie Suggs, preschool director.

Mack Hannah died Aug. 20 in Dunwoody, Ga., at age 66. He served as pastor of Harpeth Heights Baptist Church in Bellevue, Tenn., and Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta. Also, he served at Belmont University in Nashville as vice president of spiritual development.

Ron Hinson is pastor of Lafayette Baptist Church in Fayetteville, N.C. He previously served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Whiteville, N.C.

J. Brent Walker has announced plans to retire at the end of 2016 as executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. He has worked with the Washington, D.C.-based organization since 1989 and has been the group's leader since 1999.

by Jesus, they have been born again. They continue in the image of God as to choices of purpose and life pattern. However, in the new life, their purpose and pattern is to have the same purpose and pattern that God has for the world. The born-again Christian follows the image of God as described in Genesis 1:27.

Controversies are caused by mankind attempting to use behavior standards to define how mankind can please God when God's word tells us that it is our relationship with God and other humans that defines how to please God.

William H. Osborne, Deacon
Tallowood Baptist Church
Houston, Texas



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A Baptist among the Mennonites

Having attended the Baptist World Alliance gatherings in Birmingham, England in 2005, and in Honolulu, Hawaii in 2010, I considered attending the recent one in Durban, South Africa. Due to the lengthy flying time, however, I drove to Harrisburg, Penn., to attend the Mennonite World Conference the same week in July.

The MWC meets every six years; this was its 16th gathering. The BWA meets every five years; this was its 21st congress. The Mennonites' theme was "Walking with God." The Baptists' theme was "Jesus Christ, the Door."

When I met people at the Mennonite gathering, I introduced myself and added: "I'm a Baptist." The response was either "How did you hear about this?" or "What are you doing here?" To the first question I answered: "I subscribe to the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* and read about it there."

To the second question, I answered: "Five generations back, my family was Mennonite." Next came the question about the family name: It was Good, which is like Smith in America.

I arrived early to go on an all-day tour of Mennonite historic churches in eastern Pennsylvania. I was the only Baptist on the bus of 28 people. Our guides were two young men who work at the Mennonite Heritage Center in Harleysville, Penn.

We visited the first Mennonite church in America in Germantown, founded in 1708 in a log cabin. Deep Run East Mennonite Church, which is across the road from the Deep Run West Mennonite Church, provided our lunch.

The two churches split in the 1840s over progressive changes. Both current pastors attended the lunch and answered questions.

Someone asked, "What about beer drinking?" One pastor said, "We alternate." The other pastor said, "And designate a driver." They both laughed. The two churches celebrate Thanksgiving together, work on mission projects and share the cemetery.

That afternoon we toured the Indian Creek Church that seats 100 and the Franconian Mennonite Church across the parking lot that holds 1,000.

For dinner we ate at the Norristown Mennonite Church, organized in 1990 from three churches — Hispanic, African American and white. The church has a worship team with three pastors from each of these groups.



On Tuesday, after registering, I attended the first worship service in the arena, ate in the main hall along with hundreds of others, and met my hostess, Anna Predoti, at the shuttle bus. A thousand people stayed in 350 Mennonite homes. Messiah College also housed attendees.

Anna was raised Mennonite. Her husband, Joe Predoti, who came from Italy at the age of three, grew up Catholic. They both attend the Lititz Mennonite Church, and both went to the MWC. Their lovely home is in Brunnerville, a tiny village near Lititz.

From Wednesday through Saturday I attended morning and evening worship services and workshops in the afternoons. The opening worship began with a parade of people carrying banners and singing "When the Saints Go Marching In."

The preachers did not wear suits and ties. In fact, one wore blue jeans. Preceding the main sermon in the evening, we heard a sermon from one or two Young Anabaptists. The choir, whose members came from different countries, performed at all the services.

I attended a workshop given in two parts: first, the history of the shameful events at Munster, Germany in 1534-1535, followed by "What do we have to understand through the history of Munster?"

In these sessions three Amish men attended, one of whom was a bishop from Iowa. One speaker said that all Christian groups have something of which they are ashamed. I thought about our own Baptist split in 1845 over the issue of slavery.

I also attended these workshops: "Walking

with Godly Books," "Gender Challenges in a Changing World," "Cultural Chameleons" and "Walking with God in Politics."

Because of a half-day tour of Gettysburg, led by a Brethren in Christ pastor, I was not able to attend the workshop "Forgiving and Healing: the Amish Experience at Nickel Mines." Having read the book and seen the movie *Amish Grace* about the murder of schoolgirls on Oct. 2, 2006, I was interested in the session.

However, I was able to chat with a woman who did attend. She said the mother of one of the girls who died was very articulate in describing the events of that terrible day and its aftermath. Herman Bontrager spoke, along with community members from Nickel Mines.

I met one Southern Baptist who now attends a Mennonite church. I heard that a Quaker and a Catholic also attended the workshop.

On Sunday I worshiped with Anna and Joe at their Lititz Mennonite Church, where I heard a Lithuanian pastor preach with an American woman interpreting. After the service we had a "pitch-in" lunch in the basement that was planned in honor of the visitors to the Mennonite World Conference.

I highly recommend gathering with our cousins in the faith. The next MWC will be held in Indonesia in 2021. **BT**

—Nikki Stoddard Schofield is a deacon at Speedway Baptist Church, Indianapolis, Ind. She is the author of four Civil War historical novels (civilwarromances.com) and is writing her fifth, titled *Confederates in Canada*.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the sixth 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

John Quincy Adams (1825-1829)

As a young child, John Quincy Adams watched the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill at Boston, not far from his 1767 birthplace of Braintree (now Quincy), Mass. The Revolutionary War won during his teenage years, in early adulthood he followed with keen interest the drafting and ratification of the United States Constitution.

When not observing the foundational events of the American nation, young Adams, the son of a diplomat and future president, traveled to France, Holland and Russia before graduating from Harvard in 1787.

The youthful Adams did more than follow in his father's political footsteps. Raised in his parents' Unitarian (Congregational) church, the First Parish Church of Braintree, Adams as a young adult chose to remain in the faith as he settled into his own career.

Admitted to the bar in 1791, Adams briefly practiced law in Boston, near his hometown of Quincy. Although seemingly satisfied with the life of a lawyer, the world beckoned yet again.

Returning to Europe in 1794, Adams for three years served as President George Washington's minister to the Netherlands. In this capacity he played a small role in effecting the Jay Treaty of 1795, an agreement averting a second war with Great Britain. Evidencing his confidence in Adams, Washington called him "the most valuable public character now abroad."

Heritage and experience propelled the younger Adams ever upward. Now married — to Louisa Catherine Johnson, British-born daughter of an American consul — Adams served as minister to Prussia during his father's presidency, afterward entering elective politics.



First voted into the Massachusetts legislature, he then served a term in the U.S. Senate prior to an 1809 appointment by James Madison as America's first minister to Russia. During this time Adams led the American delegation in the Treaty of Ghent, ending the War of 1812.

A brief appointment as minister to Britain followed, after which Adams with his family returned to America to serve as secretary of state for the two terms of James Monroe's presidency.

While in the Senate, Adams taught part time at Harvard, but only after securing a waiver from signing the faculty declaration of religious conformity. Nonetheless appreciative of the Christian scriptures, Adams as secretary of state assumed a position as a vice president of the American Bible Society, remaining in that capacity until his death.

