



# Baptists TODAY

NEWS JOURNAL

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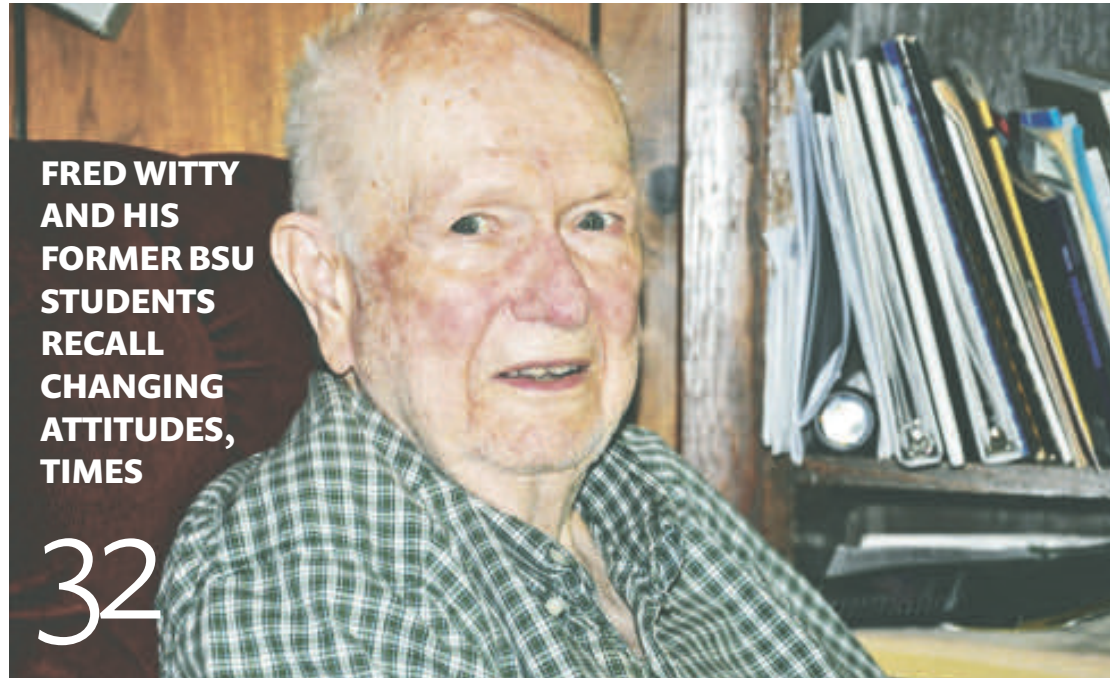
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**Cover photo** by John Pierce. Assistant principal Anicia Robinson said the children at Sabal Palm Elementary School “know there is somebody on their side” thanks to a partnership with First Baptist Church of Tallahassee, Fla.

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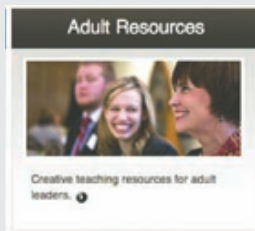
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# When the church goes to school

Students, staff, and congregation benefit from ‘beautiful and growing relationship’

**T**ALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Schoolchildren will often refer to another as “my best friend.” Sometimes the school itself could use a best friend. Sabal Palm Elementary in Florida’s capital city certainly has one: the First Baptist Church of Tallahassee.

## CONTEXT

The school was continually failing academically, said principal Ray King, who has a history of helping turn around such situations.

“Sabal Palm is in a neighborhood that’s been evolving over time,” said King.

He described it as home to several service agencies including the school board, sheriff’s department, a homeless shelter and military training centers.

The school, with approximately 540 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade, has a 100-percent free or reduced lunch designation. The percentage of students for whom English is a second language continues to grow.

But King warns against looking back or even at a school’s current situation: “Don’t judge a school on history.”

“We’ve imported teachers who feel they have a calling,” he added. And he acknowledged the important role of those faithful volunteers who come to the school from the church.

## CARING PRESENCE

“We made huge strides last year — with our partnership with First Baptist,” said King. “It really carried us through.”

“They want to be here,” he said. “They develop an attachment to certain teachers and students.”

One third-grade class last year, he said, eagerly awaited the twice-weekly visits from church member Glen Wright. The experience was so positive that he moved up to the fourth grade with those students this year.

“They depend on him being here,” said King. “He’s an example of the type of ownership that has been such a gift to us.”



**TURN AROUND:** Principal Ray King and assistant principal Anicia Robinson came to Tallahassee’s Sabal Palm Elementary last year to turn around the failing school. They credit teachers with a “calling to be here” and a partnership with First Baptist Church of Tallahassee with positive results.

Two boys, with whom Wright reads during each visit, especially look forward to his coming.

“They became clock watchers,” said King, asking their teacher: “Is Mr. Wright coming today?”

While church members do everything from mentoring to moving furniture to beautifying the campus to providing a lunch for staff at the beginning of the school year, the greatest contribution is simply a commitment to come and come again, said King.

“The main thing is their presence,” he said. “It’s a beautiful and growing relationship.”

## GOOD INGREDIENTS

A partnership between a school and a congregation calls for certain commitments that First Baptist Church members have demonstrated well, said King.

“There has to be a desire for it by the individual volunteers,” he said. “And there needs to be a good outreach person.”

He commended Rhonda Smith, the children’s minister who gives overall leadership to the church-school partnership, and pastor Bill Shiell who encourages the congregation to

reach beyond its walls and membership.

“Pastor Shiell has a whole lot of good ideas,” said King. “He’s been a major force in community outreach with a very supportive congregation moving in concert.”

Also crucial, said King, is having teachers who are willing to have other adults in the classroom and to engage students. He’s seen more of that in year two of the partnership.

“Other teachers see the benefits reaped [from having volunteers in classrooms last year] and want to get in on it.”

“This year, volunteers picked up where they left off last year,” he added.

While the ages of the volunteers vary, retirees are often those most available for serving at the school. That brings an added benefit said King.

“A lot of our parents struggle with raising children,” he said. “There’s nothing like interaction with more-experienced folks of grandparent age.”

King said relationships between churches or other community organizations and struggling schools “is not a new idea.” But this one in Tallahassee is “hard to rival.”

“I can’t say enough good about First Baptist and what they’ve done to help us resurrect this school.”

## BIGGER IMPACT

“Last year, a lot of trust was put down,” said church mission volunteer Shirley Eikeland. “It’s an example of giving beyond the church walls; it models God’s love.”

The creative ways of service go beyond improving reading skills and other academic measures, she said. A warm clothing drive has been held as well as a Valentine’s dance for mothers/sons and fathers/daughters.

Shirley, a retired educator who teaches a young adult Bible study class at First Baptist, encourages participation at Sabal Palm. One young professional, she said, uses his off day from the airport to serve at the school.

“We have about 100 volunteers — a real cross-section of the church,” she said of participation in the partnership. The main assignment is “to love on the kids, teachers and staff” and be “positive role models.”

“We’re hoping for long-term relationships,” she said, noting that 30-35 church members have completed the school system’s training and screening program for mentors to work directly with students.

The school system has sought to enlist 500 mentors countywide. First Baptist jumpstarted that effort.

Continued on page 6



LEFT TO RIGHT:  
Pastor Bill Shiell and  
minister to young  
adults Josh Hall

# Life groups

## Getting the church off the block

The stated purpose of Life Groups is “to reach the unreached, unchurched and uninvolved through groups of 15-20 people based on their common place, pursuit or phase of life.”

After considerable envisioning, planning and testing, the program was unveiled last March, said Josh Hall, minister to young adults at First Baptist Church of Tallahassee. But he expects further refinement.

“This is written in ink, but not concrete,” he said of the strategy.

Traditionally, entry into church life, and perhaps a growing faith life, has been through Sunday morning Bible study. That still works for many but not all persons, Hall and other church leaders acknowledge.

“It’s mobilizing our people to look for opportunities to reach people not being reached by the church,” said Hall of the emerging Life Groups. “We’ll go to share Christ with people across the world but not with the neighbor across the street, the coworker in the next cubicle or a dormmate.”

Church members are encouraged to form groups around common physical space (such as neighbors) or common phases of life (like newlyweds, divorcees, new parents) or common pursuits (shared interests, hobbies or causes).

The church’s partnership with Sabal Palm Elementary is an example of a

common cause. It expands the mission beyond increasing test scores to appropriately connecting with teachers and others who might otherwise not have a personal contact with a community of faith.

But each situation calls for its own unique touches, said Hall. “It’s not a cookie cutter approach.”

Pastor Bill Shiell, who envisioned the concept, saw a common thread in the congregation: “Everybody wants to reach unreached people; it’s the ‘how’ that is up for debate.”

Life Groups, he said, are a way of saying: “Let’s be intentional about building relationships.”

Markers and metrics keep the groups focused on their intended routes and purpose. An emphasis on authentic relationships keeps any participant from feeling like he or she is being embraced with an ulterior motive at play.

Josh noted that Jesus’ words “as you go” in the Great Commission from Matthew 28 suggest that disciple making should be rooted in ongoing relationships tied to daily experiences.

“I’d be happy if this is nothing but training wheels for the Great Commission...” he said. “It’s awakened an intentionality in us about being missional.”

“It’s teaching our people to go deeper with a few,” he added. “This is about getting our people off the [church] block.” **BT**



“You have to have a strong commitment from the leaders of the church and the leader of the school district,” said Shirley. “It has to be more than lip service. It has to be a willingness to roll up your sleeves and get involved.”

First Baptist’s larger “first love” community effort one Saturday included a beautification of the school’s grounds. One teacher said that previously “it looked like nobody cared.”

Now signs of care are seen all around Sabal Palm Elementary.

Assistant principal Anicia Robinson echoed those words: “The children know there is somebody on their side.”

## SCHOOL PRIDE

Anicia, who also came from the district office to the school this year, is building school spirit that reflects good self-esteem.

Now the young Sabal Palm Patriots see signs of school pride all around, thanks to Anicia. And the last Friday of each month is designated as School Spirit Day.

“Mr. King lets me do a lot of the decorating,” said Anicia of the colorful school-pride images around campus.

“The kids take a lot of pride in the school now,” she said. “And we have a list of what it means to be a patriot.”

Success doesn’t come easily, however, said Anicia. That message is made clear to prospective teachers.

“It’s not going to be easy,” she said they tell them. “You’ve got to want to be here.”

A team of intervention teachers focuses on helping students to improve reading skills. Mentors from the church help immensely with these efforts.

“They’re fabulous,” said intervention teacher Christine Thornton of the First Baptist volunteers. “What else do you need to know about them? They are wonderful!”

## ON MISSION

Pastor Bill Shiell said the Sabal Palm partnership is a great fit for First Baptist as well: “For me, it puts feet and hands to faith, and allows our good news to become good deeds.”

He described his congregation as “an educational-minded church” that has found “a mission in education.” And he celebrates that the Sabal Palm partnership is multi-generational, allowing varied members to “work side by side.”

“We have people who care,” he added. “We just needed a platform to mobilize volunteers.”

Lay leader Shirley Eikeland said it’s rewarding to see the many physical improvements to the school, but the real successes are relational.

“The intangibles are the greatest difference.”

Children’s minister Rhonda Smith agrees.

“We have been reminded that life changes cannot always be measured in testable ways,” she said. “Seeing relationships develop, eyes light up, and attitudes becoming more open are examples of what the partnership has done for all concerned.” **BT**



**SIGNS OF CHANGE:** The campus of Sabal Palm Elementary reflects the positive engagement of school administrators and teachers, and supportive friends from Tallahassee’s First Baptist Church.



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*Claude Douglas Bryan*

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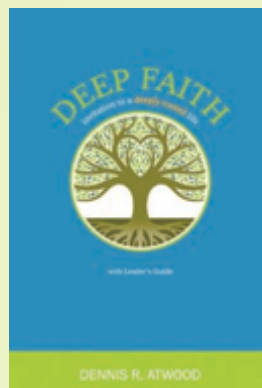


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*Jennifer Kinard Wylie*

“All of us who recognize the authority of God upon our lives, and choose to live under it, have experiences worth sharing. They are like pathways that help to lead others safely across the pitfalls of life. In this way, our lives are like bridges, and, when we share them and the things that God has taught us through them, we are like bridge builders.” With these words, Jennifer Wylie, introduces readers to her personal story of servant leadership.

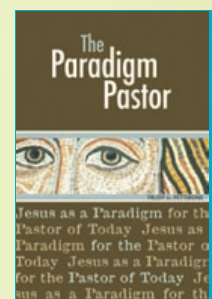


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# quotation remarks

“The WMU will meet in the CLC in the room where the GAs usually meet.”

—*Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources, on the kind of insider church language that makes visitors feel excluded (ThomRainer.com)*

“The Bible is ... like a grand narrative that reorders our imaginations and holds out for us an alternate way of seeing reality — with God at the heart of it rather than ourselves.”

—*Author Peter Enns, in an article titled “10 things I wish everyone knew about the Bible” (FaithStreet.com)*

“The great allure of fundamentalism for its followers is that by simply believing the right things, they get to go to heaven. But the allure for its leaders is even greater. For, if you know all the answers and thereby possess the keys to heaven, you have the power to control others, to bend them to your will and your way of looking at the world. It’s an intoxicating fruit to be sure.”

—*Blogger Zack Hunt at TheAmericanJesus.net*

“If you want a church that lasts, you have to build it on purpose, integrity, humility and generosity, not on people, personalities or style — because the only things that will last forever are eternal purposes of God.”

—*Rick Warren (Christian Post)*

“The holy grail for helping youth remain religiously active as young adults has been at home all along: parents. Mothers and fathers who practice what they preach and preach what they practice are far and away the major influence related to adolescents keeping the faith into their 20s...”

—*David Briggs, a writer for the Association of Religion Data Archives, on new findings from the National Study of Youth and Religion (Huffington Post)*

“One of the things we are hearing over and over again ... is that (the survivors) so badly want a college education, but that just seems so completely out of the realm of possibility for them.”

—*Kim Jones, external relations volunteer at Point Loma Nazarene University’s Center for Justice & Reconciliation, on the private Christian school’s campaign to offer full scholarships to human trafficking survivors (RNS)*

“I still love Jesus and read the Bible and pray every morning, and I don’t really care what they say. I’m willing to let God and history be my judge.”

—*Ethicist David Gushee of Mercer University responding to criticism from fellow Baptists after telling a gathering of LGBT Christians, “I will be your ally in every way I know how to be” (RNS)*

“I’d like to say he taught me about radio, but really he taught me how to be a good father, and a good husband and a good person.”

—*James Howard following the Oct. 20 death at age 92 of his co-host Luther Masingill, a radio legend and Baptist layman in Chattanooga who broadcast the Pearl Harbor and 9/11 attacks — 60 years apart — on the same radio station (Chattanooga Times Free Press)*

“If you want to huddle in armed camps and demonize others, that, too, is your right. But you don’t get to call it ‘Christian.’ The gospel of wealth and the politics of fear couldn’t be further from the Christianity that Jesus actually set in motion.”

—*Religion News Service columnist Tom Ebrich*

“When I got out of the White House in ’98, the guy who was our senior pastor said, ‘Well, now that you’re done with that, we’ve got something important for you to do.’ And it turned out they wanted me to become the director of the Sunday school program.”

—*Mike McCurry, former press secretary for President Clinton and now a professor of public theology at Wesley Theological Seminary, in an article in the National Journal about political insiders who seek theological studies*

“Part of what it means to be a Baptist is to be free and autonomous.”

—*Jennifer McClung Rygg, associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Pendleton, S.C., after the Saluda Baptist Association broke its ties with the church because of the female minister’s pastoral roles (Independent Mail)*



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# Reluctant voices

A lot of personal opinions get expressed as words from God.

That can, and should, make us overly cautious, even reluctant, to claim that our words come unfiltered from the giver of eternal truth — even if we can string together a passel of scripture references that lean our way.

Not everyone has such concern or uses such caution. Like biblical prophets, they boom personal proclamations bearing resemblance to the prophet's preface, "Thus saith the Lord..." There is no hesitation or doubt.

Some authoritative voices seek to add divine weight to their words with claims such as "The Lord has laid this on my heart..." Or they detail their deeply devoted spiritual exercises in advance of the delivered message.

My point is not to belittle serious preparation or the role of speaking spiritual truth. It is to remind us that we are imperfect deliverers who must always avoid claiming too much spiritual authority.

The caution being called for here is not to be confused with timidity. There are times to stand and speak with authority to injustice and abuse. Yet such passion and strength should be in defense of vulnerable others, not of one's own opinions or preferences.

If one takes notice, there is a detectable difference between boldness and belligerence — at least on the receiving end.

Just because something is said loudly, repeatedly and with growing confidence doesn't make that proclamation more divine.

Anyone who assumes himself or herself (usually himself) to be a consistent conduit of all truth for all others assumes too much and removes the much-needed humility that often accompanies truth. It seems, more likely, that God speaks through those who are a bit reluctant to carry such a large load.

Honestly, it's gratifying but embarrassing at times to hear someone say how something that was said touched them deeply and became God's words for them at a crucial time in life.

But much of that experience is on the receiving rather than delivery end — and with the great aid of the Spirit.

An honest deliverer will more likely wonder: "Wow. God used that?"

When someone claims to be a "man of God" or has a "word from God," the alarms should go off. Such designations should be given, not claimed.

God knows we have heard too much nonsense — even destructive claims — labeled as direct, divine truth.

