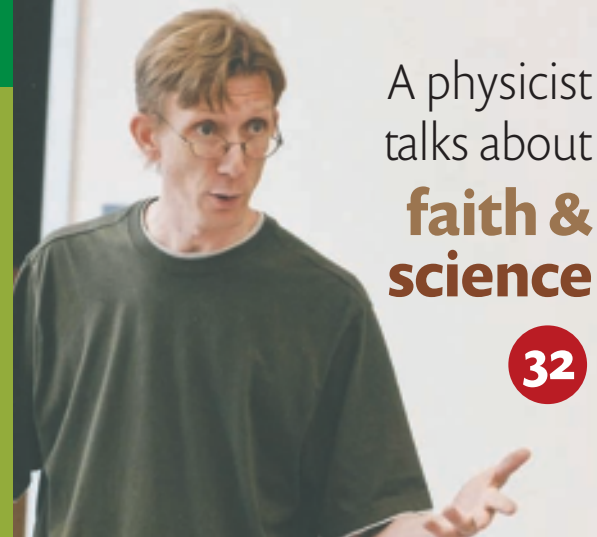


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NEWS JOURNAL



A physicist
talks about
**faith &
science**

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*New techniques,
common materials
meet housing needs*

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Nurturing
FATHTM

BIBLE STUDIES

for adults and youth

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cover photo

Cover photo by John Pierce. Adam De Jong (left), who developed a new interlocking, compressed-earth block system and a machine to make the blocks, works with Phillip Ferguson of First Baptist Church in Jefferson, Ga. These skills will be used to build houses in Liberia, Peru and elsewhere.



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Dirty business:

Adam De Jong (left) and Michael Helms lay compressed-earth blocks made on site. The mortar joints are a simple mixture of dirt (with the right clay content) and water. De Jong compared the adhesion to leaving two wet bars of soap together.



“The whole theme is to take what’s in the village and turn it into construction material in a timely manner.”

—Adam De Jong

More than blocks

New techniques, common materials help address housing needs

JEFFERSON, Ga. — Michael Helms has a heart for Liberia that goes back many years. He has helped Liberian students to study in the U.S. and continues to work closely with the resurrected Ricks Institute, a Baptist school ravished along with much else by civil war in Liberia.

Helms, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson, Ga., has written *Hoping Liberia* (2011, Smyth& Helwys). With proceeds from that book and others, he created the Bricks for Ricks Foundation that, along with donations, helps fund needed housing projects in Liberia and beyond.

“Two-thirds of the people in Liberia were at one time displaced from their homes,” said Helms, of the devastating civil war that ended in 2003.

While in Monrovia, Helms attended a Rotary Club meeting and met another American who was building an orphanage there. He had imported a large earth-block machine from a company in Texas.

Helms wondered if this construction method might help solve some of the great housing needs in Liberia and other parts of the world. He began to explore the challenges and options.

RIGHT MACHINE

Block-making machines are often large and expensive to ship, Helms discovered. And if they are difficult to operate and contain high-tech parts, highly skilled users are required and the machines are difficult to repair in remote places.

“My quest was to find the best machine,” said Helms. “I was looking for the least

amount of breakdown.”

In his research, Helms read about Adam De Jong of the Vermeer Corporation in Pella, Iowa. He had developed a machine with the very goals Helms had in mind. It would be small, durable, and easy to use and repair.

With funds from his foundation and other gifts, Helms placed an order for the first Vermeer BP 714 Block Press.

“Vermeer is a faith-based company,” said Helms, who paid a discounted \$19,400 for the prototype machine for this housing ministry.

BUILDING TOGETHER

The new, redesigned block press arrived in the small Northeast Georgia town of Jefferson in November. It was placed on the church property to be tested — with a small earthen prayer chapel being the visible result.

The larger purposes, however, were to see if the machine could be used effectively by those with little training, produce quality building blocks, hold up to the rigors of high use, and be repaired (if necessary) with simple tools and parts. According to Helms, it passed on all counts.

The little yellow machine became quite a draw. Volunteers from the church and the larger community came to make blocks.

Helms recalled how Habitat for Humanity International founder Millard Fuller often emphasized the building of community, not just houses. That is what happened in Jefferson — and what Helms believes will occur in communities around the world.

“One of the things I’ve always admired about the Habitat for Humanity concept is the coming together of people to build,” he said. “You can’t do this by yourself.”

The Jefferson congregation has discovered the joy of working as well as worshiping together, he said. And others have jumped in as well.

BLOCK-MAKING

“I’m a pastor,” said Helms. “If you can teach me how to run it, you can take it to another country and teach someone else.”

The hand-cranked start and a simple chart showing the steps for operation were among the designs De Jong brought to the machine.

With minimal training, the Jefferson volunteers completed a run of 150 earthen blocks in just two and one-half hours. Hundreds more would follow.

The machine is just one part of the construction process De Jong has improved. He has developed a new block design, too.

“Adam is the brainchild behind the redesign of the block,” said Helms of the interlocking system being used to raise the prayer chapel/construction model.

De Jong said the block needs just 6 to 8 percent Portland cement to mix with the dirt. And the dirt needs to contain 10 to 15 percent clay.

“Red Georgia clay is ideal,” said De Jong, who came to Jefferson for a few days after Thanksgiving to lend a hand. “And in Africa, there is soil just like this.”

The mortar between the blocks is a simple mixture of the same clay and water. The bonding effect, said De Jong, is similar to placing two bars of soap together.

“We designed this block so it is more construction friendly,” said De Jong of the three-dimensional, interlocking system. “It makes for a wall system that goes up a lot faster and, therefore, cheaper.”

Rebar and cement create support columns. Then the exterior is coated with a mixture of cow manure, soaked clay, sand, and a little straw and flour.

A bond beam is added to the top, and roofing is done best by locals.

“They know how to build a thatch roof in Liberia that doesn’t leak — and it’s from the jungle,” said De Jong who emphasizes using locally available material.

DIRTY CHOICES

De Jong not only showed the Georgia volunteers how to use the machine and how to build with the blocks, but also how to find the right materials.

“Soil selection is something Adam has spent a good bit of time with us on,” said Helms.



With significant experience in Third World housing construction, De Jong keeps discovering better methods. He embraced the Compressed Earth Block (CEB) approach after seeing the high price of cinderblocks in Haiti.

But he insists the earthen method is not a step down in quality. The earth blocks coming out of the yellow machine have a 2,500-psi rating, he said. The U.S. code for cement blocks is 1,900.

“I look to see if the dirt, when made into putty, can make a worm smaller than a pencil,” said De Jong of his low-tech method of testing clay content. But he added: “I’m developing a field test kit.”

“The whole theme is to take what’s in the village and turn it into construction material in a timely manner,” he said of his approach.

About one-third of the world lives in earth structures, said De Jong, who has a construction degree with a civil engineering minor. At 26, he is experienced beyond his age.

“I’ve been building since I was about 12,” he said. And he’s had a long interest in “building from your backyard.”

An accident during his senior year in college cost De Jong one eye but caused him to reassess his life and to focus more intently on reducing suffering around the world. His construction skills and ability to improve on long-term building methods became his tools of compassion.

“If you can teach me how to run it, you can take it to another country and teach someone else,” said pastor Michael Helms of the prototype block press.

BEYOND JEFFERSON

Helms said his congregation has ties to mission efforts in Peru and plans to have a block press machine sent there directly from the factory later this year. Volunteers will assist with the training.

Eventually, the first machine will be shipped to Liberia after being used by other interested congregations to gain the experience needed to multiply the construction efforts.

“The last thing I want is for this machine to sit here,” said Helms. He looks forward to volunteers from other churches learning how to select soil, make blocks and then take their knowledge to places in need of affordable, sustainable housing.

Helms said the machines will be put in the hands of locals — in places “where we have relationships already built” — so they can build housing on their own.

“One of the things in missions that we get wrong is that we often impose our own methods,” he said.

A better approach, he said, is to provide the tools and then provide the training and other assistance when invited to do so.

Helms expects many much-needed, high-quality houses to be built by locals and from local materials as a result of this growing effort. But that’s not the only anticipated result.

Reaffirming Millard Fuller’s belief, one of his deacons, Joe Morgan, said of what happened in Jefferson this fall: “This machine builds more than blocks; it builds community.”

BT

For more on Compressed Earth Block (CEB) construction and equipment, and Adam De Jong’s consultation and housing efforts, visit dwellearth.com.

For more on Bricks for Ricks Foundation and the ministries of First Baptist Church of Jefferson, Ga., visit fbcjefferson.org.



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quotation remarks

“I don’t think the Mayans put a picture of Porky Pig at the end of their calendar and said, ‘That’s all, folks!’”

—*Dream interpreter Jefferson Harman of Pompton Lakes, N.J., on end-time prognostications tied to the Mayan calendar that will reach the end of its 5,126 epoch on Dec. 21 this year (RNS)*

“We’re trying to spread the message and content of each church; get outside of their church walls during the week.”

—*Matt McKee, the founder of ROAR, a company that develops custom smartphone apps for churches (Wall Street Journal)*

“I came up with the idea while driving around.”

—*Mark Mitchum, a registered nurse and member of First Baptist Church of Panama City, Fla., who is promoting a simple three-finger hand gesture (associated with the Trinity) he calls “threethrowing” as a way of nonverbal communication between Christians (Baptist Press)*

“Christianity 2.0 will move away from expertise-based systems and arguments over right opinion, and focus more on creating circles of friends seeking God’s presence and help, both in daily life and in the world beyond personal experience.”

—*Religion News Service columnist and Episcopal priest Tom Ehrlich on the reshaping of American Christianity*

“We discovered that when you reach out to people with the love of Jesus, when you truly try to be the presence of Christ with them, their issues become your issues.”

—*Executive Coordinator Larry Hovis on the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina’s continuing discussion of immigration issues after reaching out to the growing Hispanic population in the state (CBFNC)*

“Faith keeps baptism from becoming a purely magic ritual, while baptism keeps faith from deteriorating into a purely individualistic experience, uniting us with Christian community.”

—*Bill Leonard, the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Church History and Baptist Studies at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity (ABP)*

“It’s my hope that many of you will join with me in re-digging these old wells, embracing a calendar that doesn’t honor just fathers, mothers, veterans, and Presidents — as worthy as these things are in their own right — but which also recognizes and celebrates the fully orbed life that Jesus lived for your salvation and mine.”

—*Eugene Curry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Granada Hills, Calif., inviting Southern Baptists to give attention to the Christian Year including Advent and Lent (Baptist Press)*

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“Some analysts have been concerned that those who have active spiritual lives might not be as engaged with the secular world. We see the opposite. Those who are religiously active are more likely to participate in all kinds of groups and more likely to feel good about their communities. Those who are active in religious groups seem to be joiners. They also are active users of technology.”