He wrote: "In accepting the appointment I am duly sensible to the honour conferred upon me by this invitation to join the assembly of those whose voices in unison with the heavenly host at the birth of the Saviour, proclaim good tidings of great joy to all people."

A devoted churchman, in 1821 he helped found First Unitarian Church (now All Souls

Church) in the District of Columbia.

Seeking the presidency in 1824, Adams vied for the position as one of five candidates. None obtained a majority electoral vote, sending the election to the House of Representatives for a second vote. Against his four southern opponents, Adams prevailed in the House vote, becoming only the second non-southern president of the United States, and the first not among the ranks of America's founding fathers.

John Quincy Adams' inaugural presidential address touched upon religion only briefly, offering no mention of God. The newly-elected president did, however, affirm freedom of religion. He also pledged "by the solemnities of religious obligation to the faithful performance of the duties allotted to me in the station to which I have been called."

President Adams, viewing government in the service of the freedom and betterment of all (including African Americans and Native Americans), set his sights on national infrastructure and science. His advocacy for the construction of federal highways, canals, astronomical observatories and a national university met stiff resistance from southern congressmen determined to advance the cause of slavery through states' rights. Nonetheless, the completion of the Erie Canal occurred during Adams' presidency.

Frustrated by congressional opposition, Adams declared the presidential office to be "harassing" and "wearying." Perhaps mercifully, he lost a re-election bid in 1828, soundly defeated by southerner Andrew Jackson.

Religion, meanwhile, offered some comfort to Adams. He stood apart from previous presidents, including his father, in — sometimes — expressing belief in the divinity of Jesus, the doctrine of the Trinity and the existence of an afterlife. He also wrote hymns and religious poetry, frequently mentioning God in his diary.

Yet a dark side of doubt lingered in

Adams' mind. Ever the rationalist, he wavered between opposition, reluctant affirmation and outright doubt of many Christian tenets. Human depravity, predestination and vicarious atonement he found offensive.

Enjoying church services, he approved of the preaching of "sound morals" but not "doctrinal speculation." Critical of many preachers, Adams determined "to content myself with practicing the dictates of God and reason so far as I can judge for myself."

In his diary Adams once confided his "judgment that the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ is not countenanced by the New Testament. As little can I say that it is clearly revealed. It is often obscurely intimated; sometimes directly, and sometimes indirectly, asserted; but left on the whole, in a debatable state, never to be either demonstrated or refuted till another revelation shall clear it up."

Aside from doctrine, Adams' religious faith found firmer expression in opposition to slavery. On numerous occasions as president he attended African-American congregational services. In 1826 he wrote the following words as part of a sonnet: "Who but shall learn that freedom is the prize / Man still is bound to rescue or maintain; / That nature's God commands the slave to rise, / And on th' oppressor's head to break his chain. / Roll, years of promise, rapidly roll round, / Till not a slave shall on this earth be found."

Following his presidential years, Adams' Massachusetts constituency voted him into the House of Representatives in 1830. "My election as president of the United States was not half so gratifying," he said of his House victory. Finding great happiness and purpose as a representative, therein he remained until his death.

In the House the former president's religious faith in human equality propelled him to the forefront of the ascendant abolitionist movement and set the stage for the ultimate triumph of emancipation.

Incensed over D.C.'s thriving slave

market, Adams in 1838 expressed anger against Christian slaveholders (including many southern congressmen) for "taxing their learning and ingenuity to prove that the Bible sanctions slavery; that Abraham, Isaac and Paul were slave-holders; and that St. Paul is the apostle of man-stealers, because he sent Onesimus back to his master Philemon. These preachers of the Gospel might just as well call our extermination of the Indians an obedience to Divine commands because Jehova commanded the children of Israel to exterminate the Canaanitish nations."

Arguing before the Supreme Court in 1841 and against the administration of Martin Van Buren, Adams secured the freedom of the slaves on the ship *Amistad*. Three years later he successfully led a movement to retract House rules preventing abolitionists from petitioning Congress for the abolition of slavery.

In addition, Adams became the first congressman to insist that the government could free slaves during time of war. Some two decades later, President Abraham Lincoln used Adams' wartime slavery argument in crafting the rationalization for the Emancipation Proclamation.

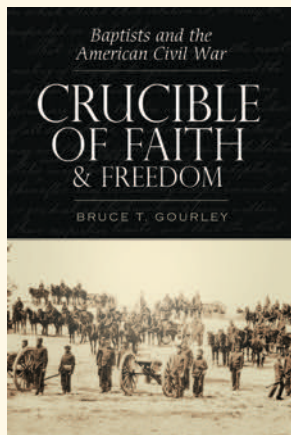
Near the end of his life Adams summarized his faith in words that conveyed his mind's lifelong religious tensions: "I reverence God as my creator. As creator of the world. I reverence him with holy fear. I venerate Jesus Christ as my redeemer; and, as far as I can understand, the redeemer of the world. But this belief is dark and dubious."

He also affirmed: "I believe there is a God who heareth prayer, and that honest prayers to him will not be in vain."

John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States and afterward a congressional representative, died in the House chamber on Feb. 21, 1848. Arguably the most religious president of the 19th century, Adams' body came to rest in the crypt of the First Parish Church in Quincy, Mass. **BT**

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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.

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Cindy Henry McMahon of Asheville, N.C., stands by a portrait of her maternal grandfather, Walter Moore, at Vineville Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., where he was a beloved pastor and denominational leader. His commitments to justice and forgiveness helped Cindy on her journey toward forgiving her troubled father who brought pain and chaos into her childhood.

Author digs deeply to uncover factors that shaped her life

Journey to Forgiveness

Cindy Henry McMahon is a wife and mother who works in non-profit management in Asheville, N.C. Most anyone would call it a normal life, she admits.

Her life today, however, belies a torturous upbringing with a troubled father. She has been on a long journey of forgiveness that called for traveling old paths, pulling together pieces of history and putting words onto pages.

Telling her story in *Fresh Water from Old Wells* (2015, Mercer University Press), she said, was like removing a painful splinter that needed to work its way out.

The upheaval in her early life was the result of her father's emotional struggles and unpredictable decisions that included rage and desertion.

"I had a lot of healing I needed to do," she told a book club gathering at Vineville Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., where her maternal grandfather, Walter Moore, had been a beloved

pastor and denominational leader. "...I needed to understand [my father's] demons and come to forgiveness."

"Forgiveness is not a destination," she said when speaking of her experiences. "It is a journey; we get there and then we go back."

CONTRASTING FIGURES

Her father, Al Henry, was "the handsomest ministerial student at Mercer University" at the time — and just what her mother was seeking, said Cindy. But the mental illness of his mother would eventually appear in her highly intense son.

Al's commitment to social justice mirrored that of his influential father-in-law. But comparisons ended there.

Walter Moore could take a stand for racial justice in the '60s and still be revered in his church and get elected president of the Georgia Baptist Convention. Al, who could not find such acceptance, left the conservative Southern Baptists for the more-progressive Congregationalists.

Yet, the Pilgrim Congregational Church in Birmingham, Ala., was not ready for the social change its pastor sought in the 1960s. After participating in the Selma to Montgomery march, he offered his well-sought resignation.

Cindy recalled finding two pieces of white paper from that time. On one, in red, he'd written of God as a consuming fire. On the other, in green, he had penned words from Psalm 11: "Flee like a bird to the mountain."

"That was my daddy, alright," wrote Cindy. "Fire. Flight. That was his legacy."

