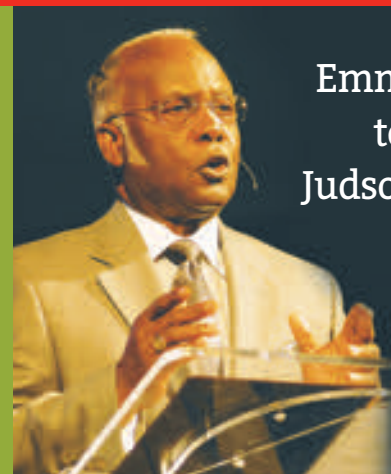


>> This is the **December 2013 issue** containing the **January Bible Study Lessons**



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ODAY
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Join Nurturing Faith Bible Studies writer Tony Cartledge on a tour of Israel next year and let the lessons come alive.

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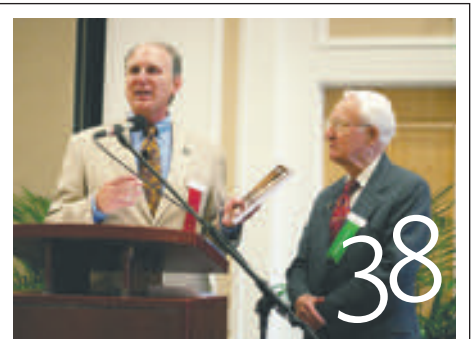
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Cover photo by John Pierce. Many Christians are changing their buying habits and seeking more meaningful ways to celebrate Christmas.

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Alternative Giving



Seeking a less crazy Christmas

A hippopotamus for Christmas?

No, but perhaps a water buffalo. That's the kind of alternative Christmas giving some people are doing to combat the growing commercialization and frenzy of the season.

Rather than putting fancy wrapping and ribbon around a sweater for a friend or relative whose closets are overflowing, a charitable gift in that person's name might be considered a better way to honor God's gift of the Christ child.

Heifer International, like other charities, makes such alternative giving possible. For \$250, a water buffalo is provided to a family in need as a source of both milk and labor. Or a \$25 gift is combined with nine others to deliver the animal.

A llama (\$150), a sheep (\$120), a pig (\$120), a camel (\$850) or a hive of honeybees (\$30) may also show up on this unusual Christmas gift list.

The range of charitable giving opportunities in honor of a friend or family member is wide — including local and global mission causes as well as non-profit groups that build homes for the poor or provide mosquito nets to combat malaria.

Alternative Christmas giving is as unique as the individuals and families who seek new ways to celebrate the season together.

MERRY ADVENT

The cultural capturing of Christmas has many Christians finding greater spiritual significance in the Advent season as a way of preparing for the coming of Christ — and resisting the onslaught of commercials, social expectations and half-price sales.



Ellen Sechrest (left), minister of spiritual formation and missions at Boulevard Baptist Church in Anderson, S.C., and Betsey Matheny prepare a gift counter at the Alternative Gift Fair that the congregation sponsors each year. (Contributed photo)

Shaun King, the new pastor of Johns Creek Baptist Church in the Atlanta area, said his previous congregation, College Park Baptist Church in Orlando, participated in Advent Conspiracy (adventconspiracy.org) for two years in a row.

"It was more of a movement than a program," he said. "We started in October, when Christmas marketing began to appear in the malls. We began provoking the imagination toward another way of entering the story of Christmas."

He described the approach as "counter-cultural," even "subversive" in moving against "the tide of overconsumption and indulgence." Each of the four Sundays of Advent focused on one of the themes: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, and Love all.

"Our aim was to take a congregational breath and at the very least enter into the season deliberately," he said. "We considered it a

success if a family at least paused to consider a simpler, more redemptive way to enter and engage the story of our Lord's birth. What moved us was that families did far more than consider a different way; they seized it."

Through social media, church families shared their creative ideas.

"Perhaps the most exciting element was our decision to leverage the energy of the movement for greater generosity toward the CBF Global Missions Offering," he said. "We encouraged families to purchase 'one less gift,' and to instead redirect the money normally spent toward our common (mission) goal."

PREACHING, PRACTICING

"I routinely preach on the way we have turned upside down God's values revealed through the Incarnation with our Christmas practices," said David Stratton, pastor of Woodhaven Baptist Church in Apex, N.C.

In his Christmas Eve sermon last year, he reminded his congregation that the gift of Jesus has far more significance than the many trappings of the popular holiday season.

“I’m continually concerned that the radical nature of the love that God expressed at Christmas gets buried under layers of sappy holiday sentimentality and materialistic excesses,” he said in the sermon. “The event that we are celebrating is worthy of a huge celebration. But I am concerned that our celebrations preserve virtually nothing of the spirit of the first Christmas.”

In order to better practice what he preaches, Stratton and his wife, Terri, also a minister, curbed and refocused their own approach to gift giving. They exchange gifts with each other on Valentine’s Day. For Christmas, they give what they would have spent on each other to a charity such as CBF Global Missions, Malaria No More or a local food bank.

They give a few stocking stuffers to their grown children along with cash gifts.

“We tell them they can spend the money any way they see fit,” he said. “However, we suggest in a card that, in light of the lessons of the first Christmas, they might consider giving a portion to some charity that helps the needy.”

FAIR TRADE

Those with a passion for shopping have options as well. The fair trade movement makes available various products — from crafts to coffee — aimed at better sustainability and equity. That is, those who put the most into the products get their fair shares of the profits.

Boulevard Baptist Church in Anderson,

S.C., is well known for its annual Alternative Gift Fair. Ellen Sechrest, minister of spiritual formation and missions, said the idea arose following the Companions in Christ study, when participants “felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit to do something meaningful for the holiday season, and for others.”

She said it is an enjoyable and helpful way to refocus on the heart of Christmas.

“The beauty of the Alternative Gift Fair is that it has become a tradition for many in the community as well,” she said. “Our event is open to anyone and everyone. Those that work the event have worked it since it began because of the joy it brings to others, the church, and ourselves.”

Rather than taking away from giving to and through the church, the gift fair enhances it, she said.

“It has been a real blessing for the people who receive our donations, the people whose items we sell, and the person receiving these thoughtful gifts,” she said. “So if you are in the area Dec. 7-8, stop by and let us sell you a goat, or maybe purchase lunch for a class at the Ruth School (in Romania), or buy beans and rice for a family in Honduras, or be part of a project for Global Women. There are lots of great ideas for your Christmas list.”

PERSONAL TOUCHES

Alternative gift giving can bring out great creativity with unlimited possibilities. Homemade gifts especially allow for unique, personalized touches.

A handmade recipe book may be treasured long after a scarf is lost or tie is stained. Make or bake something special. Offer lessons in



Several organizations distribute handicrafts made by refugees and other oppressed persons, with a larger percentage of sales benefitting the artists. Photo by John Pierce.

your specialty, whether music, art or sports.

Creatively chronicle your family history to be passed along to the next generation — or two.

And what is more personal and valued than the giving of time? Some people, especially younger persons with limited financial resources, will give handmade coupons to be redeemed in the coming year. These may be for babysitting, lawn mowing, a car wash or other service.

Groups of friends or extended families may consider forgoing traditional gift giving and hosting a fun-filled “abundance swap.” Creative ways of exchanging these gifts can add to the joy of being together. So rather than buy gifts, gather those good things you no longer want or use and swap them around.

Time together during the holidays, as families and friends, can be turned into generous giving. Participate together in a community project with other volunteers.

CAUTION

Not all charities are the same when it comes to how donations are used. It is always wise to check out an organization before writing a check or making an online gift.

Charity Navigator (charitynavigator.org) is the largest rater of charitable organizations with a focus on financial health, accountability and effectiveness.

Wise givers will want to check out the validity of charitable groups with which they are not personally familiar. This will ensure that well-intended gifts are actually used in ways that the donors desire. **BT**



Products from Koinonia Partners, a Christian farming community founded in 1942 by Clarence Jordan in Southwest Georgia, are available to shoppers at a fair trade festival sponsored by downtown churches in Macon, Ga. Photo by John Pierce.

Baptists Today to honor McCall with Judson-Rice Award

The annual Judson-Rice Award will be presented in 2014 to bridge-building Baptist leader and influential pastor Emmanuel McCall of Atlanta. A dinner event is set for Thursday, April 24, at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.

“It is hard to think of mature, thoughtful leadership in Baptist life and not have Dr. Emmanuel McCall come to mind,” said John Pierce, executive editor of *Baptists Today*.

A Pennsylvania native, McCall is a graduate of the University of Louisville, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Emory University. He worked for many years on the staff of the former Southern Baptist Home Mission Board where he helped to bridge racial division.

Currently, McCall fills the pulpit of historic Friendship Baptist Church in downtown Atlanta. His pastoral ministry also includes serving as founding pastor (1991-2004) of Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in College Park, Ga.



His significant leadership roles in the larger Baptist community have included service as vice president of the Baptist World Alliance and national moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

McCall served as chair of the trustees for the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, and has taught at Emory and at Mercer University's McAfee School

of Theology as well as seminaries in Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria.

“There is such high and wide respect for the remarkable leadership Dr. McCall has given to Baptists, and on behalf of Baptists to the larger faith community,” added Pierce. “We look forward to acknowledging those contributions and celebrating this occasion with him, his wife Marie, and the many people who love them.”

The Judson-Rice Award was created in 2001 to celebrate the contributions of early Baptist leaders Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, and to recognize a current Baptist leader who has demonstrated significant leadership while maintaining the highest integrity. The 2013 award was presented to 100-year-old physician and missions advocate Virginia Connally of Abilene, Texas, last April as part of the news journal's 30-year celebration. **BT**

Note: Details on the Judson-Rice Dinner, including reservation information, will be provided in upcoming issues of Baptists Today and on the website baptiststoday.org.

Let the lessons come alive!

NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE: ISRAEL with DR. TONY CARTLEDGE

Nov. 3-13, 2014

Nurturing Faith Bible Studies writer Tony Cartledge, who holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies from Duke University, will lead Sunday school teachers and other interested persons on a personal tour of Israel Nov. 3-13, 2014.

Join Tony and other *Baptists Today* staff on this unique opportunity to see firsthand the places where biblical stories came to life and to gain insights into the culture and languages of this remarkable setting.

DESTINATIONS will include Megiddo and other ancient cities, the Sea of Galilee, Nazareth, Capernaum, the Mount of the Beatitudes, the Golan Heights, the Jordan River, Jericho, Qumran, Masada and the Dead Sea.

In Jerusalem, view the city from the Mount of Olives, walk down the Palm Sunday Road, visit the Garden of Gethsemane,

and follow the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Then visit the City of David and slosh through Hezekiah's Tunnel, pray at the Western Wall, and walk around the Temple Mount.

In Bethlehem, visit the Church of the Nativity and Shepherd's Field — then venture through the Valley of Elah to Moreshah, for a hands-on archaeological dig, bringing pottery and other finds to light for the first time in more than 2,000 years. Other highlights will include the Israel Museum and Israel's Holocaust memorial.

COST: \$3,800 includes airfare (from select cities), lodging, breakfasts and dinners, and travel on a luxury motor coach for the entire trip. The group will be joined by one of Israel's most experienced and sought-after guides, Doron Heiliger.

Reservations, itinerary and other travel details will be available in upcoming issues of *Baptists Today* and online at baptiststoday.org. For now, hold those dates!

NURTURING FAITH is an expanded ministry of *Baptists Today* — providing trusted resources for Christian learning and living including the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, Nurturing Faith Books and the new Nurturing Faith Experiences.



By John Pierce

We are fragile

It happens at different times for different people: that moment when one realizes that mortality applies to all of humanity.

Supposed youthfulness exemptions give way to graying temples or a constant aching knee. Signs of the aging process — or of human frailty at even a younger age — appear to everyone eventually.

The timing and degrees vary, but the reality applies to all.

Even fame and fortune can't stop it or fully mask its reality. Glen Campbell struggles with Alzheimer's, and Linda Ronstadt has Parkinson's.

The question is not whether human frailty will make its presence known, but how and

when. And the bigger question is how we deal with it.

Preventative measures — good health habits and health care — can only prevent so much. The feeling of being 10-feet tall and bulletproof can be cut down to size quickly.

Life is fragile. We are fragile.

Self-sufficiency is overrated; so is living in isolation.

Communities — and faith communities, in particular — are designed for bringing individual gifts and strengths as well as acknowledged frailties and needs into the mix.

Discipleship, worship and service flow well

out of the understanding that no matter how healthy, happy and/or successful we may be at the moment, we need the presence of God and the presence of God found within others to bring meaning and purpose to our lives.

Advent and Christmas are opportunities for such greater purposes. Yet the meaning of the season is easily masked by noise, busyness and the expectations of others.

It takes intentionality to push through the trappings of this time of year to get to the heart of the matter. Yet such is worth every effort.

The coming of God in flesh — as a fragile child, not a mighty warrior — has lessons we have yet to learn and hopes we have yet to embrace.

Teach us more, O God. Give us more hope for our fragile, yet purposeful lives. **BT**



Gratitude for Edgar Twine

Baptists Today received an estate gift recently from Horace Edgar Twine of Tampa, Fla., who died in October 2012 at age 83.

A native of Chowan, N.C., he graduated from Old Dominion University, the University of Richmond, and Southwestern and Southern Baptist seminaries in preparation for ministry.

He served churches in Virginia and Maryland before going to the pastorate of Riverside Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. He also worked in stewardship campaigns, assisting congregations in providing the needed finances for their building and ministry endeavors.

An avid reader of *Baptists Today*, he often wrote letters in response to my editorials — about an even mixture of agreement and disagreement. No, I'd say they leaned about 60 percent in thoughtful disagreement.

However, he always expressed appreciation for the openness of *Baptists Today* and our willingness to tackle relevant and even difficult issues without offering simple-minded, definitive answers.

His well-stated responses were always appreciated and would often lead to an ongoing conversation for a while. Sometimes we would drop the matter at respectful disagreement.

Likewise, his appreciation showed through in his letters, and even more clearly in his choosing to leave a portion of his estate to help *Baptists Today* continue its mission.

We remember Horace Edgar Twine fondly, and are grateful for his life, ministry and generosity. **BT**



The Directors and Staff of Baptists Today appreciate your readership and support. We wish you a meaningful Advent journey and a joyful Christmas.

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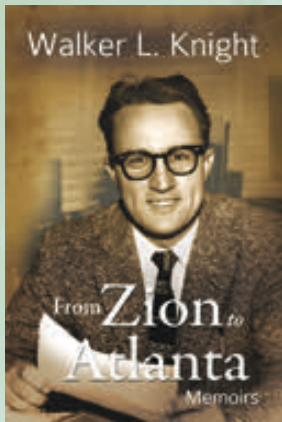


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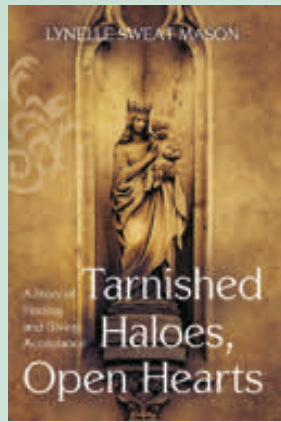
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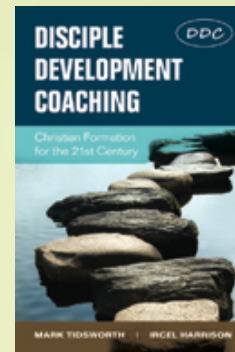
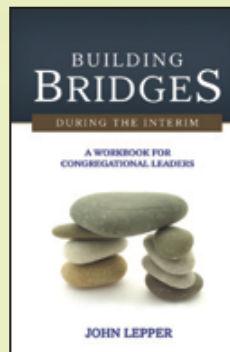
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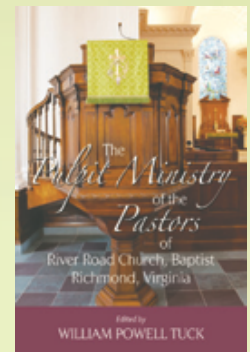
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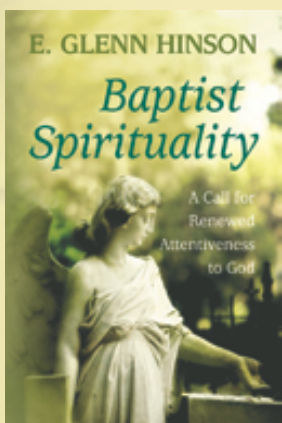
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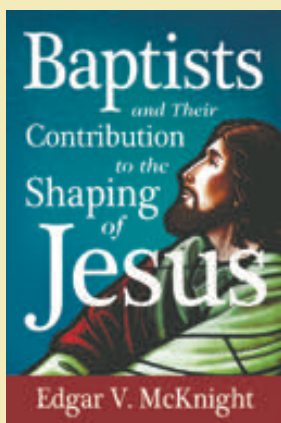
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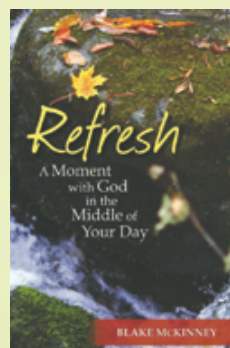
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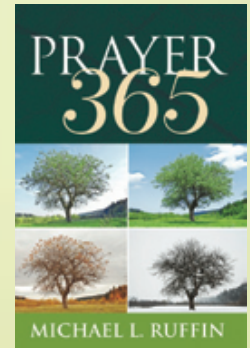
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quotation remarks

“All churches know things they don’t even know they know — things that have been passed on to them and that they can pass on to the next generation — if only they will become aware enough of what they know in order to teach it. Our churches need to teach what we know to those who will teach others as we have taught them.”