However, those who speak from pulpits or lecterns, or write on spiritual matters — or simply talk faith with others — should take seriously such tasks, yet do so amid a healthy dose of humility and the ongoing realization that no one flawlessly conveys divine truth.



God does use human words for divine purposes. In fact, God can speak through us in spite of us.

A helpful perspective comes from Don Brewer, a lay leader in First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., and chairman of the *Baptists Today* Board of Directors. He often says:

"Be careful what you write or say; somebody will take you seriously."

That's a good word. An additional warning to accompany this advice is: "And don't take yourself too seriously."

A veteran pastor once told me, fresh out of seminary, that, "Some Sundays I have something to say and some Sundays I have to say something."

There are times when insight is clear and words flow freely. And there are times when it's hard to eke out something that seems worth saying — much less something that conveys a divine word.

It is simply amazing to have "one of those Sundays" — or for any of us to mumble out a stammering statement of faith to someone in crisis — and then to hear later that our words carried something divine to the listener's ears and heart.

We need to speak cautiously but faithfully to one another, whether from a pulpit or a Bible study lectern, or in our personal conversations.

In doing so, we may become aware that reluctant voices are often the vessels of God's mercy, grace and truth. **BT**

Wishing our Faithful Readers  
and Friends a Blessed and Meaningful  
Advent and Christmas.

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your readership and support that allow us to  
carry on this unique mission.

The Board of Directors and Staff  
of *Baptists Today* / Nurturing Faith

## Declining number of U.S. nuns charted in study

By David Gibson  
*Religion News Service*

**A** new report shows that Catholic sisters in the U.S. face a more serious challenge to their existence than the Vatican-led investigation of the American nuns: A rapidly aging membership and a decline in vocations that afflicts even the most traditional orders.

“The overall change in the population of women religious in the United States over the past 50 years is one of dramatic decline,” wrote the authors of the report, published in October by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

The CARA researchers track the widely noted rise and fall in the number of nuns, noting that membership in women’s religious orders grew rapidly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, reaching a high point of 181,421 sisters in 1966. Since then, the numbers have steadily declined, to below 50,000 today, a 72.5 percent drop-off.

“There are about as many women religious in the United States now as there were a hundred years ago,” they wrote.

They also rebutted the common claim that more traditional communities — for example, those whose members wear the full habit — are growing “while those institutes that do not wear a traditional habit are declining.”

In fact, the researchers said, the more liberal, socially active communities of sisters are drawing about the same number of new entrants as the more conservative, tradition-minded communities.

The report compared data from communities of nuns who belong to the more progressive Leadership Conference of Women Religious, or LCWR, which represents 80 percent of all Catholic sisters in the U.S., and communities that belong to the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious, or CMSWR, that was established by Rome in 1992 as a traditional counterpoint to the LCWR. **BT**

## Seminaries awarded \$1.5 million to include science in coursework

Responding to a real or perceived gap between science and faith, 10 U.S. seminaries will receive a combined \$1.5 million in grants to include science in their curricula, the American Association for the Advancement of Science announced in October.

**A** diverse set of Christian seminaries will be awarded grants ranging from \$90,000 to \$200,000 provided by the John Templeton Foundation, which has funded various efforts to bridge science and faith, including \$3.75 million to AAAS for the project.

“Many (religious leaders) don’t get a lot of science in their training and yet they become the authority figures that many people in society look up to for advice for all kinds of things, including issues related to science and technology,” said Jennifer Wiseman, director of the AAAS Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion.

Indeed, evangelical Protestants are more than twice as likely as other Americans to say they would turn to a religious text, a religious leader or people at their congregation if they had a question about science, a study released by AAAS earlier this year suggested.

The selected seminaries represent broad denominational, demographic and geographic diversity, including Regent University School of Divinity, which includes Pentecostal/charismatic theology, and Howard University’s School of Divinity, a predominantly African-American seminary in Washington, D.C. Other participating schools include:

- Andover Newton Theological School (Newton Centre, Mass.)
- Catholic University of America (Washington, D.C.)
- Columbia Theological Seminary (Decatur, Ga.)
- Concordia Seminary (St. Louis)
- Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pennsylvania)
- Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University (Berkeley, Calif.)
- Multnomah Biblical Seminary (Portland, Ore.)
- Wake Forest University School of Divinity (Winston-Salem, N.C.)



Working with the Association of Theological Schools — the main umbrella group for U.S. seminaries — organizers received 28 letters of interest from seminaries interested in the pilot program.

The grants will cover faculty, events, science resources, guest speakers and other related costs. Seminaries could incorporate applicable issues of modern technology, methods of science or the history of science into courses seminary students already take, such as church history, ethics, pastoral counseling or systematic theology.

“There are interesting intersections of all these types of courses with either modern science or the history of science or the philosophy of science that would be very useful for these students to become acquainted with,” Wiseman said.

AAAS will provide seminaries with resources, including a series of short science-education videos. The association will help to recruit scientist-advisers from nearby science research institutions.

The new project, Science for Seminaries, will also organize conferences for Catholic, mainline Protestant and conservative/evangelical Protestant seminaries.

The survey from AAAS also suggested potential conflict between religion and science. Twenty-two percent of scientists (and 20 percent of the general public) say religious people are hostile to science. On the flip side, 22 percent of the general population thinks scientists are hostile to religion, and of those who feel science and religion are in conflict, 52 percent sided with religion. **BT**

# Russian Baptist pastor says Protestants sputtering along

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — A Russian pastor whose grandfather was killed for being a Christian toured the U.S. recently, studying church ministries and providing a rare, first-person look at Russia's complex religious landscape after widespread persecution ended.

**D**uring Victor Ignatenkov's youth under the Soviet regime, Christians could meet only for worship.

No Sunday school. No midweek Bible study. And definitely no proselytizing.

Today, Ignatenkov, 59, said he's free to lead whatever activities he wants as pastor of the Central Baptist Church in his hometown of Smolensk — a city situated between the capitals of Russia and Ukraine — and as regional bishop for the Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptist. The union is a group of evangelical Protestant churches that began emerging in Russia about 150 years ago as an alternative to the Russian Orthodox establishment.

The Presbyterian Church (USA)'s International Peacemaker Program sponsored his U.S. journey, which included stops in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and several other states.

Ignatenkov, speaking through a translator, hedged on discussing Russian President Vladimir Putin's close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church. Putin helped resurrect the church, which the state once crushed. And though there is no state religion, the Orthodox Church receives preferential treatment.

"Putin can be of whatever confession he chooses," Ignatenkov says. "What's important to us, what we value, is that Putin as president holds a neutral stance. We do not experience governmental limitations because we are Baptist."

Not all church leaders can say the same. The government refuses to recognize some religions, which means religious freedoms are limited. A U.S. State Department report last year slammed Russia for its treatment of minority religious groups, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals and Scientologists.

Members of those groups may be subject to arbitrary laws and denied access to places of worship or visas for visiting missionaries, the report said. Some face physical violence.



Victor Ignatenkov, left, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Smolensk, Russia, is traveling the U.S. with Ellen Smith, a Presbyterian missionary and translator, learning churches' best practices and discussing religion in post-Soviet Russia. Photo courtesy of Ellen Smith/RNS

For denominations the government recognizes, perestroika, the political reform movement that began in the waning days of the Soviet Union, threw open doors to total religious freedom.

At first, Russians couldn't get enough evangelical preaching, Ignatenkov said. They packed cultural centers for special services and snatched up free Bibles. These days, Ignatenkov's description of his countrymen sounds like the same one American evangelicals bemoan: People are indifferent.

"Probably because the quality of life is better," Ignatenkov says. "Everything that had been forbidden was of course very interesting. It's not forbidden, so of course it's not interesting now."

A Pew Research Center study of major religious groups in Russia confirms Ignatenkov's observations on Russian interest in faith. Covering data from 1991-2008, it tracked a surge of interest in Protestant Christianity, Islam and Roman Catholicism that then leveled off.

The share of Russians who attended church once a month rose from 2 percent in 1991 to 9 percent in 1998, then dropped to 7 percent a decade later. Seventy-two percent of Russian adults identified as Orthodox Christians in 2008, the survey found, but that didn't translate into church attendance.

At the same time, Pew figures show one-fifth of U.S. adults don't identify with any religion. But Ignatenkov said he's been impressed by church activities on his trip.

Ignatenkov spoke to a political science

class at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tenn., in October before heading back to Smolensk, with best-practices ideas to share with his church.

Trouble for Russian Christians began in 1937 under dictator Josef Stalin, Ignatenkov said. His grandfather, Pavel Gorbatenkov, reared six children in his Baptist faith, including Ignatenkov's mother, Olga. With the pounding of soldiers' fists on the door, they knew in an instant their happy, peaceful lives were over.

Gorbatenkov was imprisoned and denied visits with his family, who still brought food to the prison for two weeks. After that, the soldiers didn't take the food, but they also didn't tell the family Gorbatenkov had been shot — news that came years later.

The government began allowing limited worship in 1944.

Today, Russia's constitution provides for religious freedom, but other laws, including one banning "extremism" and a new law on "offending the religious feelings of believers," restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of minority religious groups.

Overall, Ignatenkov said, he was buoyed by America's large, bustling churches "with rooms for everything." He said he was most interested in examining churches' social ministries — to homeless people, in prisons and elsewhere — and taking those lessons home.

He'd also like to duplicate cooperative efforts between governments and churches to provide faith-based services to Russians in need. **BT**

# Templeton Gift

## Israeli institute gets \$2.2 million to help Christians study Jewish thought

A new institute in Jerusalem has been awarded \$2.2 million to help Christians and Jews study Jewish texts, launching what's being billed as a new kind of Jewish-Christian cooperation.

The Herzl Institute was awarded what's being called the first ever multimillion-dollar grant in Jewish theology by the U.S.-based Templeton Foundation, a philanthropic organization that has focused much of its giving on science-related projects. The Herzl Institute is a research institute that focuses on the development of Jewish ideas in fields such as philosophy and history.

The institute is named for Theodor Herzl, considered the father of modern political Zionism, ideas that have found much support from conservative and evangelical Christians in the U.S.

Jewish and Christian collaboration has often been relegated to the political level, said Herzl President Yoram Hazony. The partnership reflects a new kind of engagement between Christians and Jews, he said.

"We're not just talking about Christians wanting to help Jews out of solidarity or charity," Hazony said. "We are talking about the dominant faith of Western civilization saying: 'The Jews have something to give us, something that we need.' This is not something that appears in the old playbook for Jewish-Christian dialogue."

The King's College in Manhattan and the Herzl Institute also announced a partnership to send Christian students to a "Hebraic Heritage"



President of the Herzl Institute Yoram Hazony. Photo courtesy of the Herzl Institute/RNS

course where they will study and learn from Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem for a summer. Hazony said professors at Assumption College in Massachusetts and Wesleyan College in Connecticut will also recruit students to study in Jerusalem.

"What we're seeing right now is not the old kind of interfaith dialogue where Christians talked about their Messiah and Jews talked about their Messiah and everybody agrees to disagree," Hazony said. "This is completely new dialogue, where we look at Old Testament text and rabbinic texts and Christians are willing to look at Judaism and the Jewish text through Jewish eyes with Jewish lecturers."

Courses will include studying Hebraic tradition, the impact of biblical ideas on modern-day Israel and the Middle East, and

the relationship between Jews and contemporary Christianity and Islam.

"This new sense that there are many Christians who want to hear what Jews have to say fits very well with a dormant Jewish feeling that we have a mission to say something but for a long time people weren't interested in hearing what we have to say," Hazony said.

Though the institute is not focused on Israel as a political ideal, the institute could be seen as a way to keep Christians theologically committed to Israel, said Mark Braverman, a Jewish theologian who is executive director of Kairos USA, a pro-Palestine group.

"What we're seeing now is Israel is of course feeling threatened by world opinions," Braverman said. "They're embarking on all kinds of fancy public relations campaigns. One strategy is to get Christians on their side theologically across the world."

The Herzl Institute aims to serve as a hub for research relating to the "big questions" of human existence through science, ethics, philosophy and religion.

Hazony's book, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, took him to the White House in 2012.

He spoke to then-chief of staff Jack Lew, himself an Orthodox Jew, and a half-dozen Obama aides about the unifying possibilities of recognizing the Old Testament as philosophy that can be studied by all Americans, including in public schools.

"Especially after the Holocaust, much of Jewish discourse has been about what Jews can do to survive," Hazony said. "Jews of all movements have the same sense, this same feeling that Judaism has been for too long about talking to ourselves." **BT**



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By Michael Schulson, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

# Why evangelicals' love for Jews is a case of unrequited love

According to a new survey, white evangelical Christians feel a lot of warmth toward Jews. As for Jews, they feel colder toward evangelical Christians than they do about any other religious group.

Due the Taylor Swift ballads: We have here a serious case of unrequited love.

To gauge the interreligious emotions of the American public, the Pew Research Center asked thousands of Americans about their religious identification, and then asked them to rate other religious groups on “a feeling thermometer,” where a zero was “the coldest, most negative possible rating” and 100 was “the warmest, most positive” response.

With a wildly subjective metric and results that invite massive generalizations, the survey deserves a skeptical look.

Still, the discrepancy in the Jewish-evangelical relationship is too large to dismiss. White evangelicals gave Jews a full 69 percent of emotional warmth (very high, by the survey's standards), while Jewish respondents gave evangelical Christians a frosty 34 percent — one of the lowest ratings in the entire Pew data set.

Jews rated Catholics pretty favorably, so we can't explain this result as a response to Christianity as a whole.

Heavy-handed efforts to convert Jews — such as the Southern Baptist Convention's 1996 resolution on Jewish evangelism — have not endeared certain evangelical denominations to their Jewish neighbors. And some Jews may struggle to forget anti-Semitic comments made in the past by evangelical leaders, including Billy Graham.

But the real issue here is not that evangelicals don't love Jews enough. It's that certain evangelical communities sometimes love Jews way, way too much — or, more accurately, love

an image of what they believe Jews to be.

Seeking a return to pre-Christian roots, churches hold Passover seders and blow shofars during services. Evangelical support for Israel is legendary. Liberty University, the evangelical school in Lynchburg, Va., even has a Judaic studies program that, as its director told the Liberty student newspaper, “tries to communicate to the Liberty community that we as Christians owe a debt of gratitude to the Jewish people.”

An employee of a Jewish federation recently told me about the letters, overflowing with praise for the Jewish people, accompanied by donations that occasionally arrive from eager Protestants.



There's a term for this flavor of affection: philo-Semitism, or the love of Jewishness and Jewish culture. For some, this kind of love may represent an unmitigated good — especially in contrast to the anti-Semitism that has haunted so much of Jewish history.

More often than not, though, evangelical upwelling of philo-Semitism seems to have little to do with actual Jewish people, and more to do with Jewishness as an abstract theological concept.

A lot of evangelical support for Israel, for example, grows out of certain strains of dispensationalist theology, in which the Jews' return to Israel is seen as a prerequisite for the Second Coming.

Meanwhile, in a 2004 address, televangelist Pat Robertson didn't even try to hide the degree to which his understanding of Jewish history served his own theological ends: “You are the living witnesses that the promises of the Sovereign Lord are true,” he told an Israeli audience, after suggesting that the last 2,500 years of Jewish survival served as “primary

evidence” for the existence of God.

Elsewhere, in an essay at the orthodox Christian magazine *First Things*, Joe Carter examined “our philo-Semitism” and concluded “we evangelicals have a special affection for our Jewish neighbor” in part “because we know that God had a special affection for them too.” The sentiment, while kind, should be familiar: Jews are likable because of their role in Christian theology.

When evangelicals speak about Jews this way, they shouldn't be surprised if their love goes unrequited. At its core, philo-Semitism has much in common with anti-Semitism. Both approaches view Jewishness as an abstract monolith, and both endow Jews with particular historical roles — roles, it seems, that are rarely of the Jews' own choosing.

For centuries, the powers that be defined Jewish people in terms of New Testament themes and archetypes. The modern world has offered remarkable opportunities for Jews themselves to figure out what, exactly, Jewish peoplehood might look like.

As a young Jew, I can't help but see expressions of evangelical philo-Semitism as an attempt to keep Jewishness in its New Testament box, and to continue the old fallacy of conflating the Jewish people (of Bible fame) with living Jewish people — a diverse bunch of folks, muddling along, who have not always benefited from being evaluated in light of ancient Scriptures.

Fortunately, for those evangelicals who find themselves prey to an unreciprocated philo-Semitism, the annals of unrequited love may hold some useful advice: In relationships, you really can't start out trying to change someone. And if you genuinely want things to work, you have to court an actual person, not just a projection of whoever you wish them to be. **BT**

—Michael Schulson, a freelance writer in Durham, N.C., writes about religion, science and culture.

# Nurturing Faith: *Texts and Themes for 2015*

BY TONY W. CARTLEDGE

\*Order the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies within *Baptists Today* at 1-877-752-5658 or [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

## Season of Epiphany

**January 6-February 15**  
**One Step More**

**Jan. 6 – Matt. 2:1-12**

*“Meaningful Gifts”*

What wise folk do when knowledge is not enough

**Jan. 13 – Acts 19:1-7**

*“Powerful Hands”*

What the Spirit does when water is not enough

**Jan. 20 – 1 Samuel 3:1-20**

*“Listening Ears”*

What followers do when eyes are not enough

**Jan. 27 – Jonah 3:1-10**

*“Surprising Acts”*

What penitents do when words are not enough

**Feb. 1 – Psalm 111**

*“Inspiring Deeds”*

What believers do when awe is not enough

**Feb. 8 – Mark 1:29-39**

*“Missional Plans”*

What Jesus did when our efforts were not enough

**Feb. 15 – Mark 9:2-9**

*“Mountaintop Moments”*

What to do when human perception is not enough

## Season of Lent

**February 22-March 29**

**Heavy Days**

**Feb. 22 – Psalm 25:1-10**

*“Healthy Regret”*

Penitent tears are a good start for the season of Lent

**Mar. 1 – Mark 8:31-38**

*“Self Denial”*

Matching two words that don't like each other

**Mar. 8 – John 2:13-22**

*“Righteous Anger”*

Jesus had a temper, and was not afraid to use it.