TRACED STEPS

"This book is built on a lot of memories," Cindy told her listeners at Vineville Baptist Church. But it is also built on careful, even persistent research.

Cindy traveled to various places where her grandparents and parents had lived to better understand the context of her own life. There were warm recollections as well as painful episodes that shaped her family's life.

Admittedly, she "grew up during the dark, dark times" of her father's life.

After Birmingham, Cindy's family found refuge at Koinonia Farm — the interracial, Christian community founded by Clarence Jordan, her father's cousin. Cindy was born at that time.

"Koinonia was very much a Christian place," she wrote. However, the radical nature of human equality was not socially acceptable in rural Georgia. Violent attacks and economic boycotts struck the otherwise pastoral setting that Cindy described as "a childhood paradise."

Yet, after just a few months, it was the violence of her father toward her mother that surfaced during this time that would chart a long and ugly course for her family.

It was into this context that Cindy was born on May 29, 1966. Digging through the archives at Vineville Baptist Church, she found the Sunday bulletin from that day.

Her grandfather had preached a sermon titled, "Fresh Water from Old Wells." Cindy had found the title for her book.

DEFINING DEATH

Cindy visited Waynesboro, Ga., where her grandfather had been pastor at the First Baptist Church in the 1930s before moving to Macon. She wanted to learn more about the tragic death of Walter and Miriam Moore's daughter, Sunny.

The Moores had served as missionaries in Cuba and therefore had experiences across racial lines unlike many Georgians at the time. But the greatest test of one's acceptance and grace is found in reaction to deep personal loss.

Cindy's detective-like work led her to the man who as a boy called for Sunny to come see him. She darted into the street and was hit and killed by a car.

That evening some men arrived at the pastor's home with assurance that the black woman driving the car had been found, and that they had the rope needed to lynch her. But the grieved father told them they would need two.

The accident was just as much his fault, he added. Cindy learned that her grandfather had spent that night at the jail to comfort the woman who had understandably left the scene — and to assure her of his protection.

Such a deeply personal and painful story lessens the surprise that the pastor would be called upon three decades later to chair the committee that stood against Georgia Baptists and others when inviting a young African named Sam Oni to become the first person of color to attend Mercer University.

That same commitment to social justice rang in the heart of Cindy's father. But a hurt spirit and troubled mind played out in a very different life.

TROUBLED LIFE

Al Henry's unlikely résumé included service as a hospital chaplain, pastor, farmer, ambulance assistant and more. Then he decided to leave his role as father — and he made it clear.

As Cindy's sixth birthday came around, he penciled in his daily calendar: 'FATHER NO MORE.'

When and where his children might see their father was never predictable. His hair and beard grew long, and he took up residence in a tent. His thumb could be out for a ride in any direction.

"His life seemed far away and hard to understand," wrote Cindy. But she and her siblings tried. One summer they joined their father in the great outdoors in Virginia.

"Even though we were in the woods, living the life Dad wanted for us, it was never enough."

And when he did come home to be with the family in Atlanta, "he was still far away from us."

He didn't work. But he imposed his diet restrictions on his family and made certain they did not celebrate holidays.

PLACE OF REFUGE

Cleo, N.C., is a small, mountainous community that was first an escape and then a refuge for Cindy and her family. Summer camp there provided the Henry girls with a normalcy unknown during the rest of the year.

"Sometimes nothing but the green of Celo could soothe my soul," Cindy penned in reflection.

In 1976, Cindy's mother finally "took over" and made the bold decision to move the family to Cleo. "Still unemployed, spiraled lower into paranoia and depression," her father went along.

The peaceful mountain setting, however, would not end the familiar "rant and rage" that marked his presence in the family.

When her mother finally found the courage to end the marriage, her father wrote to Cindy assigning blame to her for the divorce and wavering on his love for her.

As his troubled life neared its end, Cindy found the courage to tell him of the "really scary childhood" he had created for her. But taking a long first step toward forgiveness, she added: "I'm working on letting it go."

The road to forgiveness for Cindy has been long and winding — requiring a lot of digging into the past, careful reflection, and putting the resulting words into print.

The extension of grace by others convinced Cindy that the risk of the road was

worth taking.

"I was beginning to understand, finally, that this forgiveness — letting go of the pain and protective anger left over from my childhood — could be the greatest gift I would ever give myself," she wrote. "It would be freedom. At last."

STRENGTH AND COURAGE

"I grew up outside the church," said Cindy in response to a question about how her experiences impacted her view of the church.

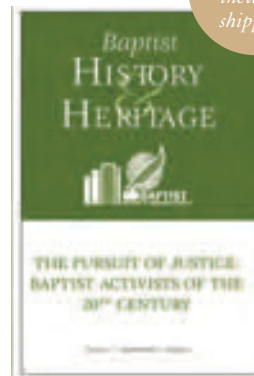
"When my dad left Birmingham, he left the church," she continued. "I always felt very much on the outside of church growing up."

Yet when she and her family started attending a UCC church in Asheville, she said, the experience provided the perspective and support needed for her to take the needed journey toward forgiveness that played out in her storytelling.

"It gave me strength and courage," she said of being in a caring, encouraging community of faith. "I don't think I could have done this without that church connection at the time." **BT**

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BEYOND EARTH

Toward a theology for the universe

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is more extensive than most content we publish. However, it addresses a relevant topic of interest to many thoughtful Christians. A recent cover story by David J. Wood in Christian Century began: "By and large mainline congregations have situated themselves outside the debates over religion and science, leaving it to the young earth creationists and the militant atheists to fight it out. Unfortunately, the rationale for disengagement from that shrill debate has resulted in a disengagement from science altogether." This article takes a helpful course away from either of those extremes.

By E. B. Self

Is it possible to have a theology for the universe? I am thinking of a Christian theology for a scientific understanding of the universe.

The reason for concern with a scientific understanding of the universe is that scientists appear to have the best evidence. Poets and storytellers may be insightful and even entertaining, but scientists do seem to have the most abundant and most reliable evidence for the nature of the universe.

More specifically, I am thinking of the areas where scientists usually agree concerning the universe. There are areas where scientists have very different views, including whether it

is possible to go faster than the speed of light and whether there are parallel universes. Also, scientists still have much to explore concerning possible but mysterious parts of the universe such as dark matter and dark energy.

Our focus will be on areas of general agreement. Scientists believe much the same way on how the universe started, the age of the universe, and the immense size of the universe.

As we think about a theology for a scientific understanding of the universe, there are two main questions: What is at least a simplified summary of current scientific agreement on the universe? What major theological beliefs are compatible with that understanding?

For those of us who are not scientists, there are various sources for gaining some acquaintance with scientific views of the universe. Especially helpful to me have been Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*, and Neil deGrasse Tyson's *Origins*.

Also of benefit were videos from the Discovery Channel, especially "The Story of Everything" in the series *Into the Universe* with Stephen Hawking and "Big Bang" in the series *How the Universe Works*.

There are also videos, usually giving various views on debatable questions, from the Science

Channel's series *Through the Wormhole*. Two especially intriguing programs at the end of this series are "Can We Resurrect the Dead?" and "Did We Invent God?"

Information gained in these ways does not match training as a scientist and may not be fully understood, but it is good to make some effort.

Scientists, primarily astrophysicists, have been trying to tell the rest of us their views about the universe. Some hope that eventually a comparatively simple formula will be discovered that expresses the essence of the universe.