—*Jim Jansen, author of a report on the recent survey findings of the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project*

Does growing religious diversity bring out our best or worst?

Many of us American Christians have never known what it is like to be anything other than the dominant faith tradition. And the lessening of such dominance can be threatening.

As religious diversity increases in our nation, even in rural communities, some of us are handling it better than others.

I am always saddened by strident Christian voices that demand preferential treatment based on faulty arguments about America's founding or the more childish expressions that sound like, "But I had it first!"

Even worse are the ugly denunciations of all faith traditions other than one's own — as if someone can be won over to Christianity through unchristian attitudes and behaviors.

"Religious pluralism" has become a common but rather confusing term because it is used in more than one way.

For some it is taken to mean that all religions are equally true. It's just a matter of personal preference.

But who could imagine anyone making a deep faith commitment to something believed to be only "as good as all others"? Such an understanding would diminish all faith traditions.

More often, "religious pluralism" is a simple acknowledgement of the many religions that exist in a society.

While some may add a note of tolerance, religious pluralism is usually just another way to speak of religious diversity.

Those of us with deeply held religious beliefs should never be expected to accept the faith tenets of another religion uncritically or to reduce our own beliefs to being no more truthful than what anyone else might believe.

But there is a significant difference between holding firmly to one's personal beliefs as being more truthful than all others and acting superior to or dismissive toward persons who might hold another faith perspective.

Too many American Christians have

created a false choice between holding deep, personal faith convictions and being loving and gracious to those of other faiths. And that graciousness requires a firm embrace of the religious freedom that has been the hallmark of the American (and Baptist) experience.

So how do we do that?

For one, we show respect for persons of other faith traditions even if we can't imagine how anyone could believe such stuff. Doing so in no way diminishes our own beliefs.

Two, seeking preferential treatment by the government (at any level) of a dominant faith tradition harms the religious liberty of all of us and implies that our faith needs to be propped up by outside sources. Even a little coercion of faith is too much.

Three, if attributes such as love, mercy, grace, hope and joy are in any way central to the religious faith we claim, let us be sure they show through in the way we relate to all persons. Otherwise, people might well assume that the faith we claim to hold so dear and defend so strongly makes no real difference in our lives after all — and choose another or none at all. **BT**





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Bin Laden's death rated top religion news story last year

By Josef Kuhn
Religion News Service

The death of Osama bin Laden and the reactions it produced among people of faith was rated the No. 1 religion news story of 2011 by the nation's leading religion journalists.

The Religion Newswriters Association (RNA) polls its members annually to compile a list of the top 10 religion stories of the year. About 90 religion beat specialists took the poll for 2011.

The al-Qaida leader's death topped the ranks because of the national discussion it sparked among people of faith on issues of forgiveness, peace, justice and retribution.

The No. 2 story was a series of controversial congressional hearings focused on American Muslims. Hearings were held in the House on the alleged radicalization of U.S. Muslims, and in the Senate on hate crimes reported against U.S. Muslims.

RNA also usually names a Religion Newsmaker of the Year, but did not do so in 2011 because of a virtual three-way tie between failed doomsday evangelist Harold Camping, Pope Benedict XVI and Texas Gov. Rick Perry.

Rounding out the 10 religion news stories in 2011 were as follows:

3. Catholic Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City, Mo., is charged with failure to report the suspected abuse of a child, becoming the first active bishop in the country to face criminal prosecution in such a case.

4. The Catholic Church introduces a new translation of the Roman Missal throughout the English-speaking world, making the first significant change to a liturgy since 1973.



5. The Presbyterian Church (USA) allows local option on ordination of partnered gay people.

6. Pope John Paul II is beatified in May.

7. California evangelist Harold Camping attracts attention with his predictions that the world would end in May and again in October.

8. A book by Michigan megachurch pastor Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, presenting a much less harsh picture of hell than is traditional, stirs discussion in evangelical circles.

9. The Personhood Initiative, designed to outlaw abortion by declaring a fetus a person, fails on Election Day in Mississippi, but advocates plan to try in other states.

10. Bible translations make news, with celebrations of the 400th anniversary of the King James Version; criticism about gender usage in the newest New International Version; and completion of the Common English Bible. **BT**

Assemblies of God exceeds goal of starting a church a day

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

The Assemblies of God, one of the nation's largest Pentecostal denominations, opened more than a church a day last year.

In all, 368 new churches opened in 2011, the denomination said. That total marks the second highest number of church starts since it began keeping reliable statistics in 1965.

Factoring in church closures, there are now 12,595 Assemblies of God congregations

in the country, the highest ever recorded.

"One of our strategic values is to vigorously plant new churches," said Assemblies of God General Superintendent George O. Wood, who was quoted by his denomination's news service. "Our goal was to plant a church a day in 2011. It was exciting to see how God helped us meet — and then exceed — that goal."

He hopes more than 400 U.S. churches will be started in 2012, and ultimately, at least 500 annually.

Denominational officials reported that 230 churches closed in 2011. Wood said there were only two years in the last decade when the denomination saw fewer than 230 church closures.

"Overall, we had a net gain of 138 churches," Wood said. "That stands as our 11th highest net gain of churches."

The denomination, which includes 3 million U.S. members, has a "Church Multiplication Network" that supports church planters with training and funding. **BT**

Poll finds nearly 80 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

More than three-quarters of Americans identify themselves as Christian, Gallup reports. Pollsters found that 78 percent of Americans identify with Christianity.

Overall, more than 82 percent of Americans have a religious identity, with this breakdown:

- Protestant/other Christian: 52.5 percent
- Catholic: 23.6 percent
- Mormon: 1.9 percent
- Jewish: 1.6 percent
- Muslim: 0.5 percent
- Other non-Christian religion: 2.4 percent
- None/atheist/agnostic: 15 percent
- No response: 2.5 percent

The findings fit the trend of an increasing percentage of Americans who do not embrace a formal religious identity. In 1951,

one percent of Americans did not have a religious identity, compared to 24 percent identifying as Catholic and 68 percent claiming a non-Catholic Christian faith.

Gallup found earlier this year that 92 percent of Americans say they believe in God, which suggests that a lack of religious identity is not necessarily linked to atheism.

The results of the religious preference survey are based on 327,244 interviews conducted between January and November 2011. **BT**

New Bible commentary promotes ‘complementarian’ gender roles

By Bob Allen
Associated Baptist Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — A Bible commentary by women and for women is now out in Old and New Testament volumes that seek to counter a prevailing view of women’s equality in the church and home.

The two-volume *Women’s Evangelical Commentary*, published by LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention, starts with the premise that most modern Bible translations and commentaries are distorted by “21st century social agendas,” particularly feminism.

“God has created men and women equal in worth and value but very different in our role and function,” managing editor Rhonda Kelley said in an interview promoting the newly released Old Testament volume Dec. 31 on the radio program *Richard Land Live*. “Rather than fighting that as Christian women, we need to understand that God created us to be women for a very special purpose.”

A product description says that other women’s commentaries advocate an “egalitarian” theology of the sexes — that men and women are created equal in every way. The *Women’s Evangelical Commentary* counters with a “complementarian” view of gender — women and men are equal before God but in the home and church husbands are to lead and wives submit.

Kelley, wife of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary President Chuck Kelley and daughter of the famed “chaplain of Bourbon Street” evangelist Bob Harrington, said the intent is to instruct modern women in “what biblical womanhood is all about, not

just what the world says about women.”

Kelley said many females arriving to study at Southern Baptist seminaries today have no biblical framework to prepare them for what they will learn there about women’s roles.

“Not only do they not have a framework, but in many situations our women students have been raised by mothers who were a product of the feminist movement,” Kelley said. “And so even their Christian mothers didn’t fully understand what it meant to be biblical women and they were rebelling with the world, with the culture, against a role that they thought women were being forced into.”

Kelley said when confronted with the contrast between “what the Bible teaches about us as women” and “what the world’s perspective has been,” students often are just “stunned” by the difference.

“Really, feminism has crept within our churches and even into our seminary homes,” she said. “And so many times there is great freedom as they discover who really God created us to be.”

Along with learning aids for use either in individual devotion or group Bible study, the women-to-women commentary gives attention to passages that general commentaries would consider obscure.

For example, the *Women’s Evangelical Commentary: Old Testament* treats passages in the Old Testament that forbid boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk.

“There are not many people who even care about that, but it does have to do with maternity,” said co-editor Dorothy Patterson, wife of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson.

Patterson, professor of theology in women’s studies at the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said another example is a women’s reading of the Book of Esther.

On the one hand, she said, there is “a section on beauty treatments and what Esther went through and the archaeological evidence that shows exactly what that is.” Then turn the page, “and you find our first excursus on submission.”

“Most people don’t think about submission as being a topic in the Book of Esther, but it is clearly in the text,” Patterson said. “I think our readers will find it interesting to see how you take the Old Testament roots for something that is very heavily discussed in the New Testament.” **BT**



U.K. Christians lose ground as culture of unbelief grows

By Al Webb
Religion News Service

LONDON — Christians in England and Wales are losing ground about as fast as nonbelievers are gaining it, according to a new government-sponsored poll.

The British government’s latest Citizenship Survey reports that in the five years leading up to 2010, the percentage of declared Christians in the region dropped by 7 percent to 70 percent.

Meanwhile, the total of those declaring no religion climbed by 6 percent, to 21 percent over the same period, the poll indicated.

It was the sixth such study since the Citizenship Survey was set up in 2001 by the government of then-Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Current Prime Minister David Cameron’s government has ordered an end to the Citizenship Survey project, on financial grounds. Officials say each survey’s 4 million-pound cost (about \$6.2 million) was too much as Britain is forced to tighten its belt.

The survey found that Christians were more than half as likely as Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus to actually practice their religion. Religious practice grew among Muslims, from 73 percent in 2005 to 79 percent in 2009-10.

The latest poll was based on questionnaires answered by some 10,000 men and women, including 5,000 Muslims and other minorities. **BT**



Queen Esther, by Andrea del Castagno ca. 1448.

‘Cut & paste’

Thomas Jefferson’s controversial patchwork Bible back in view

WASHINGTON — How would you feel about taking a razor blade to a Bible? Thomas Jefferson, apparently, didn’t have any qualms about it.

In his retirement, the nation’s third president carried out a project he had contemplated for years: he literally cut and pasted passages from the four Gospels into one integrated narrative of Jesus’ life — minus the miracles and supernatural events.

The result, he said, was “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.” Judging by the wear and tear on the book, it appears Jefferson read it regularly.

Known as “The Jefferson Bible,” the 84-page patchwork book is on display at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History through May 28. Smithsonian Books has released a commemorative full-color edition, and Tarcher/Penguin has published a pocket-sized version.

The exhibit is the first time the book has been shown publicly since it underwent a meticulous conservation process. When the pages were removed from the binding for treatment, they were also photographed, so that the entire book can now be viewed in high-resolution digital images on the museum’s website.