**Mar. 15 – John 3:14-21**

*“Light Living”*

Darkness may be familiar, but life is in the light.

**Mar. 22 – John 12:20-33**

*“Dead Wheat”*

Some things have to die before they can live.

**Mar. 29 – Mark 14:32-42**

*“Hard Praying”*

Sometimes it's easier not to know what's next.

## Season of Easter

**Apr. 5 – 1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

*“Of First Importance”*

Paul knew that everything hangs on the resurrection.

**April 12-May 17**

**The Book of Love**

**Apr. 12 – 1 John 1:2-2:2**

*“Walking in the Sunshine”*

John speaks of truth, light and the Christian way.

**Apr. 19 – 1 John 3:1-7**

*“Children of God”*

God knows, children can turn out good or bad.

**Apr. 26 – 1 John 3:16-24**

*“Real Love”*

Jesus' kind of love involves much more than words.

**May 3 – 1 John 4:7-21**

*“Deep Love”*

Knowing deep love means knowing God, too.

**May 10 – 1 John 5:1-6**

*“Water and Blood”*

Can believers really conquer the world?

**May 17 – 1 John 5:7-13**

*“Testimony”*

These could be the original “wonderful words of life.”

## Season of Pentecost

**May 24-July 5**

**Spiritual Matters, OT Style**

**May 24 – Ezekiel 37:1-14**

*“Can These Bones Live?”*

With God, our driest days are not beyond hope.

**May 31 – Isaiah 6:1-13**

*“You Want Me To Do What?”*

Did God really want Isaiah to encourage bad judgment?

**June 7 – Genesis 3:1-19**

*“The Inevitable Apple”*

Can we really put the blame on Adam and Eve?

**June 14 – Ezekiel 17:1-24**

*“Cedar Mountain High”*

Could fallen humanity really climb a holy mountain?

**June 21 – Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32**

*“Gratitude Squared”*

Being lost and found calls for a special kind of thanks.

**June 28 – Lamentations 3:22-33**

*“Goodness – and Grief”*

Troubled people need a God who won't give up.

**July 5 – Ezekiel 2:1-3:11**

*“Eat My Words!”*

God's command puts a sweet twist on a common saying.

**July 12-July 26**

**Mind-Stretching Matters**

**July 12 – Ephesians 1:1-14**

*“An Amazing Inheritance”*

Paul leaks a mysterious secret, and it boggles the mind.

**July 19 – Ephesians 2:1-22**

*“A Sacred Trio”*

Grace, faith and reconciliation: what's not to like?

**July 26 – Ephesians 3:14-21**

*“It's All Beyond Me”*

God's riches are above understanding – but not beyond imagining.

**August 2-August 23**

**The Trouble with Kings**

**Aug. 2 – 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a**

*“You're the Man!”*

Nathan sets a trap for a royal miscreant, and bags his prey.

**Aug. 9 – 2 Samuel 18:1-33**

*“Paying the Price”*

Sin happens, trouble follows, and no one is immune.

**Aug. 16 – 1 Kings 2:1-3:15**

*“Redeeming a Shaky Start”*

Solomon's prayer for wisdom was badly needed.

**Aug. 23 – 1 Kings 8:1-61**

*“Prayers for Now and Later”*

A dedication prayer designed for people who weren't there

**August 30-September 27**

**Serious Church**

**Aug. 30 – James 1:17-27**

*“Real Religion”*

“Religion” doesn't sound so unsavory when it's done right.

**Sept. 6 – James 2:1-26**

*“True Faith”*

Faith understands that mercy triumphs over judgment.

**Sept. 13 – James 3:1-12**

*“Pure Speech”*

James unleashes a tongue-lashing about tongue-taming.

**Sept. 20 – James 3:13-4:10**

*“Highborn Wisdom”*

Wise believers understand that selfishness is a dead end.

**Sept. 27 – James 5:13-20**

*“Fervent Prayer”*

The true power of prayer goes deeper than the surface.

**October 4-October 25**

**Following Jesus on Highway 10**

**Oct. 4 – Mark 10:1-16**

*“Hard Words and a Soft Heart”*

Jesus speaks about marriage, adultery and children.

**Oct. 11 – Mark 10:17-31**

*“Of Treasures and Troubles”*

Wealth and discipleship can make for a difficult combination.

**Oct. 18 – Mark 10:32-45**

*“First and Last”*

When cherished notions are turned upside down and inside out

**Oct. 25 – Mark 10:46-52**

*“What Do We Really Want?”*

Jesus’ question to a blind man sparks helpful introspection.

**November 1-November 22**

**A Time for Gratitude**

**Nov. 1 – Ruth 1:1-2:23**

*“You’re All I Have”*

The book of Ruth is really about Naomi, who should be grateful.

**Nov. 8 – Ruth 3:1-4:21**

*“An Odd Road to a Happy Ending”*

Naomi’s scheme was risky, but Ruth made it work.

**Nov. 15 – 1 Samuel 1:1-28**

*“Transformational Tears”*

A painful prayer, a baby boy, a promise kept

**Nov. 22 – 2 Samuel 23:1-7**

*“Thanks for the Promises”*

Not really David’s last words, but maybe the last happy ones

**Season of Advent**

**November 29-December 20**

**Hope Waits**

**Nov. 29 – 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

*“A Time for Anticipation”*

A reunion with friends is a foretaste of future things.

**Dec. 6 – Luke 1:68-79**

*“A Time for Praise”*

When a mute man speaks, it’s good to listen.

**Dec. 13 – Zephaniah 3:14-20**

*“A Time for Joy”*

Patience pays: long waits do come to an end.

**Dec. 20 – Micah 5:2-5a**

*“A Time for Peace”*

Big things can come from small towns.

**Season of Christmas**

**Dec. 27 – 1 Samuel 2:18-26**

*“A Time for Growth”*

Good growth can happen, even in bad company.

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# The Lighter Side

By Brett Younger

## Wild Horses

*I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him.*

— REVELATION 6:8

I picture us sitting on the veranda sipping whatever passes for lemonade in Chile. We are planning a peaceful day at the Walbaums' farm an hour west of Santiago. Then Paul asks a question that changes the picture: "Would you like to go horseback riding?"

"Sure," we say without thinking, before Paul explains, "In the spring" — which has just arrived in Chile — "the horses are not as calm."

I am not someone about whom others think, "I bet he rides horses." My favorite horse movie is the Marx Brothers' *A Day at the Races*. I root against the Dallas Cowboys. I enjoy playing horse only when it involves a basketball.

I try to get in the mood by singing Gene Autry's "Back in the Saddle Again" until I realize Gene has fallen off his horse. I switch to the Rolling Stones' "Wild Horses," also a questionable choice.

I last rode a horse when I was 12. My grandfather told everyone that Old Lady was 60, which we assumed meant horse years, but now I think she might have been 60. When she really got moving, Old Lady could go two or three miles an hour. It was like riding a bag of concrete.

Because it's been a while since I rode a thousand-pound animal, I decide to prepare. I consider watching *Blazing Saddles*, but go with *How to Ride a Horse* on YouTube. I learn that sitting up straight is a big deal, as is forming a straight line from my elbow to the horse's mouth, leaning forward going uphill, and communicating with my heels. This is helpful information, but the "emergency dismount"



looks like jumping from a speeding car.

I do not want a horse named Tornado. A cool horse racing name such as maythehorsebewithu sounds appealing, but Sausage Roll would be less likely to cause injury.

Horses are mentioned 189 times in the Bible — a lot compared to preachers (8), deacons (8) and pastors (1).

In Job 39:19, God asks, "Do you give the horse its might? Do you clothe its neck with mane?" (The answer is no.)

In 1 Kings 22:4, Jehoshaphat says, "I am as you are; my people are your people, my horses are your horses." (This should be read at weddings.)

In Revelation 19, Christ rides a white horse out of *heaven*. This is yet another way I am not good at following Christ.

Paul gives me Juanito, who I call Juan Grande, Secretariat, and Pegasus when no one else can hear.

Carol's horse, "the white one," doesn't have the ring that "Black Beauty" does, but she gets along fine with her horse with no name (though Carol was secretly hoping for a unicorn).

I think about climbing on when no one is looking, but realize as I stand beside Little John that my attempts to reach the saddle without help will end badly.

As the real cowboy adjusts the stirrups to fit

my short legs, another rider comments, "That poor horse." She is, I want to believe, expressing concern about the tightness of the saddle, but it sounds like a comment on my weight.

I am instructed not to hold the reins like the woman in the video, and am asked, "Why are you keeping your arms straight?" Everything in the video is now suspect, except that the how-to-ride-a-horse lady's helmet would prevent brain damage and the boater I am wearing will not.

My one-trick pony's trick is to not worry about his rider's desires. What I try to communicate with my heels is "I do not want to fall off." I cannot remember the Spanish word for "Whoa."

I channel the horse whisperer to work out a deal with Juanito. He can go wherever he chooses if he does not throw me to the ground.

I feel comfortable until we go up a hill (Juanito speeds up as I forget to lean forward), down (Juanito doesn't care for down), or along the embankment of a reservoir (which is narrow enough to make me think about Pharaoh's horses in the Red Sea).

When I get off my horse, it looks like an emergency dismount. Apparently I am supposed to take my foot out of the stirrup first.

When my feet are back on solid ground, I almost shout "Beer for My Horses!" but I'm not sure how big Toby Keith is in South America.

I walk fine the next day, but when I sit down I remember that I have ridden a horse.

Psalm 20:7 warns, "Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord."

I am in no danger of taking pride in horses. **BT**

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

*When my feet are back on solid ground, I almost shout "Beer for My Horses!" but I'm not sure how big Toby Keith is in South America.*



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- \* Adult teaching plans by Rick Jordan
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For **adults** and **youth**

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# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Matthew 2:1-12

Jan. 6, 2015

## Meaningful Gifts

As we enter the new year and come back to an even keel from the highs and lows of Christmas and post-Christmas and New Year's Eve and back-to-back bowl games, the season of Epiphany calls us back to the Christ child, and in particular to the story of the "wise men" who came to pay him homage.

They brought gifts, as we recall, gifts that inspired the tradition of Christmas gift giving that has pushed the baby Jesus aside and become the primary focus of Christmas in our culture.

Gifts can be valuable, but the most expensive gifts are not necessarily the most meaningful. You may have received amazing gifts that could not be put in a box and were not under the tree. The love of our family is a gift, as is the kindness of friends. But this season reminds us of the greatest gift: how God came to us through Jesus Christ, a child born to be our Savior. The first Bible verse many of us learn says "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16, KJV).

### A rising star (vv. 1-2)

But let's return to those wise men. We begin with an awareness that many of our ideas about the wise men are based far more on imagination and tradition than on the scriptural record, which tells us very little about them. There is nothing, for example, to suggest that the wise men were kings, as they're

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



Matthew 2:11

"On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

portrayed in the popular carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are." ⬇

The text doesn't even call them "wise men" using the ordinary words, but refers to them as "*magoi*," commonly translated as "magi." ⬇ The magi were a class of scholars who labored, often within royal courts, as astronomers and astrologers, as observers and catalogers of the natural order. They were the scientists of the ancient world.

A careful reading shows that most manger scenes ever constructed are probably wrong, because Matthew clearly implies that the Magi did not arrive in Bethlehem until up to two years after Jesus was born. We do not know why Mary and Joseph would have remained in Bethlehem rather than returning to Nazareth, but by the time the Magi came knocking, the holy family was no longer sheltering in a stable, but residing in a more substantial residence. The text is careful to say that the Magi entered the *house* (Gr. *oikia*).

An old church tradition assigns the names Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar to the magi, but we know nothing of

their names. Another tradition says they came from Parthia, which is possible, but the text says only that they were from "the East," which could have implied anywhere from Mesopotamia to Arabia.

Any child who's viewed a manger scene can tell you that there were three wise men, but we don't know that either. The magi brought three gifts, leading to an assumption that there were three of them. There could have been two, or a dozen.

Whatever their number, names, or place of origin, the author is clear that the men had journeyed to visit the child, because "We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage" (v. 2). ⬇

### A paranoid king (vv. 3-8)

To find the future king, the travelers first visited the current monarch: Herod. Also known as "Herod the Great" because of his extensive building programs, Herod was known as a cruel and suspicious man who never hesitated to kill anyone who got in his way,

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including his own family members. **U**

There's no way of pretending that Herod was a nice man, though he might have argued that he only did what was required to remain in power. When the magi came to ask him the whereabouts of a newborn Jewish king, his suspicions were raised to a fever pitch. The NRSV says he was "frightened," but the root word more commonly means "disturbed" (NIV11, HCSB) or "troubled" (NAS95). NET has "alarmed."

Herod's distress, Matthew wrote, extended to "all Jerusalem." Perhaps we are to assume that the magi did not go to the palace first, but had asked about the city for information about a new king, leading to public curiosity and possible celebrations, which Herod might have dealt with harshly, troubling the city.

Apparently, Herod found a way to stall the magi, perhaps by offering them a bath and a bed, then called for the Jewish priests and scribes. He quizzed them to learn if there were Hebrew prophecies dealing with a new king, and they responded with a quotation from Micah 5:2 that spoke of one who would be born in Bethlehem and become "a ruler who shall shepherd my people Israel" (v. 6). **U**

Herod sent the priests away and "secretly" summoned the magi to question them concerning the precise time they had seen the portentous star. Having gained that information – which he would later use to order the murder of every boy baby in Bethlehem under two years old (vv. 16-18) – Herod sent them to Bethlehem with instructions to bring him news of what they had found, "so that I may also go and pay him homage" (v. 8). No one would want to receive the sort of "homage" that Herod would offer.

**A memorable visit  
(vv. 9-12)**

Once the wise men departed Jerusalem for Bethlehem, just six miles to the south, the same star that had instigated their journey reappeared, leading them until it stopped "over the place where

the child was" (v. 9).

Little is said about the magi's visit. They were overcome with joy, Matthew says (v. 10). They entered the house and saw Jesus with Mary (there is no mention of Joseph during the visit). They knelt before the baby and "paid homage" to him (v. 11a, NRSV), or "worshiped him" (NET, NIV11, HCSB).

The verb translated as "knelt down" actually means "to fall," which may suggest that they fell on their faces before the baby. Their intention was probably not to "worship" the baby as we would imagine, though the verb used can have that meaning. The magi were not Jews, and would have worshiped the gods of their home country. Since magi typically worked within royal courts, their visit would have had diplomatic overtones. As ancient visitors typically bowed in the presence of a ruling king, the wise men's obeisance before the Christ child probably had this purpose. There is nothing to suggest that they thought of the baby as divine – only as a future king with whom good relations would be important.

We have more clarity regarding the gifts the magi brought as an element of their homage to the baby king-to-be. We can't know if each of the men brought a gift, as popularly portrayed, or if they collectively delivered the contents of a chest or saddlebag. In either case, the gifts consisted of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The gift of gold needs little explanation. Gold is a traditional symbol of royalty, and a fitting gift for one who would be king. The story insists that the wise men believed Jesus was born to be king of the Jews, and this gift declared their belief.

The second gift was frankincense, an aromatic spice that had various uses. In some circles, it symbolized immortality. Perhaps the wise men were declaring the beauty of the baby who

would be king, and expressing their hope that his reign would last forever.

The last gift they brought was myrrh. This gift was something of a puzzle, because myrrh had a strong spicy odor, and its most common use was as a burial spice. Why bring a bag or box of burial spices to a baby boy?

Perhaps it was a traditional gift in their country. Perhaps it was simply something valuable and easily portable that Joseph could sell for cash when needed. It is unlikely that the magi would have understood the gift as a foreboding symbol of the suffering Christ would face, as later believers did.

The saddest thing about the story of the wise men is that we cannot read it without its context, remembering that the wise men unwittingly put King Herod on the trail of a new king reportedly born in Bethlehem. Although they were divinely warned to depart by another way so as to avoid Herod (v. 12), as was the holy family (vv. 13-15), we can't help but recall that because of their visit, Herod sent hard soldiers to slaughter every baby boy under two years old throughout the town of Bethlehem and the country around it (vv. 16-18).

Even the giving of God's best gifts does not guarantee that life will be easy, that evil will not exist, that wicked people will not do bad things, that the innocent will not suffer.

Life is like that. Our greatest joys can be tempered with sorrow, but the Christmas story helps us to realize that they are all part of a piece. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *Surprised by Joy*, sorrow and happiness are two sides of the same coin. The laughter we share now will be remembered in mourning later: we wouldn't feel sorrow if we have not known joy.

The gift of God at Christmas helps us to realize that life is not a dress rehearsal, but the real thing. There is both joy and pain, but the gift of God in Jesus Christ gives us hope that one day we will experience a life that is eternal, a life in which the time of pain has passed and every tear will be wiped away. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Acts 19:1-10

Jan. 13, 2015

## Powerful Hands

Anyone who's been on a car ride with children has heard questions such as "How much longer?" and "Are we there yet?" In these cases, the driver is the authority and the children are the questioners.