—Pastor George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, in his book *Preparing the Pastors We Need: Reclaiming the Congregation’s Role in Training Clergy* (Alban, 2012)

“Do not be afraid of the subject of equality for Christian women. The conversation must begin ... Be careful in your conversation and do not demean women, not because women are too sensitive, but because women are too valuable to the Kingdom of God.”

—Shirley Taylor, former ministry assistant with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and founder of Baptist Women for Equality, in her book *Dethroning Male Headship* (One Way Press, 2013)

“There are tens of millions of evangelicals and Protestants. There is no consensus on this issue.”

—Mark Tooley, president of the Institute of Religion and Democracy and a supporter of the Evangelical Immigration Table’s “Pray4Reform” efforts (TIME)

“I do not believe that we are going to heaven together, but I do believe we may go to jail together.”

—Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Albert Mohler, telling Mormon students at Brigham Young University that he sees a doctrinal divide but a shared commitment to “natural marriage” and other issues being threatened by a “moral revolution” (ABP)

“The pancake breakfasts at CYO (Catholic Youth Organization), the pancake breakfasts at the Knights of Columbus. Eating pancakes for dinner every Friday during Lent. At this point in my life, I am one-third buttermilk.”

—TV host, comedian and lifelong Catholic Stephen Colbert (RNS)

“It has been hailed as one of our nation’s literary treasures, ... and studied in countless high school and college classrooms. The Letter earned King a place alongside Gandhi and Thoreau as a champion of civil disobedience.”

—Jonathan Rieder, in his book *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation* (Bloomsbury Press, 2013)

“Even as many of the forms in which the church is clothed today are passing away, we do not live in fear and without hope. We await with anticipation the new forms in which we shall be clothed, knowing the paradox of our faith is that in co-suffering with Christ we are born to new life and to renewed vocation as the body of Christ.”

—A. Roy Medley, general secretary of American Baptist Churches USA (ABCUSA)

“We are involved in the political process, but we must always be wary of being co-opted by it. Christianity thrives when it is clearest about what distinguishes it from the outside culture.”

—Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (WSJ)

“They remind us that Baptist missions are capable of expressing a love better than life itself. They call us to get on with it.”

—Lloyd Allen, professor of church history and spiritual formation at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology, on the sacrificial service of early Baptist missionaries Ann and Adoniram Judson two centuries ago (EthicsDaily)

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Supreme Court affirms monks' right to sell caskets

By Katherine Burgess
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — A group of Catholic monks can continue selling their handmade caskets after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal from Louisiana funeral directors.

“We really can now move forward without worrying about being shut down,” said Deacon Mark Coudrain, manager of St. Joseph Woodworks in Covington, La. “This is going to affect a lot of other people. A lot of people are going to have opportunities to do things that are their legal right to generate revenue.”

In a little-noticed ruling on Oct. 15, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case between the brothers of St. Joseph Abbey and the Louisiana State Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors.

In 2007, the abbey began selling handmade coffins, prompting the board to file a lawsuit that argued Louisiana law required a funeral director's license for casket sales.

The monks later brought suit in federal court and were upheld by both the Eastern District of Louisiana in 2010 and the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in March 2013. The funeral directors appealed to the Supreme Court; by not agreeing to hear the case, the Supreme Court let stand the appeals court ruling.

The 5th Circuit said in its decision that Louisiana does not regulate the use or construction of caskets. People may purchase any casket from out of state and Louisiana law does not require the use of a casket at all.



Abbot Justin Brown looks on as Novices Joseph Eichorn, left and Dustin Bernard move a handmade wooden casket through the woodwork shop on the grounds of St. Joseph Abbey outside of Covington, La. Photo by Ted Jackson/*The Times-Picayune*

“Whatever special expertise a funeral director may have in casket selection is irrelevant to it being the sole seller of caskets,” the decision said.

The monks had buried their own members as well as the occasional bishop or donor in handmade caskets for years. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed the abbey's timberland, a source of revenue, the monks decided to sell caskets to fund the medical and educational needs of the abbey.

The monastery invested \$200,000 in St. Joseph Woodworks and sold “monastic”

and “traditional” cypress caskets for \$1,500 and \$2,000, prices “significantly lower” than caskets at funeral homes, according to the 5th Circuit Court's decision.

Coudrain said selling caskets also serves as a way of sharing Catholic teaching about the meaning of death.

“The theology of the church is that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, and the spirit has moved on, but we want to respect the body as well,” Coudrain said. “Part of the Catholic tradition is you have a viewing, a funeral and a burial.” **BT**

Sistine Chapel pollution may lead to fewer visitors

By Eric J. Lyman
Religion News Service

ROME — The head of the Vatican Museums said in October that pollution levels inside the storied Sistine Chapel are high enough to damage its priceless frescoes and could lead to a reduction in visitors.

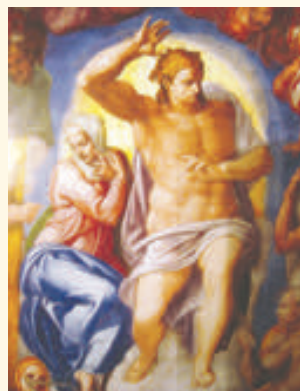
The Vatican is installing a series of new air purifiers and a new air conditioning system inside the chapel that's the site of papal elections, and the new system should be online by the end of 2014.

If it works, visitor levels can stay as they are. But if the new system can't control the

levels of dust, humidity and carbon dioxide, then director Antonio Paolucci said he'd have to make the “painful decision” to limit visitors.

At stake is the health of Michelangelo's world-famous fresco on the Sistine Chapel ceiling — considered by many scholars to be the world's single greatest painting — and his masterpiece behind the main altar, *The Last Judgment*.

The chapel also houses works from Pietro Perugino, Sandro Botticelli, Luca Signorelli and other masters.



It was last restored in the 1990s, and recent studies show that dust and humidity from the estimated 5.5 million visitors to the chapel each year could threaten the artwork.

During high season, as many as 20,000 people a day pass through the Sistine Chapel, which was again in the headlines earlier this year when it was closed off for the conclave that selected Pope Francis.

The Sistine Chapel is part of the massive Vatican Museums, home to one of the world's greatest art collections. **BT**

Fewer home-schooling families cite religion as main motivation

By Katherine Burgess
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — When Jennifer Pedersen-Giles started to home-school her son Westen six years ago, it was because he needed a more hands-on environment than what public schools could offer. Now the eighth-grader studies writing, music, art, geometry, literature and world religions from his home in Arizona.

Religion, in other words, had nothing to do with his mother's decision.

She's not alone. According to the federally funded National Center for Education Statistics, the share of parents who cited "religious or moral instruction" as their primary motivation for home-schooling has dropped from 36 percent in 2007 to just 16 percent during the 2011-12 school year.

"You used to have to be a hero to home-school," said John Edelson, founder and president of Time4Learning, a curriculum provider for home-schoolers. "You were really going against the mainstream. Your mother-in-law didn't understand it, the neighbors didn't understand it, police would stop you in the middle of the day and wonder what was going on."

As home-schooling slowly becomes more mainstream — 3 percent of American students age 5-17 are home-schooled, up from 2.2 percent in 2003 — most parents cited the environment of public schools (25 percent), not religious belief, as the main reason behind their decision to home-school.

Edelson said the number of home-school families who do so for religious reasons has not

decreased, but the percentage of those who list it as a first priority has dropped as other parents join the home-schooling community for different reasons.

"You go to any cocktail party, church, any group of people and you say, 'I'm in the home-schooling business,' and all these women will jump on it and say, 'Oh, we home-schooled,'" Edelson said.

Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute, a nonprofit organization that conducts original research, said years of studies on home education led to its increasing acceptance.

"In the earlier days of the modern home-school movement, because home-schooling was such a tiny, tiny minority of the public, parents had to be very strongly committed to what they were doing," Ray said.

Gretchen Buck, administrator of Global Village School, the customizable home-schooling program that Pedersen-Giles uses, said there is more demand for home-schooling as public schools struggle. Many parents do not like the emphasis on standardized tests; others remove their children because of bullying.

Others, like Pedersen-Giles, realize their children struggle when asked to sit at a desk for extended periods.

"By third grade, school was more about production levels with the onus being on the child to adapt to the classroom environment," she said. "(Westen's) individual needs were not being met. It would have taken so little for things to be different, but after exhaustive pleas to teachers, I decided that I would have to create my own change." **BT**

Hispanics who identify as 'nones' increasing

By Kimberly Winston
Religion News Service

The number of Hispanic-Americans who say they adhere to no religion is growing and now rivals the number of Hispanic evangelicals, a new study has found.

The share of Hispanics living in the U.S. who say they are atheist, agnostic or have no religious affiliation has reached 12 percent, according to the 2013 Hispanic Values Survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute. That is double the rate reported in 1990 by the American Religious Identification Survey.

Researchers say Hispanic "nones" are now statistically equal to the number of U.S. Hispanic evangelical Protestants — 13 percent — and warn of a religious divide in the Hispanic community that will be felt for decades to come.

"Lots of attention has been given to the rise of Hispanic evangelicals, but they have a parallel universe in the religiously unaffiliated, who think very differently about many issues," said Juhem Navarro-Rivera, a PRRI research associate who worked on the study. "There is a kind of polarization going on."

The polarization is most evident in social issues. The study found 80 percent of Hispanic nones favor same-sex marriage, while only 21 percent of evangelical Hispanics do. Similarly, 69 percent of religiously unaffiliated Hispanics favor abortion rights compared with 26 percent of Hispanic evangelicals.

Because abortion and same-sex marriage are often hot-button issues in elections, politicians should be wary of viewing Hispanics as a monolithic group.

"They think differently," Navarro-Rivera said of Hispanic evangelicals and nones. "They serve as an ideological counterweight" to each other.

The study, conducted among 1,500 American Hispanics, also found that the majority of Hispanics are Catholic (53 percent), while one-quarter are Protestant. The latter group is equally divided among mainline Protestants (12 percent) and evangelicals (13 percent). Only 6 percent identify with a non-Christian religion. **BT**



‘They’re not there as much, and consequently
they’re not giving as much.’

Church giving reaches Depression-era lows

WASHINGTON — Collection plates are growing even lighter as Protestant church member giving reached new lows in 2011, and tithing probably will not recover from the recession, according to a new report by Empty Tomb, a Christian research group.

“**I**s the issue that the church is not providing an authentic alternative to the consumer mindset?” said Sylvia Ronsvalle, executive vice president of Empty Tomb. “Over a period of time, if the church isn’t providing more of an authentic alternative, the church will lose.”

The percentage of a church member’s income given to the church dropped to 2.3 percent in 2011 (the latest year for which numbers are available), down from 2.4 percent in 2010, according to the Empty Tomb study.

In 1968, church members gave an average of 3.1 percent of their income.

Giving has declined for four consecutive years, according to the report. The only other period of prolonged decline in giving per member was from 1928 through 1934, almost entirely during the Great Depression.

In 2011, the 23 denominations researched by Empty Tomb received \$22.94 billion. In 2010 they received \$22.88 billion.

The steepest monetary decline was in the area of “benevolences,” spending that does not apply to a local congregation’s needs but includes things like seminary support or missions work. Giving to benevolences was at 0.34 percent of a person’s income, a decrease of 48 percent since 1968 — its lowest level since that time period.

Altogether, the report found, churches had \$87.2 million less to spend in 2011 on work beyond their congregations than in 2010.

Empty Tomb also reported that overall church membership has declined.

Empty Tomb examined data reported by congregations to their denominations and



A collection plate is passed during a United Methodist Church of the Resurrection Sunday evening service in Leawood, Kan. The Church of the Resurrection is known as the largest Methodist church in the nation. RNS photo by Sally Morrow

then compiled in the *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches*. In some cases, Empty Tomb obtained data directly from denominations.

The denominations included in the report encompassed more than 100,000 congregations across the U.S. and included denominations affiliated with both the National Association of Evangelicals and with the National Council of Churches, as well as unaffiliated denominations. Although Catholics were not included in the report, previous Empty Tomb research has found that Catholics generally give at comparable or slightly less rates than Protestants.

The decline could be attributed to a variety of reasons, including economic struggles, said Matt Branaugh, director of editorial and business development for the Church Law & Tax Group at *Christianity Today*. *Christianity Today* has conducted its own surveys on church tithing.

Another reason could be a decline in church member attendance, Branaugh said.

“I’ve heard some reference that phenomena as the ‘grazer effect’ — people are not going to church every week now, and the weeks they don’t go they’re listening to podcasts, doing worship on their own or fellowshiping with people in other ways,” Branaugh said. “They’re not there as much, and consequently they’re not giving as much.”

Other churches struggle with how to talk about finances, not realizing that churches must teach about how a relationship with God involves giving — “stewardship,” as churches would say, Branaugh said.

“As a result, if it’s not being talked about and it’s not really being taught, it may not necessarily grow into the culture of that congregation,” Branaugh said.

Churches need to embrace the idea that all money is God’s, not just a small tithe, said Rick Dunham, CEO of Dunham+Company, a consulting firm that assists ministries in fundraising. Dunham is also on the executive committee of the Giving Institute, an organization that seeks to advance philanthropy.

“I think the decline in giving is in part because the church hasn’t really embraced the biblical mandate around true giving, the idea of investment in eternity, in the stuff that matters most,” Dunham said. “Not just putting a little bit of money in the offering plate and thinking I’ve done my duty.”

Ronsvalle said part of the reason giving has declined is because churches still treat people as if they are living in “hard times” — even when they are not.

“They’re hard because people want to take better vacations,” Ronsvalle said. “They want to get more cars. They want to have more square footage.”

Churches and their members need to realize that if 100 million Christians gave an extra \$50 a year, child deaths could be drastically reduced across the world, Ronsvalle said.

“The church doesn’t think that way,” Ronsvalle said. “It has not understood its potential power for good.” **BT**

Falwell's Legacy

Liberty University painting an 'unusual picture' of growth

LYNCHBURG, Va. (RNS) — A crimson-colored “LU,” emblazoned in 11-foot letters on a mountainside against a backdrop of white limestone, tells students and their families they have arrived at Liberty University.

The cacophony of construction across the 7,000-acre campus it overlooks suggests that the once-struggling Christian college has not only arrived but also plans to stick around.

Dormitories built in the 1970s have been torn down to make room for high-rise residence halls. Soon to be completed is a \$50 million library in which robots will retrieve books. The campus master plan calls for more seating in the football stadium, a sign of Liberty's aspirations to one day participate in Division 1 bowl games.

“We haven't achieved all of our goals yet, but we're well on our way,” says Jerry Falwell Jr., who took over as Liberty's chancellor when his father, Jerry Falwell Sr., died at his desk in 2007.

The elder Falwell, a nationally known televangelist and prominent political figure, lived just long enough to see the Baptist college he founded in 1971 start down the road to prosperity, his son says.

Most private non-profit colleges have remained cautious with their budgets amid lingering economic uncertainty, but Liberty University is in the midst of a \$400 million, four-year spending spree. Its endowment this year topped \$1 billion.

Its business strategy, including competitive tuition and attention to customer service, is earning praise from financial analysts. Moody's Investors Service recently upgraded Liberty to one of its highest credit ratings.

“It is quite an unusual picture,” says Karen Kedem, a vice president and senior analyst for Moody's, a credit-rating agency. Liberty is “continuing to see robust revenue growth, a stark contrast in what we're seeing at a majority of our universities.”

The secret to Liberty's financial health? One is that it keeps costs down by hiring most instructors on contract; only law faculty earn tenure.

Another is what Standard & Poor's calls the school's “robust and successful” online program. This year, it enrolled 92,500 online students. Campus enrollments this fall are just shy of 13,000.



Liberty University chancellor, Jerry Falwell Jr. has overseen a massive expansion of the Lynchburg, Va. campus. Fueled by online enrollment, the campus has multiple capital projects in the works. Photo by Ryan T. Stone/courtesy USA Today

Liberty also keeps costs down for families. Tuition and fees this year for students living on campus total \$20,768 — up 4 percent from last year's \$19,968, but still below last year's average tuition and fees. According to the non-profit College Board, average tuition and fees last year were \$29,056 for private non-profit schools.

Falwell says the online and residential programs complement each other. The online division, which operates in a former Sears department store, accounts for 61 percent of the university's revenue but just 44 percent of expenses, Standard & Poor's says.

The online surplus goes toward campus upgrades, and the residential campus gives credibility to the online program. Many online students, who tend to skew older, may never set foot on campus. But they can participate in graduation exercises and other campus activities. Some programs include week-long “intensive” courses on campus.

In its early days, Liberty paid the bills mostly with donations from parishioners at Thomas Road Baptist Church, where Falwell Sr. was pastor, and from viewers of his popular national television ministry.

The school sank into debt in the early 1990s after sex scandals involving televangelists Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart dealt a blow to the evangelical Christian broadcasting industry. Falwell says Liberty paid off the last of its debt in 2007 using the elder Falwell's life insurance

policy.

Today, Liberty attracts students from 50 states and more than 95 countries to its online and on-campus programs combined. It has hosted campus visits by conservative national figures, including 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney and some of his GOP contenders, including Donald Trump.

Liberty's financial practices have drawn scrutiny. Some Christian colleges won't accept government aid. That's not the case at Liberty, whose students this year received what campus officials estimate to be \$775 million in federal aid, including loans and grants.

Falwell said that the federal money goes to students, not the college, and that most of it was used by students to pay their living expenses.

He and provost Ron Godwin would prefer Liberty get more attention for its student-loan default rate — 7.1 percent last year, about half the 13.4 percent national average. They tout the quality of the education they offer, including a 25 to 1 student-faculty ratio, and stress the school's Christian heritage.