Meanwhile, according to their Theory of Everything, scientists believe that everything in the universe started with and then developed from the Big Bang, a tremendous explosion that happened about 13.7 billion years ago.

Everything in the universe as currently understood refers to what has been or may be experienced. Dark matter and dark energy may be real but are not directly experienced. Astrophysicists think that some movements of objects in space can be explained by gravitational effects from something that cannot be seen. Thus there are references to something "dark."

Details are complicated, but the scientific view is that cosmic dust and gas from the Big Bang were shaped by gravity and eventually developed into meteors, planets and stars.

Hydrogen was apparently present at or near the beginning. Hydrogen is abundant and is the simplest of chemical elements with one electron circling one proton.

Then there were more chemical elements with more electrons going around more protons and even some neutrons. These additional chemical elements were developed through the activity of the stars. When some stars exploded, various chemical elements were dispersed throughout the universe.

At some later time, a combination of various chemical elements in the ocean, perhaps aided by the arrival of life-building materials from space, brought forth life on our planet. There were very simple living things capable of motion, absorption of food, growth, and reproduction.

Life forms became more complex over long periods of time. Eventually some living things, including humans, developed consciousness and intelligence. (A few living things became biologists and astrophysicists and tried to explain everything.)

The general view for many years was that the universe reached a certain size and stayed that size, not getting any bigger and not getting any smaller (the solid state view).

Then in 1929 Edwin Hubble made some startling astronomical observations that led him to believe the universe was expanding. Scientists now believe that the universe has been and is expanding very rapidly.

How big has the universe become? Quasars, the most distant objects from us in the universe, may be 8 to 10 billion light-years away.

A light-year is the distance that light goes in a year (one orbit of our planet around the sun). Since light travels at approximately 186,000 miles per second, the distance that it goes in a year is tremendous.

It is staggering to think that the edge of the universe is billions of light-years away. Scientists may disagree over exactly how big the universe is, but we get the idea that it is gigantic.

What is the future of the universe? Scientists believe that the end of the universe is many billions of years away but have different ideas of what might happen.

One view is the Big Chill: that the stars will eventually run out of the hydrogen they use for fuel. There would then be no light, no heat and no life anywhere.

Another view is the Big Crunch: that the universe for some reason will reverse its expansion and shrink back to its original tiny size. A further version is that a Big Crunch will be followed by another Big Bang, possibly with creation and destruction of the universe

occurring over and over again.

There is, of course, much more to the universe than is indicated in this brief summary. Astrophysicists like to talk about many things. They especially like to talk about gravity and temperature and space.

But there is one subject they usually avoid. Astrophysicists almost never mention God.

If we think there should be a theology for a scientific understanding of the universe, what might that be? Astrophysicists are not going to supply any theology, so some of the rest of us can try.

How much do we have to do? Do we not already have what we need in the Bible? My answer is yes but a qualified yes. The Bible provides very valuable material, but it is not completely satisfactory. There are at least two difficulties.

One difficulty is that the Bible does not even acknowledge much of the universe. The first chapter of the Bible does refer to the heavens and the earth. There is specific mention of the greater light to rule the day (the sun) and the lesser light to rule the night (the moon).

We are further told that God made the stars. It is hard to find much else about the universe in the Bible. We do not find anything about planets, solar systems, galaxies, quasars, black holes, dark matter or dark energy. We are not told about the immense size of the universe, the expansion of the universe or what may be beyond the edge of the universe.

A good theology for the universe does not have to include mention of every object in the universe, but the theology should at least include recognition that our entire planet is only a very small part of a gigantic universe.

Another difficulty is that the Bible, or at least a completely literal interpretation of the Bible, sometimes comes into conflict with what scientists and many others claim about the universe, including our part of the universe.

For example, there is a reference in Revelation 7:1 to "the four corners of the earth" (NRSV). A literal interpretation of the reference supports the idea of the earth as flat, as perhaps having the four corners of a square, an outdated idea for almost everyone.

Also, there is mention in Joshua 10:13 that "the sun stood still" (NRSV). The statement reflects the old belief that the sun ordinarily moved around the earth (the geocentric or earth-centered view of the solar system).

Copernicus and Galileo were significant figures in promoting the scientific claim that the earth, rotating on its axis, moved around the sun (the heliocentric or sun-centered view of the solar system). For the sun to have appeared

to be standing still, our planet would have had to stop rotating for a short time, not a very likely occurrence from a scientific perspective. (The sun, of course, is always "standing still" in relation to the planets in our solar system as they go around it.)

If we consider the age of the universe, there is another conflict between the Bible (or at least a literal interpretation of the Bible) and a scientific understanding. The first chapter of Genesis provides an account of the creation of the world and of humans within a period of six days.

Combining a literal interpretation of this account with other information in the Bible (such as genealogies), some have concluded that creation is only about 6,000 years old. In contrast the most recent claim of scientists is that the universe began about 13.7 billion years ago.

If we consider intelligent life in the universe, there is further conflict. The book of Genesis indicates that God directly created man and woman as adults in the beginning. The story in the second chapter of Genesis is that God created Adam out of earth and then created Eve out of one of Adam's ribs.

In contrast the prevailing scientific view today is that extremely simple life began from a mixture of chemical elements under special conditions. The claim is that simpler forms of life then gradually developed over a long period of time into the intelligent life known as humans. The scientific view is not clear on exactly when adult humans first appeared, except not at the beginning.

If we consider our place in the universe, there is even more conflict. The first chapter of Genesis claims that God created "the heavens and the earth" (NRSV). There is at least the implied belief that the earth is extremely important.

The theory of Ptolemy, that the sun revolved around the earth, supported the view that our planet was the center of creation. But scientists have told us it is the earth that revolves around the sun and that we are not at the center of our solar system.

Nor is our solar system at the center of our Milky Way galaxy. And there are many other galaxies, some much larger than the Milky Way. Humans and our planet are hardly a speck in this gigantic universe and do not seem to be at the center of anything. The view of scientists greatly diminishes the importance of our planet (the earth) that we find in the Bible.

These conflicts and others between science and literal interpretations of the Bible challenge the view of the Bible as inerrant teachings from God.

Why then do many people believe that the

Bible is infallible even when interpreted literally? Why do many defend the Bible with such ferocity? Might extreme devotion to the Bible represent, at least in part, a psychological wish for security and even certainty?

There is a view of the Bible that is more nearly compatible with a scientific understanding of the universe, namely that the Bible expresses profound and inspiring but not necessarily perfect beliefs from men of faith. Those who accept this latter understanding may have great respect for the Bible but still question some of the views in the Bible.

We have seen that there are convictions different from the views of men of the Bible about exactly how and when the universe began. There also might be questions about how much biblical writers were influenced by tribal and cultural ideas rather than the will of God.

How much may human rather than divine views be represented in such biblical matters as harsh penalties, extreme violence, animal sacrifice, slavery, the status of women and possibly additional issues?

Although the Bible has weaknesses regarding a theology for the universe, the Bible still has important contributions. We may regard the Bible as properly instructive in many areas.

What beliefs in the Bible are compatible with a scientific understanding of the universe?

The men of the Bible did have faith in God, including God as creator. Perhaps God did not create in the way that a literal reading of Genesis says that God did. There can still be faith in God as creator of the universe.

Scientists generally believe in the Big Bang as the beginning of the universe but have no idea as to what preceded the Big Bang. It is reasonable to believe that there was a very powerful, even if somewhat mysterious, force that produced the Big Bang. There is no conflict with the universe in believing that such a force was real and was God.