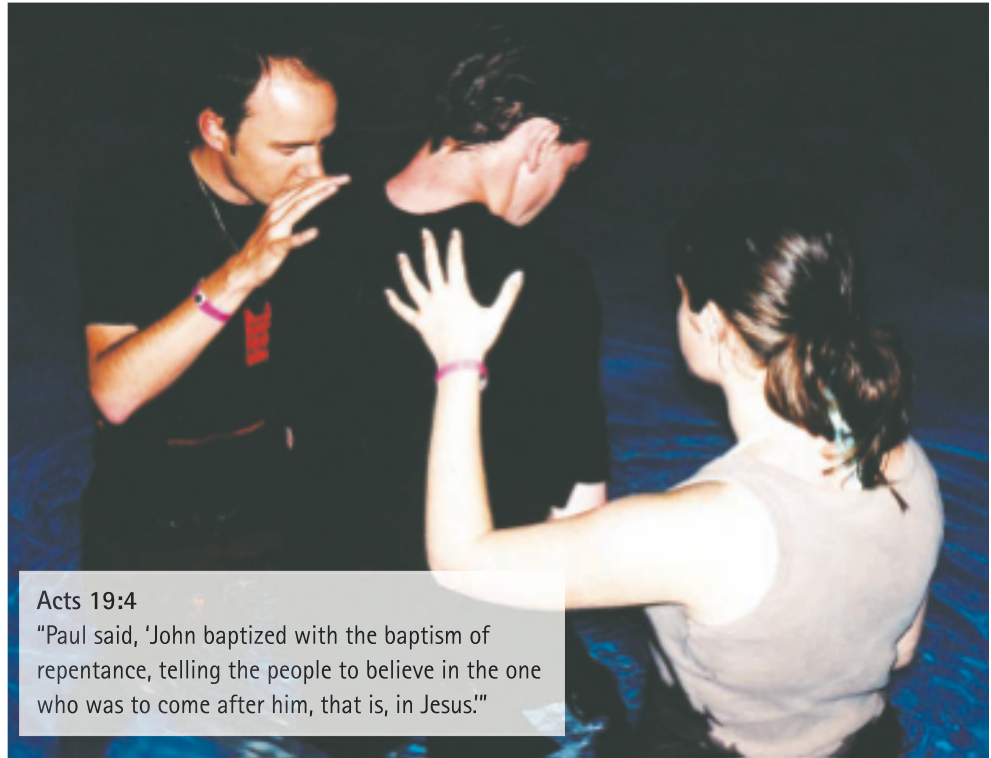
The Apostle Paul had a tendency to reverse the process. When he arrived in Ephesus during his third missionary journey and met a group of John's disciples, Paul was in the spiritual driver's seat as the authority, but he's the one who asked the group, in so many words, "Are you there yet?" – "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"

As we consider our own lives as followers of Jesus, it's helpful to check on our spiritual progress and ask ourselves, "Are we there yet?"

### Disciples of John (vv. 1-3)

Today's text continues the narrative from the previous chapter. Near the end of his second missionary journey (described in Acts 15:36-18:21), Paul and his partners Silas and Timothy traveled to Ephesus in the company of Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul stopped in Ephesus only briefly, paying a visit to the local synagogue for a discussion with Jewish leaders, who wanted him to stay longer. Paul declined, but promised to return (18:19-21). Priscilla and Aquila remained in the city, where they took Apollos under their wing, teaching him a fuller and more accurate understanding of the gospel before sending him on



Acts 19:4

"Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.'"

to Corinth (18:24-28).

While Apollos was in Corinth, Luke tells us, Paul was on the road again, traveling through the interior highlands of Asia Minor (now Turkey) on his way back to Ephesus, a bustling city near the southeastern coast. Although Priscilla and Aquila were in the city, and had previously explained to Apollos the importance of moving beyond John's baptism, Paul happened upon a dozen disciples who still had much to learn.

Luke appears to have considered these persons to be Christians of a sort, though that is a matter of debate (see "The Hardest Question" for more). Luke called them "disciples" (v. 1), and quoted Paul as asking "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" (v. 2).

The group responded that they had never heard of the Holy Spirit, which suggests they had not yet come into contact with Priscilla and Aquila. But Ephesus was a large city where Artemis was the patron deity and Christians probably needed to keep a low profile,

so there easily could have been pockets of believers who did not know each other.

Paul's question about baptism (v. 3) led to an explanation that group members knew only the baptism of John. Whether they had also heard about Jesus, or sought to follow him, is not said.

### Disciples of Jesus (vv. 4-7)

Paul reminded the group that John's work was preparatory. He had called people to "believe in the One who was to come after him, that is, Jesus" (v. 4). The group required no additional persuasion, for Luke reports: "On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v. 5).

The story isn't just about baptism, however, or whether the name of Jesus was invoked, so much as it is about the Holy Spirit. In conjunction with their baptism, Paul laid his hands on them, with powerful results: "the Holy Spirit came upon them, and

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## Disciples at work (vv. 8-10)

they spoke in tongues and prophesied” (v. 6). The coming of the Spirit and its effects recalls earlier accounts in which Jewish believers received the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), and Gentile believers in Caesarea had a similar experience (Acts 10), though neither of those involved the laying on of hands.

Two other stories in Acts do connect the laying on of hands with the reception of the Holy Spirit. Acts 8:14-17 describes how Peter and John were sent to Samaria to visit new believers who had been baptized in the name of Jesus, but did not know about the Spirit until Peter and John laid hands on them. A man named Simon became jealous of the apparent power in the disciples’ hands, and offered them money, saying, “Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (Acts 8:19).

The other story involves Paul himself. After the blinding vision of Christ that led to his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul (then called Saul) was visited by a man named Ananias, who laid hands on him so he might regain his vision and receive the Spirit. In this case, baptism came afterward (Acts 9:1-19).

The letter of 2 Timothy, which claims to have been written by Paul, instructs Timothy to “rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Tim. 1:6). “The gift” is probably a reference to the Spirit. 📖

But what about us? Have we received the Holy Spirit? Are we somehow deficient if we haven’t spoken in tongues or prophesied? Many Pentecostal or charismatic Christians believe in a baptism of the Spirit that is secondary to water baptism, and often use the laying on of hands as a way of invoking the Spirit. Tongues or prophecy are typically expected as signs of the Spirit’s presence.

On the other hand, while a similar practice is sometimes described in the New Testament, it is not necessarily normative. We have no record that Jesus taught his followers to baptize new believers and then require evidence of receiving the Spirit separately. Luke

most commonly connects baptism in Jesus and the reception of the Spirit as a single event, with or without the imposition of hands. 📖

Perhaps we are to understand that unusual manifestations such as tongues speaking were important during the early days of the church, effective within that culture as a public sign of God’s new work in Jesus and a needed reminder that, despite Christ’s ascension, he remained present through the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Baptists, like many other Protestants, hold that God’s Spirit is always present with believers and does not need to be invoked through special ceremonies. The process of baptism by immersion necessarily involves placing hands on the candidate, and no further imposition is necessary. While believers may experience tongues or testify publicly of their experience with Christ (a part of what “prophecy” means in the New Testament), the presence of the Spirit can be manifested in many ways. A variety of “spiritual gifts” or “fruits of the Spirit” allow us to demonstrate the Spirit’s presence and power as we show love, kindness, and generosity to others. 📖

Luke’s primary intent in this text was not so much to explicate doctrine as to show how Paul was able to win over related groups and bring them into the mainstream faith of the early church. 📖

Why do you suppose Luke made a point of saying that “there were about twelve of them” (v. 7)? There could have been more, or less – but invoking the number 12 would no doubt lead readers to think of the 12 tribes of Israel, or the 12 apostles. Perhaps Luke wants readers to imagine these 12 as emblematic of believers in Asia, or as symbolic of John’s disciples as a fringe group that had become fully legitimated by the presence of the Spirit and empowered to do the work of the kingdom in their part of the world.

Following Paul’s encounter with John’s disciples, as Luke depicts it, Paul shifted to his usual strategy of going to the synagogue in hopes of persuading the local Jews to accept Jesus as the promised messiah. There he “spoke out boldly,” Luke says, “and argued persuasively about the kingdom of God” (v. 8).

Surprisingly, the synagogue leaders allowed this to go on for three months: In Thessalonica, Paul had been thrown out of the synagogue and forced to leave town after just three weeks (Acts 17:1-9). Paul’s welcome eventually wore out, however: “When some stubbornly refused to believe and spoke evil of the Way before the congregation, he left them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus” (v. 9).

Luke’s language recalls the “stubbornness” of Israel during the exodus from Egypt. As rabble-rousers there had criticized both Moses and God, some synagogue members “spoke evil of the Way.” 📖 Paul and those who followed his teaching relocated to “the lecture hall of Tyrannus,” probably a school. Whether Paul rented the space or used it freely is unstated. In either case, it is impressive that his daily exhortations attracted so many believers that they apparently could not fit into a house, as they did in other cities.

Paul remained in Ephesus for at least another two years, using it as a mission hub for preaching and teaching, making disciples, and no doubt sending followers to preach in the surrounding area. Luke claimed that “all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (v. 10). Even allowing for some hyperbole, that’s impressive.

While readers may get hung up on questions about the Spirit or speaking in tongues, this is the bottom line: We are called to believe and proclaim the gospel so that all might hear and have an opportunity to respond to Jesus, who continues to be known through the Spirit. **BT**

# Youth

January 6 — January 27, 2015

Youth Lessons by  
**David Cassidy**  
and online youth  
teaching resources  
(at [nurturingfaith.net](http://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.

## Gifts

Matthew 2:1-12

**O**f the gifts you received at Christmas, what was your favorite? Was it one that you had been hinting about?

We receive lots of gifts, and over the years our favorite gifts get replaced, but the season of Advent reminds us there is one gift that is never replaced: God's gift in Jesus.

The wise men who came to honor Jesus knew of his importance because of the star that rose, but they did not know where they could find this "new king." Most likely they began to ask around to see where they could find him. With his ears on the street, King Herod had to know of the questions these wise men were asking, so he secretly summoned them.

King Herod's "men" questioned the wise men about the new king, and King Herod got the information he was seeking — under the guise of wanting to pay homage to the child. But King Herod had no intention of paying homage, since he was threatened by the power that would be taken from him by a new king. Even the wise men saw through King Herod's plan and didn't return after visiting the new king.

The wise men found Mary, Joseph, and the new king Jesus and fell to the ground, offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. King Herod would pay homage to the new king as well, but his gesture was to kill every child under two years old as he tried to remove the threat of this new king from taking the throne.

JAN. 6, 2015

### Think About It:

*The greatest gift that God gave brought not only great joy, but also great suffering to the families whose children were killed as a result of King Herod's decree. How can using your gifts and talents both build up and break down the kingdom of God?*

### Make a Choice:

*God's best gift didn't rid the world of evil. How do you continue to love God, knowing there is still evil in the world?*

### Pray:

*God, we pray that in our quest to pay you homage we lead others to love you instead of fear you.*

## Done

Acts 19:1-10

**I**'m directionally impaired. That means I use Google Maps a lot. One of my favorite things about this app is that it will not only tell me how to get there, but also what lane I need to be in and how much longer I have before reaching the place where I need to merge. The app will even re-route me if there has been a wreck along my path. But the absolute best feature of the app is that at the end of each journey, the voice comes through my speakers to tell me, "You have arrived."

Wouldn't it be great if along our spiritual journey God would tap us on the shoulder and say, "You have arrived"?

On his way back to Ephesus, Paul found some disciples. Instead of affirming

them in their belief, he asked them: "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" The disciples did not know about the Holy Spirit and as Paul pushed, he discovered they only knew of John the Baptist and not of Jesus. Paul built on John's teachings and reminded the disciples that John was only preparing for Jesus. Paul then laid his hands on them, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

This story of acceptance is followed by one of stubbornness. The disciples acted quickly in accepting Jesus, but the Jews of the synagogue refused to believe — even after three months of Paul's teaching. Paul found another preaching venue, however: For two years he preached to an audience that was more willing to hear — so willing, in fact, that all of Asia heard about Jesus.

JAN. 13, 2015

### Think About It:

*Each of us has a unique faith journey. That is why it can be so difficult to know where we are on our personal journey. How do you keep your faith even when you aren't sure you know where you are?*

### Make a Choice:

*Paul could have given up when the people in the synagogue didn't want to hear what he had to say. How will you choose to tell the story of Christ even when others don't want to hear it?*

### Pray:

*Dear God, may your Spirit guide us on our journey of faith and life.*

JAN. 20, 2015

## Unknown Calls

1 Samuel 3:1-20

**D**o you ever have those moments when you are involved in something and you think someone calls out your name? You're not quite sure, so you keep working. But after the second time, and definitely by the third time, you are sure.

Samuel had a similar experience: He thought he knew who was calling his name, but he would find out that he was wrong.

The opening verses of today's scripture help us understand why Samuel was unsure of who was calling to him: "The word of the Lord was rare in those days." Even though Samuel was sleeping where the ark resided, he was still unsure who was calling out to him. When Samuel heard his name called, he ran to his aging

teacher's side, because it made sense that he would need help. But Eli sent Samuel back to bed, reassuring him that it was not he who called.

After this happened two more times, in all of Eli's wisdom he determined that it was God who was calling Samuel. When God beckoned to Samuel again, Samuel responded. Eli was correct, and Samuel heard a word from the Lord.

You might think that Samuel would be excited to tell Eli that he was correct and pass on what God told him, but what Samuel heard from God was not positive news for Eli. When Eli awoke he wanted to know if his hypothesis was correct, so he asked Samuel what God had told him. Obediently Samuel told Eli, and with willing acceptance Eli heard the hard news.

### Think About It:

Eli knew he wasn't calling out to Samuel and could have easily written Samuel off as having a strange dream. Instead, he directed Samuel to respond to God. What person in your life has helped you to hear God speak?

### Make a Choice:

God calls in a variety of ways and at different times. Will you answer the call, or will you continue to put God on hold?

### Pray:

God, may we recognize your voice when you call to us.

JAN. 27, 2015

## Change

Jonah 3:1-10

**O**ne of my favorite days of the week is "Throwback Thursday" (TBT). That's because friends post pictures of how they looked months or years ago on Twitter and Facebook. My favorite photos are the ones where a huge transformation can be seen, to the point you can barely recognize your friends in the original pictures. Thursday is also my favorite day online because it shows that people not only can change, but also do change — and that gives me hope.

Imagine the pictures Jonah could have posted on #TBT with these hashtags:

#notgoingtodoit

#insideawhale

#betterdoit

#thesepeopledochange.

Jonah wasn't thrilled about the journey God planned for him, so he did the opposite of what God asked. After spending some time in a big fish, Jonah decided he had better do what God wanted or who knows where he would end up next. Jonah finally accepted God's call and headed to the city of Nineveh to preach God's message.

The narrator tells us that after Jonah had proclaimed God's message for only one day, the entire city had repented. Nineveh was so large that it would take three days to walk across. Jonah didn't even have time to get halfway through the city before the entire city heard his words and repented.

Three changes occurred: 1) Jonah accepted his call, 2) the Ninevites repented of their ways, and 3) God didn't destroy the city. That is a lot of change — all because one person accepted God's call.

### Think About It:

*The Ninevites repented and changed their ways because of God's threat that Jonah told them about. What will it take for you to change some things in your life?*

### Make a Choice:

*Jonah knew all along that he had been called by God, but decided to push that call aside while he did his own thing. In the end he accepted God's call. Will you accept the calling God has placed on your life, or will you come kicking and screaming?*

### Pray:

God, may I accept the calling that you have for my life.

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Jan. 20, 2015

## Listening Ears

**D**o you ever think that maybe you've outlived your usefulness, or that you've never grown into it? Do you ever feel frustrated or incompetent, based either on your own evaluation or someone else's sharp-tongued opinion?

On days when I'm feeling a bit less than useful, I find comfort in remembering how God used one of the most apparently incompetent characters in the Bible to do an amazing thing in the life of a child – to do something that would open new windows into that child's life and set him on the road to a life of faithful service that we still talk about 3,000 years later. 📖

### A bumbling old priest

Today's text is so familiar that we can easily overlook it, thinking: "Oh, I know that story." With stories we know so well, it can be helpful to seek a new perspective by looking at it from a different angle. Sermons or studies typically focus on the boy Samuel, and rightly so, but we shouldn't overlook the character of Eli. The old priest was judged a failure, but he still played an important role in Samuel's first encounter with God.

Eli first appears in the stories of Samuel's birth and dedication. He lived in a small town named Shiloh, in the central hill country of Israel, where he presided over the sanctuary where the Ark of the Covenant was housed. 📖 According to the story, Eli was old and nearly blind. His sons had followed him in the priesthood, but were said to be



1 Samuel 3:10

"Now the LORD came and stood there, calling as before, 'Samuel! Samuel!' And Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening.'"

worthless scoundrels who mistreated worshipers, misappropriated offerings, and misused the women who served at the shrine (2:12-20, 22-25). 📖 📖

The text does not expressly blame Eli for his grown sons' wickedness, though he was twice chastised for being unable to control their behavior (2:29, 34; 3:11-14). Sadly, though the unprincipled brothers served as priests, "they did not know the LORD." 📖

Young Samuel was at the temple because his childless mother had come from her home in Ramathaim and vowed that if God would give her a son, she would give him back. When old Eli had observed Hannah praying, he misinterpreted her tearful whispering as drunken babbling. Still, he managed to offer a word of encouragement that lifted her spirits (1 Sam. 1:9-18). Within a year, Samuel was born. Samuel's name means "Heard of God." Hannah had prayed, and God heard.