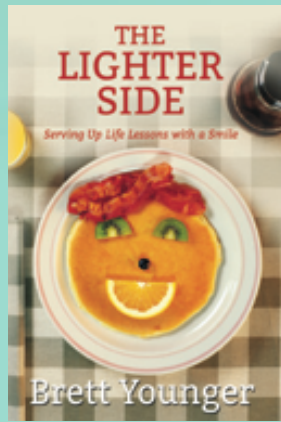
During a recent campus visit, tour guide Alyssa Hammond, 22, told students and parents, “Every class is going to be tied back to the Bible. Every class will open with a prayer.”

Liberty also has invested heavily in recreational activities, including a synthetic ski slope that operates year-round, an ice rink and dozens of opportunities for sports. **BT**

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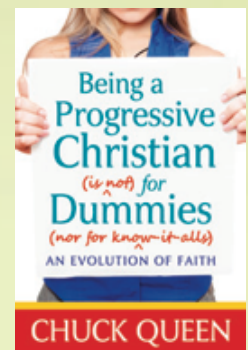
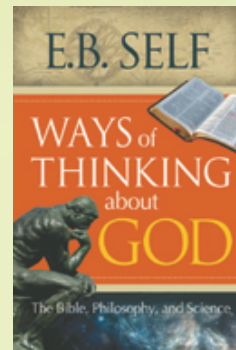
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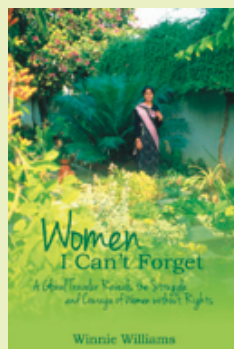
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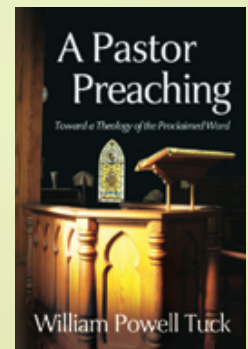
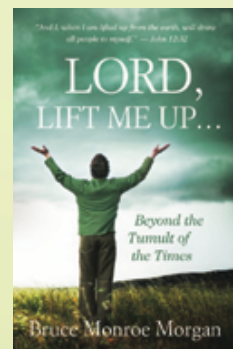
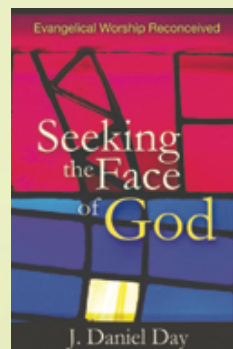
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By Elizabeth Evans Hagan

Welcome to Watonga

When my husband, Kevin, and I made the decision last year to transport at least half of our lives to Oklahoma because of his new position as president and CEO of Feed The Children, I was concerned about how I would be received as a Baptist pastor.

Would I ever find opportunities to preach again in the state that self-identifies as the “buckle of the Bible belt”?

Within months, most of my fears came true. Repeatedly I heard: “Are you sure you used to preach at a church every week? We’ve never heard of a woman doing such.”

To make matters worse, potential male Baptist colleagues I met told me to consider lowering my expectations of acceptance.

But, I wasn’t going to give up. There had to be some community within Oklahoma that would welcome me, female preacher-ness and all. I’d just have to keep looking, even outside the bounds of denominational leadership.

After an email exchange with Jim Kee-Rees, I felt that I had met a clergy friend in town. He serves as a mission pastor to an Episcopalian mission congregation in Watonga, Okla. — a town about 60 miles from Oklahoma City situated within the Cheyenne and Arapaho reservation land.

He invited me to Watonga on the rounds of his pastoral visits one morning last March. It felt like a good opportunity to learn more about Native American culture, if nothing else.

Though I knew that I might not be readily welcomed as an “outsider” in such a community, I tried to arrive with the posture of a learner.

To my surprise, by the time we reached the home of Ms. Ruth — a Cheyenne elder and leader at Watonga Indian Baptist mission for which Kee-Rees also had a pastoral relationship in town — I felt received in kindness.

Sitting down in Ms. Ruth’s living room, a house filled with her children, grandchildren and even great-grandbabies, I learned of her enthusiasm about the ministry of the Watonga Indian Baptist Mission, a congregation supported by the American Baptist Churches USA and one of 14 ABCUSA congregations in the state of Oklahoma (all Native American).

Ms. Ruth began to ask me more about



Elizabeth Evans Hagan (left) finds a warm welcome from women of the Watonga Baptist family.

myself and seemed delighted that I was a Baptist pastor.

“You should meet Quinton [Roman Nose], one of our other tribal elders,” she said. “We always need preachers at our church.”

Within an hour, pastor Kee-Rees and I shared lunch with Quinton at the only locally owned restaurant in town.

“You’re an ordained American Baptist minister?” he soon asked over our RC Colas and plates of meatloaf and green beans. “Yes,” I said, and Quinton smiled.

Without any hesitation he asked, “You want to preach at our congregation sometime soon? We don’t have a pastor right now.”

Within a week, we set a date for me to come back. It did not seem to faze Ms. Ruth or Quinton at all that I was both female and pastor.

My first Sunday I shared as the guest pastor at Watonga Indian Baptist Mission was Mother’s Day.

When touring the facility before worship, Quinton pointed out a flyer posted on the bulletin board from the 2007 ABCUSA bi-annual meeting in Washington, D.C. Pictured was one of the Cheyenne tribal elders who had helped to establish a Baptist presence in the area in the early 1900s. It became clear that being rooted in a larger Baptist tradition meant a lot to Quinton and the church as a whole.

When the service began, we sang hymns, both from the donated 1976 Baptist Hymnals (a gift from a congregation in Tuscaloosa,

Ala., unknown to the church), and from the Cheyenne tradition, led by Ms. Ruth. My husband, Kevin, who came with me that day even found himself playing the piano for the service because they didn’t have someone to do that either.

As I preached and then shared a lunch in honor of the church’s mothers, I discovered the hope and the spirit of this community: the children. The children under 14 outnumbered the adults in the congregation. What a ministry opportunity gem!

I’ve been invited to return once a month ever since.

In our growing friendship between this congregation, my family and me, I’ve been reminded once again not to pay attention to the traditional narratives that might say, “You’ll never preach again,” or “Those people won’t welcome you.”

It’s nonsense to think that female pastors aren’t welcomed even in places like Oklahoma. It’s nonsense to think that Native American communities aren’t welcoming to outsiders. We all have callings to fulfill. All churches need pastors to love them, even those who enter as guests.

I have been reminded to keep looking for God in these unlikely places, most particularly among those who are marginalized, forgotten or poor.

The Watonga Indian Baptist Mission has already taught me so much about God’s welcome. And I’m glad I have been here to learn. **BT**

Story and photo by John Pierce

Teaching church

Pastors share lessons learned in congregational life

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — A lot of good ideas are brewed over cups of coffee. Such was the case for Birmingham pastors Sarah Jackson Shelton and Christopher M. Hamlin. So, in addition to ongoing support and exchanging of ideas, a book emerged.

“The story behind the book is that Chris and I have become great friends, meeting for coffee at a shop halfway between our offices, in order to share our concerns, victories and wounds from ministry,” said Shelton, pastor of Baptist Church of the Covenant. “From that friendship and its ensuing conversations, we realized that there was a lot that seminary did not teach us — not just skills of finesse, but basic ‘how to’ abilities that come only from being in a local congregation.”

They concluded that their congregations had become needed instructors, hence the book’s title, *The Teaching Church: Congregation as Mentor* (Smyth & Helwys, 2013).

Hamlin, pastor of Birmingham’s Tabernacle Baptist Church, who formerly served the historic Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, said he and Shelton wrote the book to address the questions they were raising about who is responsible for teaching pastors beyond the seminary experience.

“Initially, it would have been easy to



address what the seminary did not teach ministers,” he said. “However, we wanted to take a deeper look, especially at the first-church experience, to validate our thoughts.”

So they invited other ministers from various backgrounds into the conversation — through 81 interviews — to explore what they were learning through experiences with congregations.

“We were surprised that so many other ministers not only felt the same way, but were willing to tell us their stories,” said Shelton. “In fact, as they would leave our interviews, we often heard words of appreciation for asking them questions and then giving them the safe

space to tell their stories.”

Anonymous excerpts from the interviews along with the authors’ interpretations are grouped around the subjects of social ethics, conflict management, grace and pastoral care. Two earlier chapters focus on the seminary experience and the role of a pastor’s first congregation in shaping pastoral identity.

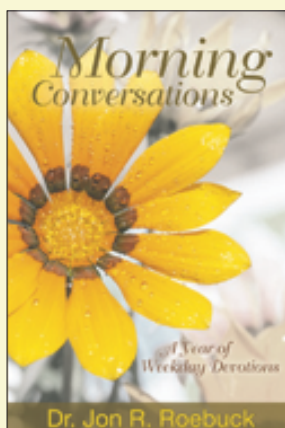
Shelton calls them “sacred stories of those who said ‘yes’ to God’s call and the congregations that were willing to say ‘yes’ to their calling to teach and mold ministers into being true servants of the church.”

“As we began this study, we braced ourselves to hear many horror tales, and we did,” they write in the book. “But there was also a pervasive appreciation for congregations as they attempt to live their understanding of the gospel in a particular time frame and historical context.”

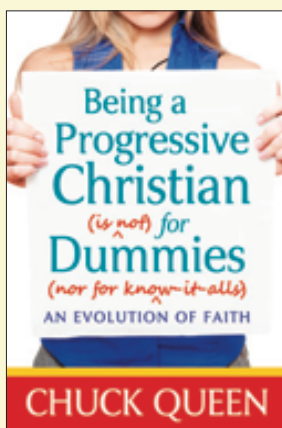
Hamlin and Shelton are careful not to be overly critical of theological education, which they believe fills an important role, but rather to acknowledge that many important lessons in pastoral ministry are learned in the daily laboratory of congregational life.

Hamlin said the education process is unending and that “the church continues to be an effective place where ministers learn.” **BT**

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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

John 1:10-18

Jan. 5, 2014

The Word That Walks

“What is God like?” Inquiring minds want to know, and have wanted to know for as long as people have believed in a higher power. We’ve not been short on ideas. The ancients wondered what deity looks like, and so we have images of gods like Marduk and Ishtar from Babylonia, of Osiris and Ptah from Egypt, of Aphrodite and Zeus from Greece.

We have wondered what divinity acts like, and so we have a world of mythology from the Greeks and the Celts, from the Incas and Aztecs, from Australian aborigines and forest tribes of Papua New Guinea. Every culture has traditions about the supernatural.

Christians believe that God has taken the initiative of self-revelation through the stories, teachings, letters, and other materials that make up the Bible.

The Bible begins with the radical claim that God has created humans in God’s own image (Gen. 1:27), so that there is something godlike in us, some spark of the divine, some shadow of God’s face. That in itself is a mind-boggling idea: that God could be revealed through human flesh or personality.

The Bible ends with an even more remarkable claim that God and human believers will live together face to face, for in eternity “God himself will dwell among them, and they shall be his people” (Rev. 21:3).

In between, John’s gospel declares that God is revealed most perfectly in the human life of Jesus Christ. Christ not only shows us the way to God; he is God, the very essence of God, the

John 1:14 –

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

embodied word of God in the form of a man. ↓

Prologue to the prologue

In the memorable and poetic prologue to his gospel (1:1-18), John describes Christ as the divine *logos*, the Word of God incarnate. The basic meaning of the term *logos* is “word,” but it is not limited to that. It could also carry connotations such as “reason,” “wisdom,” “matter,” or even the “reckoning” of an account.

Writers have often assumed that John used the *logos* concept to make the gospel more appealing to Gentile audiences familiar with Hellenistic philosophy, but the word would communicate well with readers from a variety of backgrounds.

William Hull has suggested at least three approaches. Jewish readers could have thought of *logos* in terms of the Hebrew Bible’s witness to the word of God as a creative power that could speak the world into being (Gen. 1; Ps. 33:6, 9) or accomplish any divine purpose. “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth,” Isaiah insisted.

“It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).

Greek readers could have imagined the *logos* as a philosophical principle, the projected thought of the transcendent God, giving stability to life and forming a divine-human bond of rational thought. ↓

Early Christian readers would interpret *logos* as the proclamation of Christ through the preaching of the gospel as a “ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4), whose content was Christ himself (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:21-22). Jesus’ very life was a sermon on the nature of God who offers the gift of relationship to the human world.

Thus, Hull concludes, people of different backgrounds might first think of the *logos*/word as a divine power, as a rational principle, or as a redemptive proclamation, but in every case the true “Word of God” finds its fullness in a person, in Jesus Christ (“John,” in the *Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 [Broadman Press, 1970], 211-12).

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



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Knowing Christ's power
(vv. 10-13)

John declared that Christ came into the world for the purpose of redeeming the world, but the world did not appreciate his unique person or mission (v. 10). Creation did not recognize its creator! John found it especially heartbreaking that the people of Israel did not recognize Christ as their own long-awaited Messiah: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (v. 11).

Still, there were individuals who did recognize Jesus as Lord, who believed in him, and who accepted him as savior. To these people, John said, "to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (vv. 12-13).

To believe in Christ's name is to believe that he is who he claims to be – the very Son of God, the Word of God, indeed, very God himself. To those who believed in his name, Christ "gave power to become children of God" – the divine Son of God empowered human persons to become the mortal children of God. ↓

As the human Jesus was conceived by God, John taught, mortals who become children of God enter the relationship "not by blood or the will of the flesh or the will of man" (a threefold reference to human birth), but by God's will and God's work alone. Jesus' earthly birth is the pattern for our spiritual birth (cf. John 3:1-16). Thus, John defines Christianity purely in terms of God's grace: God loved the world enough to become incarnate in Christ so that we might believe and become children of God. ↓

Knowing Christ's glory
(vv. 14-15)

John's description of Christ begins with the concept of the *logos*, then expands to show more of Christ's nature: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of

grace and truth" (v. 14). Because the eternal *logos* became incarnate as a mortal like us, because Jesus took on the flesh and bones of our humanity, we are better able to see and appreciate God's true glory. ↓

The meaning of John's description of Christ as "a father's only son" is subject to debate. The word he uses is *monogenēs*, which can suggest the idea of "only begotten," but can also mean "singular" in the sense of "the only one of its kind." Jesus certainly was the only one of his kind, but the added phrase "of the father" leads us to choose "only begotten" as the best translation. In a sense, God is the Father and begetter of all persons, but God's relationship with Christ, the "only begotten," is absolutely unique.

The human Christ reveals God's matchless glory, and he declares it most clearly through his nature, which is "full of grace and truth." John preserves a careful balance by coupling these terms. Grace is God's free gift of love and forgiveness. Truth reflects God's desire to be consistent and trustworthy in dealing with humankind. As Hull notes, "Grace without truth is easily seen as sentimentality while truth without grace can appear to be an inflexible rigidity" (p. 218). In Christ, we see the depths of God's compassion combined with a devotion to what is right.

John offers further testimony of Christ's glory in the parenthetical remark of v. 15, where he quotes John the Baptist as saying "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me'" (cf. Matt. 3:11). Many people expected John to reveal himself as Israel's Messiah, but John pointed to Jesus as the true Anointed One (the name "Christ" [*Christos*] is a Greek form of the Hebrew "Messiah" [*mashiach*] that means "anointed"). The Fourth Gospel further argues that John

the baptizer did not recognize Jesus' importance at first, but God revealed it to him (cf. John 1:25-34).

Knowing Christ's grace
(vv. 16-18)

Since Christ is "full of grace and truth," it follows that "from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (v. 16). The grace we receive as believers has its source in God. Perhaps John is suggesting that our human propensity to sin always leaves us in need of more grace, which we can receive "from his fullness." ↓

John draws his prologue to an end with a brief comparison between the way God was seen through the eyes of the law and through Christ: the law was given to humans through Moses, he said, but "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (v. 17).

God has been gracious from the beginning, but tablets of stone and written laws could not communicate that grace as effectively as Jesus could. Jesus was grace and truth in the flesh, the living embodiment of divine character.

Moses had once begged to see the Lord's glory, but was only allowed to catch a brief glimpse of God's "back" or "afterglow" (Exod. 33:23). The most interesting thing about this story is that, while passing by, God revealed the divine nature in words: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6).

Although the story claims that Moses spoke with God "face to face" (Exod. 33:11), it also quotes God as saying "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). Thus, John insisted that no one had truly seen God until the coming of Christ, for "it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18).

The face Moses longed to see was the face beloved by John and Mary and Peter and James. It is the face of Christ, the living embodiment of divine grace, God with us. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Acts 10:34-43

Jan. 12, 2014

Who Converted Whom?

Have you ever changed your mind about a social custom or belief that you once held dear? Many of us who have reached our sixth decade grew up in an environment steeped in racism. Getting used to the idea that blacks and whites could share the same school, bathroom, restaurant, or water fountain was a struggle, but now most of us think little of it: we have learned to embrace new attitudes toward people of different racial backgrounds. 📖

How did this happen? We were children of our age, awash in an environment of bias, but at some point, we began to see more clearly and began a long journey on the road away from racism. Others may have seen a similar transformation in attitudes toward issues such as women in ministry or in growing acceptance of people who are gay.