It is also reasonable to believe that this possible force at the beginning (before the Big Bang) has a continuing relationship with the universe. For example, the scientific explanation of the origin of life is far from satisfactory.

The scientific view of the origin of life may be accurate as far as it goes but does little to explain exactly how lifeless matter became living matter. There is also no clear scientific view on how consciousness and intelligence developed. Unless scientists arrive at a compelling alternative, it is not against the universe to believe that God is ultimately responsible for life, consciousness and intelligence.

The Bible as a whole presents the belief that God is especially concerned about people.

Does this idea fit a scientific understanding? In view of the vastness of the universe and the tiny place that our entire planet occupies in it, why would God be especially concerned about humans at all?

We may have various questions about God's relationship to people, but the overall claim that God is concerned appears to be compatible with the universe. Humans and our planet are barely a speck in the vastness of the universe. Yet, as far as we know, we are the only intelligent life in the universe.

We have not yet detected even unintelligent life anywhere else than our planet. It seems preposterous in some ways but quite reasonable in other ways to believe that God is especially interested in people.

If God is interested in us, what does God expect from us?

A very important part of the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament was what he considered to be the greatest commandment: to love God with all of your heart, all of your soul, all of your mind and all of your strength.

The commandment allows for some flexibility in interpretation in its various parts but does call for great commitment to God. There seems to be no conflict with the universe in believing that God, if real, requires great devotion from people.

If so, what is the extent of God's interest? What does God expect not only from us but also for us?

We find intriguing answers in some of the teachings of Jesus. According to John 10:10b, Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (NRSV).

What was meant by having life? Was Jesus speaking about spiritual life that would be added to physical life?

The part of the statement about abundant life has usually been interpreted in the sense of spiritual fulfillment. Although there may be differences over its exact nature, improving life in some way sounds like an appropriate goal even for a scientific understanding of the universe.

We should also consider the often-quoted statement of Jesus in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (NRSV).

What is meant by believing in God's only Son?

There are beliefs about Jesus that fit a theology for the universe because the beliefs are compatible with science.

Jesus taught that the greatest commandments were ones about love. He showed great

compassion for the sick and the poor. He spoke against violence and promoted forgiveness. He criticized some who were extreme about minor matters but neglected weightier parts of the law concerning mercy. Jesus was willing to die for his convictions. There is much about Jesus that was admirable and that does not go against science.

But there is also much about Jesus that does not meet scientific expectations.

Does believing in Jesus require belief in his divine conception, his virgin birth, his salvation-granting death, his resurrection, and his ascension into heaven?

Should we go beyond biblical terms and believe that Jesus was of the same substance as the Father? Should we think that Jesus was one person with two natures (human and divine)?

Many Christians hold strongly to these beliefs, even though these beliefs are scientifically questionable.

What is the proper and full meaning of "believes in him" that is called for in John 3:16?

The belief is associated with not perishing but having eternal life. Many are convinced that a simple, childlike faith in Jesus is both necessary and sufficient for salvation (going to heaven). Science cannot prove nor disprove that claim.

If we go beyond simple faith, it is challenging to see how additional traditional views of Jesus (such as divine conception, virgin birth and resurrection) can be considered compatible with a scientific view of the universe.

Should these views be considered metaphorical? Perhaps interpreting them as symbols of some kind would be appropriate. Another possibility is for faith to go beyond science and perhaps even against science in this area. A further idea is to say that some beliefs about Jesus do exceed scientific expectations but are not necessarily false.

Extremeophiles, for example, exceed scientific expectations for conditions of life but are real. Extremeophiles are forms of deep ocean life that apparently thrive under normally unbelievable conditions of nearly boiling heat and high acidity. Extremeophiles do not have the significance of Christian beliefs about Jesus but simply indicate that scientific expectations are sometimes too limited. Perhaps Jesus is a special exception.

Let us think further concerning the claim in John 3:16 about not perishing but having eternal life.

Does eternal life sound like wishful, unscientific thinking?

Doubts have been expressed not only about the immortality of the soul but even the existence of souls.

As to another claim, does it sound realistic to talk about the resurrection of dead bodies?

The challenges are formidable.

Eternal life does not appear to fit in with a scientific view of the universe but consider various views of scientists. Our bodies are said to be made of chemicals, which are made of atoms. The atoms are composed of electrons, protons and neutrons, all of which are some kind of electrical energy.

Things made of atoms can change form, but the atoms or at least the component parts of atoms do not die. They can be reassembled.

If atoms or at least their component parts can be reassembled, might not bodies be reassembled or assembled in some new form?

If there is the objection that life cannot come from a collection of chemicals, we might remind ourselves of how scientists think that life started in the first place.

There may be other and better explanations, but the belief that God has provided for eternal life expresses a possibility that does seem to be compatible with the universe as scientifically understood. Continuation of life or renewal of life would not be much more astonishing than the existence of life itself.

So, as we consider a theology for the universe, what would be a proper view of the Bible?

Although the idea may be disturbing for many, a scientific outlook would not include belief in the Bible as wholly inerrant or perfect. There would be no wish to interpret the Bible literally all of the time. And there would be recognition that the writers of the Bible were probably very heavily influenced by the tribal and cultural views of their times. But there could be deep appreciation for the beliefs expressed in the Bible by men of faith if those beliefs were very carefully interpreted.

A theology for the universe should allow for distinguishing between various beliefs about God. Some traditional beliefs should be rejected because the scientific evidence is against them. These views include the belief that God created the world less than 10,000 years ago. Whether or not the universe is exactly 13.7 billion years old, scientists have reasonably established that the universe is extremely old.

Also to be rejected is the belief that God instantly created adult humans. Scientists are not clear on the exact time of the appearance of adult humans, but there is overwhelming evidence that life started with very simple forms.

There are other traditional beliefs about God that do not contradict scientific views

and that may sometimes receive support from scientific views. It does not contradict science to believe that God is not only real but also is the power behind the Big Bang. Scientists currently have no serious proposals as to what may have preceded the Big Bang.

The belief that God is real and has special interest in humans seems to be a reasonable possibility when we consider that humans, as far as we know, are the only intelligent life in the universe. Our planet is only a speck in the vast universe, but human consciousness and intelligence suggest both a higher power and special significance for us.

As to inclusion of Jesus in a theology for the universe, here again there should be a distinction of beliefs. We have seen that some beliefs about Jesus are not in conflict with science. These beliefs include his emphasis on love in the two greatest commandments, his compassion for the sick and the poor, and his concern for mercy more than for strict adherence to minor matters. There is much about the life and teachings of Jesus that is free of conflict with science.

There are some special beliefs about Jesus that raise scientific objections or that, at least, are not supported by science. These beliefs include his divine conception, virgin birth, redeeming death, resurrection and ascension. These beliefs may be interpreted symbolically as well as literally. If any of these beliefs are accepted literally, it should be emphasized that these beliefs do not so much contradict science as exceed scientific expectations.

Some things that exceed current scientific expectations may still be real. Scientists and others may discuss the degree of probability that something is true, but possibilities are important for both science and theology.

There are questions about a theology for the universe that extend beyond the Bible.

Why did God, as far as we know, restrict life in the universe, including intelligent life, to our comparatively tiny planet? What is God's plan for the universe beyond our planet? Has God provided for any universes beyond our own?