### A bright young apprentice

We are not told of Eli's reaction when Hannah walked onto the temple grounds about four years later to present him with a 3-year-old boy (1:21-28). Our text for today is the only story of any interaction between the child Samuel and his old mentor. It begins with a mournful reminder that "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (v. 1).

This is said, even though the preceding story described how an unnamed "man of God" had come through Shiloh and spoken the word of the LORD, prophesying that the wickedness of Eli's sons would bring divine punishment (2:27-36). Sadly, though both Eli and his sons represented God at Shiloh, people did not hear the word of Yahweh from them.

The sanctuary at Shiloh was such an informal affair that Samuel slept "in the temple of the LORD, where the ark

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






of God was,” with Eli in an adjoining room. One evening, after all had gone to bed but before the oil in the temple lamps had run out, Samuel heard a voice calling his name and ran to Eli, saying “Here I am, for you called me!” Eli insisted that he had not called, and sent Samuel back to bed (vv. 2-5).

The same thing then happened again: A voice called, Samuel ran to Eli, and Eli told the boy to go back to bed (v. 6). The reader knows that Yahweh was calling the boy, but neither Samuel nor Eli knew. In fact, v. 7 makes a point of saying that “Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.”

When God called yet again and Samuel returned, perhaps with some hesitation, to Eli’s bedside, the aged priest perceived that it must have been God who was calling him. Eli instructed Samuel to return to his blankets, and if he heard the voice again, to say: “Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening” (vv. 8-9).

When Yahweh called as before, Samuel was ready. He listened, and God spoke (v. 10). Unfortunately, God’s first words to Samuel were similar to those spoken by the man of God: Because Eli had failed to restrain his corrupt sons, their days as a priestly family were numbered (vv. 11-15). Samuel did not volunteer the distressing information to Eli the next morning, but when the old man insisted, Samuel told him the unwelcome news (vv. 16-18).

The story concludes with a comment that Samuel continued to grow both physically and spiritually, gaining a reputation as a faithful prophet of Yahweh whose words could be trusted (vv. 19-20). 

Now, let’s take a closer look at some curious aspects of the story. Although Samuel grew up “ministering to the Lord” under Eli’s supervision (2:11), the text says “Samuel did not yet know the LORD” (3:7). The boy had learned much, surely, from his mother Hannah and from Eli, but he had not yet had a personal experience with God.

The narrator doesn’t connect the rarity of a word from Yahweh to Eli’s

uninspired leadership, but the implication is apparent. Eli’s failing eyesight that rendered him so dependent on Samuel may be a subtle literary comment on the old priest’s lack of spiritual vision. Likewise, while Samuel slept before the ark of God, Eli slept “in his place,” presumably a cell attached to the sanctuary. Through their physical locations, the author suggests that young Samuel, for all his naïveté, was really closer to God.

Still, we should not overlook Eli’s role in the story. The declining priest, portrayed in so many ways as incompetent, still found it within himself to introduce young Samuel to God. Eli was nearly blind, but he was the one who saw that God was speaking to the boy and taught him how to respond: “Say ‘speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” God spoke, and Samuel heard, and the boy grew into a man who not only replaced Eli and his sons as Israel’s primary priest, but who also became known as a true prophet of Yahweh.

### A word of promise

What can we learn from this story of an inept priest whom God would not speak to, choosing to make a prophet of his apprentice instead? One thing is this: No matter how fumbling and incompetent we may feel – or how unappreciated by others – our efforts can play a role in bringing others into a relationship with God.

When God spoke to Samuel, the voice apparently sounded like the voice of Eli. God speaks to children in ways that are familiar, most commonly in the voice or the words of parents or teachers who love them. It may be our voices through which our friends and acquaintances may learn of God.

No doubt, Eli was often discouraged, and he had the right to be – his sons turned out badly and his tenure as priest was remembered as a time when “the word of the LORD was rare.”

But Eli persevered, and when he least expected it, in the middle of the night, he was the one who helped young Samuel meet the God who would work so powerfully through him.

The story also reminds us that *knowing about God* – as through Bible stories or memorizing scripture – is not the same thing as *knowing God*. It is easier to teach knowledge than relationships. To help children or others know God personally, we must let them see the evidence that we have a relationship with God. If we fail in this, the word of God could become rare in our days, too.

Yahweh’s midnight visit to Samuel suggests that God calls each of us personally, not generically. God’s call may not be as specific as it was for Samuel, and the common notion that God has planned our lives to the last detail is almost certainly overstated. Yet, God has given special gifts to each of us, and calls us to use those abilities in service to God and to our world.

We are blessed with different gifts, but we are called to respond in the same way. Consider again Samuel’s response when he heard God calling his name. Even when he thought it was Eli, he responded appropriately: “Here I am! You called?”

God may call us when we least expect it, or at the most inopportune time, or in the most unlikely situations. And, God may have to call more than once to get our attention. God’s call is rarely as clear as we like, and the world is filled with distractions that make it hard for us to distinguish God’s voice.

Nevertheless, we may be sure that God has a word and a work for each of us. None of us are too small or too inexperienced – or too old and incompetent – to be used by God for big and important work. In fact, God seems to take particular delight in calling “little people” to do big things.

The story of Samuel’s call is a perpetual favorite for many reasons, not least of which is the belief that it can be *our* story, too. It is the story of every one of us who, in our own bumbling and stumbling way, have said “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening!” **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Jonah 3:1-10

Jan. 27, 2015

## Surprising Acts

Imagine this. One day the Lord God appears to a Baptist preacher named Jimmy Ray Dove. Jimmy Ray loves to wear pastel suits with loud ties. He is proud of his patriotism and his bouffant hairdo. He likes to be called “Reverend.”

Now God says to him, “Jimmy Ray, I want you to get yourself a passport and fly over to the Anbar province in Iraq. When you get there, I want you to lead a crusade for that fringe sect of Muslim extremists who call themselves ISIS. They’ve been running roughshod, killing thousands of men while raping their wives or selling them and their children as slaves, and they need to repent.”

Jimmy Ray thought God must be mistaken, so he flew to Hawaii and booked a cruise around the islands instead. On the first day out, the ship ran into a whale and sank, but everybody made it to the life rafts except for Rev. Jimmy Ray. He held on to a floating lounge chair until he finally washed up on the north coast of Maui two days later.

As Jimmy Ray stumbled ashore in his shrinking suit, the Lord spoke to him again: “Jimmy Ray, I told you to go to Iraq and preach to those murderous extremists.” Jimmy Ray finally realized that God meant business, so he said, “Alright, I’ll go if it will make you happy, but as far as I’m concerned, this whole thing is a waste of time!”

So, Jimmy Ray went back home and packed some clean suits and had his hair done, and then he caught a plane to Iraq. He hired a military surplus blast-shielded Humvee, and the driver soon left him near a military base that had



Jonah 3:9

“Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.”

been overrun by ISIS. Jimmy Ray went just inside the gate of the camp, where he stood on his big suitcase and used his best preaching voice to announce in English that they were all going to hell.

Figuring that was enough, Jimmy Ray turned around to hightail it back home, but he couldn’t get back out of the gate. To his great shock and consternation, men in makeshift uniforms and turbans surrounded him. They were all crying and praying and telling him how they were going to change their ways and how they wanted to know Jesus and asking if he would baptize them in the Euphrates River.

Local farmers came out of hiding and asked Jimmy Ray to bless their camels and sheep and goats and cows so they could be Christians, too. The self-proclaimed Caliph himself walked up with tears in his eyes and shook Jimmy Ray’s hand and said: “You have shown me the light. I’m going to call off our attacks and order our people to return everything they’ve stolen and then to repent and ask for mercy.”

How do you think Jimmy Ray felt about all that? How would *you* feel?

### A second call (vv. 1-2)

If you know the story of Jonah, you know that unlike Isaiah, Jeremiah, or Hosea, he did not respond to God’s call on the first opportunity. In fact, he went to great lengths (and depths) to avoid it. However, God did not give up on Jonah. God had called to Samuel three times before the young prophet-to-be realized who was calling, but he answered the first time he knew (1 Samuel 3).

Jonah knew who was calling from the beginning, but it took him a while to accept God’s plan for him. He took off in the opposite direction, ended up in the sea, and had to be rescued by a big fish – or at least that is the way the story is told (Jonah 1-2). Whether the book was ever intended to be taken literally or understood as a parable is an open question. 🇺🇸

When God called again, Jonah’s commission had not changed: In the

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Jonah Leaving the Whale, Jan Brueghel the Elder, 1600

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Hebrew text it is repeated word for word (3:2a = 1:2a). Once again, God called Jonah to go to the great (but wicked and dangerous) city of Nineveh and proclaim God's message. What is different is not the message, but Jonah's response. This time, he went.

### A short sermon (vv. 3-4)

The narrator reminds us that Nineveh was a large and important city, and it was, though not as large as Babylon or nearly as large as it is described in v. 3. In Hebrew prophecy, Nineveh was remembered more for its violent, bloodthirsty reputation than for its physical dimensions (compare 2 Kgs. 19:36-37, Zeph. 2:13, Nah. 2:12). As the capital of the Assyrians, Nineveh was a prophetic paradigm for wickedness and aggressive opposition to Yahweh's people. Nineveh had the reputation of being the world's most evil city, and it was apparently the *last* place Jonah wanted to go.

The claim that Nineveh was "a three days' walk across" suggests that Nineveh had a diameter of at least 30-40 miles, which is greatly exaggerated. Archaeological evidence shows that Nineveh was about three miles across at its widest point, with a circumference of only eight miles. This would have been an impressive city by ancient standards, but falls far short of requiring three days to cross. The NIV translation suggests that it would take three days to visit all of Nineveh, but the text does not support that interpretation.

We need not worry about this, for the author's intention is not to provide a geography lesson. Phrases such as "day's journey" were often used with no specific distance in mind. The point is that Nineveh was a very large city. The "three days' journey" of v. 3 is necessary to set the context for the "one day's journey" of v. 4, showing that the entire city repented before Jonah had even reached the center.

In obedience to God's command, Jonah began to make his way through the streets of Nineveh, proclaiming

the message God had given: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

One might ask how the Ninevites could have understood Jonah's short sermon, since he certainly did not speak Assyrian, and the city's populace would not have been conversant in Hebrew. Ezekiel 3:4-7 raises a similar issue. There, God complains that the Israelites did not respond to Ezekiel's message even though they understood it, while a similar message sent to a people of a "dense and obscure language" would have engendered a response. The experience of Jesus' disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) may also offer a clue: God has the ability to get any message across. Even so, God relies on human messengers to proclaim it.

Was Jonah's message a proclamation of doom alone? Some commentators think the verb could be translated either as "be destroyed/overturned," or "turn itself over." The verb may be intentionally ambiguous: Jonah was prophesying that Nineveh would be overturned in 40 days, but he did not know whether the city would turn over a new leaf or be turned over like newly plowed soil.

The following chapter makes it clear that Jonah assumed the more violent option. He fully expected Nineveh to disappear from the earth, and he was disappointed when it did not happen. The careful ambiguity of the prophecy, however, means that it could be fulfilled in more than one way.

### Two amazing results (vv. 5-10)

The incredible result of Jonah's simple sermon is that "the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth" (v. 5). Not only that, but when news came to the "king of Nineveh," he joined in the mourning,

called for every citizen to turn away from their evil ways, and declared a citywide day of penitence and fasting – so thorough that it extended even to cattle and sheep (vv. 7-8).

Evidently, the Ninevites also interpreted Jonah's words as a declaration of doom and coming destruction. The king's call for national repentance was based on the hope that Jonah's God might relent, be appeased, and withhold the promised destruction (v. 9). The Ninevites' surprising repentance moved God to repent of the intended judgment, and to Jonah's unhappy surprise, the city was saved (v. 10).

So goes the story, but did it really happen? Archaeologists have uncovered thousands of historical, governmental, economic, religious, magical, and medical documents from Nineveh, where cuneiform records were inscribed on clay tablets. None of them makes any mention of a visitor named Jonah or a citywide conversion to Israel's God. Assyria remained in thrall to its patron god Ashur, along with other Mesopotamian deities, for as long as it stood – but it was destroyed a few years before the Israelites went into exile.

Even if it is intended as a parable, the story of Jonah declares that anyone – even the wicked Ninevites – is capable of change. The author of Jonah probably wrote long after Nineveh's destruction, directing his message to a people who sought to isolate themselves from other groups so they could keep their Jewish faith pure and undefiled. The point of the story is that the best way to preserve and live out one's faith is not to hide it under a nationalistic or isolationist basket as the religious leaders were doing (cp. Matt 5:14-16), but to share it with others. You never know who will hear it and find their heart overturned within them.

Do you believe people really can change – even you? Are there types or groups of people that you or your church may have given up on reaching, thinking it's hopeless? Does Jonah's experience suggest that another try may be in order?

# Classifieds

**Senior Pastor:** First Baptist Church, Forest City, N.C., (fcfbc.com) is seeking a full-time senior pastor for a 160-plus-year-old church located in the foothills of North Carolina. We are a moderate, traditional Baptist fellowship primarily aligned with CBF but having SBC and BSCNC ties. Qualifications include a degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school and 5-10 years of pastoral experience. Applicants should submit a résumé with references to fbcforestcity@bellsouth.net or to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 211 W. Main St., Forest City, NC 28043. Responses are due by Dec. 31.

**Associate Pastor for Music:** Auburn First Baptist Church in Auburn, Ala., is seeking a full-time associate pastor for music. The church has an extensive music program with an esteemed tradition. Responsibilities include the music ministry of the church, while serving alongside the ministerial staff in congregational care and leadership. Experience in planning worship and directing choirs and a degree from an accredited institution are required, while a master's or doctoral degree in music is preferred. Auburn First Baptist is a moderate congregation that affirms the leadership of women in all areas of the church. The church is located one block from Auburn University. Résumés will be accepted through Dec. 31 at musicsearchcomm@auburnfbc.org or Search Committee for the Associate Pastor for Music, Auburn First Baptist Church, 128 E. Glenn Ave., Auburn, AL 36830.

**Associate Pastor for Youth, College, and Young Adults:** Auburn First Baptist Church in Auburn, Ala., is seeking a full-time associate pastor for youth, college, and young adults. The church is committed to the faith development of young people, offering them opportunities for leadership and mission. Responsibilities include developing programs and activities for youth, college and young adults, while serving alongside the ministerial staff in congregational care and leadership. Experience working in a local congregation or similar ministerial setting and a Master of Divinity or equivalent degree are required. Auburn First Baptist is a moderate congregation that affirms the leadership of women in all areas of the church. The church is located one block from Auburn University. Résumés will be accepted through Dec. 31 at ycsearchcomm@auburnfbc.org or Search Committee for the Associate Pastor for Youth, College, and Young Adults, Auburn First Baptist Church, 128 E. Glenn Ave., Auburn, AL 36830.

**Associate Pastor of Children, Youth, and Families:** First Baptist Church of Burlington, N.C., a downtown church in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is seeking a full-time associate pastor to minister to our children, youth and their families. The job description is available at firstbaptistburlington.com. Candidates should be graduates of fully accredited colleges/universities and seminaries/divinity schools. Salary and benefits are commensurate with qualifications of the candidate chosen. Applications will be accepted until Dec. 15 at pastor@firstbaptistburlington.com or First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 2686, Burlington, NC 27216.

# In the Know

**Anthony G. Pappas** is retiring next year as executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts, a position he has held since 2005.

**Guy Sayles** has resigned as pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., where he has served for 13 years, effective Jan. 11.

**Marc and Kim Wyatt** will work with internationals in North Carolina's Research Triangle region through the collaboration of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Global Missions and CBF of North Carolina. The native North Carolinians have worked with internationals in Canada for 15 years.

## Associate Minister of Youth and Congregational Life

Job description: roxborobaptist.org

Résumés with cover letter by Dec. 31:

Attn: Search Committee  
 Roxboro Baptist Church  
 P.O. Box 348  
 Roxboro, NC 27573  
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A review by George H. Shriver

**Redeemer**

The Life of Jimmy Carter  
By Randall Balmer  
(2014, Basic Books)



# Title aside, Balmer offers best religious history of Carter

This is an excellent book with an unfortunate title. Jimmy Carter would never have used the word “redeemer” about himself.

In his epilogue, Balmer states: “The man whose improbable election in 1976 redeemed the nation from the sins of Watergate has finally earned his own redemption” — thus the title that would sell more copies as well.

A better title would have been *A Religious History of Jimmy Carter*. Nevertheless, Balmer has written by far the best biography of our truly evangelical president with correct moral visions.

The only words on the page just prior to his “Preface” with its creative title, “Jimmy Carter and Me,” are as follows: “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. John 1:11.”

Balmer’s preface surveys the years of his own life as they touched upon Carter’s own years. He hopes his readers will come away with an in-depth understanding of religious as well as political forces at work during Carter’s whole career.

He concludes with a strong sentence: “It is a story that begs to be told in the evangelical parlance of striving, betrayal, defeat and redemption.”

From the first chapter (“The Household of Faith”) to the last (“Sunday Morning in Plains”), Balmer presents a man he truly knows mainly in the contexts of politics and religion. Balmer is at the top of his presentation in relation to evangelicalism and fundamentalism.