Our journey to acceptance may have begun with a developing friendship with someone different. We may have been influenced by a powerful book or a prophetic sermon. Or, we may have learned from a new environment, such as a college campus or military unit, where more accepting viewpoints prevailed. 📖

Prejudice is nothing new. Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, had grown up in an environment of suspicion and distrust between Jews and Gentiles that went back for hundreds of years. As Hebrews returned from exile in the fifth and sixth centuries, BCE, they lived under Persian rule and had no national identity. As a means of self-preservation and an attempt to please God in hopes of future blessing, religious leaders began a campaign that promoted



Acts 10:34b-35 —
"I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

pedigree and purity.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the establishment of policies that outlawed marriage to anyone outside of the Jewish community while also calling for closer adherence to purity laws and more faithful support of the temple. This conscious effort to cement a stronger ethnic identity proved very successful, but also drove a wedge between the Hebrews and their neighbors.

This isolationist worldview prescribed by his inherited faith was all Peter knew, so God had to teach him that Christ's saving work was not restricted to the Jews. Through a vision involving a hungry Peter and a bevy of "unclean" animals, God revealed to Peter that he should not regard anyone as unclean (10:9-16).

The Lord of all (vv. 34-36)

As Peter was trying to make sense of the vision, three messengers from a Roman centurion named Cornelius arrived, asking Peter to accompany them to Caesarea and meet with their

boss, who was described as a "God-fearer," a Gentile who worshiped the God of the Jews but had not fully converted through circumcision. 📖 The text emphasizes Cornelius's piety as a man who prayed constantly and gave generous alms for the poor.

Earlier, as he had knelt for Judaism's regular mid-afternoon prayer time, an angel instructed Cornelius to send messengers to bring Peter to Caesarea. Peter arrived to find not only Cornelius but also a large group of Gentile God-fearers, all eager to hear a word from God (10:17-33).

Peter knew that he was violating Jewish law by meeting with the group and acknowledged some awkwardness about it, but when he learned that the Gentiles sought eagerly to hear a message from God, he had little choice but to preach.

Peter began by relating what he himself had only recently learned: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (10:34b-35). 📖

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



The crusty apostle had begun to connect the dots between his vision of unclean but edible animals that God had declared acceptable and a house full of “unclean” but eager Gentiles who also feared God and who wanted to please God.

As Peter spoke of God’s message to Israel through Christ, he threw out a parenthetical statement that is key to understanding his new view: “He is Lord of all” (v. 36b). Peter, like other Hebrews, had long known and confessed this truth. The Jews, however, had typically looked at it from a different angle, believing that while God was Lord of all nations or ethnic groups, Israel was chosen to be a special people, to live in a unique and potentially rewarding relationship with God (Exod. 19:5-6).^U

Peter’s confession asserts that God’s love is universal, but the message is not universalistic. The ones to whom God shows no partiality are those who show reverence to God, and whose respect for God leads them to do what is right and pleasing to God.^U

A savior for all (vv. 37-41)

After referring twice to God’s message (literally, “word”) through Christ, Peter finally got to the point: that God had “anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power,” which Jesus demonstrated by traveling about, doing good deeds and healing people, proving that God was with him and that he had power over evil (v. 38).^U

Peter spoke as a witness of what happened next, of how “they” put Jesus to death by “hanging him on a tree” (a first-century idiom for crucifixion), and how God had raised him from the dead on the third day.

Note Peter’s tact in describing Jesus’ death. Charges had been brought against Jesus by the Jewish authorities, but Roman soldiers had carried it out. Peter was a Jew in the home of a Roman soldier and surrounded, no doubt, by other soldiers. Instead of assigning blame in the death of Jesus,

he says only that “they” killed him, using the third person plural form of the verb.

Peter had already come to believe that Jesus’ death was a necessary part of his message and work in the world. When God raised Jesus from the dead and caused him to appear before witnesses, eating and drinking in their company, the disciples became fully convinced that Jesus’ message and God’s message were one and the same.

Even as he spoke, Peter was learning in practical terms that the good news was intended for all people. Peter would have been present when Jesus ascended to heaven and would have heard his parting words, which Luke describes as a promise to the disciples that they would be empowered by the Spirit to “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Now Peter found himself beyond Judea, beyond Samaria, speaking to a cosmopolitan group of people who may have come from “the ends of the earth” as far as Peter was concerned. Peter may have felt like an Anglo preacher in an African-American church, but he plunged ahead.

A message for all (vv. 42-43)

Peter recalled how Jesus had “commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead” (v. 42).

What “command” did Peter have in mind? We may think of Matt. 28:19-20, commonly known as “the great commission,” or of Luke’s version in Acts 1:8.

Luke also had written of a post-resurrection occasion when Jesus appeared to the disciples and “opened their minds to understand the scriptures” that both taught of him and declared “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his

name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:45a, 47).

Peter was beginning to understand in practical terms what he had previously known in theory: the gospel really was for all people, and Jesus’ disciples were to proclaim it in all places.

Peter’s speech suggests that he still may have been uncomfortable with the notion, for he proclaimed the gospel more as a warning than as good news. When he said the disciples were “to preach to the people and to testify,” he used a word that can also describe a solemn warning. Since the context involves the prospect of judgment, a better translation might be “to preach to the people and to warn them . . .,” as in NET.

All will be judged, Peter said, both living and dead – and the criteria of judgment will be one’s response to Jesus.^U

Peter concluded his speech with a claim that “all the prophets” had testified that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness through his name” (v. 43). The statement cannot be read literally: not all of the prophets spoke of a coming Messiah, and none of them spoke in the specific terms that Peter described.

There was a belief, however, that the prophets had envisioned a coming age in which all peoples would come to worship God. In his speech on the day of Pentecost, Peter had quoted Joel 2:32a in saying “Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21).

Thoughts of Pentecost immediately arise when we read of what happened next. While Peter was still speaking (and thus, before his audience made any outward response), “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” so that the Gentiles spoke in tongues and praised God, astounding the Jews who had come with Peter (vv. 44-46).

The evidence was clear and the verdict was in: the gospel truly was – and is – for all people. Peter was just beginning to accept the radically inclusive nature of God’s grace. Do we? **BT**

Youth

January 5 — January 26, 2014

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



of the Bible lessons by Tony Cartledge.

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

Knowing

John 1:10-18

We all want to be “in the know.” We follow our friends and other interesting people on Twitter so we can know what is going on in their lives. We post pictures on Instagram of things we see and experience. We “check-in” on Foursquare so we know where our friends are hanging out. We search Google to know the answers to our questions and have news pushed to our phones so we know what is going on in the world. We live in a time when knowing is important.

In the first chapter of John we are introduced to someone else whom we will come to know: Jesus. Through Jesus we know God, because Jesus is God.

John puts us in the know by

introducing Jesus as the “Word that became flesh” but goes on to explain why Jesus came. Jesus came to redeem the world, but the world didn’t receive him. There were those who believed him and what he claimed to be, and they became children of God.

John describes the nature of Jesus as “full of grace and truth.” Jesus was full of grace because he was God’s free gift of love and forgiveness. Jesus was full of truth because he lived in ways that were consistent and trustworthy.

We are able to know grace because we know Jesus. We know that the source of grace is God because we experience it through Jesus. We fully know grace and truth as we come to know Christ — a God who is with us, a God whom we can know.

JANUARY 5

Think About It:

There are so many possible ways that God could have revealed his grace and truth to us, but God chose to be among us in the person of Jesus. What things do you do so that others might also know Jesus?

Make a Choice:

There is always more to learn and know about God. As you grow and mature, how will you learn more about God?

Pray:

God, we give you thanks for coming to live among us so we might know of your grace and truth.

All

Acts 10:34-43

Is there really something that could be for everyone? In a world that seems to be more and more divided, specialized and customized, is there one thing that could work for everyone? Is there something that would work for all of your friends, people who aren’t your friends, and even those whom you would consider rivals? Is there really such a message? Peter says there is. His message is that Jesus is Lord of all.

In today’s lesson, Peter is in an awkward situation because he is with a group of Gentiles who want to hear a word from God, but Jewish law forbids him from even meeting with such a group. But because of Peter’s experience with Jesus, Peter knows

that God’s love is universal to all people. So Peter preaches to these Gentiles out of his own experience and from what he knows. In spite of their differences in culture and worldview, Peter shares a story that is for everyone.

Peter tells them of Jesus being anointed with the Holy Spirit and the deeds that were done to prove that he had been anointed. He explains how Jesus was put to death and how God raised Jesus three days later. Peter preaches that Jesus, and the message of Jesus, is for all people — not just those who have witnessed these events, or even just for the people of Israel. Peter knows the inclusive nature of God’s grace because he has experienced it and now is sharing it with others.

JANUARY 12

Think About It:

Differences abound in our culture and in our world, so to imagine that God’s grace is for everyone is still as radical as in Peter’s day. How can you show others that God’s grace is for everyone?

Make a Choice:

It’s easy for us to assume that God’s love is only for “people like us.” How do you need to change in order to see that God’s grace is for everyone, no matter how different?

Pray:

Dear God, we give thanks that your grace has no limits.

Faithful

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Do you have that one person in your life you can count on no matter what life brings? It is the person who will answer your text message at 1:30 in the morning when you can't sleep. It is the person who will be there for you when you lose someone you love. It is the first person you text when you receive wonderful news. Who is that person in your life?

Paul reminds the people of the church at Corinth that God longs to be that person for them. He knows that the church at Corinth has some issues because he had seen their problems during a recent visit. The church had people in it with varying

ideas of what should happen within the church. Paul writes to remind them what it means to be church and what they are called to be. He explains that they are church because they are "sanctified in Christ" and are "called to be saints."

Paul helps the Corinthian church remember that it is more important for them to focus on what God is doing through them. He acknowledges the gifts they have but reminds them that giftedness has to be translated into action. Most of all, though, Paul acknowledges that God is faithful even when the people are not faithful to God. God will be with them as they move forward and make the changes needed to be a stronger community of faith.

JANUARY 19

Think About It:

Even those of us who have the best intentions fail at them sometimes. How can you be more faithful to God? How can you be more faithful to those people whom God puts in your life?

Make a Choice:

We have a daily choice to turn to God as the one we rely upon, turn to for help, and include in our celebrations. How will you relate to God?

God, we give you thanks that you are there for us even when we don't deserve it.

One?

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Have you ever been part of a sports team? What about a mission group that painted a house or worked on a roof?

Both of these kinds of groups work best when everyone is on the same page and working together toward the same purpose. Situations can get messy when team members decide they want to do it their way or attempt something completely different. Successful teams work together even if there are differences of opinion. Sometimes, turning around a broken team takes one person willing to step up and help unify the group.

The church at Corinth was in this sort of mess, and Paul was the one who stepped up and attempted to get things back in order.

Even if you don't know something is wrong in Corinth before reading Paul's letter, it quickly becomes obvious, since Paul names the problem. He knows what division will do to the church, so he reminds them that they are to live in communion with one another as one people in God.

Paul also understands that the cure for the division is for people to remember whose they are: They are not Paul's people nor Apollos' people nor Cephas' people, but they instead belong to Christ. Paul shows how ridiculous it is for them to choose sides when they are all on the same side. Christ cannot be divided, so why should the church be divided?

Paul helps unify the Christians at Corinth by reminding them what Christ did for them and to whom they really belong.

JANUARY 26

Think About It:

Why is it when we meet someone new we tend to look at how we are different instead of how we are the same? How would your perception of other people change if your first thought of them as children of God?

Make a Choice:

When you face situations where divisions keep people from working together, how can you help be a unifying leader?

Pray:

Dear God, forgive us when we forget that we belong to you.

Bible Study

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 19, 2014

Certain Strength

Have you ever been on the receiving end of a backhanded compliment, when someone insulted you with a statement disguised as praise?

“I like your dress: it makes you look so slim” sounds like a compliment, but it could be a left-handed way of observing that you’re trying to hide extra pounds beneath vertical stripes.

Sometimes, backhanded compliments can simply be mindless: an old photo may spark “You used to be a real beauty.”

They can also be biting: “The junior senator is well-spoken for someone with so little experience.”

And sometimes, they can be carefully calculated attempts to say something nice without giving more credit than is due. That’s the sort of thing we find in Paul’s greeting to the church in Corinth – a church with a lot of potential for a membership that was so immature, self-serving, and polarized.

A troubled church

Let’s begin with a brief introduction to the city of Corinth and the believers who lived there. ⚓

The Corinth Paul knew was only 100 years old, a Roman metropolis built on the ruins of an ancient Greek city. ⚓ The city’s population included present and former slaves, wealthy merchants, shrewd traders, government administrators, Roman soldiers, and veteran sailors, along with teachers, philosophers, and devotees of various religions. For a variety of reasons, Corinth was an important city. ⚓

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



1 Corinthians 1:9 –
“God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The Apostle Paul had a long and uneven relationship with the people of Corinth. Along with Timothy and Silas, he first came to the city around 49 or 50 CE, during his “second missionary journey.” Paul met and was aided by Prisca (or Priscilla) and Aquila, a Jewish Christian couple who had emigrated from Rome after the emperor Claudius expelled Christians from Italy (Acts 18:2). ⚓ Paul may have lodged with Prisca and Aquila even as he supported himself by joining them in the leatherwork trade, and remained in Corinth for about 18 months. ⚓

After a brief return to Jerusalem, Paul traveled to Antioch before departing on his third missionary effort, going overland to Ephesus, where he stayed for two years. While at Ephesus, Paul had several contacts with the Corinthian church.

The letter we know as 1 Corinthians was not Paul’s first letter to the church, for in 1 Cor. 5:9 Paul speaks of a “previous letter” he had written (some scholars think parts of that letter may be retained in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

Individual members of the church such as “Chloe’s people” (1:11) contacted Paul, perhaps through personal visits, telling him of problems at Corinth. Paul also received at least one letter from the church requesting his advice (7:1).

In response, Paul wrote what we now call 1 Corinthians. ⚓ Unfortunately, it appears that the letter was not well received, leading Paul to make a visit to the church that he called painful (2 Cor. 2:1). After returning to Ephesus, he wrote another letter that he described as tearful and difficult (2 Cor. 2:3-9; 7:12), and sent it by Titus. Some scholars think this “severe letter” may be partially preserved in 2 Cor. 10-13, which is sterner in tone than the surrounding chapters.

Later, Titus met Paul in Macedonia and told him the Corinthians had accepted his letter and were reconciled to him (2 Cor. 2:12; 7:5-16). Paul wrote 2 Corinthians to express his joy and to encourage the Corinthians to raise a worthy offering for the poor in Jerusalem.

Later, Paul seems to have made a third visit, probably around 55-56 CE,

writing his letter to the Romans while there (Rom. 15:26).

A greeting of grace (vv. 1-3)

As Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, he had learned that various factions existed, possibly with parties claiming to follow Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ. Scholars have sought to identify various theological differences among the factions, but it seems clear that a struggle for power and leadership of the church fueled the dissension.

The church appears to have included members across the spectrum of social classes, from slaves to relative elites, and there is evidence that some members considered themselves to be superior to others on both spiritual and social grounds.

How does one begin a letter to a church in turmoil? Paul followed the standard pattern for letters of the time by naming the sender and recipients, followed by a brief greeting.

Paul first identified himself as the writer, then, indicating that someone named Sosthenes was with him and perhaps contributing to the letter. ⚓

Paul further named himself as one who was “called to be an apostle of Jesus by the will of God.” There is evidence that some members of the Corinthian church questioned Paul’s authority as an apostle (an issue that later become more explicit, 2 Cor 10:12-18; 11:5), so he wanted to emphasize from the beginning that his authority lay not in himself, but in his divine calling.

In the address, Paul identifies his audience as a church ⚓ and reminds his readers that they are “sanctified in Christ Jesus” and “called to be saints” (v. 2a). Although the Corinthians were unlikely saints, their calling — like Paul’s — originated with God.

Saintly or not, Paul called them “sanctified,” using a verb that means “to make holy” in the sense of “to set apart as sacred to God.” Believers are to be set apart for holy living, but the Corinthians showed that church members can be perfectly forgiven but not

perfect in behavior, saints and sinners concurrently.

Paul tactfully reminded the Corinthians that they were not the only church, but were called to be saints alongside “all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (v. 2b). This remains a helpful word, for it’s easy for a church or denomination to become isolated, thinking only of itself. Ecumenical activities remind us that we are not alone, but part of the much larger body of Christ.

While secular letters of the period typically began with the word “greeting” (*chairein*), Paul typically altered that to the word for “grace” (*charis*), and here added “peace” as well — along with the reminder that grace and peace derive “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3).

A faithful God (vv. 4-9)

In his letters, Paul usually followed the greeting with a prayer of thanksgiving for his readers, often subtly raising issues that will reappear in the letter.

In some cases, Paul affirmed his hearers with words of praise, as in 1 Thessalonians, where he thanked God for “your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 1:3). Paul also praised the Colossians for their faith, love, and hope in Christ that was bearing fruit among them (Col. 1:3-6).

In writing to the Corinthians, however, the best Paul could offer was backhanded praise. He thanked God for the grace that had been given to the Corinthians, enriching them in every way and blessing them with spiritual gifts — but he extended no congratulations for what they had done with the blessings they had received.

Paul thanked God for the Corinthians, but his focus was clearly

on what God had done for them, not what they had done for God. God’s grace had enriched them “in speech and knowledge of every kind” (vv. 4-5), even though they had used speech against one another and some believed they had special knowledge that made them superior to others — issues to be addressed later.

The witness of Christ had been confirmed among them, Paul said (v. 6), so they weren’t lacking in spiritual gifts (v. 7), though the use and distribution of spiritual gifts had become a matter of controversy that Paul would address in chapters 11-14.

This is a reminder that one’s spiritual failings do not necessarily negate spiritual gifts. One can be a spiritually gifted sinner as well as a saint — as demonstrated by charismatic evangelists who draw many followers but use their offerings to enrich themselves.