A complete theology for the universe should include but needs to go beyond very careful consideration of the Bible. These observations are far from being a full theology for the universe. Yet they do indicate some of the questions and problems as well as some positive possibilities. **BT**

—*E. B. (Ben) Self of Hopkinsville, Ky., is the author of Ways of Thinking About God: The Bible, Philosophy, and Science (Nurturing Faith, 2013).*

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church, Gastonia, N.C., is seeking a senior pastor to lead the congregation in a new chapter in our history. FBCG enjoys a 140-year tradition of moderate Baptist life (affiliated with CBF) and a broad mission emphasis, and is poised to use the campus and facilities for greater service to the community. The senior pastor will possess strong preaching skills, have excellent skills in relationship building, and be an inspired leader in guiding and directing the church spiritually and administratively. The pastor will possess a strong calling to the pastoral ministry and a degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school, and have some years of experience as a congregational minister. Interested candidates may learn more at fbcgastonia.org. Résumés may be submitted until Dec. 1 to Pastor Search Committee Co-chair Donnie Cann at Cann1@aol.com or at Pastor Search Committee, P.O. Box 6298, Gastonia, NC 28056.

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church, Fayetteville, N.C., seeks a full-time senior pastor to lead our congregation spiritually and administratively; to work collaboratively with all groups in the church and community; and to guide revitalization of our ministries and missions as a downtown church. We affirm both women and men in leadership roles, are affiliated with CBF and SBC, and prefer blended and traditional worship styles. A master's degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school and relevant experience are required. Submit cover letter and résumé by Dec. 15 to psc@fbcfay.com or to FBC Pastor Search Committee, c/o Steven Lawrence, P.O. Drawer 2737, Fayetteville, NC 28302.

Senior Pastor: Bethel Baptist Church in Norman Okla., is seeking a full-time senior pastor. Located one mile from the University of Oklahoma, we are a conservative Southern Baptist church that supports the Cooperative Program. Please send résumés to bbcnormanpsc@gmail.com or to Pastor Search Committee, Bethel Baptist Church, 1717 W. Lindsey St., Norman OK 73069.

Pastor: First Baptist Church, Oak Ridge, Tenn., seeks a full-time pastor to lead our church into the next chapter of our rich and unique history. The successful candidate will have a strong calling to the pastoral ministry, hold an accredited seminary or divinity school degree, and possess experience in congregational ministry. Interested candidates are encouraged to explore the pastor search info at fbcoakridge.org and submit résumés to Pastorsearch@fbcoakridge.org.

Pastor: First Baptist Church, Shepherdsville, Ky., established in 1837, is seeking a full-time pastor. Submit résumé to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 254 S. Buckman St., Shepherdsville, KY 40165.

Making progress

By Tony W. Cartledge

Recovering from any sort of surgery is a process. I've now had four of them, all involving moving parts. There's something artificial now in both shoulders and both hips.

I'm hoping the knees still have some good tread left on them.

Replacement of my right hip in September didn't come too soon. The surgeon said the weight-bearing portion of my femur — which should be round — was worn down flat.

No wonder I couldn't bend it.

There's little chance I will live long enough to flatten the cobalt chrome replacement, which is working just fine. The only pain I have left is from the incision, and that's diminishing. I can walk again without looking like I'm constantly stepping in holes.

Even so, the comeback trail isn't immediate. There's physical therapy to do, and ice to apply, and resting with the feet up to keep swelling down. It's a process, but there's daily progress, and confidence that I'll soon be back up to full speed — which isn't very fast, but it's steady.



Tony Cartledge wears the Old Testament-inspired T-shirt given to him by his Baptists Today/Nurturing Faith colleagues following his hip-replacement surgery in late September.

It occurred to me that spiritual growth works in much the same way. If we want to see progress, we need the daily discipline of doing what's good for the soul as well as the body. That includes the intentional pursuit of both spiritual exercise and rest — and maybe a bowl of chicken soup, made for someone else. **BT**

Redeeming the skewed church

By John Pierce

The highly publicized, early fall visit of Pope Francis to the U.S. provided an opportunity to reflect upon the historic as well as much-needed, ongoing efforts at church reform — from the large, opulent expression in Rome to the small, white-steeped ones on street corners near us.

It's easy to get off track from the church's primary purpose and to allow lesser, baser concerns to override the clearest of callings. Simply put, the narrow, hard path of following Jesus requires greater love, deeper forgiveness and broader acceptance than most of us find comfortable.

Like those who troubled Jesus so much, we'd rather work up neat lists of rules and beliefs that make us feel good when excluding others.

Of course, being comfortable and confident is a pretty good sign of having detoured from the selfless, sacrificial Way of the Christ. But our tendency is to give our best attention to other easier matters.

The late theologian Edward Farley, who taught for decades at Vanderbilt Divinity School, published a book a dozen years ago that rings a still-fresh warning.

In *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Church's Ministry*, he

identifies “three skewed trends” in congregations that deserve attention — and, yes, I would add, reformation.

One: The church as a modern bureaucracy — overly concerned with management, organization and enlargement.

This business success model must be kept in check. We rightly organize, support and work efficiently for a greater purpose than being well organized, financially sound and efficient. These are means to a greater end.

If our measuring stick becomes the organizational condition of a bureaucracy, we will likely find ourselves to be successful but not particularly faithful.

Two: The church as a source of individual fulfillment — overly concerned with personal satisfaction and appeasement.

Those of us with many ministers as close friends see, hear and feel this reality often. It is the congregational trap set for pastors — who are expected to appease listeners (thereby keeping the bureaucracy sound) while somehow proclaiming the Gospel.

It doesn't work. Either the pastor gets in hot water or the Gospel gets watered down in order to appease.

Three: The church as a moralistic meter — overly concerned with detailed codes of behavior and ethical legalism.

This is part of the preacher trap as

well. It allows for addressing only certain so-called sins. In American culture, evangelical Christianity has been widely rebranded as a political ideology that reflects very little of the life and teachings of Jesus. It is simply astonishing to witness what gets called “Christian” today — and what attracts those who profess to be Christian.

As a result, it is widely acceptable for those claiming to be Christian to be greedy, racist and belittling of others, and to foster injustices through one's personal and professional life. Just don't drink and gamble, or hold the “wrong” opinion on women's roles, gay rights, immigrants and other issues mislabeled as biblical truth.

Preachers know that there are only certain toes most congregants are willing to have stepped on.

Indeed, the mission and function of the church can get skewed without careful reflection and intentional redirection. And defensiveness is often the roadblock to needed change.

Church reform in Rome may come best from its papal leader. In congregations without such hierarchy, however, it comes best from bold, influential lay leaders who affirm and free their ministers to preach, teach and exemplify the counter-cultural, life-changing, grace-filled Way of Christ — even if it makes us uncomfortable and less confident.

Or, perhaps, *because* it makes us feel that way. **BT**

By David Gushee, Religion News Service

Warning: Anti-immigrant rhetoric can be deadly

Some of this year's crop of politicians tell us that illegal or undocumented immigrants pose a deadly threat to our country. I say that anti-immigrant rhetoric is the more dangerous threat.

It has been deadly before, here and in other countries. It can easily become deadly again. You can watch the rhetorical escalation up the ladder — or down the slippery slope, choose your metaphor — toward danger.

Step one: It is perfectly reasonable for those concerned about illegal immigration to express concern about our nation's ability to secure its borders, especially from those who might pose a real threat.