Members of the media could be corrected at so many points on these subjects if they read and absorbed this probing book. It is perfectly clear that Reagan’s victory in 1980 was due to his alignment with the “religious right” and religious fundamentalists.

Little did they know of how simple and superficial was his knowledge of Christianity. On the other hand, Carter’s career had reflected a thorough commitment to the essence of Christianity and a genuine understanding of major Christian writers such as Tillich and Niebuhr.

Interestingly, Carter was a moderate evangelical for sure, while being sandwiched between the immorality of Nixon and the religious superficiality of Reagan. Neither of these two had any understanding about true evangelicalism.

It must be observed that the excellence of this book would only have been improved if Balmer had made use of Samuel S. Hill’s creative works on southern religion, such as *Southern Churches in Crisis* (also *SCC Revisited*). He never even refers to these works.

Also, Balmer should have used Carter’s own work, *Our Endangered Values*. Two chapters in this book contain superior explorations of both religious and political fundamentalism.

I risk being misunderstood, but it must be observed that with a careful exploration of fundamentalism, it might be said that this movement is *not* evangelical for it seems to deny

what is at the heart of “gospel.” At the heart of gospel are kindness, love and acceptance.

Let me almost shout, however, that Balmer has gotten to the very heart of what Carter was all about before, during and after his presidency. I also lived (and in the South) during all these years of Carter and have been convinced that he was and is a true evangelical committed to the heart of “gospel.”

Congratulations to Balmer on writing one of the finest volumes in religious studies this year. I feel sure that Jimmy Carter would agree with this value judgment. **BT**

—George H. Shriver is emeritus professor of history at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Ga. His writings include *Pilgrims through the Years: A Bicentennial History of First Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia*.

*“Balmer is at the top of his presentation in relation to evangelicalism and fundamentalism. The media could be corrected at so many points on these subjects if they read and absorbed this probing book.”*

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# Baptist theology

PART  
6

This is the final article in a series of six about academic theology written by Baptists since 1950. In this article we first review a controversy in which some Baptist academicians began to engage in the 1990s, and then suggest some ideas about what the future may bring for Baptist theology.

## Re-envisioning the Baptist identity (1990s)

In previous articles we said that beginning in the 1950s Baptists engaged in 11 conversations and controversies. The final controversy centers around a 4,000-word document titled “Re-envisioning the Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America.”

Created by American theologians, the Manifesto was published in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* in 1997 and has been disseminated widely, discussed in conferences and other venues, and written about in various journals. I will summarize two examples of that writing.

In 1997 Curtis Freeman published an article titled “Can Baptist Theology Be Revisited?” In it he argued that “the definition of Baptist theology in terms of libertarian notions of autonomy is a modern account.”

Freeman believes that modernity is dying, and he wants Baptists to sever their ties with modernity.

He contends that Baptists in the southern United States should dissociate from the cultural hegemony they have experienced in the past. They should dissociate from the Enlightenment’s “foundationalist theory of knowledge which requires all beliefs to be justified by a special class of beliefs that cannot be questioned.”

According to Freeman, fundamentalists are foundationalists inasmuch as they appeal to an inerrant Bible as the foundation for their beliefs. Liberals also are foundationalists inasmuch as they appeal to religious experience as the foundation for their beliefs.

Freeman wrote: “Conservatives and liberals (as well as evangelicals and moderates) are really twin trajectories of modern theology.” None of these options has “resources to develop a Baptist theology for the next millennium.” Baptists should say farewell to modernity so they can live faithfully in an increasingly post-modern world.

Freeman extols the freedom that Christ gives, but he is troubled when fellow Baptists extol any freedom that is established by government or stated in terms of human rights.

He worries that appreciation for freedom in this sense can lead to idolatry with the state as god. He disapproves of theology that was “less a way of giving warrants for communally held convictions and historically preserved practices as it became more a discourse of classifying and arranging the facts of the Bible.”

The proper role of doctrine is to render intelligible the communal life of the church. Baptist theologians who already have taken steps in this direction include Stanley Grenz, Barry Harvey, Harvey Cox, W. T. Connor and especially James Wm. McClendon.

In 1998, also in *Perspectives*, Walter Shurden published “The Baptist Identity and the Baptist Manifesto” in response to the Manifesto, not to Freeman’s article. In it he sought to share some sincere appreciations, to voice some serious reservations, and to ask some honest questions.

Shurden appreciates that the Manifesto affirms the disestablishment of the church and that it issues a forceful call to serious discipleship. He expresses reservation, however, in these two points: The Manifesto makes its case for (1) the importance of Christian community at the expense of an appreciation for the individual and (2) the spiritual freedom that Christ gives to Christians, at the expense of the freedom that God gives to all humans in creation and for which societies and nations express respect by means of political freedom and human rights.

Shurden questions: (1) “To what community is the Manifesto referring when it speaks

of ‘the community’s legitimate authority?’” (2) “Are you serious or are you just ‘pulling our Baptist legs’ when you write in the Manifesto that you ‘reject every form of private interpretation that makes Bible reading a practice which can be carried out according to the dictates of individual conscience?’”

Shurden displays in some detail what Baptists have written about what he calls three Baptist genes, namely, individualism, community and freedom. All three, he says, are part of Baptist identity.

The controversy surrounding the Manifesto, like the sacramentalism controversy, has generated splendid theological writing.

## 17 things the future may bring for Baptist theology

As we look back over the Baptist theology surveyed in these six articles, the following likely will be the case in the coming decades.

1. The content of Baptist theology will remain diverse. Baptists are today, as they were in 1972 when Walter Shurden’s book was published, *Not a Silent People*. Anyone who hopes that all Baptist theology will converge is going to be disappointed.
2. Baptist theologians will write more theology. They are writing more now than they were 60 years ago. (And, of course, they also are writing much more than has been surveyed in these articles. Perhaps this is a good place to offer an apology to the many fine Baptist authors whose work I have mentioned too briefly or not at all in these articles.)
3. Baptists will continue to make creative proposals in theology. It seems that there weren’t many of those in 1950, but they are evident in the recent work of theologians such as Paul Fiddes, Mark Heim, Elizabeth Newman and Clark Pinnock, among others.

*“Baptist theologians will increasingly embrace a sacramental understanding of baptism and the Lord’s Supper ... Baptists who have experienced the presence of the Lord in baptism and the Lord’s Supper will be open to this change.”*

4. Baptist women will write more theology. It's difficult to think of Baptist women who were writing theology in 1950. Today there are many including, in addition to those mentioned in these articles, Sheri Adams, Sharon Baker, Molly Marshall and others.

5. Baptists will write theology in languages other than English. The Baptist World Alliance continues to be a catalyst for this effort. It is understandable that most Baptist theology is written in English, since the majority of Baptists are English-speaking people, but Baptist missionary work has resulted in there being millions of non-English-speaking Baptists.

6. Baptist theologians will continue to treat the Bible as authoritative for their theology. We must not be misled by the Southern Baptist controversy over biblical inerrancy. Baptists love the Bible and believe it to be the Word of God and an authoritative guideline for theology.

7. Baptist theologians will continue to engage historical theology in more sophisticated ways.

8. Baptist theologians will engage in more conversation with other religions. This will be a huge project, but we have seen that pioneers such as Harvey Cox, Mark Heim and Charles Kimball have made a beginning and set a high standard.

9. Baptist systematic theologians will incorporate more social ethics into their work.

10. Baptist theologians will continue to advocate for causes, especially for causes related to injustices arising from issues of gender, race, class, ecology and war.

11. Baptist theologians will continue to wrestle with standing issues of modernity such as science and human rights.

12. Baptist theologians will increasingly embrace a sacramental understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper. It seems unlikely that a majority will do so in the immediate future, but it is difficult to imagine that the authoritative, scholarly work that Baptist theologians have done on the New Testament will not eventually find its way into the lives of Christians and churches. Baptists who have experienced the presence of the Lord in baptism and the Lord's Supper will be open to this change.

13. Baptist theologians will continue to write about the Trinity. Although many Baptists suspect that a theology of the Trinity is speculative and unbiblical, others realize that the Trinity is, after all, the distinctive Christian understanding of God and therefore the principal prerequisite for participation in ecumenical conversations.

14. Baptist theologians will continue to debate issues that for them have remained unresolved, the principal one of which is Calvinism and Arminianism.

15. Baptist theologians will continue to debate issues that emerge from new movements such as Pentecostalism and ecumenism. As the movements change, they take new forms that can provide openings to groups such as Baptists who in the past were reluctant to become involved.

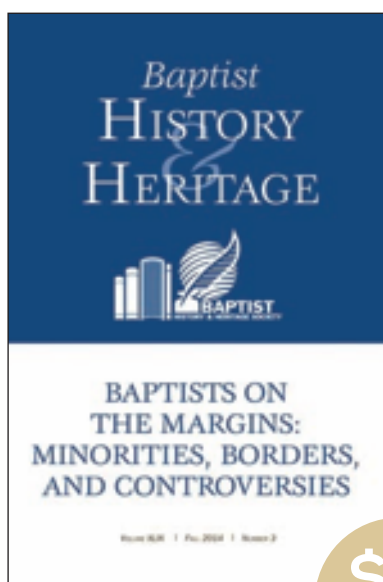
16. It seems unlikely that Baptists will develop schools of thought around individual theo-

logians. Continental theologians famously do this, and British theologians famously do not. In the past six decades this might have happened with Baptist theologians such as Harvey Cox, Langdon Gilkey, Millard Erickson, Clark Pinnock or Paul Fiddes, but it did not. On the other hand, it did happen with James W. McClendon, but in a limited way.

17. Finally, we may hope that in the future Baptist people and churches may benefit even more from the work of their academic theologians. If they do, then Baptist theology should flourish, because ecclesiastical groups tend to get the kinds of theologians they value. **BT**

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

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## ‘Bouncing ahead’

*Fred Witty, former students recall changing attitudes and times*

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. — At 91, Fred Witty still keeps up with many of the students from his long-ago years as a Baptist Student Union director. He speaks proudly of their accomplishments in a variety of careers and their faithfulness in Christian service.

“When you add it all up, it adds up,” says Witty, sitting comfortably in a recliner in his East Tennessee home while reflecting on the influences of the men and women who were once students within his ministry circle.

“We had them at a crucial time in their lives.”

Witty served on the campuses of New Mexico State University, University of Louisville and East Tennessee State University. Likewise, his students speak of their former BSU director with fondness and gratitude.

### STANDING UP

When *Baptists Today* presented its annual Judson-Rice Award last April to influential pastor and Baptist leader Emmanuel McCall, he was quick to credit Witty for helping break down racial barriers.

McCall, an African-American student from Pennsylvania, entered the University of Louisville in 1954, just two years after integration. He found a warm reception from Witty and the BSU students.

Some local Baptist pastors, however, opposed the inclusion of black students in the campus ministry program.

“I figured my job was over,” said Witty of his strong opposition to three pastors from the Long Run Baptist Association in Louisville who came to the BSU center demanding a racially exclusive organization.

But Witty, unwilling to back down, added: “That was a day you had to take a stand or go with the flow. I knew I was on the right side of history.”

McCall said that Witty and the fellow students stood up for him at every turn.

“These were my college brothers and sisters who stuck with me.”

Through the years he and Fred have touched base by phone and hold each other in very high regard.

“Emmanuel was such a bright star, even then,” recalled Witty.

### EARLY INFLUENCES

When asked about his inclusive perspective at a time when racial prejudice was so prevalent, Witty reflected on his upbringing.

His father was a school superintendent in Oklahoma. And Fred just couldn’t see the justice in black students going long distances to attend another high school.

“My dad would go with the flow as long as it was his job,” Fred surmised.

His mother, however, had a different perspective that was passed along to her son.

“When I was about three years old, I had



a rag doll with a black face that my mother had made,” recalled Fred. “There wasn’t a prejudiced bone in her body. She’d played with black children growing up. I’ve just been blessed by that standpoint all along.”

Fred said he and his dad often debated and continually disagreed about racial equality and inclusion.

“He just thought I was bouncing well ahead of the times,” said Witty. “I was, thank goodness. If not, I would have missed a lot of friendships. And Emmanuel McCall was one of them.”

## BREAKING GROUND

Witty served in a time when Baptist Student Unions were often on the cutting edge of social change.

“The mission projects kept us in the forefront of it,” he said.

He recalled the surprise of some Baptists back home when a nursing student in the 1960s, assigned to Africa as a summer missionary, sent back a photo of a beautiful black baby she had delivered.

A former BSU president at ETSU moved to South Africa and would return on occasion to talk about the struggle for justice there.

“You just have to be thankful that God does all of this,” said Witty. “[Campus ministry] has been one of the more joyful and rewarding things Baptists have ever done.”

Vocational ministry was not on Fred’s radar when he decided to major in animal husbandry at New Mexico State University. However, when the BSU director Ken Chafin left, leadership fell to Witty — who was the oldest among the student leaders.

Fred put together the spring retreat and enlisted a guest speaker, who remarked: “You sure have a way with them.”

That experience turned into a calling. “But I almost missed it,” Fred said.

## GOD’S TIMING

Rodney Strong lives in Chattanooga, Tenn., where he is an assistant district attorney and a lay leader in the First Baptist Church. As a freshman, he went to the Baptist Student Union at ETSU in the fall of 1970 for the free food, but he found a mentor and a family of faith.

Of all the things he learned from Witty, this one sticks out: “I learned to be patient with God’s timing.”

When Rodney was not elected BSU president during his junior year, he was deeply disappointed. But he recalls Fred taking him

aside and talking about “early bloomers and late bloomers,” and assuring him his time would come. It did the next year.

Looking back over four decades now, Fred said: “Rodney was one of my best BSU officers.”

That lesson has lingered, said Strong.

“Fred’s words of advice at a time of great disappointment have served me well over the years,” he acknowledged. “I have come to appreciate that God is in control of the timing of the events in my life. That knowledge has served me well and gotten me through times when things don’t happen the way I think they should.”

There were other lessons as well, he added.

“Fred taught me inclusiveness and open-mindedness,” said Strong. “Fred welcomed everybody at the BSU. He included them in the programs and made them feel at home. He also made sure that those of us who were a part of the BSU showed the same warmth.”

Rodney said that Fred would caution any group going on a BSU-related trip to not exclude others upon returning to campus but to share their experiences with them. And anything, said Rodney, could be discussed with Fred.

“No topic or opinion was taboo at the BSU under Fred,” he recalled. “He would allow us to speak our minds and share our opinions and thoughts without fear of being cut off or criticized. Fred would be equally open about his thoughts and opinions but never in an ‘I’m right and you’re wrong’ attitude.”

He called Fred “an encourager,” who was always positive in his approach to students and encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams.

“He made the scriptures and teachings of Christ real in his ministry,” said Rodney. “He encouraged us to be involved in mission activities and to reach out to others for Christ.”

## LESSONS LEARNED

Fred’s daughter, Elaine Witty Binegar, assistant controller for the Cesar Chavez Foundation in Keene, Calif., said her father’s commitment to missions easily rubbed off on others. Those who didn’t go on mission trips would feel compelled to raise the needed funds for their fellow students to engage in those experiences.

“Rodney and I washed windows one year for one of the professors who made a donation to the mission fund,” she said. “Raking leaves was another popular activity to raise money.”

“Father Fred,” as she called her dad in his ministry setting, helped her understand the importance of not seeking to impose human restraints on God, she said.

“Probably the most important thing I learned from him was not to expect my experience as a Christian to be the same as anyone else’s,” said Elaine. “Everyone is different and has different experiences.”

Judy Braswell, minister for children, education and missions at First Baptist Church of Monahans, Texas, was also an ETSU student in the ’70s who was greatly influenced by Witty’s ministry.

“He was friendly, compassionate, and seemed wise as he greeted students and invited them to join the BSU family,” she recalled. “Through my four years at ETSU, Fred cared for us students and loved us as persons despite our silliness, immaturity and shortcomings. He challenged us through his teaching and discussion to study God’s word and think about what it meant for us to grow in faith and in service.”

Following graduation, she served a two-year stint in overseas missions and followed a calling into congregational ministry.

“Fred is one of the key persons in my life who demonstrated what it means to be an incarnational Christian, one who allows the Lord Jesus Christ to live through him in such a way that people recognize him as a Christ follower and are drawn closer to Christ because of him.” **BT**

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# BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

For the Confederate States of America, the month of December is one of wrenching horrors. The devastation, in the Battle of Nashville, of the one remaining large Confederate army in the Deep South is followed by the even more traumatic fall of Savannah.

From Milledgeville, Ga., Sherman's armies march steadily southeastward largely unopposed, pillaging and torching infrastructure, confiscating livestock and crops, freeing slaves and garnering the hatred of white citizens. What little armed resistance Sherman encounters is quickly and easily dispatched, including lopsided battles at Waynesboro and Fort McAllister on the approach to Savannah.

Many churches in the path of Sherman's march cancel services, as does the Bark Camp Baptist Church of Midville. The disruption is noted in church minutes:

*This was the regular day for conference but owing to General William T. Sherman's Yankee Raid there was no meeting of pastors or members. We as members of Bark Camp Church do hereby place on record our solemn protest; also our thorough contempt for the vandals who desecrated our church. We are willing to leave the issue in God's hands and fervently pray that the time will come when we can worship our God under our own fig tree and have none to make us afraid.*

On Dec. 21 Savannah, posing no opposition, falls to Sherman as the Union general completes his march to the sea. The following day Sherman writes to President Lincoln:

*I beg to present you as a Christmas Gift the City of Savannah, with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition and also about 25,000 bales of cotton.*

Celebrations of joy erupt throughout the United States as many now believe the defeat of the Confederacy is imminent.