Paul reminded the church that God is faithful, even in difficult circumstances, even among unfaithful people. God’s faithfulness would grant the Corinthians “strength to the end” so they might be found “blameless” when Christ returned (v. 8). God had called them into fellowship on the basis of God’s own faithfulness, not theirs: they were not only saved by God’s persistent grace, but also sustained by it.

Paul’s prayer tactfully avoided any praise for the Corinthians, but did not condemn them either. Although they were sinners, he still called them saints. In spite of their shortcomings, he acknowledged their giftedness.

We, too, are called into fellowship by God’s faithfulness. We also are gifted by God’s Spirit. We also may fail and fall short of God’s best hopes for us, but our faith is grounded in God’s faithfulness, which will remain “to the end.”

If Paul were to write a letter to you, to your Bible study class, or to your church, what might he say? Would he have to settle for backhanded compliments, or could he offer unabashed, grateful praise? What would you like him to say? **BT**

Resources to teach adult and youth classes are available at nurturingfaith.net

Bible Study

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

with Tony W. Cartledge

Jan. 26, 2014

Perilous Polarities

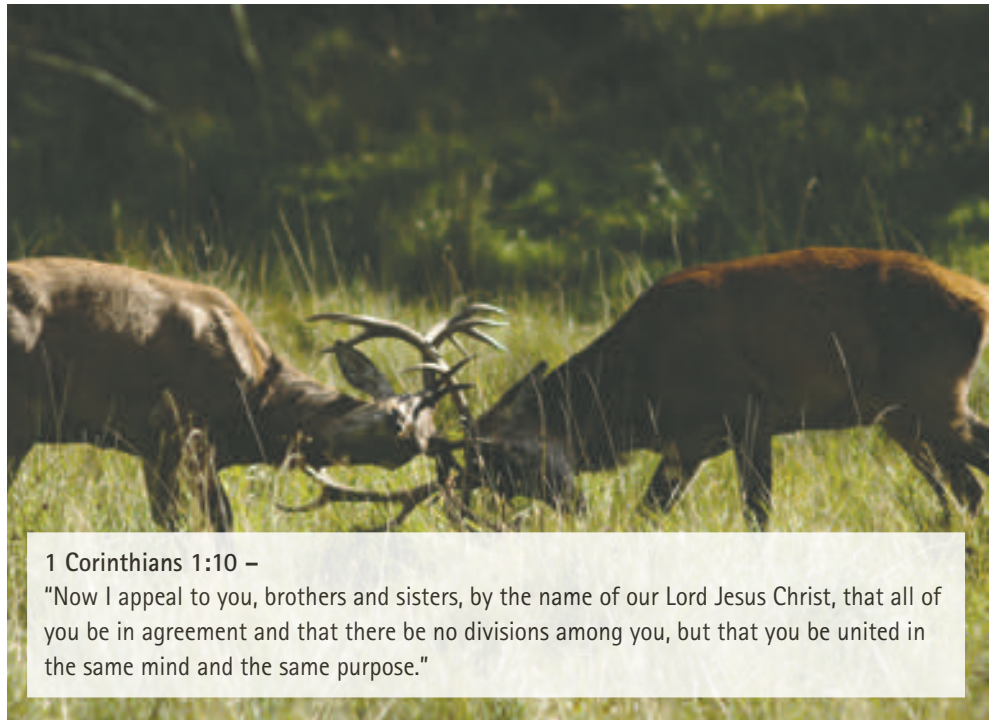
Have you ever ridden a “Tilt-a-whirl,” “Octopus,” or something similar at a traveling fair or an amusement park? The nausea-inducing rides consist of a series of arms, each with a seating compartment at the end. While the entire contraption goes round and round, the seating pods spin and the arms go up and down in a stomach-lurching orbit that threatens to launch partially digested funnel cakes, hot dogs, and turkey legs into the surrounding crowds.

I get dizzy just thinking about it, and continue to wonder why people would willingly spend money to get on a ride designed to make them sick.

I thought of those devil-inspired contrivances while contemplating today’s text, in which Paul confronts a problem of division and dysfunction that was sickening the Corinthian congregation. 📌 The thought of competing factions – and there appear to have been several in Corinth – reminds me of the seating pods on that amusement ride: each one spins on its own axis with little thought that all of them are connected to a central point.

One appeal (vv. 10-12)

The carefully worded way Paul began his letter hinted that there was trouble in the air, and he wasted no time in confronting it: the church in Corinth, immature but proud, was riddled with dissension. That matter was so grave that, in one way or another, Paul’s efforts to deal with it stretch from 1 Cor. 1:10 to 4:21.



1 Corinthians 1:10 –

“Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”

Paul knew the serious danger that division can bring to a church, so he had already reminded the Corinthian believers that they all were called by God to live in *koinonia* (fellowship or communion) with Christ and other “saints” wherever the gospel was known.

With v. 10, Paul spelled things out more clearly, making an earnest appeal “that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” 📌

He knew that wasn’t the case. A visit from “Chloe’s people” had filled him in on the current state of the church.

📌 “I belong to Paul” (literally, “I am of Paul”), some said, while others said “I am of Apollos” or “I am of Cephas.”

The verse ends with “I am of Christ.” Was there a fourth faction who claimed to be the true Christ party? Or, could the last statement be Paul’s exasperated response: “I belong to Christ!”? The NRSV and other translations insert “or” between each of the options listed, but that is for clarification; there is no corresponding Greek word for “or,” just

a series of four statements introduced by the initial particle “men,” meaning something like “indeed” or “on the one hand.”

What were these divisions about? Scott Nash argues that disagreement over whether to accept Paul’s authority was at the heart of the matter (*1 Corinthians*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary [Smyth & Helwys, 2009], 24-29, 84-85). The city of Corinth, like other great cities of the time, would have had its share of homegrown or traveling sophists and rhetoricians who were known for their sparkling speech and clever arguments, and visitors like Paul would have been measured against them.

Paul, by his own admission, was a steady worker and faithful witness, but not a polished speaker. In a later letter, Paul quoted his critics’ judgment that “his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (2 Cor. 10:10).

Apollos was known as “an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures,” according to Acts 18:24, so it is not surprising that some would prefer his leadership. Peter (Cephas) was not

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



known for his scintillating speech, but was regarded as chief among the apostles. Apollos spent some time in Corinth (Acts 19:1), but there is no firm evidence that Peter had visited the city, and we have no reason to suspect that either would have sought to cultivate a following in opposition to Paul.

It is possible that local members of the church who were practiced in the skill of rhetoric and public speech had developed their own followings and named their parties for one of the more famous leaders of the early church.

Scholars have long speculated what theological differences may have divided the Corinthians (for more on this, see “The Hardest Question” online), but the dissension may have been as much about church politics and power as about theology.

Three questions (v. 13)

Paul, despite his perceived shortcomings as a public speaker, was a master of rhetoric, and he understood the power of pointed, even sarcastic questions. In v. 13, he launched into three sharp queries: “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

The first question exposes the absurdity of Christians choosing sides when all are called to follow the same Christ. We are human, however, and will have different understandings of what it means to follow Christ.

Some believers take a fundamentalist position, insisting that the only way to honor Christ is to regard the Bible as inerrant truth and interpret it literally – including social mores from the Old Testament that suit their conservative tastes.

Other believers take a more open view of scriptures and believe that Christ is best served when we adopt his approach of extending compassion to all people, with more emphasis on grace than law.

Those who lived through the controversy that wracked the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and

90s know how ugly such conflict can be. While that conflict was couched in theological terms, there was an undeniable undercurrent of politics and power struggles.

Similar factions can develop within churches, even small ones. Can divorced-and-remarried men serve as deacons? Can women be allowed to preach or called as pastors? Will the church welcome people who are gay or transgendered? Should worship follow a traditional model or a more contemporary approach? Should the church buy a new van for mission trips and fellowship outings, or donate the money to direct mission support?

Division comes in many forms, and arises for many reasons. When we frame our personal desires in theological language and use the Bible as a weapon against others, we find ourselves desperately in need of Paul’s appeal to overcome divisions and “be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (v. 10b).

One answer (vv. 14-17)

While Paul asked three questions, he addressed only the third one directly. The first two questions were primarily rhetorical, designed to show the foolishness of factionalism.


“Is Christ divided?” Of course not, though his followers might turn against each other because they hold to quite different images of Christ’s life, work, and call.


“Was Paul crucified for you?” No one would have raised such a ridiculous question, but some may have shown more practical allegiance to Paul than to Christ, and such a query might shock them into considering where their deepest loyalty should lie.

The third question also had its absurd aspects: “Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Paul knew that all of the believers had been baptized in the

name of Christ, even if some of them seemed to put more emphasis on the preacher than the savior.

Paul’s comments about which persons he had baptized do not address the question directly, for they have to do with the act of baptism, not whether the new believers were baptized in Paul’s name. Even so, Paul expressed some relief that he had baptized only a few of the Corinthian believers – not enough to create a viable faction!

Crispus, a former leader of the synagogue, along with a man named Gaius and the household of someone named Stephanas were the only people Paul could remember baptizing in Corinth. Paul didn’t want anyone claiming superiority because they had been baptized by the church’s founder, and certainly not because they were baptized in his name (vv. 14-16). 

At all times, Paul sought to keep the spotlight on Christ. Jesus had not called him to baptize but to preach the gospel, and that “not with eloquent wisdom” such as the Corinthians loved, but with straightforward speech, “so that the cross might not be emptied of its power” (v. 17). 

Paul’s goal was to see people come to trust in Christ, not because a slick-tongued evangelist had persuaded them to do so through an emotional appeal or because a skilled apologist had convinced them with a rational argument, but because they recognized the centrality of Christ’s atoning death.

Paul wanted to maintain the priority of the message over the messenger, but some members of the church in Corinth had it the other way around: they were more loyal to a particular leader or a polished style or a theological position than they were to Christ.

Where does our loyalty lie? Have we ever found ourselves more concerned about a decision relative to the church building or the style of worship or the calling of a pastor than we were about serving Jesus? Can we rally around Christ as the unifying center that is stronger than our differences?

Those are not rhetorical questions. **BT**

Classifieds

Senior Pastor: Walnut Grove Baptist Church located in Mechanicsville, Va., a suburb of Richmond, is seeking applications for the position of senior pastor. Walnut Grove has affiliations with the BGAV, CBF and SBC, and affirms the BFM 1963. We are a multi-service, historic church of 250 active members who affirm women in leadership and engage in a variety of local and global missions. This is a full-time position that requires a Master of Divinity degree and a minimum of five years pastoral experience. The candidate must have a passion for biblical teaching and preaching, the ability to relate to all age groups, strong strategic leadership skills, and the ability to direct the administration of the church. Qualified candidates should submit their résumés to the Pastor Search Committee at walnutgrovebaptist.psc@gmail.com.

Pastor: First Baptist Church in Corbin, Ky., affiliated with CBF and Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, is seeking a full-time pastor. FBC is a traditional, progressive church with a community focus. The church has a proud 118-year history in Corbin and is ecumenical in its approach in reaching the communities of Southeastern Kentucky. Located in historic downtown Corbin, the church is within minutes of I-75. The congregation of approximately 400 members welcomes diversity and inclusiveness while celebrating many gifts among its members for service and ministry. Interested candidates should submit résumés to the Pastor Search Committee at fbcb_resumes@yahoo.com.

Interim Minister of Education: Southside Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala., is seeking an interim part-time minister of education to coordinate opportunities for Christian education and related activities. This position will coordinate Christian education for preschool, children, youth and adult Sunday school. A graduate degree in Christian education or a related field is required. Please submit résumé to Personnel Committee, Southside Baptist Church, P.O. Box 55058, Birmingham, AL 35255 or to champton@southsidebirmingham.org.

Minister of College Outreach and Student Ministries: Blacksburg Baptist Church (BBC) (blacksburgbaptist.org), affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, seeks a full-time minister of college outreach and student ministries. BBC is one of Virginia's largest and most missional churches, and is located across from Virginia Tech. It is also within the ministry area of Radford University and New River Community College. Approximately 50,000

college students matriculate within our ministry radius. We seek a candidate who is dedicated to the faith, self-starting and energetic. He/she must hold baccalaureate and seminary degrees from accredited institutions. This minister must be highly involved on campus and in the church, and be capable of developing outreach/evangelistic ministries, personal counseling, spiritual growth, and mission projects involving students and working in and relating to a highly diverse community and a strong church staff. The position is open to males and females of any ethnicity. Please send résumés with references to Blacksburg Baptist Church, 550 N. Main St., Blacksburg, VA 24060 or to bbc@blacksburgbaptist.org.

Pastor of Children and Family Ministries: Memorial Baptist Church of Columbia, Mo., is seeking a passionate and committed individual to lead in the areas of children and family ministries. The right person will possess the skills to provide comprehensive leadership and oversight for all children's related ministries (birth-grade 5) and to promote and establish effective working partnerships between Memorial Baptist Church and parents for the overall spiritual formation of their children and families. In addition, this person will be Memorial's primary advocate and driver for strengthening families and equipping parents. Applicants should possess an accredited undergraduate degree in children and family ministry or a related field. Seminary education is a plus. Experience, a proven track record of effective ministry, and alignment with Memorial's vision, values, and purpose is required. For additional details, or to submit a résumé, visit memorialbaptist.org/#/additional-info/childrenfamilies-pastor.

Minister to Families with Children: Smoke Rise Baptist, a CBF church in Stone Mountain, Ga., is looking for a creative, organized and energetic individual to coordinate a comprehensive program of ministry for families with children. The ideal candidate will have a seminary degree and prior experience in a similar position. Maturity, flexibility and a desire to create spiritually enriching experiences for children are essential traits of the candidate. For a complete job description, see smokerisebaptist.org/visitors/about/employment.aspx.

Associate Minister of Preschool and Children: Greystone Baptist Church, located in a diverse and growing area of North Raleigh, N.C., is prayerfully seeking a part-time (20 hours per week) associate minister of preschool and

children. A four-year degree from an accredited college or university with additional training and experience in ministering to preschool and children through fifth grade at church or in a church-related environment are required. Responsibilities would include coordinating and planning goals and activities for preschool and elementary school children in the area of understanding the Bible, spiritual growth, recreation, fellowship and mission involvement. Duties would also include mentoring families with young children. Greystone is a contributing member of CBF and CBFNC, is affiliated with the Raleigh Baptist Association, and partners with local ministries. Our 750+ member church affirms and ordains men and women as leaders, including deacons and ministers. Please submit a résumé by Dec. 15 to Children's Search Team, 8313 Apple Orchard Way, Raleigh, NC 27615 or to ampcsearch@gmail.com. Please also visit our church website, greystonechurch.org.

Minister to Children: First Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala., is seeking a full-time minister to children. This ministerial staff position is responsible for the spiritual development of children in grades 1-6. A seminary degree with experience in children's ministry is preferred. A full job description and more information about our church are available at fbchsv.org/search. Résumés and inquiries may be sent to search@fbchsv.org.

Development Specialist: The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is seeking to add a development specialist to its staff in Decatur, Ga. This person will help plan and implement strategies to meet current and future financial needs, including the Offering for Global Missions, the Annual Fund, and endowment and future capital campaigns. For a full job listing, visit thefellowship.info/About-Us/jobs/Development-Specialist. Inquiries and résumés should be directed to Allison Tennyson, director of human resources: atennyson@thefellowship.info or (770) 220-1608.

Graphic Design Specialist: The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is seeking to add a graphic design specialist to its staff in Decatur, Ga. This person will design, lay out, and produce publications and artwork for projects such as *fellowship!* magazine, visual presentations, website and e-newsletter graphics, newsletters, flyers, brochures, and other print collateral. For a full job listing, visit thefellowship.info/About-Us/jobs/Graphic-Design-Specialist. Inquiries and résumés should be directed to Allison Tennyson, director of human resources: atennyson@thefellowship.info or (770) 220-1608.

Latha Bandela died Oct. 11 in Atlanta at age 66. She served as a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field worker for 17 years. Along with her husband, Sam, she started the Chamblee-Doraville Ministry Center in Atlanta and then worked with a variety of ministry areas in India.

Robert W. Bowman has retired as senior associate pastor at Central Baptist Bearden in Knoxville, Tenn., after 25 years there. Next year, he will relocate near Houston, Texas.

Paul Burgess is pastor of Benson Baptist Church, N.C.

Kathy Charland of Westfield, Mass., has been endorsed by American Baptist International Ministries to serve as a missionary in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Dorothy Jordan Fletcher died Oct. 16 at age 80 in Abilene, Texas. She was married to Jesse Fletcher, president emeritus of Hardin-Simmons University, and was a member of the Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest in Abilene.

J. Hoffman Harris died Sept. 25 in Hickory, N.C., at age 87. He served churches in Louisiana, Mississippi and Missouri before accepting the pastorate of Briarlake Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., where he served for 29 years.

Peter and Sarah McCurdy of Madison, Ohio, were endorsed by American Baptist International Ministries to serve as missionaries in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

Curtis Murdock is retiring after a long tenure as minister of music at Beech Haven Baptist Church in Athens, Ga.

Samuel Park is assistant to the dean for Korean language education administration and assistant professor of practical theology and contextual ministry education at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan.

Kathy Pickett is pastor of Prairie Baptist Church in Prairie Village, Kan. She had served on the staff of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., since 1998.

Tim and Kathy Rice have been endorsed by American Baptist International Ministries to serve with the Baptist Community of the Congo. Tim, a medical doctor, and Kathy, a registered nurse, will train nurses and medical students at Vanga Evangelical Hospital. He comes from the faculty of the School of Medicine at St. Louis University, Mo. They have made 10 previous trips to the Democratic Republic of the Congo as volunteers.