Curator Harry Rubenstein said the book can be controversial, but it depends on how you look at it.

“It’s either a statement that strips out the divinity of Jesus ... or it’s a distillation of his moral philosophy,” Rubenstein said.

Jefferson cut passages from six different Bibles, in English, French, Latin and Greek. He left behind any elements that he could not support through reason or that he believed were later embellishments, including the Resurrection.

The politician in Jefferson well understood



(RNS) Thomas Jefferson cut and pasted portions of all four Gospels -- minus any miracles or unexplained events — for the “Jefferson Bible,” currently on display at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. Religion News Service photo by Hugh Talman/The Smithsonian Institution.

the scandal that such a project could cause. He kept it secret until his death in 1826, although he confided his religious views in contemporaries such as John Adams and Benjamin Rush, a signer of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence.

A champion of religious freedom and the father of the American tradition of “separation of church and state,” Jefferson was denounced as an anti-Christian and an atheist by political opponents throughout his career.

The accusations were unfounded, scholars say. In 1803, two years after taking office, Jefferson said, “I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other.”

“Jefferson’s basically a deist,” said Joseph Ellis, a Pulitzer Prize-winning historian at Mount Holyoke College. “(He) thinks that Jesus is really a neat guy — like Socrates; we can learn a lot from him. But he’s not the Son of God.”

Ellis noted that he has experienced a lot of resistance from those who don’t wish to see one of the leading Founding Fathers as anything other than a devout Christian.

Ellis, who added a page on Jefferson’s religious views to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, said, “I can’t tell you how many hits I’ve gotten. I’ve got thousands of people trying to kill me, you know?”

The reaction reflects a trend among politicians and pundits to try to draft Jefferson and

the other Founding Fathers into contemporary culture wars.

For instance, last year broadcaster Glenn Beck hosted David Barton to talk about the Founding Fathers. Barton is the founder of WallBuilders, a conservative group that aims “to educate the public concerning the periods in our country’s history when its laws and policies were firmly rooted in biblical principles.”

On the show, Barton argued that most of the Founding Fathers were more devout than people tend to think they were. Jefferson, for example, signed his presidential documents with the words “in the year of our Lord Christ,” he said, and in 1800 started holding church services in the U.S. Capitol.

On the other hand, atheists have recently tried to claim Jefferson as one of their own. In a park in Santa Monica, Calif., a display was set up this year alongside rival Nativity scenes that quotes Jefferson: “Religions are all alike — founded upon fables and mythologies.”

Ellis said Jefferson, like most of the Founding Fathers, was not a devout Christian.

George Washington was “a lukewarm Episcopalian” and James Madison was “sort of like Jefferson,” he said. “(Alexander) Hamilton was sort of an agnostic until the end, when his son got shot in a duel, and then he started to become a Christian.”

So which was he, Christian hero or skeptical heretic? Even Jefferson himself seemed to have trouble answering the question: “I am of a sect by myself,” he once said, “as far as I know.” **BT**

Death penalty opposition grows with options

EDITOR: Thank you for the article about the death penalty (December issue, page 10). Like the author, I am encouraged by the fact that the public's opposition to the death penalty has been rising for four decades.

The author reported on a Gallup poll showing that 35 percent of Americans are opposed to the death penalty. In fact, the news is even better than that.

Last year the Death Penalty Information Center commissioned Lake Research Partners to conduct one of the largest studies ever made of public opinion about the death penalty. They asked 1,500 registered voters which one of four penalties they prefer for people who commit murder.

Here are the four penalties and the results of the survey:

- Death: 33 percent chose this option.
- Life with the possibility of parole: 9 percent
- Life without the possibility of parole: 13 percent
- Life without the possibility of parole plus the

inmate works to make restitution to the victim's family: 39 percent

- No response: 6 percent.

(For more on the survey, see <http://www.deathpenaltyinfo.org/public-opinion-about-death-penalty>).

This means that, although only 35 percent of Americans say they oppose the death penalty, when offered other options, 67 percent choose another option rather than the death penalty.

People oppose the death penalty for a variety of reasons. Some feel it is barbaric and unworthy of modern societies (indeed, most industrially developed societies have abolished it; the nations that lead the world in executions are China, Iran, North Korea, Yemen and the United States, in that order).

Some are concerned about the risk of executing an innocent person (since 1973, 139 persons in the United States have been released from death row because their conviction was overturned and the charges against them were dropped, or they were tried again and acquitted, or else a governor granted them a pardon because of new evidence of their innocence).

Some are convinced the death penalty

cannot be administered justly because factors such as race and poverty invariably affect the process. Some are concerned about the massive costs of execution (it is much more expensive to execute than to give a sentence of life without parole; one recent study showed that California is spending \$100 million more per year than it would have to spend if it commuted the sentences of its death row inmates to life without parole, and another showed that Florida is spending \$51 million more).

These are good reasons for opposing the death penalty, but something else is decisive for me. Jesus said, "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Whatever else the death penalty is, it is not merciful.

I know that good, intelligent people disagree about the death penalty. I am glad public opinion is turning against it. I think that is what Jesus wants us to do.

Fisher Humphreys, Birmingham, Ala.

—Humphreys is professor of divinity, emeritus, of Samford University and a member of the Baptists Today board of directors.

His e-mail address is fisherhumphreys@gmail.com.

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Led by Natalie Aha, Communications Specialist for the Center. Natalie is also a communications specialist for the Associated Baptist Press and Alabama CBF. She is a coach for SocialPhonics, teaching social media to ministers. She is earning her Masters in Interactive Communication.

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Confronting the elephant in the sanctuary

By Christopher R. Gambill

The "elephant in the room" is a metaphor used to describe an issue that we know is real, but no one wants to talk about. For Christians, the more helpful metaphor and question may be, "Is there an elephant in the sanctuary?"

It appears that recently there has been an elephant invasion. I have encountered several in my work with congregations.

Perhaps one of the following elephants is in your sanctuary:

- "We are in conflict, but everyone's afraid to admit it."
- "Attendance at worship and programs is steadily declining."
- "It feels like we are just drifting along without any sense of direction or purpose."
- "Our buildings have become our biggest burden, but we don't want to give them up."
- "Our leadership structures aren't working anymore, but we're afraid to change them for fear of upsetting someone."
- "Almost everyone here is over 50, and we may not have a long-term future."
- "Money is getting tighter with every passing year, but we don't want to make hard choices about how we spend it."
- "We want to be faithful and missional, but there aren't enough volunteers."
- "We want to be faithful as a congregation, but we don't want to make any changes that would be uncomfortable."
- "We need to have an honest conversation about our situation, but we're afraid we can't talk without fighting."

These elephants are pretty common, but you may have a somewhat different one inhabiting your sanctuary. Regardless of which elephant you have, though, it is an unwelcome guest.

The first step in getting rid of it is to honestly admit as a congregation that you have been allowing one to live in your sanctuary. This seemingly simple step can be surprisingly difficult to take.

Leaders also need the ability to remain calm, objective and aware of what's happening in the group itself.

Most congregations are loath to turn a critical eye towards themselves. It's one thing to recognize the elephant in someone else's sanctuary but quite a challenge to recognize the one in yours.

In general, we had rather play the role of the prophet Nathan ("Thou art the man!") than David, the recipient of the prophet's hard words.

There is a common myth in congregations that keeps elephants alive and well. It is the myth that talking about a difficult subject will make it worse.

In my experience, talking about a difficult issue does not make it worse. It just makes people *feel* worse when they begin the conversation.

If you really want to evict the elephant from your sanctuary, the most effective strategy is to name it and begin a constructive conversation about solving the problem.

The critical word in my last sentence is "constructive." A constructive conversation begins by naming the problem — not by placing blame on a scapegoat for allegedly causing it or not fixing it.

The unfortunate but common tendency when congregations finally get tired of living with their elephant is to find a convenient scapegoat. This approach does nothing to solve the problem and can easily polarize a congregation around the "blamed" and the "blamers."

Problem solving can only occur by focusing on the problem and seeking to create solutions under the leadership of the Spirit. Constructive conversations about elephants need a thoughtful

structure if they are to be productive.

Unfortunately, this also seems to run counter to the first impulse of many congregations. A common first strategy is to have a "town hall meeting." More times than not, such meetings end up in a shouting match that reinforces the myth that talking about a difficult thing makes it worse.

Simply inviting a large group of people into a room to talk usually means you will hear from the extroverts who enjoy talking, the people who are the most angry or upset, and those who want desperately for everyone to get along and the problem to go away.

Tackling a real elephant — an emotionally charged or complex issue for which there is no easy solution — requires structure that encourages those who are not usually inclined to speak out to have a voice in the conversation. Often, these may be the people you most need to hear from.

Finally, congregations need mature leaders who can keep an elephant conversation "in bounds." Leaders need the capacity to stand up in a tension-filled room and not succumb to panic or reactive behavior when the conversation gets uncomfortable.

They also need genuine faith — both in themselves and in God — to be able to say to the group, "I believe through the gift of God's Spirit we can work together to solve our problem."

Leaders also need the ability to remain calm, objective and aware of what's happening in the group itself. There are cases where an elephant is so big and scary that a congregation needs an objective outsider (such as a consultant/facilitator) to help the members have a constructive conversation. Regardless, however, the elephant won't leave until the congregation can begin the conversation about how to evict it.

The good news is that no matter how long you have had one in your sanctuary, it's never too late to start the eviction process. A sanctuary should be an elephant-free zone. **BT**

—Chris Gambill is manager of congregational health services for the Center for Congregational Health.



Pastoral leadership: Sayles encourages a ‘genuine partnership’ between pastors, congregations

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Baptists should not let their commitment to freedom and equality get in the way of valuable leadership, says Guy Sayles, pastor of First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C.

Sayles teaches a seminar on leadership and serves as a field supervisor for the doctor of ministry program at Gardner-Webb University’s School of Divinity.

“Among moderate and progressive Baptists, leadership is legitimately and rightly complicated by our commitments to freedom and equality,” Sayles said. “We want to energize and encourage a genuine partnership between laity and clergy, and we have an allergy to any kind of ‘authority’ which is even subtly manipulative or which erodes the priesthood of all believers and congregational self-determination.”

Baptist fundamentalists and hard-line conservatives often stress pastoral authority and top-down leadership styles. Sayles said he thinks some moderate and progressive church leaders have overreacted to the concern about authoritarian or dictatorial leadership.

The result, he said, has been a tendency toward “weak consensus” where little gets done unless almost everyone agrees: “I think some people have become too passive.”

Sayles said congregations should be clear about the roles they want clergy and lay leaders to play. Churches should entrust their leaders with those roles, he said.

“It’s not a power grab as much as an assumption of responsibility,” he said.

Sayles said that shortly after he became pastor of the Asheville congregation, he discovered the need to bring ideas to church leaders. But he also had to be ready for those suggestions to be modified or set aside, he said.