150 YEARS AGO

*December 1864*

The few resident whites remaining in Savannah resignedly accept the occupation. The First Baptist Church remains open, one of few coastal congregations that does not close during the war. The Sunday before Sherman arrives, pastor Sylvanus Landrum preaches to a congregation of mostly Confederate soldiers stationed in the city. The Sunday following the fall of the city, Landrum preaches to a congregation largely consisting of Union soldiers.

While whites in Savannah lament their ill fortune, black residents rejoice, praising God and celebrating newfound freedom. The Baptist faith is predominant among black Savannahians, with black Baptist churches accounting for some of the most prominent African-American ministers in the South. Amid the ongoing celebrations, black Baptist leaders imagine a future of opportunity and prosperity for African Americans, a future defined by the freedom that God wills for all persons.

Many white Baptists, meanwhile, refuse to concede that slavery is unbiblical. An editorial in the North Carolina Baptist *Biblical Recorder* states the matter quite plainly, faulting whites only for not caring for the souls of their slaves.

*I have no conscientious scruples in regards to slavery; on the contrary, I believe it to be a divinely authorized institution ... much of the national distress which has fallen upon us has been permitted by God for our neglect of duty in regard to the souls of our slaves ... the sooner we appreciate and discharge our religious duties to our servants, the sooner will our calamities be past.*

In Virginia, the Siege of Petersburg near Richmond continues. With each passing day in the frigid trenches, hunger and despair grow among Confederate soldiers.

In Kentucky, a Baptist laywoman reflects on Confederate victories early in the war and prays for a miracle. In so doing she represents the melancholy mood that envelopes the Confederacy.



*I believe it was reading of [the] battles in the life of General Stonewall Jackson today that reminded me of my Father. [I] have so often in early life heard him describe the scenes of his childhood, boyhood, and youth in Culpeper. Jackson was doubtless a great and good man, but the Lord that has an undisputed right to govern all things gave him to and took him from his country and possesses all powers to raise another to fill his place. Have mercy on our guilty nation, O Lord, and with Thy strong arm drive the invaders of our soil back to their own and give us peace once more, if it be Thy will. I ask in the name of Jesus.*

Meanwhile, slaves freed by Sherman's armies stream from Savannah into nearby Union-controlled Beaufort, S.C., seeking housing, education and job training offered by U.S. government officials and soldiers working in partnership with northern missionaries. A month of unparalleled despair contrasted with great hopes thus marks the close of the year 1864. **BT**

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

# Growing a culture of graciousness

By Dan Elash

It's an unpleasant truth that gossip, hard-heartedness, unkindness and petty personal spats can run steady in the background of many churches. The louder that background noise, the more distracted the congregation becomes from fulfilling its purpose.

Imagine that as long as our congregations are comprised of flawed and flailing humans, this will always be the case.

Christianity is a religion of emotion as well as intellect. We celebrate the joy of Christ's birth at Christmas, the passion of Christ during Lent, the hope of the resurrection at Easter time and the vigor of our faith at Pentecost.

Beyond emotions, however, we are commanded to love God with our whole heart, mind and soul — not just to think about it, but to do it.

We are instructed to love our neighbors and to love our enemies. Our faith is both felt and acted out.

Love is a powerful emotion that deeply affects human relationships. My wife expects me not to simply say, "I love you," but to demonstrate that love through my behavior. I expect the same of myself.

Yet, often when we say that we love God or our neighbor, we do so in an intellectual sense, describing what we want to feel but not fully manifesting it in how we behave. We like the idea of loving, especially if we can pick and choose how we express those feelings.

Humans are creatures of habits and patterns. We usually create a comfort zone for ourselves and settle in.

We do what is easy but not necessarily what is hard. To consistently do hard things

for others can be difficult, especially if it is not fostered by a passionate sense of our love for God and for our neighbors.

I am often struck, when called to intervene with a church in crisis, with just how unkind and unloving people are to each other in their particular community of faith. We give lip service to loving others, but fall into destructive ruts and ways of thinking and acting.

It is much harder to reverse these patterns once we have drifted into a period of crisis or conflict. It is far easier to avoid these crises than it is to resolve them when they are raging out of control.

When working with pastors in the areas of personal growth or leadership development, I urge them to challenge their congregations (and themselves) to develop a culture of graciousness among their congregants.

In the professional literature, the word "culture" really means "How we treat people here." In a church it means treating each other with grace and love at every opportunity.

Every church has some difficult people as members. They occasionally gravitate to positions of leadership within the church. Left unchecked and unguided, problems are sure to follow.

When these people or their respective factions are confronted, they take this personally. They feel threatened and defensive. They dig in and hold their positions more strongly, and they often respond with hostility. It's not easy and often results in significant collateral damage to the church.

Rather than waiting until tension or conflict forces a pastor to confront these issues, what if we set an expectation among



the congregation that we will consistently treat each other graciously, doing our best to treat each other the way we hope to be treated by God?

No one is singled out for negative feedback; rather we are all challenged to act out our faith in a loving fashion. Building the habit of grace-giving among each other on a daily basis keeps conflicts subdued.

Just as grace is nothing that we earn or deserve, the people who vex us are the hardest to offer grace. Of course, that's the point of Jesus' teaching: we are to love the unlovable.

When working with a church in crisis, I'll usually ask the pastor to lead the congregation through sermons, directed Bible studies and prayer to articulate the aspects of a culture of grace that fits their congregation.

How will we, as lovers of Christ, treat people here? What's the norm? What can/should I expect?

What would it look like if your church worked to develop a culture of graciousness? What are the norms, rules and expectations that all should be urged to adopt?

It's not like you haven't been told this before. Christ was very clear about how he would prefer us to treat each other.

Rather than having a dry, intellectual faith, we can raise the graciousness in our church by passionately committing each day to love both our God and our neighbor, not just in thought but in deed.

Grace isn't deserved; it is given. And it is usually the most hurting, lost or confused people who need it the most. By instituting a culture of graciousness, you can build a faith community worthy of the name. **BT**

—Dan Elash is a psychologist in Free Union, Va., who serves as a leadership coach and congregational consultant for Center for Healthy Churches.

*"I am often struck, when called to intervene with a church in crisis, with just how unkind and unloving people are to each other in their particular community of faith. We give lip service to loving others, but fall into destructive ruts and ways of thinking and acting."*

## Responding to nutty comments — or not

By John Pierce

Our editorial staff is an ignorant bunch. Fortunately, someone with far superior knowledge picked up a copy of our monthly publication recently — and not only read it, but also warned us of the embedded dangers associated with our wayward thinking.

One obvious offense was our foolish advancing of sorcery and other sorts of things associated with “lifestyles that Christians don’t support.”

We were advised against using words like “cultic” and “liturgies” as was done in one of the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies on Joshua.

How our Bible studies writer Tony Cartledge missed all of that during his seminary days and Ph.D. studies at Duke is baffling. He must have been reading the Harry Potter series instead of doing proper research and going to chapel.

(And never mind that cultic practices abound in the Old Testament and that liturgy is simply any group’s way of doing worship.)

A second message of warning followed: Our critic had read Tony’s lesson for the following week — and things were even worse.

Tony, in fact, quoted directly from J.K. Rowling’s lead character.

Rhetorical (I think) questions followed — filled with words such as “credulous” — and then a strongly stated fear that some readers might conclude that it’s OK to read Harry Potter books or even see the movies. God forbid.

We were asked directly why we’d “go so far as to put evil in PRINT?”

“I don’t believe J.K. Rowling’s books are on the Lord’s bestseller list,” we were told — following the quotation of a biblical proverb about God detesting the thoughts of the wicked.

We do appreciate feedback — and often benefit from it. There are never claims from



us that we always — or even often — get it all right.

But it’s hard to know how to respond appropriately to one who is writing “for the sake of the true gospel” that we clearly miss.

Our online editor and special series writer Bruce Gourley doesn’t help either. He’s into the third year of recounting (monthly in print and daily online) the role of Baptists in the Civil War.

If he doesn’t change the storyline soon, it appears the Confederacy may lose.

The Ph.D. program in history at Auburn, where Bruce did his work, must not teach its students how to always root for the home team.

A reader (make that, a former subscriber) in Charleston, S.C., has assured

me more than once that Bruce is wrong to claim that slavery was a central issue in the War Between the States.

Nice southern people just wanted to preserve their rights to grits and sweet tea, I guess.

Never mind that Bruce’s columns — titled “In their own words” — are mostly lengthy, direct quotations from Baptist editorials, sermons and denominational resolutions from a century and a half ago.

In others words, they are not Bruce’s opinions but primary source opinions expressed by

leading Baptists at that time.

Apparently, however, some modern southerners wish such historical records would remain buried in dusty old books. They can screw up revisionist narratives about the War.

Then there is eagle-eyed managing editor Jackie Riley who is supposed to help me catch all of these flagrant errors. Yet these things passed her by.

And, of course, as executive editor I must take a little blame myself. As Jesus said: “The buck stops here.”

(Wait. Maybe Harry popularized that line. Truman, not Potter.)

I often ponder the best responses to such freely offered enlightenment — given with much passion and, hopefully, some genuine concern.

The temptation is to rationally explain away the accusations. But, in most every case, there is no amount of logic that could possibly change a convinced mind.

A ranting response would be foolish and unproductive. There are enough of those kinds of endless debates on social media and in comment streams that I’ve learned to ignore.

Perhaps there are better options.

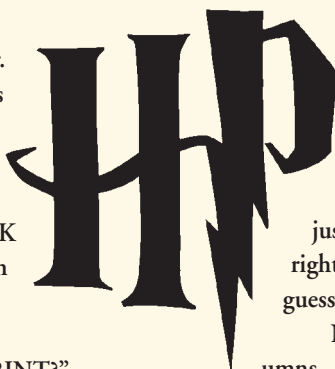
Maybe it’s best to just say something like: “Thanks for sharing your thoughts. Have a nice Halloween.”

Or maybe just not respond at all.

Or, perhaps, write a Friday morning blog about it.

Or maybe not.

Too late. I just hit “Publish.” **BT**



# The challenge of good hospitality

By Tony W. Cartledge

Does the world see Christianity as a friendly and hospitable faith? We'd like to think so, but the truth is that many people perceive Christians primarily as judgmental folk who are focused on the afterlife and care little about others' present needs.

That's a problem that should concern the church said Amy Oden, professor of early church history and spirituality at Saint Paul School of Theology at Oklahoma City University, during the annual Reavis Lectures at Campbell University Divinity School this fall.

The importance of Christian hospitality was a central tenet of the early church, Oden said, citing several early church writers who promoted the importance of showing kindness to others, especially those who are poor, sick, imprisoned or strangers.

The preacher known as Pseudo-Clementine, writing in the early fourth century, argued that Christians should practice hospitality to all persons because the image of God is in everyone. Respecting the image of God in others is a way of showing worship to God, he said.

About the same time, the North African teacher Lactantius taught that Christians should show hospitality even to the dead, and for the same reason. During a time of plague, when bodies piled up because no one would touch them, he encouraged Christians to take the risk of removing and burying the shunned bodies, standing in the place of relatives to show respect to the dead and honor the image of God in them.

In doing so, he said, Christians would do out of kindness what absent relatives would have done by affection.

John Chrysostom, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople (modern Istanbul), encouraged church members to voluntarily host traveling soldiers, who depended on the local population for housing. Instead of just supporting a charity to host the soldiers, each



family should have a "Christ room," he said, where hospitality could be shown within the home.

Christians should recognize that they were once strangers, too, he said.

Julianus Pomerius, a fifth-century North-African monk who later relocated to Gaul, added an interesting twist. He noted that unexpected visitors could upset the ordered routine of monastery life, but that monks should be willing to accommodate them despite the disruption. Even if fasting, he said, monks should be willing to "unbend" for the sake of others lest their fasting bring sadness to the visitors.

In a second lecture, Oden spoke to the meaning and practice of hospitality. Gospel hospitality is not what we find in the "hospitality industry," she said, nor is it measured by gracious accommodations or by effusive greetings. If visitors to a church are greeted warmly by ushers at the door but not welcomed by the members inside, for example, they haven't experienced true hospitality.

"Gospel hospitality is welcoming the stranger as Jesus for the sake of the good news," Oden said. "It is a spiritual posture as

well as a spiritual practice."

Oden cited the example of Abraham and Sarah receiving visitors under the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18) as paradigmatic for teaching hospitality. That text was quoted more frequently than any other during the first 500 years of the church, she said, more than any gospel passage.

The four marks of gospel hospitality are "readiness, risk, repentance and recognition," Oden said. Like blazes on a hiking trail, they indicate we are on the right path to gospel hospitality.

*Readiness* involves intentionality and willingness to accept the difficulty of showing hospitality, she said, as well as the curiosity necessary to learn about others and their needs.

There is always *risk* in hospitality, she said, especially to others we don't know. It can disrupt our lives and make us uncomfortable — but in the process, we find that we are changed as the risk and disruption involved in helping others results in a blessing to the host.

Such change reflects the concept of *repentance*, she said. "If our churches are not being changed," Oden said, "we may not be practicing gospel hospitality."

Churches should point to ways that they are being changed through ministering to others, she said, celebrating ways in which children's programs or feeding programs bring change and blessing to those who practice gospel hospitality.

The end result of showing true hospitality is *recognition*, Oden said: "We will see Jesus."

Such recognition is not something we can manufacture, she said, but as Jesus taught in Matt. 25:34-40, when we help the strangers, the poor, the imprisoned or the sick, it is as if we have ministered to Jesus himself.

The source of gospel hospitality is God, Oden said: "Welcome is God's doing."

As we accept God's welcome into abundant life and participate in the life of God, we share that welcome with others. Jesus taught that the kingdom of God has come near.

In participating in the kingdom, Oden said, we meet Jesus again. When we welcome strangers we welcome Jesus, and we are changed.

And in pondering these thoughts, we are challenged. **BT**

# ‘Lightning rod for justice’

*Getting to know the real St. Nicholas with Adam English*



**AMONG THE SANTAS:** Adam English (front row, second from left) joins Santas in training.

BUIES CREEK, N.C. — Adam C. English, professor of religion at Campbell University, has dug deeply to uncover details about a historical figure at the root of a grand Christmas tradition.

In 2012, Baylor University Press published English's book, *The Saint Who Would Be Santa Claus*. Editor John Pierce posed questions to English about this often-misunderstood person from church history — and the evolution of modern-day St. Nick.

## **BT: So, who was St. Nicholas?**

AE: Nicholas was a Christian bishop of the early fourth century who performed works of charity and generosity and attended the Council of Nicaea in 325, a watershed event for Christian history.

He was born in Patara sometime after 260 and was elected bishop, or head pastor, of the church in the nearby city of Myra, on the coast of what is today Turkey. According to Acts, Paul founded churches in both Patara and Myra.

Nicholas was so well loved in Myra by

believers and non-believers alike that when he died sometime around 333, a special church was built outside the walls of the city in his honor and to hold his tomb. The remains of the church and the tomb can be seen and visited to this day.

Does he live at the North Pole with reindeer and elves? Unfortunately, no.

## **BT: How did he get associated with Christmas?**

AE: The feast day of St. Nicholas has always been Dec. 6. For that reason, he has always been associated with the season.

In early 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, different holiday practices were tried and tested. America was this melting pot of influences from the British, Dutch, German, French and so forth.

Traditionally, parents surprised their children with simple gifts of oranges, nuts and chocolate coins on or around Dec. 6 (and they still do in places like the Netherlands). However, exchanges of gifts also occurred on New Year's Day between colleagues, friends and employees.

Eventually these various gift-giving customs combined to create the new custom of St. Nick arriving with presents on the eve

of Dec. 24.

That's a condensed answer to a big question — or should we say an “elf” answer to what could easily become an “abominable snowman” question?

## **BT: What do people often get wrong about St. Nick?**

AE: The presumption has often been that St. Nicholas is just as fictitious as Santa Claus, that they are both made-up characters. Or, if Nicholas was a real person, he must have lived a long time ago and we probably don't know anything about him.

I am happy to report that after spending years researching the question and going back to the original sources, I can testify with full confidence that Nicholas of Myra really did exist.

When I began to look for historical facts, I quickly became frustrated because, so it seemed, no one considered or even knew of any of the historical documents and primary records. Until now, writers have been content, even in books supposedly about Nicholas, to repeat legends and stories they had heard from who-knows-where.

My own frustration over the lack of precise information about Nicholas pushed me to investigate further and find documents, still not translated, from the 500s, 600s, 700s and beyond that narrate the deeds of Nicholas. I also studied scholars who have found firm archaeological evidence that supports the stories.

**BT: What is helpful to get right about this historical figure?**

AE: No matter how big and glossy the American commercial Santa Claus becomes in the theaters and shopping malls, the original St. Nicholas will always be way more interesting.

Here is someone known for sacrificial generosity, but also someone of deep faith who had a fiery passion for justice.

Many of the earliest stories tell us about these other layers of his character. Many times he refused to back down in the face of power, but defended the innocent and advocated for the needy.

On one occasion, he threw himself into harm's way and personally halted the beheading of innocent citizens. Just as soon as he secured the situation at the executioner's chopping block, he marched off to the judge's house to reprimand him to his face for his miscarriage of justice.

He was a lightning rod for justice.