Travis Russell is pastor of First Baptist Church of Graham, N.C.

Terry Megginson Walton of Cornelia, Ga., died Oct. 17 at age 51. A native of Fairhope, Ala., she was pianist for several churches and worked in public relations for Broadway Baptist Church in Ft. Worth, Texas, and her alma mater, Mobile College. For the past 15 years she worked for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Atlanta.

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Alabama CBF names Terri Byrd as coordinator

By John Pierce

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Terri Byrd becomes coordinator of Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (ALCBF) on Dec. 1. She has served as associate coordinator for congregational life for the past four years.

A graduate of Mercer University and Samford University's Beeson Divinity School, she served in church staff positions prior to coming to Alabama CBF.

"Terri believes in our mission, meets everyone as a friend and colleague, and has

exhibited leadership skills during this interim time which give us confidence that she will do a wonderful job" said Gary Furr, pastor of Vestavia Hills Baptist Church and the moderator of ALCBF who chaired the search committee. "My assessment is that Terri, with our support and voted confidence in her, will soar as a leader."



Terri Byrd

The Alabama CBF Coordinating Council unanimously approved the search committee's recommendation. Byrd succeeds Ronnie Brewer who left the coordinator position earlier this year to accept the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Bristol, Va.

Byrd recently served as interim pastor of Crosscreek Baptist Church in Pelham, Ala. She is also a contributing writer for *Baptists Today*. Her work appears in both the national edition and the Alabama edition through a collaborative effort between the news journal and ALCBF. **BT**

Conservative Judaism turns 100

Works to welcome those who have lost touch with roots, reverse decline

For those who care deeply about passing on Judaism to future generations, a new, exhaustive study on American Jews is rife with worrisome statistics that show increasing numbers of the disinterested.

But if the trends look bad for Jews in general, they look especially perilous for the Conservative movement, which for much of the 20th century was the largest branch of American Judaism.

In 1971, Conservative Jews accounted for 41 percent of American Jews. Today, they represent a graying 18 percent, according to the landmark Pew Research Center survey, released in October.

“Rescue the Conservative movement,” *The Forward*, the national Jewish newspaper, pleaded in an editorial after the Pew study’s release.

“Further shrinkage would be a tragedy,” it continued, citing the movement’s anchoring role at the center of Jewish life, sandwiched between Orthodox Judaism’s adherence to

tradition and the Reform movement’s openness to change.

As the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism — the umbrella group for the nation’s more than 630 Conservative congregations — celebrates its 100th anniversary, Conservative Jews are confronting their undeniable shrinking stature.

In advance of United Synagogue’s annual conference held in Baltimore in mid-October, the movement opened the “Conversation of the Century,” asking members to discuss publicly their fears and hopes for their future.

“It’s not a pretend conversation,” said Shira Dicker, a public relations consultant — and the daughter of a Conservative rabbi — known for her offbeat approach.

Hired by United Synagogue to help the denomination confront its challenges and brainstorm solutions, Dicker does not hesitate to describe the formulaic services at some old-style Conservative synagogues as “deadly.” And she pushed United Synagogue to produce an unscripted video that features a wide spectrum of Conservative Jews asking elephant-in-the-room questions.

“Why are we embarrassed to say we’re Conservative Jews?” asks one woman in the video.

“This is our reset moment,” said Rabbi Steven Wernick, CEO of the United Synagogue, who added that Conservative Jews were well aware of their poor retention rates long before Pew released its study.

Years ago, he said, some bright lights within the Conservative movement began to experiment with ways to bring more meaningful services and programs to Jews of all backgrounds.

A cadre of creative rabbis, mostly in urban centers, is drawing crowds of young unaffiliated Jews by infusing Jewish ritual with yoga, music and meditation — sometimes outdoors or in a funky cafe.

Perhaps tellingly, two of the most talked-about young rabbis in the nation, the magnetic Rabbi Sharon Brous in Los Angeles and the soulful Rabbi Rachel Nussbaum in Seattle, were both ordained in the Conservative movement’s Jewish Theological Seminary, but both lead nondenominational Jewish communities.



“People who have grown up in Conservative Judaism are playing an extraordinarily impactful role in the larger Jewish world,” said Wernick.

But how many Jews will continue to grow up in Conservative Judaism?

According to the Pew study, the Reform movement is the largest branch of American Judaism, claiming 35 percent of U.S. Jews. Conservatives represent less than one in five, and the Orthodox have held their ground with 10 percent.

But the future looks particularly tough for the Conservatives. Among young American Jews (those 18-29), just 11 percent identify as Conservative, compared with the 29 percent for Reform Jews and 41 percent who have no formal affiliation.

Though they claim the same share of young Jews as the Conservative movement, the Orthodox are relatively fertile, and for this and other reasons the Pew researchers predict that their numbers will grow.

“I know some people are willing to write the whole Conservative movement off and say Kaddish for it,” said Jonathan Sarna, professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University, referring to the Jewish prayer for the dead.

But he hopes enough people, both within and outside the movement, do not want to stand by as the demise of Conservative Judaism leaves a hole in the center of American Jewish life.

“One needs a new middle lest one ends up with two Judaisms,” Sarna said. “The middle, it seems to me, has been very valuable in keeping things together. They understood both sides. They talk to both sides.”

Rabbi Rachel Kobrin is another Conservative-trained rabbi mentioned as one to watch, and she still works within the movement as the assistant rabbi of Conservative Congregation Agudas Achim in Austin, where she founded, among other programs, “Selah.”

“Selah,” which translates to “amen” in Hebrew, attracts 100 mostly unaffiliated Jews to Shabbat services at a satellite of the main synagogue in hipster-heavy South Austin.

The descendants of American Jewish immigrants have assimilated beautifully into American life, Kobrin said, excelling in school and their professions. But in the process, many lost touch with their Jewish roots — and the Hebrew language, which is the *lingua franca* of a typical Conservative service.

Here is what goes through their heads as they sit through Conservative services, she said: “I feel smart in every other aspect of my life and I walk into this synagogue and I don’t even know what page we’re on.”

U.S. Jews say others face discrimination

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

American Jews say they face discrimination in the U.S., but they see Muslims, gays and blacks facing far more.

This and other findings from the recently released Pew Research Center’s landmark study on Jewish Americans help make the case that Jews — once unwelcome in many a neighborhood, university and golf club — now find themselves an accepted minority.

“While there are still issues, American Jews live in a country where they feel they are full citizens,” said Kenneth Jacobson, deputy national director of the Anti-Defamation League, which was founded in 1913 to combat anti-Semitism.

“You have (Jewish) Ivy League presidents in schools that used to have Jewish quotas,” he said.

Most American Jews are descendants of the great migration of Jews to the U.S. from 1880 to 1920. Today, they make up little more than 2 percent of the population, but their influence is outsized. Jews make up 10 percent of the U.S. Senate, and they lead major cities, corporations, philanthropies and arts organizations.

Anti-Semitism has most certainly waned in the U.S.

The ADL’s 1964 benchmark survey, conducted by University of California researchers, showed that 29 percent of Americans held hard-core anti-Semitic views. The ADL’s latest poll, in 2011, found that 15 percent did.

But interpreted differently, the Pew numbers can also paint a portrait of a Jewish community that sees anti-Semitism as a persistent problem.

The more than four in ten (43 percent) Jewish Americans who see Jews facing “a lot” of discrimination in the U.S. is still a “pretty substantial” proportion, said Alan Cooperman, co-author of the Pew study, “A Portrait of American Jews.”

Seventy-two percent of American Jews surveyed believe that Muslims face “a lot” of discrimination in the U.S., and the same percentage said gays and lesbians face such levels of bigotry. Slightly fewer — 64 percent — said blacks face such prejudice.

“One way of looking at these numbers is to say that Jews perceive a lot of discrimination against a whole bunch of groups in American life,” Cooperman said.

Reform Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the largest movement of Judaism in North America, called Jews’ perceptions of prejudice against others “inspiring.”

“Because of our somewhat painful history of persecution, we have a deep sensitivity to the suffering of others,” he said. **BT**

A language barrier is not keeping mainline Protestants from church. But Andrew H. Walsh, of the Leonard Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College, said there are plenty of parallels between Conservative Judaism and the shrinking Protestant mainline — which captured one-third of Americans 40 years ago, and between 10 and 12 percent today.

Conservative Judaism’s challenges reflect those of centrist movements in general — they’re traditions that don’t easily follow the culture, especially cultures that emphasize individual choice. A movement that “tries to hold on in some serious way to tradition might be in trouble,” he said.

That’s why, Walsh continued, Conservative Jews are going to have to confront the phenomenon of interfaith marriage.

Nearly six in 10 young Jews are marrying

non-Jews, according to the Pew study, and while some Reform clergy will officiate at those ceremonies — especially if the couple plans to raise their children as Jews — Conservative clergy will not.

Something else Conservative Jews may want to consider: their name.

As the Pew study shows, American Jews, as a group, are far more likely to line up behind liberal than conservative politicians and causes, and many Jews feel “Conservative” is a bad fit for a movement that ordains women and gay rabbis and has written guidelines for its clergy to preside at gay marriages.

Some new names have been bandied about — “Centrist” Judaism, “Conservationist” Judaism — but none has yet captured the imagination of the people left in the pews.

“I’m a Conservative rabbi,” Kobrin said, “but I’m a liberal!” **BT**

Nurturing Faith: *Texts and Themes for 2014*

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

*Order the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies within *Baptists Today* at 1-877-752-5658 or nurturingfaith.net.

Jan. 5 – John 1:10-18

“The Word That Walks”

In Jesus we learn what God is like – and how to live as God’s children.

Season of Epiphany

Jan. 12 – Acts 10:34-43

“Who Converted Whom?”

Cornelius and company became Christians, but Peter may have had the most significant conversion of all.

January 19-February 23

Things That Matter

Jan. 19 – 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

“Certain Strength”

Paul thanks God for the Corinthians’ progress in the faith and affirms his confidence in them.

Jan. 26 – 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

“Perilous Polarities”

Divisions and polarization can threaten even strong people, and strong opinions can lead to strong divisions.

Feb. 2 – 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

“Foolhardy Wisdom”

Paul’s thoughts on wisdom and foolishness may be surprising.

Feb. 9 – 1 Corinthians 2:1-12

“Spiritual Secrets”

Some things are beyond purely mental comprehension.

Feb. 16 – 1 Corinthians 3:1-9

“Baby Talk”

The Corinthians’ immaturity frustrated Paul, who called them babies and pleaded with them to grow up.

Feb. 23 – 1 Corinthians 3:10-23

“Quality Construction”

All believers begin with the foundation Christ laid; what we build on it is up to us. How do our temples look?

Mar. 2 – Psalm 2

“More Than Meets the Eye”

Believers, like kings in Israel, are “adopted” by God and brought into a special relationship that calls for transformation.

Season of Lent

March 9-April 13

Songs for Serious Seekers

Mar. 9 – Psalm 32

“Forgiveness”

Observing Lent begins with repentance and forgiveness.

Mar. 16 – Psalm 121

“Preservation”

The confidence needed for bold living comes from God.

Mar. 23 – Psalm 95

“Worship”

The closer we come to God, the more we are drawn to worship.

Mar. 30 – Psalm 23

“Trust”

Sheep thrive when they trust the shepherd.

Apr. 6 – Psalm 130

“Hope”

Even the strongest believers face trials that force them to rely on hope.

Apr. 13 – Psalm 118

“Multi-tasking”

The psalmist blessed God, prayed for deliverance and celebrated God’s answer – all at once.

Season of Easter

Apr. 20 – Matthew 28:1-10

“Who’s Afraid?”

The post-resurrection Jesus told the women not to be afraid, but others needed to hear the message more.

April 27-June 1

The Challenges of a Changed Life

Apr. 27 – 1 Peter 1:3-9

“Hopeful Faith”

Faith and hope are closely related; we can’t have one without the other.

May 4 – 1 Peter 1:17-23

“Deep Love”

Deep love isn’t a surface phenomenon; it comes from the heart.

May 11 – 1 Peter 2:13-25

“Paradoxical Living”

How can people be slaves and free at the same time?

May 18 – 1 Peter 2:1-10

“Living Stones”

The temple of God is built of the living stones of God’s people.

May 25 – 1 Peter 3:13-22

“Good Suffering?”

Can anything good come out of suffering?

June 1 – 1 Peter 5:6-11

“Lion Taming”

Temptation never goes away, but it can be tamed.

June 8 – 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

“One and Many”

The gift of the Spirit connects many persons into one body – a marvelous, miraculous feat.

Season after Pentecost

June 15-July 27

Words about Words — from God

June 15 – Genesis 1:1-2:4a

“And God Said ...”

The Bible begins with a lesson on the creative power of divine speech.

June 22 – Jeremiah 20:7-13

“Fire in the Bones”

Jeremiah learned that a personal message from God isn’t easy to ignore.

June 29 – Jeremiah 28:1-17

“Not Just Yoking Around ...”

The words Jeremiah heard led to some peculiar behavior and intense confrontations. Are we ready for that?

July 6 – Zechariah 9:9-13

“Prisoners of Hope”

Those who have been captured by hope are free to hear God’s promise of freedom.

July 13 – Isaiah 55:6-13

“The Fertile Word”

Where God’s words are planted, amazing things grow.

July 20 – Isaiah 44:6-20

“The Real Thing”

God’s word to Isaiah reveals the glory of God and the folly of idolatry.

July 27 – 1 Kings 3:3-15

“A Listening Heart”

Deep wisdom comes from listening – to God.

Aug. 3 – Matthew 14:13-21

“A Picnic to Remember”

Jesus fed the multitudes with far more than physical food.

August 10-August 31

Talking Tough

Aug. 10 – Romans 10:5-15

“No Distinction”

We may draw social lines consciously or unconsciously, but Paul reminds us that God does no such thing: that salvation is for all.

Aug. 17 – Romans 11:1-32

“What about Israel?”

Paul struggled to understand and explain the ongoing place of Israel in God’s plan. It’s not an easy issue.

Aug. 24 – Romans 12:1-8

“Everyone Is Gifted”

God’s grace, like God’s salvation, is available to all. Every believer is gifted for service and responsible to be a good steward of those gifts.

On the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies

by Tony Cartledge
in *Baptists Today*:

“This curriculum ... is a huge time-saver over what I had been doing. All the gathering, culling and creating have been done, and I feel like the online resources are quite helpful. THANK YOU!”

—ELAINE ANDERSON SARRATT,
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“Thank You!”

“This has been a **wonderful study for our class**. None of us had ever ventured into a study of Revelation because we were worried about not understanding the symbolism that seemed so difficult to understand. We feel this book has become in our American culture a symbol about ‘doom and gloom’ rather than the book of encouragement it was written to be. All of the class members have **really enjoyed this six-week study**. Tony’s videos have been extremely helpful. Thanks again for helping us stretch our comfort zone and realize that this is a book to encourage and not threaten us in our walk with Jesus.”

—ANN BOLINGER, WEAVERVILLE, N.C.

Aug. 31 – Romans 12:9-21

“A Labor of Love”

Paul unleashes a string of imperatives – all of which can be fulfilled through genuine love.

September 7-September 28
Hard Lessons

Sept. 7 – Matthew 18:15-20

“Confrontation and Community”

What should we do with sinners in the church?

Sept. 14 – Matthew 18:21-35

“The Power of Forgiveness”

Forgiveness is not a one-time thing; it is a life-long attitude.

Sept. 21 – Matthew 20:1-16

“A Question of Fairness”

When the first are last and the last first, what’s fair about that?

Sept. 28 – Matthew 21:23-32

“Who’s in Charge?”

Honoring human authority while remaining faithful to God can be tricky.

October 5-November 23
Growing Pains

Oct. 5 – Psalm 19

“Silent Speech”

God speaks in many ways; not all of them are audible.

Oct. 12 – Exodus 32:1-14

“Rebels Without a Cause”

The golden calf episode was a tragedy; Moses’ intercession was instructive.

Oct. 19 – Exodus 33:12-23

“Holy Boldness”

Moses’ determination to seek God *and* intercede for the people earned a reward.

Oct. 26 – Deuteronomy 34:1-12

“A Good End to a Good Life”

Moses’ death was a reminder of both possibilities and limitations.

Nov. 2 – Joshua 3:7-17

“Crossing the Jordan”

Crossing rivers with no bridges calls for creativity and faith.

Nov. 9 – Joshua 24:1-25

“Making Choices”

Joshua’s call to “choose this day” is really a call to make good choices every day.

Nov. 16 – Judges 4:1-17

“What Women Can Do”

Women can do whatever needs doing – as illustrated by Deborah and Jael.

Nov. 23 – Ezekiel 34:1-31

“The Good Shepherd”

Sometimes it’s good to be a sheep.

Season of Advent

November 30-December 21

An Adventurous Advent

Nov. 30 – Isaiah 64:1-9

“The Cry of the Clay”

The Advent season begins with a cry of hope.

Dec. 7 – 2 Peter 3:8-15a

“While We Are Waiting”

Israel and Christians alike look toward a coming day of consummation. While waiting, our behavior matters.

Dec. 14 – 1 Thessalonians 5:14-24

“Imperatives Abounding”

Paul could get very specific about what God expects from those who anticipate the Messiah’s arrival.

Dec. 21 – Luke 1:26-38

“When Heaven Comes to Earth”

Gabriel’s visit to Mary set world-changing events in motion.

Season of Christmas

Dec. 28 – Galatians 4:4-7

“Children of God”

As we celebrate a baby in a manger, we remember that we are all children of God.

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Inspired Creativity

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Winter weather limits troop movements and allows generals time to devise new tactics for future battles. This month the war is waged primarily on the home front, where imagination and memory serve in place of military strength.