“They wanted someone to be part of the process and lead the process,” he said.

Sayles said there are good reasons to avoid “command and control” styles of leadership.

“As much as possible, we want to flatten hierarchies and widen circles of participation in leadership and ministry,” he said. “These commitments can, if we’re not careful and intentional, generate inertia and passivity in leaders.”

Sayles said Baptist leaders should take the initiative needed to articulate vision and facilitate discernment. Leaders should make

proposals, encourage accountability and evaluate effectiveness, he said.

“We need to be sure our commitment to freedom doesn’t prevent our exercising the responsibility of our leadership roles,” he said. “And, as we help others find their voices, we need to be sure not to lose our own.”

Sayles said larger Baptist groups — such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — must give attention to leadership as well as to avoid simply settling for the status quo.

“As a 54-year-old white male, I can say that I am concerned that we don’t listen enough to the voices of younger leaders and potential leaders, of women, and of ethnic minorities,” he said. “There’s a difference between having diverse groups ‘represented’ and having (them) meaningfully ‘involved’ and ‘heard.’”

Sayles sees three possible ways to improve leadership among moderate and progressive Baptists.

First, he said leaders should pay attention by listening, observing, feeling and taking-in what happens in their context and culture.

Second, they should practice discernment by praying, pondering, and engaging in conversation with other leaders about what God might be saying and doing.

“The conversations need to be wide-ranging and deliberate, including as many voices and perspectives as possible,” Sayles said.

Third, leaders should speak up. They

need to take the initiative to articulate vision, set agendas, make proposals, encourage others, model accountability and evaluate results, he said.

Sayles said the leadership seminar he teaches focuses on what it means to be a leader in the context of a relationship with Jesus. The classes include lessons on family systems theory and corporate leadership practices.

Sayles said the family systems theory shows the strong relationship between the health and functioning of a leader and the health and functioning of a congregation. It stresses the importance of leaders being clear about their beliefs and connected to people, but not anxious, he said. As the leader demonstrates those traits, the system will eventually change.

“It’s about changing the system, not only getting things done,” he said.

Seminar students also study the concept of “adaptive leadership” described in Ronald Heifetz’s book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*. And they use Jim Collins’ *Good to Great and the Social Sectors* to look at appropriate ways congregations can use corporate models of leadership.

Congregational leaders should look critically for what they can learn from corporate leadership, instead of rejecting or accepting those practices in knee-jerk fashion, Sayles said.

He is concerned that many ministerial students are looking outside congregational life for places of service. “Church life isn’t always as attractive to them as I wish it was,” he said.

Sayles said he has been impressed with the students he works with, particularly the skills and giftedness he’s seen in women.

“I’m hopeful about the future,” he said. **BT**



Guy Sayles

Classifieds

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church of Columbia, Mo. (fbc-columbia.org), a progressive church with 188 years of ministry in the downtown of a vibrant college community of 100,000, seeks a gifted preacher and leader to partner with the congregation in ministry and mission. FBC has 500-plus members and an average worship attendance of 175 with Sunday contemporary and traditional services. Mission partners are ABC, CBF and Alliance of Baptists. The church has completed a self-study process. To apply, please submit résumé and cover letter to PastorSearch@fbc-columbia.org. Questions may be addressed to the search committee co-chairs Charles Hunter (573-864-2050 / charles.hunter@mchsi.com) or Nick Kieffer (573-489-7325 / dadnickieffer@gmail.com).

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church of Monroe, N.C. (monroefirstbaptist.org), affiliated with the Union Baptist Association, CBFNC and CBF, is seeking a senior pastor. We are a fellowship of free and faithful Baptist Christians committed to a journey of serious study, intentional worship, loving and compassionate fellowship, and hands-on ministry. We have just completed a 12-month transition process and self-study. A seminary degree is required, and senior pastor experience is preferred. Send résumés, including references,

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WMUNC Interim Executive Director/Treasurer: Woman's Missionary Union of North Carolina is seeking an interim executive director/treasurer to direct the work of staff, manage budgets, assist with planning and executing events, and build relationships among Baptist churches statewide. Candidates must possess a working knowledge of WMU, including a broad scope of ministry and missions; be mature in the Christian faith and involved in a local church; hold a bachelor's degree (master's degree preferred); and have 3-5 years of progressive work experience in a related field. Strong management, organizational and computer skills are required. Please send résumés by Feb. 20 to Tana Hartsell at WMUNC, P.O. Box 18309, Raleigh, NC 27619-8308 or htana@carolina.rr.com.

In the Know

Jim Dant resigned as pastor of Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., to become a full-time partner in FaithLab, a creative services firm, Feb. 13. He is available to churches and other organizations as a speaker and consultant.

David Hardage was elected executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas during a called meeting of the BGCT executive board meeting Jan. 12. He is director of development for Baylor's Truett Seminary and former director of the Waco Regional Baptist Association. His pastoral experience includes the First Baptist churches of Sulphur Springs, Holliday and Blum, Texas, and First Baptist Church in Weatherford, Okla.

W. Francis McBeth, an internationally acclaimed composer and conductor and longtime professor of music at Ouachita Baptist University, died Jan. 6, at age 78. He also served as conductor of the Arkansas Symphony and as Arkansas' composer laureate, the first composer laureate named in the United States.

Cherith Fee Nordling joins the faculty of Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Ill., as associate professor of theology.

Robin Norsworthy has resigned as pastor of University Baptist Church in Montevallo, Ala.

Mike Oliver is pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Madison, Ala., coming from Williams First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Ala.

New officers for American Baptist Churches USA are **Ruth Clark**, president; **Don Ng**, vice president; and **James R. Ratliff**, budget review officer.

John Rogers is minister to students at First Baptist Church of Fort Payne, Ala. He is a 2010 graduate of Mercer's McAfee School of Theology.

Weston Ware received the T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Award from the Maston Foundation. He is the retired director of citizenship and public policy with the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, and a longtime anti-gambling activist. **BT**



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Popular Bible teacher and writer **Tony W. Cartledge** writes each of the weekly Bible studies in *Baptists Today* (beginning on page 18). Themes are based on selected texts from the Revised Common Lectionary.

These lessons — found exclusively in this Nurturing Faith section of *Baptists Today* — form the foundation for the teaching resources for all age groups. **Each class participant should have a copy of *Baptists Today* with these lessons in hand.**

Christian educator **Rick Jordan** of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina provides a teaching plan for each lesson, available at nurturingfaith.net. His FIT FAITH approach to teaching allows for class engagement with the biblical texts as well as with one another.

The Youth Lessons — found on pages 22-23 — build off of Tony's Bible studies and direct these biblical truths to the daily lives of students. Curriculum developer **David Cassady** writes the youth lessons in the news journal, and student minister **Jeremy Colliver** provides the online teaching guides for each lesson found at nurturingfaith.net (or linked from baptiststoday.org).

Thanks sponsors!

These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (Bo Prosser, Coordinator of Congregational Life) and from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!

Bible Study

Gen. 17:1-27

with Tony W. Cartledge

March 4, 2012

Yes, I Did Promise ...

Each lesson for March deals with an Old Testament text involving a covenant or agreement between God and the community of faith. The stories testify that God, in various ways, has sought to build relationships of grace and trust with humankind.

Try to remember a time when you were promised something, but had to wait for it. Were you promised a new bike for Christmas? The privilege of dating when you turned 16? A car when you graduated from high school?

Perhaps you had to wait for weeks, or months. Can you imagine waiting 25 years for a promise to be fulfilled? To hold on to the hope of a promise-come-true, you would probably require periodic assurances from the one who made the promise. This is precisely where we find old Abram as we read Genesis 17. God had made promises to Abram many years before, and the would-be patriarch had been waiting for a long time.

Great promises (vv. 1-8)

The Old Testament lectionary text for today is Gen. 17:1-7, 15-16, but we'll understand the story better if we take a look at the entire chapter. God promises something very big — but also looks for a big response.

God had first called Abram, promising to make of him a great nation, when he was 75 years old. After 10 years of waiting, Abram's wife Sarai urged him to father a child by her handmaid Hagar, resulting in the birth of Ishmael



when Abram was 86. This story reportedly takes place 13 years later, leaving the aged Abram just one year shy of 100. 🇺

Something new is happening in this text, and it is marked by three new names and a new practice: God self-identifies with the previously unknown name “El Shaddai,” assigns new names to both Abram and Sarai, and institutes circumcision as a sign of covenant belonging.

God called Abram to “walk before me, and be blameless” (v. 1). To walk before God is to faithfully follow God's way. The second imperative, “be blameless,” follows the first. The word does not imply perfection so much as integrity. Abram is to be wholly devoted to God.

“I will make my covenant between me and you” (v. 2a, NRSV) is literally “I will give my covenant ...” The terminology indicates that God's offer is not a mutual agreement between equal parties: God offers the covenant; Abram can accept and follow.

Within the covenant, God promises to make Abram “exceedingly

numerous” (literally, “I will multiply you muchly, muchly”).

Faced with the awesome presence and promises of God, Abram flung himself to the ground, saying nothing (v. 3). Indeed, he won't make a sound until v. 17, when he again falls on his face — and laughs.

God's covenant includes a part for God (v. 4-8), a part for Abram (v. 9-14) and a part for Sarai (v. 15-22). God's part includes a promise to make Abram the ancestor of “a multitude of nations” (v. 4), the giving of a new name (Abraham) to emphasize his new status (v. 5) and the promise that his numerous descendants would include kings (v. 6). 🇺

The promise would be extended to Abraham's offspring “throughout their generations as an everlasting covenant” in which God promised “to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (v. 7).

How are we to understand this covenant? God makes what appears to be an unconditional promise, but there is an implied expectation that Abraham and his offspring are to be faithful and

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walk before God as partners within the covenant. Later in the conversation, God will assert that all who fail to acknowledge the covenant through circumcision “shall be cut off from his people” (v. 14, where there is an interesting play on words: those who refuse to cut off their foreskins will be cut off from the covenant community).

An earlier covenant story gave much emphasis to the promise of land (15:17-21), but here land is mentioned in v. 8 alone. This account also recognizes that Abraham dwelt in the land as an alien; only later would his offspring possess it.

Great expectations (vv. 9-14)

With v. 8 we come to Abraham’s part, introduced by “As for you ...” While God gave the covenant, Abraham and his descendants were to keep it. “... you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring throughout their generations.” The word for “keep” is *shamar*, a term that could also describe responsibilities involved in keeping sheep. It implies faithful actions of watching, observing and preserving the command to walk faithfully before God, living with integrity.

There is more involved than the call to faithful behavior, however: God instructs Abraham to adopt male circumcision for his household as a physical sign to indicate membership within God’s covenant people.

Note the detailed repetition in vv. 10-14. The author/s of the Priestly material were especially interested in cultic rituals and regulations. Not only was Abraham to circumcise himself, but also his sons and any slaves born in his house or that he had purchased.