As one who regularly waits in lines to pass through border controls, I get it. In a nation-state world, borders matter. All nations attempt to secure their borders. The United States has a right and a need to secure its borders.

Step two: It is also perfectly reasonable to be concerned about potential economic impacts of illegal immigration. It is reasonable to fear the creation of a job market for undocumented immigrants that can undercut employment for American citizens.

It is reasonable to fear a drain on government social services or health care spending. Of course, if research demonstrated that undocumented immigrants do not create more unemployment or cost more than they contribute to tax dollars, this would resolve the concern.

Step three: It is debatable whether it is reasonable to be concerned that undocumented immigrants pose a threat to American culture or the predominant use of the English language. The reasonableness of such concerns relates entirely to our vision of America.

What kind of country are we or should we be? A "white" country, or a multiracial country? A predominantly or exclusively English-speaking country, or a polyglot nation? A European-colonial-descendant nation, or a multiethnic nation with people coming from all parts of the world?

To opponents of (illegal, and sometimes legal) immigration, I say that if this is your concern, say it loud and plain, and let us debate the matter.

Step four: It is not debatable but abhorrent to express concern that undocumented immigrants as a group are dangerous and morally inferior.

This, of course, was assumed in Donald Trump's infamous comment earlier this year: "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. ... They're sending people that have lots of problems. ... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."

Notwithstanding the slight caveat at the end, this comment dismisses Mexican (and

surely not just Mexican) immigrants, as a group, in a very dangerous way. It invites all "non-Mexicans" to look at all "Mexicans" in a demeaning way and to treat them accordingly.

Citizenship status gradually melts away here as the central issue. It is skin color and assumed ethnicity and nationality that is the problem.

And some evidence is coming in that brown-skinned, Hispanic, or "Mexican-looking" people face routine and even escalating dehumanization and degrading treatment today. A spirit is abroad in the land that goes far beyond one candidate.

It is a proven pattern: When one group of people in a country is taught to look at another group of people in that country as inferior, immoral and dangerous, the latter group will eventually pay a huge price. All kinds of indignities, discrimination, and violence can be expected. Need I cite examples?

So we have reason to be concerned about illegal immigration. But right now we ought to be more concerned about campaign rhetoric inflaming racial, ethnic and nationalist fears in some very dangerous ways. All of us need to be on our guard against it. **BT**

—David Gushee is distinguished university professor of Christian ethics and director of the Center for Theology and Public Life at Mercer University. He is the author or editor of 20 books, including *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, *Kingdom Ethics*, *The Sacredness of Human Life*, and *Changing Our Mind*.



When one group of people in a country is taught to look at another group of people in that country as inferior, immoral and dangerous, the latter group will eventually pay a huge price.



Many preachers struggle with the appropriate use of visual images in sermons, said preaching professor Tom Long, calling for the visual to be informative and supportive of the oral rather than to compete or replace the spoken word.

The Power of Orality

Tom Long talks about preaching in challenging times

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. — “About every 60 years or so I think preaching has a nervous breakdown,” said Tom Long, to an October gathering of Baptist preachers in downtown Chattanooga. “...We start looking around for the next thing.”

Long, a Presbyterian minister and the Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, preached and taught during the annual preaching consultation sponsored by Mercer University and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship organizations.

“Narrative preaching is beginning to take on water a little bit,” said Long of his own preaching style that he defends. The Gospel, he said, is narrative.

“There is a sense that orality can take you places that a flat screen image cannot,” he said.

Through presentations and dialogue, Long explored preaching as it relates to the biblical genres of parables, wisdom sayings and laments.

The “surprise” that comes from parabolic sermons is missing in much preaching, said Long, noting however that Jesus used this method.

“Simply telling listeners that God loves them is not enough,” he said of the contemporary narcissistic culture: “They aren’t surprised.”

He called for enough “disruption” to show how “the kingdom of heaven corrupts the corruption of the culture.”

Preaching “wisely,” he said, should emphasize how “life has purpose and value, but also form and shape” that goes beyond rules to wisdom.

Concerning the role of laments, Long warned preachers: “On Good Friday, you don’t really want to go to Easter yet.”

Lament, he said, properly startles listeners who have been raised in an American culture summarized as: “I was born an extraordinary person but have had some setbacks, but with hard work I’ve put them behind me and the future is bright.”

Long, who has researched and written on Christian funerals, said: “Lament is not the ultimate voice of the Bible, but praise only becomes authentic when the lament is there.”

Popular megachurches, with an over-emphasis on positive thinking, tend to ignore the biblical laments, he said. “But they are going to have to come to grips with the full range of human life.”

Death “with a capital D” is not our friend and comes to every funeral, he said. Lament is a proper response. “Yet it is our duty and delight to raise our fists and say, ‘O Death, where is your sting...?’”

A CONVERSATION

In an interview with *Baptists Today*, Long responded to questions from editor John Pierce. This exchange has been edited for space and clarity.

BT: You said some affirming words about the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship being “salt in southern Christianity.” We don’t often hear that from someone outside of CBF life. Will you say a little more about how you as a Presbyterian perceive Fellowship Baptists?

TL: As a southerner, I watched with alarm as the Southern Baptist Convention drifted to the hard right and was finally taken over and some marvelous institutions were deeply damaged.

Take, for example, Southern Seminary. People know that was a wonderful Southern Baptist seminary but ... it was one of the world’s finest theological schools and it was damaged.

Baptist life is so important to southern religious life because of the dominance of it. If the whole southern Baptist movement had become hardened, like the dominant strain was, it would have been hugely damaging to the rest of us.

But there were these courageous people and many of them are found in the CBF who said, “No, this is not the Gospel; this is not the way of Jesus Christ.”

It was painful and a price was paid by many of those people, but the lesson was not lost on the rest of us. It was very encouraging.

BT: What do preachers call or write to you about most often?

TL: A couple of things: First, most of the emails I get from preachers are: “I remember a story you told one time and I want to use it. Could you give it to me again?”

But beyond that I think it’s the anxiety of preaching centered on the generational split — and along with that the use of technical media

in preaching and how far one can go in that.

This especially comes from people who were trained to preach a generation or a half ago when that wasn’t even in the picture and now they have to learn a new language and they wonder what they ought to do.

BT: Can you say a little more about the challenge to preaching that comes from digital communication?

TL: I think we are battling a cultural assumption and a cultural preference. The cultural assumption is that the visual trumps the oral. The preference is for the moving image — something to delight the eyes.

The old Jesuit scholar Walter Ong, who studied orality and literacy, once said that there’s no form of human communication more powerful than someone who loves someone else telling the truth in love, speaking the truth. Orality has a power that literacy, in his case, or visual art does not.

So I think the challenge is to figure out the appropriate use of the visual. It’s with us; it’s appealing to our culture.

I don’t think we know all the rules yet, but I think the big rule is something like: the visual must always support the oral in preaching, not compete with it or replace it.

So if I’m preaching on Corinthians and talking about the historic reality of meat being offered to idols, I might want to put a picture of excavated Corinth on the screen where you can see the little butcher shops next to the shrines.

It would be informative; it would support the proclamation of the Gospel. It is informative and supportive.

I can imagine preaching a sermon on the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 and putting up Rembrandt’s depictions of Abraham as a young man and as an old man. They are quite different.

As a young man, Abraham is going to do God’s will and ... the angel has to wrestle the knife away from him. But when he’s an old man, the knife is held reluctantly and the angel only has to touch his arm for him to drop it. It’s the changing and maturing understanding of the will of God and tragedy. So art could support that theological point, I think.