Momentum is decidedly on the side of the United States. With much of the South now under Union control, Lincoln offers a proclamation of pardon that lays out the basic elements of Southern reconstruction. At the same time, an uncharted, post-war future of freedom for blacks is being imagined on the grounds of a prominent former plantation.

Days after the Civil War began on April 12, 1861, U.S. Col. Robert E. Lee had resigned his commission from the United States Army to cast his lot with the Confederate States of America. His decision effectively ceded the Lee plantation, Arlington Estates, to the North. The estate, inherited by Lee's wife Mary from her father and located across the Potomac River from Washington, was occupied by the Union in late May.

Arlington Estates in the months and years following becomes a microcosm of the unfolding narrative of the war over slavery. While fighting to preserve slavery, then-Conf. Gen. Robert E. Lee in 1862 was required by the stipulation of his father-in-law's will to free the family's remaining slaves. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's 1862 emancipation of slaves in D.C., followed by his national Emancipation Proclamation of Jan. 1, 1863, resulted in a great influx of former slaves into the capital city. Overcrowding in the city led Lincoln to turn the Lees' plantation into a temporary camp for freedmen.

This month, Freedmen's Village is formally established at Arlington Estates, completing the

150 YEARS AGO

December 1863



ironic makeover of the plantation. Religious ceremonies and speeches by army and government officials mark the occasion. Hundreds of free black families move into their newly-constructed homes and begin acquiring an education while learning job and living skills. Even though the settlement is operated under military rule, visions of a future of racial equality are conjured.

Religion is central to the freedom movement and the black experience. By the end of the month, a non-denominational village chapel opens for services. Yet many if not most village residents are Baptists, and the first two denominational churches constructed on village grounds are of Baptist persuasion: Mt. Zion Baptist Church and Mt. Olivet Baptist Church. Freedmen's Village is dismantled in 1900, while the Baptist congregations remain to this day.

Meanwhile, within the Confederate States the growing number of emancipated slaves contributes to widespread national gloominess.

The second half of 1863 has been marked by major battlefield losses. Soldier deaths are rapidly mounting. Confederate soldiers are deserting in record numbers even as fresh recruits are hard to come by. Home-front families, hungry and despondent, are fomenting domestic unrest.

In desperate times true believers double down, and this is no exception. In the ideological heart of the Confederacy, the South Carolina legislature holds a day of "fasting, humiliation and prayer," reaffirming their commitment to the godly cause of African slavery and their confidence in ultimate Confederate victory.

Believers also, Baptist denominational leaders and newspaper editors of the South assure their white constituency that despite the difficult times at hand, God would ultimately lead his chosen nation to victory over the barbarous northern abolitionist enemies.


Georgia Baptist *Christian Index* editor Samuel Boykin epitomizes the desperate hopes of a white Christian South. Dismissing the present "dark cloud," he looks to the past and writes of "a prophetic vision" of a southern future "flecked" with "snowy" cotton where "happy negroes throng the fields" while "indulgent masters" dwell in "luxurious farm houses" and "church spires innumerable point gratefully to heaven."

Boykin's message to his white readers ends thus:

Arouse from your apathy! Cease from your money-getting! Fly to the arms and rush to the rescue! Let God and men and angels behold the terrible earnestness of your purpose to be independent! Be not dismayed by disaster; for before you lies a path of honor and renown all lit up by suns of glory... Arise, then, in your might, and hurl the invaders from your border, and soon shall be filled this prophetic vision.

Believers and dreamers, the past and the future thus intersect as the year draws to a close. Much has yet to transpire before the war is over, yet a trajectory is emerging. Many non-combatants North and South recognize the inevitability of the outcome of the great conflict and are even now lending hands and minds to begin mending the present brokenness, a process in which reality, imagination and memory battle for the upper hand. **BT**

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Waiting for Christmas

People who want Christmas to hurry up and get here have not thought it through. Every once in a while we hear a grinch complain that the folks at Wal-Mart put up their decorations before Halloween, but we need more Christmas — not less.

I think *It's a Wonderful Life* should have its own cable channel 12 months of the year. Cooks should use nutmeg in September. McDonald's should sell eggnog shakes in October. Trees look just as good in the living room in November. Mistletoe should be included in Thanksgiving centerpieces. "Joy to the World" is a fine hymn to sing in January. We need more candles in February and more flutes in March. The people with whom I grew up in Mississippi understood that you should *never* take down your Christmas lights.

We need more preparing because waiting is the best part. We get to drive into the parking lot that used to be a landing strip in hopes of making it to the zoo that used to be the mall. We listen to Manheim Steamroller and wonder what songs they play the rest of the year. We hang sentimental ornaments whose story we cannot remember. A few brave souls try to re-create the smell that came from grandmother's kitchen.

We look at plastic figures kneeling on floodlit lawns. Mary is always in blue. Jesus, who looks about two years old, wears what seems to be a onesie — not the traditional translation for "swaddling clothes." We can distinguish between Joseph and the shepherd only because Joseph stands a foot closer to the bassinet. The shepherd has an easy job because there is only one sheep. An angel playing a harp leans against the flagpole. Santa Claus shimmies down a rope while four reindeer wait on the roof. Three turbaned wise men stand in a line. The magi bring a jewelry box, a golden football and a silver sausage.

We spend December secretly hoping that we will feel like children. We want to hear bells. We want it to snow. We want everything to be wonderful. We try to make Christmas happen.



Our earnest, misguided attempts to force Christmas to come may backfire. Some of you will be ready for your children to go back to school about December 23. Some have visitors on the way that you wish were not coming. We have moments when we are tempted to skip the whole thing. Why are we the ones doing all the work? Why is Scrooge so misunderstood? Where can we get one of those "Humbug" buttons?

By the time Christmas Day gets here, it is a racecar that has run out of gas. We end up sitting on the hillside tending our sheep as though it was an ordinary day.

Our mistake is thinking we are in charge. If we let go of the idea that we are in control, we can be surprised again. God will astonish us with moments of grace:

... A moment when a child gives you a handmade Christmas card with a big "Merry Christmess" on the front and your eyes mist up.

... A moment when you open a peculiar gift from someone you adore. You feel like you should pretend it is what you want, but you cannot imagine how the giver could ever picture you as funny enough to wear antlers that light up.

... A moment when you think of someone who was with you last year, but is not this year.

Along with the sadness you feel at their absence, you are surprised by gratitude for the time that you had together.

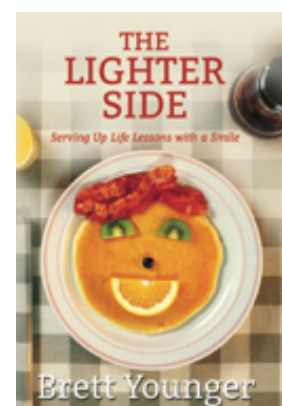
... A moment when you almost hear the songs of angels, and cannot figure out why it would happen to you.

We cannot make Christmas meaningful, because we are not in charge. The best we can do is take the spotlight off the distractions and look for the star. We stay open to the possibility that God is present. Waiting for a surprise sounds contradictory, but that is how Christmas happens. We give up the lesser expectations of the kind of Christmas we can create and open our hearts to God's joy. We need the days of waiting because it takes us a while to learn how to listen to the songs God is always singing, always waiting for us to hear.

We join the chorus singing the carols not because everyone expects us to, but because something stirs within us. We give and receive gifts not because it is required, but for the joy of it. We look carefully at the manger and feel what the shepherds felt as earth rose to heaven and heaven stooped to earth.

These days of waiting are a gift. Christmas happens when we least expect it, when we receive Christ as a hope, born in our hearts. **BT**

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Loss of biblical literacy impacts preaching

Religious literacy has declined to the point where modern audiences would be baffled at films such as Monty Python's 1979 *The Life of Brian*, A British Broadcasting Corp. official said recently.

Comedians are also affected, Aaquil Ahmed told *The Independent* newspaper in England, because audiences don't have the basic biblical knowledge required to get certain jokes.

"They can't go into specific stories anymore because no one knows what the stories are," he said.

Some Christian leaders on this side of the Atlantic agree with Ahmed's observation, adding that a drop in religious literacy is a natural result from the rise of the "nones" — that growing population of church-averse Americans.

And it's more than an academic issue for the nation's churches as those trends are changing how newcomers learn the Bible and the way preachers preach.

"One of the results of biblical illiteracy is that sermons are, for the first time in centuries, getting longer," said Brett Younger, associate professor of preaching at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

"Precisely because people have not grown up with the stories, many preachers see their job as explaining the text rather than helping worshippers experience the hope of the story," he added.

Brandon Hudson said his preaching has



changed to accommodate visitors and newcomers who grew up without church.

"That's a very different audience than people who have been in Sunday school for 20 years," said Hudson, pastor at Crosscreek Baptist Church in Pelham, Ala. "They don't know the general narrative."

Church members must also make room for worshippers who aren't steeped in biblical stories and the traditional teachings about them. It calls for patience for longer sermons and a willingness to avoid church-speak around those who are learning, he said.

"One of the real challenges for those of us who grew up in the church — and now work

in the church — is to now realize what kind of translation is necessary in this insider vs. outsider language," Hudson said.

Baptists in particular are experiencing these shifts, especially outside the Bible belt where they are still relatively known, said Bruce Gourley, moderator of CBF West, executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, and online editor for *Baptists Today*.

"Out here in the West, the general concept is that all Baptists are Southern Baptists or Westboro Baptists," he said.

Baptist, Christian and religious literacy in general has been in rapid decline in the Western states well before the concept of the "nones" gained national headlines in 2012.

"We moved to Montana 20 years ago and I immediately realized that some of the stories of the Bible that I took for granted ... were not known by many people," Gourley said. "Even the Christmas story was not known by many children."

The South is headed in the same direction "if the trend of the 'nones' continues," he said.

The rise in religious illiteracy doesn't bother Susan Sparks — either as a pastor or a stand-up comedian. However, Sparks has had to get more basic with her preaching at Madison Avenue Baptist Church in New York City.

"I have to lay more of a foundation before I can spin off of it," she said.

Bible studies tailored to previously un-churched adults also have been introduced, she added.

In her stand-up routines, when she makes religious references, she keeps them broad, like: "The Bible says to love your neighbor, but what if your neighbor is a telemarketer?"

But Sparks disagrees with the BBC's Ahmed that younger audiences wouldn't laugh at humor presented in *The Life of Brian*. They might miss the specific references, but they would get that authority, judgment and hypocrisy are being lampooned.

That's because, while un-churched, young people have a strong sense of right and wrong and a yearning for ethical living, Sparks said.

Plus, in some ways they are more comfortable in church than many who grew up there.

"They are walking in not carrying that stigma against laughing in church," Sparks said. **BT**

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Check your congregational aroma

By Bill Wilson

Like many of you, I regularly read outside the world of congregational life in an effort to understand leadership issues. Recently, in *Fast Company*, I ran across an article dedicated to helping start-up entrepreneurs establish healthy practices in their ranks.

The title "6 Signs Your Company Culture Stinks" was a little off-putting, but I quickly recognized that much of what writer Matt Ehrlichman was talking about resonated with the life of a congregational leadership group.

Let's see if your congregational aroma needs some attention as you consider whether your congregation's culture stinks:

1. YOU'VE GOT GOSSIPS IN YOUR RANKS.

The book of James is right in describing the tongue as being "a fire sent from hell." Not only is gossiping a nuisance in the local church, but it also has a toxic impact upon the life of a church.

While transparency and collaboration are the marks of a culture that people enjoy being part of, cliques, malicious smear campaigns, and hidden agendas are the marks of a place no one wants to be. Healthy congregational culture is built upon trust.

I once went through a training event dedicated to the idea that trust was the critical link to building a healthy relationship culture. A key idea: there are "trust accelerators" and "trust decelerators" in your congregation.

Gossips are some of the most effective decelerators to the work of the Spirit in your midst that you will ever encounter. Find them, name them, and confront them *or* be controlled by them.

2. YOUR LEADERSHIP TEAM HAS BAD HABITS.

The prevailing culture of your congregation

takes its cues from those in significant leadership positions. If congregational leaders cut corners on their work ethic, devotional life or personal morality, or display sloppy work habits, it has a trickle-down effect on the whole congregation.

Conversely, seeing a leadership model that is diligent, conscientious, humble, focused upon the needs of others and attuned to spiritual discernment sets a standard that others want to emulate.

3. YOUR MANAGERS' HANDS ARE TOO CLEAN.

I've watched many a minister send an unconscious, yet powerful message to a congregation: "I'm too busy/spiritual/important to do that." Asking others to do what you are not willing to do is a short route to a dysfunctional congregation.

A healthy engagement with hands-on ministry means showing up and pitching in, managing by walking around, being accessible and engaged, having an open door, and making it a point to be focused on the needs and concerns of others.

When a minister sends the unconscious or conscious message that "you or your class or your project or your problem is an intrusion upon my valuable time," it is a congregational aroma killer.

4. YOUR EMPLOYEES ARE COMPETING — WITH EACH OTHER.

The Center where I work does a significant amount of conflict intervention work in local churches. Almost without exception, when we begin to peel back the layers of the conflict in order to design an appropriate intervention, staff competition and/or broken relationships are found at the heart of the issue.

When members of a leadership team spend more time competing with each other than banding together to meet the challenges

of the day, you know you have a rotten culture. Back to the accelerators/decelerators designation: identify who is critical for moving forward. Build up the accelerators.

5. YOU DON'T PLAY TOGETHER.

I recently spent three days with a church staff as part of their annual weeklong staff retreat. It was amazing what those days away did for their sense of unity and shared mission. They balanced their strategic and calendar work with hilarious games, incredible food and true re-creation. I realized that my paltry efforts at twice-a-year overnight staff retreats paled dramatically beside this much deeper version.

Building a culture of healthy congregational leadership includes regular times for play as well as planning. Despite the eye rolling from your stick-in-the-mud staff members, do it anyway.

One staff that I was part of took the four "5th Tuesdays" of every year and planned a fun afternoon away from the church as part of our ongoing effort to create a positive team experience.

The church leadership group that doesn't make time for team building or relationship building outside the office inherently faces unity and retention risks.

6. YOU LACK SCHOOL SPIRIT.

Is it possible for congregational leaders to maintain a spirit of joy and meaning about their task? I believe it is not only possible, but also essential to the effectiveness of the ministry.

A unified understanding of your call, mission, vision and strategy is a necessary prerequisite. The moment you stop actually believing in your church, something essential begins to ebb.

How about it? How would you describe your congregation's leadership culture aroma? **BT**

—Bill Wilson is president of the Center for Congregational Health.



Responsible freedom

Two editors talk about the mission of an independent news journal

Throughout this year *Baptists Today* has been celebrating 30 years as an autonomous, national news journal through special articles, a commemorative book, a dinner event and a video tribute. During a break between interviews for the video, current editor John Pierce and founding editor Walker Knight talked about the publication's mission. This article is adapted from that conversation as a final nod to three decades of the news journal's unique role as the first child of a moderate Baptist movement.

PIERCE: When *SBC Today* (now *Baptists Today*) started, I was a subscriber without any idea that I would have a second career in journalism. And I certainly never expected to be editor of this publication.

But it was with great admiration of you that I became a subscriber. And one of the things that impressed me so much about the publication early on was that you addressed the issues that were being talked about in the corners of Baptist life.

Often those issues weren't front and center because they would be considered divisive. That's really been a mark of your editorship, even before you started *SBC Today*, right?

KNIGHT: Very definitely. In fact, it goes all the way back to the *Baptist Standard*, when I was associate editor there and Dr. E.S. James became editor.

He called me in to ask what we should do about a situation. I said, "Well, Dr. James, the things that are going on in the corridors of the convention are not being discussed in the newspaper, and we should address those because that's where peoples' concerns are."

Then when I came to the Home Mission Board, for 24 years we covered those issues.

PIERCE: And that got you in trouble sometimes.

KNIGHT: It was not unusual for me to be called to the president's office and hear, "What's that got to do with home missions?"

PIERCE: I remember you saying one time that if people only received their news from denominational publications in the '60s and '70s, they



Current *Baptists Today* editor John Pierce presents the author's copy of the autobiography, *From Zion to Atlanta*, to Walker Knight at an April celebration in Gainesville, Ga., in recognition of the 30th anniversary of the news journal. Knight founded the independent publication, first known as *SBC Today*, in 1983. Photo by David Cassady

would have never known there was a Civil Rights Movement or a Vietnam War.

KNIGHT: Right. And we covered all those issues in depth.

When I first came to the Home Mission Board, I was asked not to publish information about blacks, even though we had a department with National Baptists.

I was called to the president's office once and he said, "We've got all the integration that we can stand."

And we had one (black) secretary out of about 100 staff. I didn't answer him, but I determined that I would continue and they'd just have to fire me to stop it. Because this was

really what Southern Baptists needed to do. And so we did that.

PIERCE: Which reminds me of another thing I heard you say once: that an editor really cannot do his or her job if afraid of being fired.

KNIGHT: That is true. And the amazing thing was that we were able to address all of these issues, and address them sometimes before any other publication addressed them.

For example, the Jesus People movement. We were the first publication to address that issue, and we sent photographers and journalists around the nation to cover what was happening.

'People who read the publication have to believe that **we are presenting the truth** as best we know it at the moment.' —WALKER KNIGHT

Then Tyndale House put those articles in a book called *Jesus People Come Alive*, and used our photographs and writings. They sold over 100,000 copies; it even went into French and Spanish editions at that time.

We addressed other issues, like women in ministry, back in that time. And a lot of people have just now discovered that.