The unapologetic references to slaves may leave us feeling a bit uncomfortable, though we recognize that the text was written within a culture that had different sensibilities and customs from our own. Even so, the text suggests a remarkable inclusivity: those who were circumcised were regarded as members of the covenant community

— even slaves who had been purchased from foreigners.

Great hopes (vv. 15-22)

This covenant, more than others, spells out Sarah’s role as a progenitor of the chosen people. Her part is introduced by “As for Sarah, your wife ...” (v. 15: as with Abraham in v. 9, the English words “as for” have no Hebrew equivalent, but are added for clarity).

Like Abraham, Sarah is to be called by a new name to mark a new stage in her life (v. 15): old Sarah is destined for motherhood. The promise to Sarah echoes the promises made to Abraham in v. 6: “I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her” (v. 16).^U

Having earlier prostrated himself in awe (v. 3), Abraham again falls on his face, but this time with incredulous laughter, wondering if a 100-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman long past menopause could possibly conceive a child (v. 17). Abraham’s laughter — to be echoed later by Sarah (18:10-15), foreshadows the birth of the promised son, who God declares is to be named Isaac (v. 19). “Isaac” means “he laughed.”^U

Abraham still had hopes for his son Ishmael, so he prayed “Oh, that Ishmael might live in your sight” (v. 18). God insisted, however, that the child of the promise was yet to be born. Abraham and Sarah would have a son, his name would be Isaac, and God would establish his “eternal covenant” with him and his offspring (v. 19).

Though Isaac is to be the chosen one, the text insists that God also has a place for the “unchosen” — Ishmael would also become “fruitful and exceedingly numerous,” the father of 12 tribal chiefs and “a great nation” (v. 20). Just as Jews trace their ancestry to Abraham through Isaac, many

Arabic Muslims trace their ancestry to Abraham through Ishmael.

The story concludes God’s visit to Abraham with a concrete prediction that Sarah would give birth to Isaac “at this season next year” (v. 21). The word for “season” means “an appointed time.” The promise of a son for Sarah was no longer abstract: it was on the calendar.

Great obedience (vv. 23-27)

The story closes with a monotonously detailed account of how Abraham obeyed God’s command to circumcise himself and all the males of his household.^U

Abraham is said to have wielded the knife himself, an exercise that would have taken quite a while (ch. 13 asserts that 318 members of Abraham’s household had military training, which implies there were hundreds of males to circumcise). The emphasis on the ritual and repetitive detail is typical of the Priestly writer: Ishmael’s circumcision is described no less than three times, and for everyone else it is mentioned twice (vv. 23-26).

Circumcision is a physical sign, but not ordinarily a public one. It serves as a daily reminder to the individual. Circumcision doesn’t guarantee that one is faithful any more than baptism guarantees that one will follow Christ. Yet, it was a constant and ineradicable reminder of covenant obligation.

It is significant to note that Ishmael and all male members of Abraham’s extended household were circumcised, even though Ishmael was not the one chosen to become the progenitor of the chosen people, and servants within the household were not even related by blood. In this way, the extension of circumcision to others shows an openness and inclusiveness to outsiders as well as insiders. This divine desire for inclusiveness would later become manifest in the birth of another son — a descendant of Abraham and Sarah — whose advent would be “good news of great joy for all people” (Luke 2:10).

We’re included, too. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Exod. 20:1-17

March 11, 2012

Here's the Deal ...

Living in our post-modern society sometimes feels like treading water in a sea of moral chaos. We long for a firmly anchored buoy to keep us afloat or a sturdy boat to carry us ashore. We find just such an anchor in Exodus 20, the covenantal text we think of as the “Ten Commandments.” The commandments are not just negative demands, but God’s guidelines for healthy relationships. If we want to live in fellowship with God and others, here’s the deal ...

The God who speaks (v. 1)

When Moses brought the Israelites to Sinai, he instructed them to cleanse their hearts and prepare for an encounter with the God who had delivered them from Egypt and called them into a covenant relationship (see Exod 19: 1-17). As Israel stood trembling before the mountain, Yahweh appeared in a great theophany signaled by fire and thick smoke, a trembling of the earth, and the piercing wail of a ram’s horn blowing louder and louder. 📌

As millions of hairs stood up on thousands of terrified arms and necks, Yahweh spoke what Israel came to remember as “The Ten Words” (so Exod. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4: translations read “Ten Commandments,” but the Hebrew is “Ten Words”).

Relating to God (vv. 2-8)

The Decalogue (from the Latin for “Ten Words”) constitutes the heart



of the law that governed Israel’s self-understanding. The text falls into two obvious sections: four commands describing a proper relationship with God, followed by six precepts for relating to other persons. Note the order: sound relationships with other people grow from a vital relationship with God.

God’s message to Israel begins with the self-revelation “I am Yahweh.” Yahweh was God’s personal name (translated as LORD, see Exod. 3:13-15). “I am Yahweh” is a reminder of who God is, even as “your god” reminds the Israelites of who they are, the people of Yahweh, the people whom Yahweh had delivered from Egypt.

The first commandment acknowledges this: “you shall have no other gods before me” (v. 3). At this point, monotheism had not fully developed. Thus, the command doesn’t really mean “You shall acknowledge me as the only God,” as we often assume, but means exactly what it says: Yahweh is to hold first place in Israel’s worship, despite the common belief that other gods existed.

The next three guidelines for life as Yahweh’s people describe how Israel

is (and is not) to show devotion to God. This is one of several commandments that show evidence of expansion through the years. The original command was probably something like “You shall not make any shaped image ...” Scholars have debated whether the original intent was for Israel to eschew images representing other gods, or to refrain from making images of Yahweh. Since the worship of other gods was already forbidden by the first commandment, the second must suggest more than just the aversion to pagan idols.

The point of the command is that Israel must accept and worship Yahweh as God is, and not as they want God to be. God is mysterious and invisible to human eyes. Israel’s neighbors had images to worship as tokens of their gods, and Israel might also be tempted to visualize Yahweh as a mighty bull or strong tree, but they were not to do so. 📌

The third command reminds us that worshipping Yahweh is serious business. Respecting God’s name is a way of showing honor. It is a sad and alarming thing that many children grow up thinking God’s last name is damn, or that “Jesus Christ!” means something

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bad has happened. The respect we show to God's name is a reflection of our respect for God's person. 📌

Such respect means we avoid invoking God's name to bolster a false statement as well as to use it for an empty purpose in profanity. Similarly, when someone tries to back up misguided notions such as racism or intolerance by presuming to add "God says," they violate the spirit of the third commandment.

The fourth command speaks to one specific way of honoring God: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." In covenant contexts, the word "remember" suggests more than just calling something to mind; it means to observe faithfully and without lapse. There is more to "remembering" the Sabbath than just recalling what day it is. God's people are to actively observe the Sabbath day through particular practices that honor God. 📌

Relating to others (vv. 9-17)

Just as the second, third and fourth commandments grow out of the first, the last six commandments find their roots in the first four, and all of them find their foundation in the opening statement: "I am Yahweh, your God." The way we live with other persons is firmly grounded in the way we learn to live with God.

From our parents we first learn skills for communicating and rules for behavior. Thus, it is only appropriate that a directive relating to family should be the bridge between the commandments dealing with our relationship to God, and those relating to others.

It is also fitting that "honor your father and your mother" should stand next to the first four commandments, because it is from our parents that we gain our first understanding of God — for good or bad. God is our eternal parent, our ultimate authority figure, to whom we owe honor and respect as Lord. Unfortunately, the children of parents who are caustic, coercive or demanding may learn to think of God

in the same harsh way. As children are called to honor their parents, parents have an equal responsibility to be worthy of honor. The commandment does not counsel blind obedience to badly misguided parents, but we can show our parents honor even when we disagree with them. 📌

The last five commandments grow from the foundation established by a right relationship to God and to family. Those who give proper honor to God and parents are more likely to live in healthy relationships with others, as well.

The sixth command is straightforward: don't kill people. The word used (*ratsakh*) evolved over time, ranging from the early technical meaning of a murder associated with a blood feud to intentional killing, finally to a more general meaning that includes manslaughter or unintentional killing. The word always refers to killings within the covenant community.

Killing is wrong because it is God who gives life, and it is not our place to take it away. We are not free to use and abuse life at will. 📌

The seventh command, like the sixth and the eighth, consists of only six consonants in Hebrew: the negative *lo'* plus a four-letter verb. These commands come closest to the concept of the Ten Commandments as the "Ten Words."

The seventh "word" is that we should avoid adultery. Why? Because sexuality is a gift of God, an important part of who we are as individuals and as partners in a committed relationship. We are not at liberty to use that gift in ways that tear down rather than building up persons.

In ancient Israel, "adultery" was technically an offense against the husband or father of a woman who was considered to be dependent on him. It could also, however, be seen as an offense against Yahweh, for it violated the integrity of relationships that

God had established. The prophets often used the metaphor of adultery to describe Israel's turning away from God and giving their hearts to idols (Isa. 57:1-13; Jer. 3:6-9; Ezek. 23:36-49).

It is wrong for us to steal (v. 15, commandment eight) because it is God who gives all things. God grants the ability to work and to earn an income. God's blessings to others are not ours for the taking. Stealing is harmful, not only through the loss of one's physical goods, but also through the destruction of trust that accompanies it. Blessings rightly come from God and from the proper use of our God-given abilities — not from stealing what belongs to another.

We are not to bear false witness against our neighbors (v. 16, commandment nine) because in doing so we are stealing their good reputation and bringing them harm. As with other commandments, however, this precept has religious as well as social significance. Bearing false witness violates the integrity of relationships as established by Yahweh, who has created us in God's image and called us to be people of the truth.

To declare mistruths about others — whether in court, or in misleading political advertisements, or through personal slander — also brings literal harm to other persons who are also made in God's image.

The final commandment deals with the obsessive desire for what belongs to another. Giving in to covetousness opens the door to breaking any one of the other commandments — or all of them. The specific expansions added to the tenth commandment ("your neighbor's house. . . your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor") are clear indicators that this was a problem area for Israel. Few would deny that the desire to have what belongs to another is a constant obstacle for us, as well.

For those whose lives have felt a bit chaotic lately, a review of the Ten Commandments could be just the medicine we need. **BT**

Youth

March 4 — March 25, 2012

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

New Names

Have you ever heard of superstars Earvin Johnson, Nicole Polizzi or Stefani Germanotta? What about Magic, Snooki or Lady Gaga?

Maybe this will help: Earvin Johnson earned the name Magic on the basketball court, Nicole Polizzi earned the nickname Snooki from her antics on Jersey Shore, and Stefani Germanotta took the stage name Lady Gaga to launch her musical career.

In today's lesson we also have some name changes: Abram becomes Abraham, and Sarai becomes Sarah. Their name changes aren't for something they have done, but rather to signify what God will do for them.