BT: I recall you saying a few years ago that there is a tendency for worship leaders to draw vertical lines to separate the styles of music they will or will not use in worship. You called for drawing a horizontal line

that simply separated good music from bad music regardless of style. Are worship leaders doing better at that now?

TL: I actually think there is a little progress on the worship wars. Different churches are at different stages about this, but there is a loosening up of hidebound traditionalists in worship. They are recognizing that we are in a different generational setting.

But there is also a maturing of the youth-oriented, contemporary worship. It burns out pretty quickly when it only runs on fizz and high-energy music.

I think the incorporation of global music is really helping because there are deeply reverent hymns and other musical compositions that come from all over the world that have a kind of musical appeal to younger folks — but aren’t standing up and shouting “Awesome” at the screen for two hours.

BT: Two questions: What is the biggest challenge you see facing the church right now? And what is the most hopeful sign?

TL: I think the huge challenge is that we have spent centuries building up Christian institutions and structures that are falling down. And I happen to think that, to some degree, God is the one who is tearing them down.

That’s a good thing to say that God is actually reconstructing the church. But it doesn’t minimize the pain. I’ve spent almost my whole ministry in theological education, building up schools.

Wow, the changes are dramatic in theological education. And a lot that I built up is now in dust. I have some personal grief about that, and I think those of us raised in the church — the generation I am — have some grief about all of these churches that are now empty.

So I think that is our big challenge: not only to live in a time of collapse and reconstruction, but to get over our grief about what we loved that is now gone.

But the hopeful sign — and again it’s connected to my vocation as a teacher — is when I look out at my classes and see the very creative, very bright young people who are deeply committed to the ministry and they have a nimbleness that I don’t have about what’s happening in the church.

They are willing to bet their ministries and bet their lives on highly experimental structures. A lot of those will not work out, but some of them will, and they will be there in the building up of the new Christian community. I’m hopeful of that. **BT**

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“Nurturing Faith” was first used by Baptists Today as the name of the Bible study curriculum written by Tony Cartledge.

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.

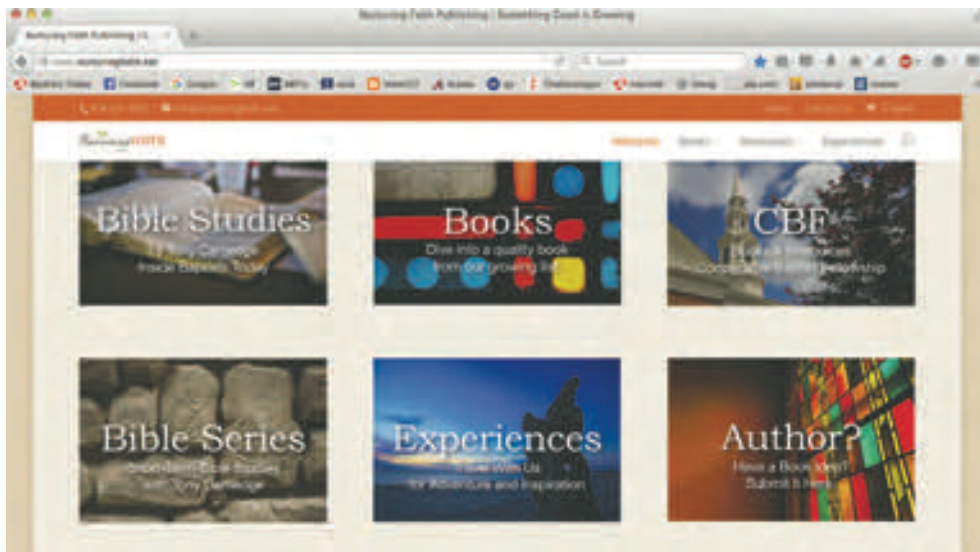
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Reclamation

Lessons from Lula Lake

STORY AND PHOTO
BY JOHN PIERCE

Images of Lula Lake and its cascading falls — atop Lookout Mountain where Georgia meets Tennessee — were popular during the postcard era. You can find them on eBay with dates such as 1902, 1910 and 1924.

Scenic views, cool water and mountain air made for a relaxing gathering space, especially on Sundays when for many people anything more strenuous than lifting a fork was regarded as sin.

Over time, however, the area began to show signs of overuse and other abuses. Then, on Easter Sunday 1966, the heinous murder of two teenagers there cast a shadow of fear and shame on the once postcard-perfect mountain setting.

By the way, the crime reportedly influenced the fiction writing of Cormac McCarthy who was in Knoxville at the time and would have read the news reports.

Although the murder suspect lived in the small community off the mountain in which I was raised, any discussions of the murders were shielded from my awareness as a 10-year-old. (That was more easily done before social media and nonstop, sensationalized news cycles.)

Easy access to the lake and falls on private land was cut off, and the abandoned space became a convenient dumping ground. Figuratively, it was all downhill from there.

A half-century later, however, the green-blue lake, falls and surrounding mountain land have been reclaimed thanks to the foresight and generosity of the late Robert M. Davenport and the ongoing work of those charged with protecting this lovely natural resource.

Efforts to counter the impact of overuse, dumping, mining and logging have resulted in a refreshing experience of natural beauty for those who walk the mountain trails today — as my daughters and I did over Labor Day weekend.

The Lula Lake Land Trust was established in 1994 according to the will of Robert Davenport, who began quietly acquiring the mountain land decades earlier. Since his death the environmentally protected and restored land in trust has grown from 1,200 to more than 8,000 acres (lulalake.org).

Also a new trail system now connects Lula Lake Land Trust with beautiful Cloudland Canyon State Park in Georgia, providing more than 60 miles of total hiking trails across this part of Lookout Mountain.

This great work of reclamation is the result of seeing and seeking a better way. It is rooted in acknowledging the need for change and then taking the patient, careful and blister-producing efforts that allow for renewal

or rebirth.

Walking within the reclaimed land of trees, mountains, soil, greenery, mushrooms and wildlife can clear the cobwebs of overloaded and distracted minds. It can give fresh perspective to our own needs to be reclaimed from whatever mars our very beings: anxiety, anger, fear or self-centeredness.

Often, we need to be restored to our intended purpose. Reclamation is at the very heart of the grand and ancient biblical story — although too often it gets over-packaged and mislabeled to serve some other personal, organizational or nationalistic purpose.

Sadly, there is a tendency to reduce the Gospel message to a formula rather than a radical reorientation. Too often it gets presented as mechanical rather than relational, transactional rather than transformative, instant rather than ongoing, and legalistically cumbersome rather than spiritually freeing.

Yet spiritual reclamation, flowing like mountain waterfalls, meets the greatest of human needs — allowing that which is old and destructive to give way to that which is fresh and freeing. **BT**

—*This article is adapted from a blog at BaptistsToday.org.*

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C. Lynn Brinkley

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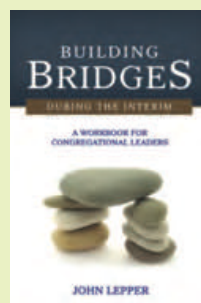
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commit and support in a shared experience. There is no beginning or end, but a process toward an intentional way of life.

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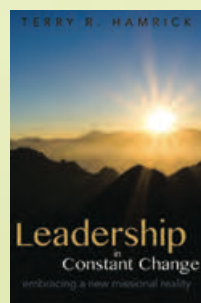


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