PIERCE: Often I use the term “responsible editorial freedom,” because there are reckless ways of dealing with controversial issues, and then there are responsible ways.

It doesn't mean that you shy away from the issue. But you use the publication to educate people on a particular issue, so that they are able to wrestle with it in their own minds and hearts.

KNIGHT: Exactly. And we tried to make sure that all sides of an issue were presented.

PIERCE: When you started *SBC Today*, which became *Baptists Today*, you were dealing with denominational controversy and the issues surrounding that. Did you feel pressure from people on one side wanting you not to talk too strongly about the fundamentalism that was taking place and, on the other hand, people wanting you to be more aggressive toward the fundamentalists?

KNIGHT: Yes, both sides were there. In fact, I remember a committee of the moderates coming to me wanting me to be more aggressive in the publication.

I told them, “Well, I can only publish that which I can publish with integrity. If you want to write an article along that line, I'll see if we can publish it at that time.”

But I wanted one that deals with all of the facts; that really deals with it truthfully and doesn't make false claims. If it's going to be a free publication for free Baptists, it has to hold their integrity as well as mine.

PIERCE: Often that is done by being very clear about what is an opinion piece and then what is news that can be verified. When people express opinions, we label it as such.

We're in unique positions in that we write opinion pieces and news pieces and feature pieces, rather than just one of those. It's wonderful that we're able to do all of that, but we

do have to be conscious about which one we're doing at the time.

And I've had people say to me, “I read something in *Baptists Today* that I disagree with.” I will say, “Well, I disagreed with that column too, but I thought it was well stated and that that opinion deserved to be heard.”

So it's not about protecting the paper from other voices other than our own, as editor, but inviting those people in for a healthy dialogue around important issues.



KNIGHT: Right. In fact, I felt that if I did not get letters of reaction from our readers, I hadn't really done my job.

You talked about being careful as an editor. Sometimes there is a thin line between covering honest issues and sensationalizing issues. And I think one of the responsibilities of an editor is to be very clear about that distinction.

We do not want in any way to keep a valid opinion from being shared, but we also do not want to sensationalize an issue.

It comes back to that one word you use over and over again, that I really do believe is the foundation on which *Baptists Today* is built, and that is “integrity.” People who read the publication have to believe that we are presenting the truth as best we know it at the moment.

PIERCE: I have told you before how much I appreciate you and your vision and the sacrifice that you made, during a very important time in Baptist life, to start this publication.

Each day when I go to work, I have a sense of gratitude that I'm building on a firm foundation. And I appreciate what you have done.

KNIGHT: Well, thank you. And I appreciate the leadership that you've given us. We were doing in kind of a miniscule way some of the things that you now have made departments of the work.

It has been very astounding to me the success you've had. And it has pleased me very much that we're now in book publishing and curriculum development as well as the publication of *Baptists Today*.

PIERCE: As we know so well, no one can do

this work alone. It's done with a wonderful staff and with a Board of Directors that gives the freedom to do that. And then with a really large number of supporters who value what we're doing, believe in what we're doing, and rally to support us.

KNIGHT: That's exactly right. If you have the right kind of staff and the right kind of Board, then you're going to grow and learn with them. And there will always be that kind of give and take, both with the readers and within your staff.

PIERCE: That's really true. In fact, one of the challenges we face now is determining which good opportunity to tackle first.

But ultimately we know that the audience is made up of those church leaders, laity and clergy who every day deal with the reality of trying to do effective ministry in their current social context.

It's not easy. So we want to provide reliable information and resources that help them in discerning what they do as a congregation to reach out and minister effectively today. **BT**



Walker Knight's autobiography *From Zion to Atlanta* is available at nurturingfaith.info. The commemorative book *Baptists Today @ 30: Enabling, Recording and Shaping a Baptist Movement* may be ordered at baptiststoday.org/30th-anniversary-book-video.

Uncovering evangelical obsession with Israel

By John Pierce

It is not unusual to hear certain politicians, commentators, preachers, and their followers express strong support for the nation of Israel. In recent years, however, these calls for unwavering loyalty to the Israeli government, regardless of their policies or actions, have grown in frequency and intensity.

Where does such an obsession come from? The two-fold answer is: political ideology and religious eschatology — that often get mixed together.

Some who espouse unfailing support of Israel are simply delivering yet another line picked up from a voice they believe offers truth — and finding it to be another handy way of expressing displeasure with a political leader or party they view with disdain.

Few of these supporters have had serious conversations with Israeli Jews or Arab Christians who live daily in such tender-box tensions. Some don't even know there are Christians in Palestine — who suffer and are declining in number.

The complexities of the Middle East are not of interest to those who like to simplify

everything — and often argue that Israel is “the apple of God’s eye” and, therefore, should be free to act in any way current leaders choose. They have the divine seal of approval, and anyone who opposes any of Israel’s policies or actions is opposing God and risking godly retribution.

To say that many evangelical Christians are politically obsessed with Israel might seem like an overstatement to some. But consider the latest results of a recent Pew Research study of American Jews.

Twice as many white American evangelical Christians (82 percent) believe that God gave the land of Israel to the Jews than do American Jews (40 percent). Even after subtracting from the survey those who do not claim a belief in God, evangelicals still top Jews (82 percent to 55) in holding to that position.

The study also found that white evangelicals favor stronger American support of Israel than do American Jews — although American Jews still identify very heavily with Israel.

Politically, however, American Jews tend to be less conservative than evangelicals. And unwavering political support of Israel has become another mark of conservative political

identity in America.

I’ve spoken with Jewish persons who live in Israel and in the U.S. who admit the oddity of finding strong uncritical support of the Israeli government from this segment of the American population that tends to not value interreligious activities and often seeks governmental preference for their own faith tradition over others.

Scratch deeper and one finds that the political ideology that drives this obsession has roots in a version of eschatology — end-times beliefs — that calls for the preservation of Israel as an essential step leading to the Second Coming of Christ.

Perhaps that explains a little bit more why so many white conservative Christians are so adamant about giving a foreign government their unquestioning loyalty while heavily criticizing their own. But then, advancing a political ideology mixed with bad theology is the likely answer to many questions that arise today.

But I’m still quite surprised by the results of this extensive study of American Jews — and how overwhelmingly and passionately evangelical Christians have bought into this theologically shaped, political ideology. **BT**

Give your pastor a break

By Tony W. Cartledge

Working at a card table in front of the TV on a Sunday afternoon allowed me to keep tabs on the Goody’s 500 NASCAR race at Martinsville. Most of the race was typical short-track racing: lots of bumping and shoving, spinouts and drivers getting short-tempered as the day went on.

Jeff Gordon won the race, his first win in 2013, but what caught my attention was toward the back of the pack. Amid all the high-speed billboards for beer, motor oil, insurance and fast food, the 98 car driven by Michael McDowell devoted its entire hood to the words “Pray for your pastor.”

McDowell finished in 26th place, two laps down, but he managed to stay on the

track and display the message for the entire day. It turns out that Phil Parsons Racing, which owns the car, and Energize Ministries, of Winston-Salem, decided to team up on the project for Clergy Appreciation Month, which is promoted in October of each year.

The fast-paced, white-knuckled, high-stress environment of a NASCAR race is not a bad metaphor for the life of a busy pastor, and it’s not good for the pastor’s health. A recent article in the *New York Times* documented the serious health risks that pastors may face, especially if they’re not good at getting some time away for personal rejuvenation.

Pastors suffer from higher rates of obesity, hypertension, and depression than most Americans, according to one study, and have a shorter life expectancy. Pastors, believing

that they’re doing the work of the Lord and constantly meeting others’ needs, sometimes have a hard time recognizing that they have needs, too — and that running themselves into the ground can be counterproductive both for themselves and for the church.

You can’t be an effective pastor when you’re constantly running a hundred miles an hour.

Praying for your pastor is a great thing, but if you really want to help your pastor, make sure that he or she has adequate vacation time and at least one designated day off during the week, and insist that he or she takes that time away.

Don’t just suggest or support it: insist on it, and both your pastor and your church will be better equipped to finish the race. **BT**

A passion for Christ

Hollywood looks to the Bible for screenplay potential

NEW YORK — Studios and filmmakers are rediscovering a classic text as source material for upcoming mainstream films: the Bible.

Nearly 10 years after the blockbuster success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, which earned \$611.9 million worldwide, studios are looking to the Good Book for good material. Future films include:

- * LD Entertainment is financially backing *Resurrection*, a drama set immediately after Jesus' death and directed by *Hatfields & McCoy's* director Kevin Reynolds.

- * Paramount will release *Noah*, a \$125 million adaptation starring Russell Crowe next year.

- * 20th Century Fox is developing *Exodus*, a Moses film starring Christian Bale.

- * Warner Bros. has another Moses-themed film titled *Gods And Kings*, which Steven Spielberg flirted with directing.

- * Warner Bros. also is working on a film on Pontius Pilate.

- * Sony is producing Will Smith's *The Redemption of Cain*, on the sibling rivalry of Cain and Abel.

- * Lionsgate has been developing *Mary Mother of Christ*, described as "a prequel to *The Passion of the Christ*."

Alongside the string of upcoming Bible-related films, producers from the History channel's *The Bible* miniseries announced that the series' film adaptation *Son of God* will be released in theaters nationwide in February with 20th Century Fox.

The couple behind the show, Mark Burnett and *Touched by an Angel* star Roma Downey, said mixing Hollywood and the Bible can be tricky.

"It's not just some story," said Burnett, who produces *The Voice* and *Survivor*. "There's a price to pay for failing to stay on track and failing to get the right advisers."

"It's not enough to have good intentions," said Downey, who plays Jesus' mother Mary in the series. "It has to be told in a way that's relevant to a contemporary audience."

The couple have been able to reach across traditional religious divides in getting promotions; Downey is Catholic and Burnett considers himself a nondenominational Christian. Their efforts have received endorsements from



Diogo Morgado plays Jesus in *Son of God*. RNS photo courtesy Lightworkers Media.

religious leaders ranging from megachurch pastor Rick Warren to Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl.

Previous generations of filmmakers largely stayed within their own traditions without much interest in what other Christians were making, said Dallas megachurch pastor T.D. Jakes, who hosted a film festival earlier this year.

"Faith is not limited or incarcerated by labels that restrict it from being able to be woven into the fabric of the human experience," he said. "I think that faith is best worn when it is part of the totality of the human experience rather than relegated over to a tribal expression of a particular group of people."

Taking a cue from Gibson's success with *The Passion*, film marketing campaigns now go after pastors' endorsements through special advance screenings to secure endorsements from big-name religious leaders.

"No pastor went to seminary to put people in (theater) seats or build revenue for a film producer," said A. Larry Ross, who has handled publicity for several religious leaders and organizations. "Many pastors are realizing that in this video-driven culture, stories are the vessels of meaning."

"For many faith and family films, the impact on the screen is less the answers given than it is the questions asked that you could discuss over coffee with someone who would never go to church with you but go to a movie with you," he said.

In some ways, Hollywood's fascination with the Bible isn't new: Hollywood drew on biblical storytelling after World War II, especially with Charlton Heston, who played Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, and *Ben-Hur*, a movie about a Jewish prince sent into slavery and rescued by Jesus.

But some films flopped when they took too much license. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Martin Scorsese's 1988 film about the life of Jesus and the temptations he faced that included sex scenes, took in only \$8.4 million domestically amid a widespread boycott led by Roman Catholics.

Independent films have dealt with the Bible in the past, but it's significant that major Hollywood studios are taking this up, said Tom Allen, a partner in Allied Faith & Family, a Hollywood marketing firm.

"We're beyond the cheap ministry movies that appeal only to a certain constituency," he said.

As Hollywood looks to epic tales of floods, burning bushes and parting seas, films with biblical themes will also continue to pop up. Nicolas Cage is slated to star in *Left Behind*, a movie based on the book series on the Second Coming of Christ.

Sony's adaption of the popular book *Heaven is for Real* is also scheduled for next year. But sticking strictly to the Bible starts with a financial upside — no one collects copyright or licensing fees. **BT**

50 years later

C.S. Lewis' legacy shines in U.S., not in homeland

CANTERBURY, England — When he died on Nov. 22, 1963, hardly a soul blinked in Northern Ireland where he was born or in England where he spent most of his working life as one of the world's greatest Christian apologists.

Alive Staples Lewis was a week short of 65 when he suffered a heart attack at his home in Oxford. The obituary writers barely noticed his demise, in part because he died on the same day that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas.

British indifference to Lewis half a century ago was examined at a one-day seminar at Wheaton College in November, co-sponsored by the Marion E. Wade Center, the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals, and Wheaton College's Faith and Learning program.

Lewis may be the most popular Christian writer in history, with millions of copies of his books sold, the vast majority in the United States where his influence is far greater than in his native country.

Was it Lewis' modesty or British fear of discussing religion that fueled such indifference in Britain and Ireland?

A mixture of both, said Paul Johnson the prominent British journalist, author and former editor of the *New Statesman* magazine.

Writing in the *Catholic Herald*, Johnson, a leading British Roman Catholic, said he first met Lewis when he was a student at Magdalen College, Oxford University, where Lewis was a don, specializing in Renaissance literature.

"When I knew him, just after the Second World War," wrote Johnson, "he was famous for his work in English literature. ... When we went for walks together, we discussed Chaucer and Dickens, Shakespeare and Dryden. 'The Chronicles of Narnia' were never mentioned. Indeed, I had no idea he wrote stories."

Half a century later, his books sell



Statue of C.S. Lewis looking into a wardrobe. *The Searcher* by Ross Wilson. Photo by "Genvessel."

between 1.5 million and 2 million copies a year.

C.S. Lewis was born in Belfast, on Nov. 29, 1898. His father, Albert James Lewis, was a lawyer; his mother, Florence Augusta Lewis, was the daughter of an Anglican vicar.

His mother died of cancer in 1908 when C.S. (known as "Jack" to family and friends) was 9.

Shattered by her death, Lewis abandoned his inherited faith at the age of 15 and threw himself into a study of mythology and the occult.

In 1916, when he was just 17, Lewis was awarded a scholarship at University College, Oxford. World War I was raging, and the following year he joined the army.

He served in the Somme Valley in France with an English infantry division and experienced the horrors of mass slaughter. He was wounded when a British shell falling short of its target killed two of his colleagues.

After the war, he returned to Oxford and in 1925 was elected a fellow and tutor in English literature at Magdalen College where he served until 1954.

His conversion to Christianity was slow and laborious. Reluctantly, he fell under the influence of Oxford colleague and friend J.R.R. Tolkien and G.K. Chesterton, who met every Tuesday morning at a local public house in Oxford and formed a debating club called "Inklings."

In his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he said that the night he turned from atheism to Christianity he became "the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

Tolkien and Chesterton were disappointed that their new convert turned towards the Church of England, not Rome.

C.S. Lewis went on to write acclaimed books about Christianity — *The Screwtape Letters*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space Trilogy*, *Mere Christianity*, *Miracles* and *The Problem of Pain* — the latter written after he watched his American Jewish wife, Joy Davidman Gresham, die of bone cancer in 1960.

The following year, Lewis experienced medical problems and on Nov. 22, 1963, he collapsed in his bedroom. He is buried in the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church, Headington, near Oxford — now a place of pilgrimage.

Celebrations of his life were held last month in Belfast. On Nov. 22, he was honored with a memorial in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey, where the kings and queens of England are crowned and where some of the world's greatest writers are buried.

His friend Johnson said Lewis, along with Tolkien, provide a counterbalance to the enormous flood of atheist literature, especially in children's books.

"It is one of Lewis' great merits that his tales can be read with equal pleasure by teenagers and grown-ups," said Johnson. "He is thus, in a sense, the answer both to Richard Dawkins and Harry Potter." **BT**

Church news outlets struggle to keep editorial independence

The closing of several Protestant denominational newspapers, magazines and other news services has played a part in eroding the standards of professional religious journalism, according to members of the Associated Church Press.

As denominational news services contend with fiscal challenges that have beset secular media as well, church press officials worry these outlets have lost their editorial independence and are increasingly performing public relations roles for their denominations.

“There has been a strong commitment on the part of many denominations to promote religious journalism that lives up to the standards of what professional journalism should be,” said Meinrad Scherer-Emunds, chair of the ACP Religious Journalism Task Force. “We feel that has been limited in more recent years.”

Jay Voorhees, executive editor of *The*

United Methodist Reporter, bought the digital assets of the publication after it ceased publication in May when UMR Communications closed after months of financial losses. He now runs it as a much smaller, Web-only publication.

“We still think there is an important need for a voice in the Methodist Church that is independently operated from the official Methodist structure,” Voorhees said. “The reality is that it’s very, very difficult to find a funding model that will allow for independent journalism that is not simply regurgitating what is coming out in press releases from denominational agencies.”

Joe Thoma, executive director of ACP, said his organization has seen a “significant change” in its membership as news services contract. Many denominations have resorted to telling the “good news” only, Thoma said.

Verity Jones, executive director of the Center for Pastoral Excellence at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, said this shift toward public relations led the ACP, which has more than 100 member

organizations, to write a statement affirming religious journalism.

“We were seeing the eroding of support for and trust in an independent voice within traditions and denominations reporting the news,” said Jones, a former editor of *DisciplesWorld*, which ceased publication in 2010. “It’s not optional, because the free exchange of ideas is central to the living out of Christian community. It’s important for accountability; it’s important for news sharing.”

Jones, who also serves on the board of Religion News Service, added that sometimes news is not good for a denomination, pointing to scandals involving clergy sexual abuse of minors as an example.

Other publications that have shut their doors include *The Progressive Christian*, *Episcopal Life*, *United Church News* and the *Church Herald*. **BT**

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