The scripture passage begins with God offering Abram a covenant to give him descendants that would become many nations if Abram will be fully devoted to God by living with integrity. God gives Abram the choice to accept the covenant or not. We see Abram's acceptance of the covenant as he falls with his face to the ground.

With acceptance of the covenant, there are now parts for God, Abram and Sarai to play:

- God is to make Abram an ancestor of a multitude of nations, to give Abram the new name of Abraham, and to give Abraham and his descendants the land on which they now live.
- Abraham is to circumcise all the males in his household.
- Sarai is to get a new name, Sarah, and she is also to have a son from whom kings shall come.

With the acceptance of the covenant, Abraham again falls with his face to the ground, but this time it is with laughter at the idea of a 99-year-old man and a 90-year-old woman having a son.

The scripture passage concludes with Abraham personally circumcising every male who is part of his household. The inclusiveness Abraham shows is a reflection of the covenant made with God for all people. That means the covenant accepted by Abraham is even for you and me.

MARCH 4

Think About It:

Abraham chose to accept the covenant from God, which means Abraham chose to live for God rather than for himself. How difficult would that choice have been for Abraham to make?

Make a Choice:

God offered the covenant to Abraham freely, but Abraham had a part to play in obeying the covenant conditions. Christians believe we have been offered a new covenant in Christ. Are you willing to commit your life to obeying Christ?

Pray:

Thank God for the covenant he made with Abraham so long ago that would include you as part of the people of God.

The Top Ten

David Letterman shares his "Top Ten" every weeknight. Sports Center has its "Top Ten Plays of the Day." God delivered his "Ten Words" through Moses to the people of Israel.

The Ten Commandments begin with a proclamation from Yahweh. The statement is personal, reminding the Israelites that Yahweh is their God and they are Yahweh's people.

The first section of the Ten Commandments (numbers 1-4) builds from this initial proclamation to describe a proper relationship with God.

The first commandment is almost a restatement of Yahweh's proclamation. Yahweh is to be in the first place.

The second commandment says God is not to be shaped to fit who we want God to be.

The third commandment states the name of God should be used to show honor, and not to blame God for what is not God's.

The fourth commandment states the Sabbath is to be kept through activities that honor God.

The second section of the Ten

Commandments (numbers 5-10) describes how to have a proper relationship with others.

The fifth commandment means children should honor their parents but that the parents should also be worthy of honor.

The sixth commandment means we are not to take a life because it was God who gave it.

The seventh commandment means we should not interfere with a relationship built from God.

The eighth commandment means we should not steal because it is God who gives and blesses.

The ninth commandment means we should not accuse someone falsely because that person was created in the image of God.

The tenth commandment means we should be content with what we have been blessed with by God.

The Ten Commandments proclaimed by God through Moses provide a guide to how we should live for God and in relationship with others.

MARCH 11

Think About It:

The people of Israel used these 10 laws as the basis for all other laws they made. What would your life look like if you based your decisions on these 10 rules?

Make a Choice:

Here are 10 rules for living a holy life with God and a healthy life with others. Will you choose to live by these rules or by 10 that you make up yourself?

Pray:

Thank God for providing a guide for our lives so that we might have a holy relationship with God and a fulfilling life with others.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



Snakes Alive!

"I'll do anything. Just get me out of this."
How many times have you pleaded these words? You've gotten yourself into a situation you can't escape. The people of Israel find themselves in a situation just like this in our scripture passage for today.

The story begins on the Israelites' road home to Canaan after their defeat of the king of Arad. Instead of going the shortest route to Canaan, however, they decide to go through Edom, which is a longer and more difficult route. To top it all off, the Israelites are denied free passage through Edom, so they have to go even further out of their way around Edom. And the peoples' response to all of this ... "Why have you brought us out here to die? We don't have any food or water, and we don't like the food we have."

At this point, Moses' inner dialogue must have been going something like this:

"You chose to come the long way. We could have been home by now. You claim we have no food, but then claim to not like the food we do have."

As Moses sits there shaking his head, the Israelites come to him asking for help because God has sent poisonous snakes among them, biting many of the people. They acknowledge their sinful ways and ask Moses to pray to God to remove the snakes.

Moses prays to God, and God tells Moses to put a snake on a pole so that whoever had been bitten may look upon it and be healed. Take note that God does not remove the snakes that represent the sin and judgment of the people but offers the people healing instead. This theme will run throughout the biblical story, even as Jesus did not remove sin and judgment but offered redemption and healing.

MARCH 18

Think About It:

Jesus did not come to take away sin and judgment, but to live among the people of God to offer healing to those who have sinned. Recognizing this, where do you find hope in the life of Christ?

Make a Choice:

We all get to make choices. How can you be a healing presence in the community in which you live? What can you do to offer hope in the name of Christ for someone?

Pray:

Take time to thank God for the healing that is offered through Jesus Christ.

How Many Chances?

"He'll always get another chance because he is good." I have heard sports commentators say this countless times about athletes who have been in trouble time and again. Sadly, it's true that if you are good enough at something, you will be given another chance. That is, until you are no longer good, and then you'll be pushed aside for the next great athlete.

Our text for today is also about second, and third and four millionth chances. To receive what is promised in this text, you don't have to be good at anything!

Jeremiah had seen the people of Israel walk with God and walk away from God. He knew of the covenants God had made with the people of Israel, and how the people of Israel could not uphold their end of the covenants. Jeremiah also understood how the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel were defeated and made captives. But in

spite of knowing all of these weaknesses, Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant.

This new covenant would be a new kind of relationship with God. It would not be like the covenants that had been made between God and the people of Israel before. This would be a new covenant. The law that had become external and written on stone tablets would be internal and written on their hearts. Everyone would have the opportunity to take part in this covenant, this covenant where people would know of their forgiveness and remember their sin no more.

Jeremiah knew the covenant that was promised by God, but we know of the covenant in the gift of Jesus Christ. We read of the life with God and the new law that Jeremiah projected. We read of how Jesus lived and taught the new law of love. We practice this new covenant of love because God first loved us.

MARCH 25

Think About It:

Jeremiah lived during dark times for the people of Israel, and still saw a new covenant from God. Will you choose to see the light or continue to live in the dark places of your life?

Make a Choice:

The old covenant was built on the law. The new covenant is based on love. Will you choose to live out of a rulebook or out of a relationship?

Pray:

Take time now to pray to God for the law of love that we witness through Jesus Christ and experience through the Holy Spirit.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Num. 21:4-9

March 18, 2012

A Bump in the Road

Are you afraid of snakes? Humans seem to have an innate fear of the slithering reptiles, which the Bible partly explains by the etiological story in Gen. 3:14-15.

For all of our fear, very few people have actually been bitten by poisonous snakes. I am one of them. I was four years old when my father sent me to gather some kindling to start a fire in an outdoor grill he had constructed. When I reached behind a stump to grab some wood shavings left by a chain saw, a ground rattler grabbed me by the elbow.

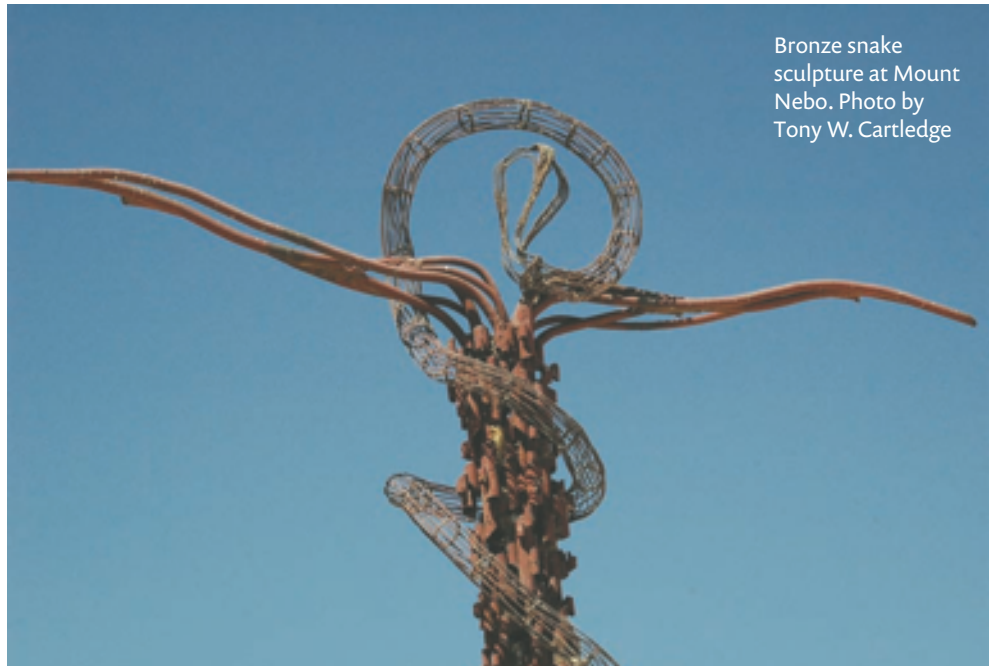
It hurt — a lot.

I had to spend a few days in the hospital, and the future health of my right arm was in question for a while, but afterward, I was more enamored with snakes than afraid of them. I read about them, learned to identify them, and never ran from them. Having learned a bit about the antibody response, I thought I had become immune.

Snakes and religion

Most of us can probably relate at least one snake story. The Bible has several.

Before we get to today's story, however, let's consider the historical and cultural context in which the ancient Israelites lived. We should be aware that serpent gods were often worshiped in the ancient world. The Canaanites revered a goddess who appeared on sacred plaques with a serpent coiled about her neck. Examples have been found of Debir, Shechem, Hazor and Gezer, along with



several from the temples in the ancient city of Beth Shan, which means “house of the snake.”

In Greek mythology, serpents were associated, of all things, with healing, and there was an entire cult surrounding the worship of Asclepias, the serpent god. Even today, the most common symbol of the medical profession portrays two snakes wrapped around a pole. It is called a Caduceus, and it originated from the ancient belief that serpents were associated with healing.

Snakes also appear at several points in the Bible. Beyond the familiar story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), a serpent also figures into the call of Moses in Exodus 3. When Moses asked God for a sign to prove that God had sent him, he was granted the ability to turn his shepherd's staff into a formidable snake, and back again. Then, serpents turn up again in Numbers 21, our primary text for today.

Snakes as punishment (21:4-9)

The story is surprising, given its position in the surrounding text. In

Num. 21:1-3, we read a story of amazing faithfulness: the entire people collectively made a vow to God, promising to devote all the spoils of war to God if the Lord would give them victory over the Canaanite king of Arad. God empowered Israel to defeat the enemy and conquer several cities. You would think the people would have been impressed enough to remain in a trustful and worshipful mood. But, the very next story suggests that the people quickly reverted to their old ways: they hit a bump in the road that threatened to become the end of the road.