**BT: Does he really keep that good/bad list?**

AE: The faint glimmer of the original Nicholas's concern for justice can still be seen in the naughty/nice list of Santa.

We in America have blunted Nicholas's sharp edge or turned it into a toothless threat given to misbehaving children: "You better shape up or you'll get put on Santa's naughty list."

In many places in Europe, however, St. Nicholas visits the home in his bishop's robes and sits down with the children, asking them pointed questions about their behavior and manners and lessons.

And here in the United States, I know some men who impersonate Santa Claus but who do not ask children what they want for Christmas. Instead they ask, "What have you done to deserve a present this year?"

They find a way to direct the conversation away from the child's wants to his or her actions. And in general, it means a lot to children to be asked such a question and to be able to tell Santa Claus how they have helped around the house or done something nice for a neighbor.

**BT: How have people reacted to your book and further commentary on St. Nicholas?**

AE: The response has been extremely positive and gracious. One surprising outcome of the



**Adam English** has gotten to know many Santas since the publication of his book, *The Saint Who Would be Santa Claus*.

book was that I have been introduced to the world of professional Santas.

I had no idea that there were schools and seminars and associations of guys who impersonate the man in the red suit. Some do it as a seasonal gig, but others see themselves as year-round Santas and take the craft very seriously.

Even more interesting, a number of them are former pastors and ministers who in their retirement have found a ministry of compassion and comfort to children. These cheery fellows go to children's hospitals and military bases to meet with families.

They bring joy all year round. Can you think of a better retirement ministry than that? I have relished meeting them; their jolliness is contagious — if "jolliness" is a word.

**BT: You've gotten a good bit of press over this book. What does the media want to know?**

AE: Last year, news agencies from New York to Los Angeles called me asking if St. Nicholas was in fact a "white" guy.

You may remember that last Christmas Megyn Kelly caused a flap on Fox News when she said that Nicholas and Jesus were both "white."

**BT: What are the best lessons from the evolution of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus?**

AE: You may be surprised to learn that I have no problem with Santa Claus. I love the Santa Claus Christmas Eve traditions.

Santa Claus reminds me not to take myself too seriously. Look, we take ourselves way too seriously.

The 24-hour news cycle, constant updating of social media, work email, text messages, and the avalanche of commitments we labor under — Ask anybody and they will tell you they're stressed, exhausted, busy, tired.

We take all of that into our churches and homes, and it's not healthy.

Our salvation is found in the joy of Advent, in the child born in a manger. We need to know that the joy of Advent makes room for the bowl-full-of-jelly silliness of Christmas, and it is just this silliness that might rescue us from our overgrown seriousness.

Smirking seriousness is easy. Genuine laughter takes hard work.

**BT: Is there something to learn here about the difference between commercialism/materialism and the generosity that can mark the seasons of Advent and Christmas?**

AE: Let me tell you about the home I grew up in. My parents always seemed conflicted about Christmas.

They wanted us to sing carols, hang stockings, string lights and find presents under a tree on Christmas morning. But, they also felt convicted by the "true meaning" of Christmas — our Savior's birth.

For this reason, Santa Claus was never viewed as a fellow worker in the vineyard of the Lord. Santa was secular. At best he represented the commercialization and greed of the season; at worst he was the pied piper of paganism luring children away from the true meaning of Christmas with his sack of goodies.

Even as my dad opened the flue to grant Santa Claus access to our chimney on the 24<sup>th</sup>, he reiterated that Jesus, not some elf from the North Pole, was the reason for the season.

The tension that I saw manifested in my mom and dad's struggle with Christmas drove me, in part at least, to learn more about St. Nicholas. What I discovered was a committed Christian pastor who, as it turns out, was the perfect fit for Christmas.

Commercialism and materialism are always at work bleaching out the beautiful and richly dyed facts of the history, and it is our job to recover and preserve them.

**BT: Personally, what is your favorite Christmas tradition?**

AE: We love to decorate our home for Christmas. There is something about hauling a live tree into the living room with its smells and feel.

Limbs cut off the bottom become greenery on the mantle, and the whole house takes on the excitement of the season. **BT**

# Shift in Tone

*Southern Baptists, LGBT activists talk with each other*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — When Southern Baptists convened a national conference to discuss issues of human sexuality, bringing conservative evangelicals and LGBT Christian activists into the same ballroom was a recipe ripe for potential fireworks.

Perhaps the most shocking thing was how few fireworks there were.

The Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission was clear: Sex is reserved between a man and a woman within the bonds in marriage. And openly gay evangelicals in attendance were equally clear: Homosexuality is not incompatible with Christianity.

No concessions were made, but leaders on both sides expressed surprise at how the two agreed to coexist.

"I do want to apologize to the gay and lesbian community on behalf of my community and me for not standing up against abuse and discrimination directed towards you. That was wrong and we need your forgiveness," said North Carolina mega-church pastor J.D. Greear, drawing applause.

"We have to love our gay neighbor more than our position on sexual morality."

For now, at least, some gay groups seem willing to give the other side the benefit of the doubt.

The conference brought together a "who's who" within contemporary conversations on homosexuality and evangelicalism, including ERLC President Russell Moore and Atlanta megachurch pastor Andy Stanley, who attended the conference of 1,300 with a group of other pastors from his nondenominational North Point Community Church.

The interactions were largely friendly, with none of the hostility seen from both sides in recent years. Inside the ballroom and out in the hallway, LGBT activists mingled with Southern Baptist leaders. From the crowd, gay advocates



tweeted responses to the speakers on stage, at times seeming to overtake the conference's Twitter hashtag.

While the substance remained much the same, the evangelicals' shift in tone was noticeable. Moore regularly referred to people who are gay — not merely people who are sexual sinners in need of redemption — and denounced so-called "ex-gay" therapy as "severely counter-productive."

Even R. Albert Mohler Jr., the veteran culture warrior and president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., seemed to have a change in tune, if not an outright change of heart.

"Early in this controversy, I felt it quite necessary, in order to make clear the gospel, to deny anything like a sexual orientation," Mohler told the crowd. "I repent of that."

Yet the thawed relations could not hide tensions between the ideas of "loving your neighbor" and "defending your rights," particularly as legal recognition of same-sex marriage continues its lightning-fast expansion across the country. With the clashes between religious liberty and gay rights that inevitably follow, many still question whether the friendly conversations can continue.

The closest conference speakers came to politics during presentations from the Arizona-based Alliance Defending Freedom on what it sees as a threat posed to religious freedom by legalized gay marriage.

Barronelle Stutzman, the Washington state florist who declined to sell flowers for a same-sex ceremony, drew a standing ovation.

Erik Stanley of ADF, the organization defending business owners such as Stutzman, called the murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming in 1998 "a hate crime myth."

Mohler also decried "revisionists," or LGBT advocates like Matthew Vines, who are encouraging evangelicals to embrace the idea that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality. A copy of Mohler's rebuttal to Vines' book was included in the conference grab bag.

Even as Moore denounced ex-gay therapy, he nonetheless cited examples of some people who have changed their sexual orientation. The conference also featured four speakers, including Rosaria Butterfield whose personal story went viral last year, who spoke of leaving homosexuality or embracing celibacy.

Even so, specific political positions or political endorsements were largely absent. "Baptizing lost people and teaching them to vote Republican is not a revival," Moore said to cheers and claps.

Numerous conference speakers encouraged Christians to love their neighbors who identify as LGBT. Focus on the Family President Jim Daly, who has cultivated a friendship with a lobbyist for the gay rights advocacy Gill Foundation, said he prays for LGBT activist Tim Gill.

Several speakers said the church should lead, not follow, in combating anti-gay bullying. "You have to ask, what greater lie we could tell about our savior than to distance ourselves from the hurting and the broken in the moment they needed us most," Greear asked.

Justin Lee, executive director of the Gay Christian Network, said the real opportunity for change could be for LGBT children who grow up in Southern Baptist homes and how they're treated when they come out.

"That's an area where a shift can literally mean the difference between whether a kid is treated with understanding and compassion or winds up homeless, suicidal, or even dead," Lee posted on Facebook. "For that reason, these are significant conversations." **BT**

*"Baptizing lost people and teaching them to vote Republican is not a revival."*

—RUSSELL MOORE OF THE SBC'S ETHICS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION



# In evangelical nonprofits, women leaders lag behind peers in the general market

At an organization where 45 percent of U.S. senior leaders are women, Romanita Hairston's gender is mostly a nonissue as she oversees children's welfare programs at World Vision, the giant evangelical relief agency.

**B**ut in the larger evangelical universe, high-ranking women like Hairston remain a relative rarity.

"I think it's kind of inappropriate at this time in history to be shocked, but I think there are places where I'm one of the few women in a position of authority or shaping theological perspective," said Hairston, a World Vision vice president who serves on boards and teaches about gender inequity at Seattle Central Community College.

A new study by researchers at Gordon College and Wheaton College has confirmed what many have long suspected — that many evangelical institutions lag far behind the general marketplace in leadership roles for women.

Looking at more than 1,400 evangelical organizations, researchers for the Women in Leadership National Study found that women held 21 percent of board positions, 19 percent of top-paid leadership roles and 16 percent of CEO posts in 2010.

In comparison, women make up 43 percent of nonprofit boards and 40 percent of CEOs in the general marketplace.

Principal researcher Amy Reynolds of Wheaton College in Illinois said the figures for top college leaders were particularly low, at 5 percent, compared with 26 percent of college presidents overall.

None of the evangelical student ministries — which included InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) and Fellowship of Christian Athletes — had a female leader in the highest position.

Janel Curry, provost at Gordon College in Massachusetts and the other principal researcher of the study, said evangelicals ignore the gifts of women in leadership at their own peril.

"It's about multiple perspectives," she said. "And it's tied to organizations just doing better



Romanita Hairston

if they have diversity in leadership, which is something we know in the corporate world."

The study found that despite the relatively few women in evangelical leadership, vast majorities of evangelical men and women — 94 percent — said they believe men and women should have equal, or egalitarian, opportunities to lead in society, rather than distinct, or complementarian, roles.

R. Marie Griffith, director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics at Washington University in St. Louis, said that disparity seems to reflect the "glass ceiling" effect that occurs in a range of workplaces — but should prompt new questions about its evangelical dimension.

"Are evangelical women making decisions in the workplace that limit their own options for leadership, or do attitudes persist that make men more likely candidates for leadership jobs, even if the education and skill sets are the same?" asked Griffith, author of a book on evangelical women.

World Vision's U.S. President Rich Stearns said evangelical organizations must take calculated steps to increase women's roles — from including female candidates in hiring pools to ensuring that women are "visible and in front" at strategy and management meetings and are being mentored for succession.

"Gender parity, participation of women in organizational life and all dimensions of it doesn't just happen because you wish it will,"

he said in a panel discussion about the survey findings at last month's Religion Newswriters Association meeting. "It happens because you are intentional about making it happen."

The two researchers found that women and men are often confused about the gender parity stance of their evangelical nonprofits.

"We looked at all the websites of these organizations," Curry said. "There is very little there."

Owen Strachan, president of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, thinks there's a "biblically driven" factor in the contrasting numbers of women leaders in the evangelical and general workplaces. He thinks many evangelical mothers look to Scriptures such as Titus 2 in the New Testament, which speaks of women being "busy at home," loving their husbands and children.

"Simply put, there aren't as many evangelical women in the marketplace as there are secular women because of this desire to care well for children," he said, reflecting his group's embrace of traditional gender roles for both sexes.

But he added: "Complementarian leaders have been real clear to distinguish between the roles in the home and church, which Scripture does clearly speak about, and roles in society," he said.

Nevertheless, his organization — reflecting many that were studied — has an all-male board of directors (but women serve on its advisory council).

"We are a theological organization and so that's why things have tended that way because we see that there is a need for men to lead and teach on theological issues," he explained.

Jo Anne Lyon, general superintendent of The Wesleyan Church, said she was "disappointed yet encouraged" by the study's findings because the research has been a catalyst to get people to think about gender diversity.

Lyon, the only woman to lead a denomination that's affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals, is a member of the NAE board.

"My goal in all of this is that it just becomes normalized and that people are seen for their gifts, and not their gender," she said. "I may be naive but I think we are making progress in that direction." **BT**

# More diversity, more drums

Study shows that U.S. churches are feeling the beat of change

U.S. religious congregations are marching to their own drums now more than ever.

The National Congregations Study's latest look at the country's churches, synagogues and mosques — the third wave of studies that began in 1998 — finds more congregations:

- Open their doors to gays and lesbians in active membership and in leadership.
- Show racial and ethnic diversity in the pews.
- Encourage hand-waving, amen-shouting, and dancing-in-the-aisles during worship.
- Disconnect from denominational ties, doctrines and rules that might slow or block change.

The study, released this fall, draws on interviews with leaders at 1,331 nationally representative congregations and updates data from 1998 and 2006 studies. Non-Christian congregations were included in the study, but there are too few for statistical analysis by topics.

## SURPRISE

Duke University sociology professor Mark Chaves, who directed the study, said he was “surprised” by how much the acceptance of gays and lesbians has risen since 2006, the first time the study asked about gay involvement in religious congregational life.

Congregations that “permit full-fledged membership for openly gay or lesbian couples in a committed relationship” climbed to 48 percent in 2012, up from 37 percent in 2006.

Most congregations still draw a line at permitting gays to take leadership positions, though the number of congregations allowing gays in leadership is rising; it stands at 26 percent, up from 18 percent.

A look by regions shows this liberalization roughly mirrors the state-by-state legalization of same-sex marriage, which began in New



England then swept down to the mid-Atlantic and west to California by 2012.

The standout exception: Only about 4 percent of white conservative evangelical or fundamentalist churches permit gays in leadership roles.

Meanwhile, Roman Catholic churches turned more sharply conservative during the years of the study focus. The percentage of Catholic churches permitting full-fledged membership for gays dropped to 53 percent, down from 74 percent of congregations. And those permitting gays in leadership roles fell to 26 percent from 39 percent.

James Martin, editor-at-large for the Jesuit magazine *America*, observed, “During those years, U.S. bishops were much more vocal against gay marriage. It’s only been in the last year or two — since the election of Pope Francis — that the church has begun opening up on this.”

## DIVERSITY

For women, however, there’s no statistical progress in the NCS study. Despite a handful of recently named women senior pastors, the

percentage of congregations with women in the top post has been locked at roughly 11 percent since 1998.

America’s largest religious groups — Catholics, Southern Baptists and Mormons — do not ordain women or allow them to lead congregations.

For diversity, look to the pews, particularly in predominantly white congregations.

In 2012, 11 percent of congregations had an all-white membership, down from 20 percent in 1998. About a third of congregations have some Hispanics, and nearly a quarter have some Asians. Behind the change, Chaves said, are factors such as upward mobility by blacks, increasing rates of interracial marriage and immigration.

Still, in an issue of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Chaves wrote:

“We do not want to overstate the significance of this increasing ethnic diversity within American congregations. Eighty-six percent of American congregations (containing 80 percent of religious service attendees) remain overwhelmingly white or black or Hispanic or Asian or whatever.”

*The trend toward informal and entertaining and exuberant worship services, first marked in 1998, continues to climb.*

Chaves said in an interview, “On the ground, this means there are more white congregations with a smattering of minorities. However, the percent of mainly black churches with some white people is not increasing.”

## BRANDING

The NCS also finds distinctive religious denominational brands are losing congregational market share. Nearly one in four congregations — or 23 percent — described themselves as nondenominational, up from 18 percent in 1998.

Nondenominational churches can have greater leeway in leadership, teachings and style of worship.

Look in the aisles for changes in the way people worship. The trend toward informal and entertaining and exuberant worship services, first marked in 1998, continues to climb, the study finds.

More people now attend congregations where drums are played during the main service — up to 46 percent in 2012 from 25 percent in 1998. Every tradition from Catholic to Protestant to non-Christian pumped up the

beat by 7 to 20 percentage points or more.

The margin of error was plus or minus 3 percentage points for most findings for the survey.

Eighty percent of people attending black Protestant congregations reported that people jump, shout or dance during the main service, up from 66 percent in 1998.

This worship-in-motion trend is increasingly true for people who attend white evangelical conservative or fundamentalist congregations (25 percent, up from 16 percent in the first study).

## SIT OR STAND?

Other groups — particularly people who worship at white moderate or liberal churches and Catholics — still keep to their seats.

Although more people attend services where worshippers raise their hands during the main service (59 percent in 2012, up from 48 percent in 1998), all the increase was among Protestants, conservative or liberal.

However, *Martin of America* magazine observed, enthusiastic worship is growing among Catholics in ethnic congregations

where the service “has a different cultural flair. You might see something very different at a Hispanic Mass in Los Angeles than on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It’s more a cultural divide than a religious one.”

But Chaves wondered if all the spontaneous expressions of enthusiasm during worship affects the religious message. He speculates that there’s “more emphasis on generating a kind of religious experience as opposed to teaching religious knowledge or doctrine.”

Hardly, countered Marcia McFee, a worship consultant and speaker who coaches subscribing church leaders at her web site [worshipdesignstudio.com](http://worshipdesignstudio.com). She works with mainline denominations and churches on enhancing their services with light, sound and motion.

The Christian message should be a “deeply rich sensory experience,” said McFee, so people “can embody that which we proclaim.”

Sit-still-and-listen is not the way many people connect with God, said McFee. “For some, it doesn’t feel like a spiritual pursuit unless they’re engaged by dancing or drumming or raising a hand or absorbed in rich visuals.” **BT**

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