Although the account in vv. 4-9 immediately follows the war story of vv. 1-3, we don't know how much time had passed. Despite their defeat of the king of Arad whose land was inside the southern border of what would later become Israel, the Israelites chose not to take a direct path into Canaan, but turned around and went south on a roundabout route that would position them to enter the land from the east.

That route would require them to travel through Edom, however, on the southeastern side of the Dead Sea.

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



When the King of Edom refused to grant the Israelites free passage through his kingdom, according to the story, they were forced to go around.

Even if the Israelites had been allowed to travel through Edom, it was a rugged and barren land of blazing sun and scorching wind and sharp rocks scattered on a forbidding landscape of rocky, red-tinted mountains. Without permission, the journey was made that much longer.

It is the sort of land that might inspire even modern travelers to gripe and groan, and that is exactly what the Israelites did. To translate literally, they became “short in spirit” (v. 4). The people criticized both God and Moses, crying “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food” (v. 5, the word translated “food” is literally “bread”). Evidently, the people had grown tired of manna. Though they knew God had provided it, they were dissatisfied.

God, apparently, also felt some dissatisfaction, though it was with the people’s ingratitude. The writer assumes that God orchestrated an attitude adjustment. So, according to v. 6, “the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.”

Try to imagine the scene: a snake slithered out from the shade of a rock, and bit somebody. Then there was another snake, and another, and another. Israel seemed to have wandered, like Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, into a huge nest of snakes. Thousands of snakes. Angry snakes. People were bitten. They screamed. They swelled and had trouble breathing. They began to die.

At some point the people seem to have recognized the outbreak of snakes as divine punishment for their wrongful criticism of God’s care. Whether they were truly sorry or just seeking a way out, representatives came to Moses and confessed their sins. They asked him to intercede for them and pray that the

Lord would take the serpents away (v. 7).

In response, God instructed Moses to “make a poisonous serpent,” fasten it to a pole and display it in a public place. He was then to announce that anyone who had been bitten could come to the place, look upon the snake and live (v. 8). Moses responded by fashioning a serpent from bronze.

The notion of being healed from a poisonous snakebite simply by looking at an image of a poisonous snake sounds so much like superstitious, sympathetic magic that later writers felt it necessary to reinterpret the text. In the apocryphal book called the Wisdom of Solomon (16:5-7) and a semi-commentary called the Pseudo-Jonathan targum, the authors insisted that the people were required not only to look upon the serpent, but also to look upon it with faith that God could heal.

The people apparently attributed healing powers to the image alone, however. They kept it around, and in later years began to worship it in idolatrous ways. According to 2 Kings 18:4, the people treated it as a god, named it Nehushtan, and made offerings to it. As part of his religious reforms, King Hezekiah had it destroyed.

A closer look

But let’s go back to the plague of snakes and God’s response to the people’s cries. Take note of an interesting thing. The people prayed for God to “take away the serpents from us,” and God responded to the prayer — but instead of removing the snakes as they asked, God offered a means of healing for those who were snake-bitten.

Now, let’s look forward. The story of Nehushtan does not end with Hezekiah destroying the image. It lived on in Israel’s memory as a symbol of healing. Jesus knew the story, and drew attention to it as a way of describing his

own life and death and atoning work. Many people might read this story in Numbers as an illustration of the wrath of God or the judgment of God, but Jesus saw it as a story about the love of God.

When Nicodemus struggled to understand what Jesus had to say about being born again (or “born from above,” the translation is uncertain), Jesus resorted to this familiar story from Israel’s history to explain his own work: “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:14-16).

When the snake-bitten people of Israel looked upon the bronze serpent that Moses made and lifted up on a pole, they found hope and healing. Just so, when Jesus was hung on a cross in public view, he demonstrated the remarkable height and depth and length and breadth of God’s love.

Just as God did not remove the threat of snakes from Israel but offered healing instead, Jesus did not come to remove the threat of sin and judgment, but to offer healing and hope and life to those who fall victim to sin and are subject to judgment.

That includes every one of us who lives long enough to understand what sin is. Sooner or later, all of us fall. All of us get snake-bitten. None of us is immune to the tempting tune of the serpent’s call. That is the way the world is. God cannot remove the possibility of evil from the world and leave us truly human at the same time. But God can offer healing and hope and life to those who look to him in faith.

That is what Jesus was doing on that cruel cross that stood on a rugged hill before a ragged group of people. Like the snake in the wilderness, Jesus was lifted up as an emblem of what our sin can do, and of what God’s love can do. Now, the question is, what are we going to do? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Jer. 31:31-34

March 25, 2012

A New Deal

She stood before the teacher with tears streaming down her face. Mrs. Armstrong had appointed her as Monday's "special assistant." She let young Sally call the roll and put her in charge of distributing handouts to the class. Sally felt very proud and very responsible.

Mrs. Armstrong was so pleased that she even allowed Sally to sit up front while she escorted a student who was feeling ill to the office. Soon, Sally began to pretend that she was the teacher.

First, she tried to imitate Mrs. Armstrong's quavering voice. "Now class, let's turn in our textbooks to another exciting story about early America." When the class laughed, Sally was encouraged. She mimicked the way Mrs. Armstrong gargled with Listerine every morning and spit it out the back door. The class giggled again, and Sally imitated Mrs. Armstrong's famous laugh: "Hee hee hee — snort!"

But, the rest of the class stopped laughing before Sally did: they could see that the teacher had returned and was watching from the door. When Sally realized what had happened, she burst into tears.

Mrs. Armstrong looked at Sally with the wisdom of a career in teaching. She saw an insecure child who had jumped at a chance to get attention, even though she did it in the wrong way. And so, Mrs. Armstrong came and knelt before Sally, looked straight into her tearful face, and said "Hee hee hee — snort!" And Sally learned the meaning of grace.



An old story ...

Many years ago a small band of people who called themselves Hebrews had an opportunity to be the special friends and helpers of Almighty God. But, despite God's friendship and clear instructions for life in relationship, they rebelled and did things their own way, time after time after time.

There came a point at which they were in so much trouble, they lost their land and were forced to live in Babylon. The people were very discouraged — hopelessly caught in a web of weakness. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was led away in 722 BC, and in 587 BC their kinsmen from the Southern Kingdom of Judah were also made captive.

This was a very frightening time, but it gave the people an opportunity to look back and see their many mistakes and to understand how they had failed. The leading theologians of Israel-in-exile decided they had been broken because of their sin, but the people secretly hoped that the God who

had once befriended them would come and find them, forgive their failures, and grant them another chance.

A hopeful prophet ...

Jeremiah was one of those people. Through much of the book attributed to him, Jeremiah proclaimed his share of doom and gloom to a disobedient and rebellious people, but he also believed that God was always willing to give Israel another chance.

In his long career Jeremiah saw increasing evidence that Israel appeared completely incapable of upholding the covenants God had made with the people through Moses at Sinai (Exodus 20, 24) and reaffirmed through Joshua at Shechem when they had come into the promised land (Joshua 24).

But Jeremiah did not give up hope. In chs. 30-33, often called "The Book of Consolation," Jeremiah declared his belief that God had spoken to him with the promise of a new covenant. The heart of that belief is found in our text for today.

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



A new covenant (vv. 31-34)

Read the focal text carefully, perhaps in multiple translations. Read the entire chapter at least once so you can see it in context. Can you sense the excitement that lies behind it?

Jeremiah's words almost seem to vibrate on the page and set the air shimmering as they declare Jeremiah's declaration that Israel might be hapless, but not hopeless, that God would show grace in their wilderness (v. 2), express an everlasting love for the people (v. 3), and rebuild the nation (vv. 4-6), so they would celebrate with joyous songs (vv. 7-9). There would be hope for the future (v. 17), because God would make a new covenant with Israel.

The promise of a new covenant is found in vv. 31-34, a brief text in which we find nothing less than gospel. Here is grace, God's second chance to a people who have blown their chance too many times already.

Jeremiah saw a coming day when people could have an entirely new kind of relationship with God (v. 31). Something had gone badly wrong with Israel's understanding of the old covenant. The people had come to regard the law of God and the rituals of temple worship as unconnected to daily life. The law was something external, written on stone tablets, taught by the priests, used in the courts, but not followed faithfully (v. 32).

But now something new would happen. God would bring about a new covenant relationship in which the law would no longer be written on stone or in scrolls alone, but engraved on the people's hearts: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (v. 33).

Everyone could know God, Jeremiah said, from the inside out. God's law would be transformed into an internal assurance that God would "forgive their sin, and remember their iniquity no more" (v. 34).

Despite his openness to divine revelation, Jeremiah himself did not see

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the new covenant come to pass. Nor did any of his contemporaries. Though many Jews still hold to the hope of a messiah who will restore Israel as a leading political entity, Christians believe the new covenant Jeremiah prophesied was fulfilled in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

We learn about Jesus in what is often called the "New Testament," but it might be better to speak of the Bible as containing an "Old Covenant" and a "New Covenant." Now, because we look at this text through the lens of Christ's coming, we can appreciate it in a way that even Jeremiah could not.

It may seem strange to think of God's law being written on our hearts, but that is what happens when God's presence is also living and working within us. In some way beyond our understanding, through the work of Christ, the Spirit of God lives within those who entrust their lives to him. Paul spoke of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

It is hard to envision what it means to have God's presence within. Our typical language is in the concrete thought of a child, as we speak of "inviting Jesus to live in our hearts." 🙏

Adults are capable of thinking more abstractly, but we can't comprehend the full meaning of God's indwelling any more than a child does. There is something very mystical about the way God lives and works within us. Fortunately, we don't have to understand God's promise completely in order to put our trust in it.

One of the primary evidences that God lives in us is that the indwelling Spirit brings about a change in our attitudes. We develop an internal sense of what is right and wrong. We develop a sense of compassion that leads us to react to harm with forgiveness and to

be proactive in showing tangible love toward others. God has written the law of love upon our hearts through the gift of the Spirit who dwells in all believers.

Jesus made it very clear that Christians were to follow a new law, a law of love that is not written in a book, but in our hearts. The decisions we make, the actions we take, are not determined by a manual of rules, but by a heart that is ruled by God.

We love God because God first loved us — and we love others for the same reason. When we come to understand Christ's love, and to experience the Spirit's presence, it changes our lives.

Jeremiah looked to a day when God would say "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more." That is what happens when we trust in Christ. We are forgiven. Our slate is wiped clean. The grace of God purifies our past and sets us on a new road with a new heart. If that truly happens to you, your life can never be the same again. God's grace makes all the difference.

But there are some people who cannot deal with grace on that level. They are people of law. They can't get out of the Old Testament, out of the old covenant. They cannot get out of the rulebook and into a relationship. 🙏

Jeremiah looked beyond a religion based on rules to a covenant based on relationships. The great promise he foresaw has now been offered to every person. Jesus Christ stands ready to forgive us completely, to set us free from sin and death, if only we will accept the amazing grace he offers.

We may choose to hold on to our old way of thinking, but our end will be the same. We will live dark and bitter lives and die a dark and bitter death when there is light for the asking. On the other hand, we may choose the path of grace. We are sinners and we know it, but when confronted with the amazing grace of God's love, we can look past our sin and be changed from the heart-side out.

We can, in short, become new. **BT**

Adventures with LULER the Hound



Kelly Belcher



Luler the dog loves to run. While we're inside during these cold, rainy or snowy days of March, Luler will sit at our feet, look up at us, wag her tail and bark once, which is the signal she wants to go OUT! When the door is opened, she races outside, up the steps, across the grass and immediately finds a squirrel or bird to chase, barking all the way. She runs back and forth, in and out between the trees, her happy tail wagging.

Imagine if Luler could not get outside to run. She would bark more, being jumpy, running around the furniture. It wouldn't be the same as a big yard or a long trail. She'd feel sad and frustrated. She might chew on the rug or tear up our shoes.

During Lent, parts of us need to be let free to run. You have a spirit inside you, like Luler's running spirit, made by God. Every day in Lent, let your spirit out to run, and feel God's spirit running close to you, happy tail wagging.

The Bow-wow

Luler says that a free spirit is an offering to God. Give yourself room to be who God made you to be.

The Idea Box

Each day of Lent, do two things.

Thing 1: Set free something you hold in:
fear, anger or disappointment.

Thing 2: Follow the feeling of your spirit,
God's direction in you.



More Online: Jump online at nurturingfaith.net to discover weekly ideas for children's leaders.

Not an ark, but still interesting ...

By Tony W. Cartledge

Bible readers remember Mount Ararat, in northern Turkey (though also claimed by Armenia), as the final port for Noah's ark. According to Genesis 8:4, it came to rest "on the mountains of Ararat" (though the word could also be translated as "Urartu," a reference to the general area, but no specific mountain).

There are actually two distinctive peaks called Ararat: Armenians call the largest mountain "Big Ararat," and a smaller adjacent mountain, a perfect volcanic cone, "Little Ararat."

According to ArtDaily.org, Joel Klenck, a Harvard-trained archaeologist who heads the Paleontological Research Corporation, has described surveys of two cave sites on Mount Ararat (the big one, presumably). Both contain large wood structures that date back to the Epipaleolithic period, with radiocarbon dates suggesting sometime between 13,100 and 9,600 B.C.

The finds won't do anything to bolster the persistent ark hunters who periodically claim to have found remains of Noah's ark. These



Mount Ararat, with Khor Virap monastery, Armenia, in the foreground. Photo courtesy of Andrew Behesnilian/Wikimedia Commons

structures actually seem to have been some sort of multi-level residential construction, including stairs.

Unfortunately, the site is mostly covered with ice and stones that have accreted through the years, and it's at an altitude of 4,200 meters (about 2.6 miles), so it won't be easy to examine closely.

Still, it's fascinating to imagine what the people would have been like who lived and apparently thrived there 12,000 years ago — and even more intriguing to envision what they would think of their descendants in 2012.

And it could possibly be worth asking which group should be considered more civilized. **BT**

The redefining of evangelical Christianity

By John Pierce

A question often haunts me: "Would I want to be a Christian if my only understanding of Christianity is that of the designated "social-conservative Christian evangelicals" being courted by political candidates and questioned by pollsters?"

The answer, I'm afraid, is a resounding "No."

Media reports on the presidential caucuses and primaries consistently refer to the "evangelical vote." When moving into such circles, candidates crank up their "Godspeak" and espouse strong opposition to abortion and gay rights.

It helps them as well to proclaim once again that God has been ceremoniously kicked out of school and that America was

built exclusively by and for socially conservative, evangelical Christians.

Amens (and votes) are further sought when candidates promise to give a blank political check to Israel based (intentionally or unintentionally) on faulty end-time theology. This plays well in so-called evangelical Christian circles where there is a complete misunderstanding that Palestinian Christians even exist and are being harmed by a political perspective that opposes a two-state solution in Israel.

The barrage of news coverage during this aggressive political season has revealed more than which candidate is up, down or out at the moment. We can now confirm, sadly, that the designation of "evangelical" has been assigned to or captured by a narrow brand of theological and political

fundamentalism.

And, in growing and more tragic ways, the very term "Christian" is being (heavily if not almost solely) applied to this one group and narrow way of thinking as well.

Evangelical, by definition, means to bear good news. It was once a more inclusive term applied to a wider range of Christians who seek to spread the Gospel of Jesus.

The challenge for the larger Christian community now is to provide good alternate voices without coming across as hostile toward those who hold such vastly different understandings of what it means to be Christian. However, silence is not a good option when the Christian gospel is getting repackaged into a narrow political ideology that has little resemblance to the life and teachings of Jesus. **BT**

The Lighter Side

By Brett Younger

Service with a smile

Parents of varsity basketball players are not asked if they would like to work the concession stand; we are handed a schedule. Couples deciding whether to have children should consider how they feel about hawking hot dogs.

I show up early for my shifts, so I will have time to familiarize myself with that day's specials. I pick up pointers from Mavis and Bob. Imagine Paula Deen and Gordon Ramsay in the same kitchen. I learn how to talk like a real waiter.

"Can I help you even though you're wearing an Alabama shirt?"

"Will that be dine in or carry out?"

"How do you want your popcorn cooked?"

"The red skittles make you dizzy, the yellow ones make your hair curly, and the blue ones make you look like you've been kissing a Smurf."

"You understand that two orders of chili cheese fries is not a meal."

"We need another shrimp etoufee!"

"How about some hot sauce with that pickle?"

"The hamburgers are a tender cut of corn-fed Midwestern beef, USDA Prime at its best. It's the rich flavor of sirloin coupled with the tenderness of a filet. You can have it with mustard or ketchup, but if you want both you have to buy another burger."

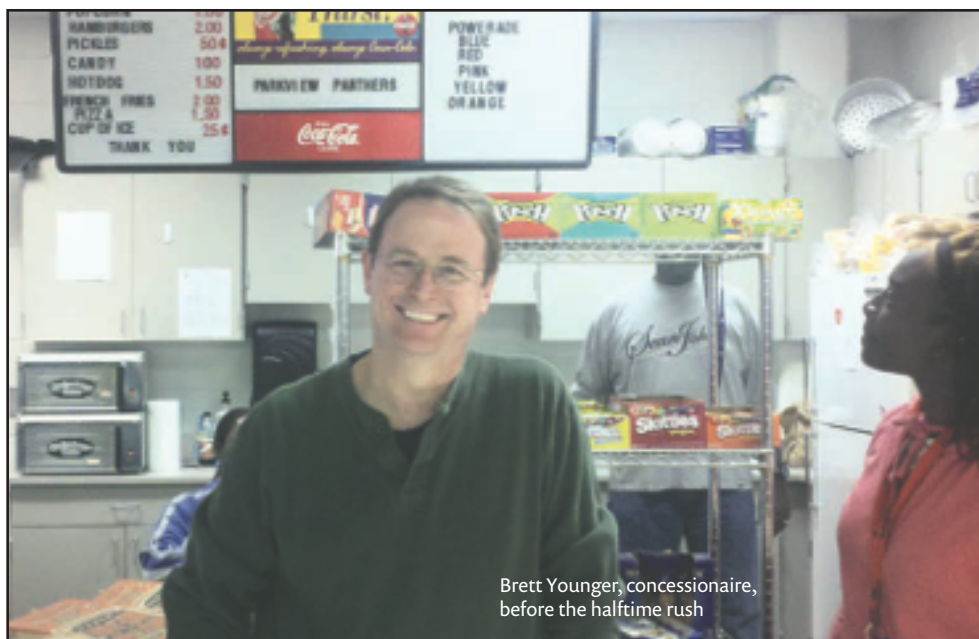
"Enjoy that Coke while you can."

When you're my age you'll be ordering diet everything. Plus you know it's rotting your stomach lining."

"I think it's great that you drink pink Powerade. Lots of guys would think it feminine."

"We also have clear Powerade, but we put it in water bottles."

"It's two cookies for a dollar, four cookies for two dollars, or everything on the counter for a hundred dollars."



Brett Younger, concessionaire, before the halftime rush

"This dollar bill looks counterfeit."

Know your clientele. Ten-year-olds seem to enjoy witty repartee more than 15-year-olds who tend to roll their eyes.

People stare at the menu over our heads as though they are trying to figure out a complicated physics equation. We get some goofy questions: "Do you take credit cards?" "Could I have some lemon for my water?" "What's healthy?"

We have repeat customers who think of the concession stand as a five-course meal — Cheetos for the appetizers, green skittles for the salad course, cheese nachos for the soup, pizza for the main course (hot and ready after just 25 seconds in the microwave), and Otis Spunkmeyer's finest for dessert.

I advise customers to get to the concession stand early in the game. (None of the food is getting any better.) If you're worried about germs, order things in wrappers (like Snickers bars) or eat at home.

I've learned that when a 7-year-old gives you five quarters for a \$1.50 hot dog, you hand it to them and say, "Don't let your dog bite you."

Unlike some of the wait staff, I like being 50 feet from the pep band — whose favorite song is the classic "Louie, Louie." Everything is more fun when you have to shout.

I have considered putting out a tip jar. If I label it "Bribes for the Refs," we might do pretty well.

On one recent shift I realized that our customers were self-selecting. The teenage girls were going to the handsome player from my son's team. The teenage boys were going to the varsity girls' team's star. Everyone over 40 was coming to me. I pointed this out to my two young co-workers and got a look that embodied the word, "Duh."

I have discovered that I like saying, "Do you want some fries with that?" I find great joy in being the one who knows where the extra napkins are. My hour-and-a-half shifts fly by.

Most people don't want a future in the fast food industry. It is hard work when it is eight hours a day, five days a week. On career day the line at the "Service Industry" booth is short. "Community Service" is a form of punishment.

And yet, "How can I help you?" is a Christ-like question. Jesus suggested that we try "to serve and not to be served." Perhaps Jesus suggested we serve others, in part, because it can be fun. **BT**

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

Younger calls for preaching to a broader audience

ST. SIMONS ISLAND, GA. — To those who know Brett Younger only as “The Lighter Side” columnist in *Baptists Today*, he is probably perceived as an all-around funny guy who can turn most any situation into a quirky, lighthearted story. Yet, to a new generation of seminarians, he teaches through word (often humorous) and practice (sometimes serious) why preaching still matters in a post-modern society.

However, a group of seasoned ministers benefited as well from Younger’s messages at the Mercer Preaching Consultation held on the Georgia coast last fall. The former pastor of Fort Worth’s Broadway Baptist Church challenged them to consider their preaching task from a new perspective that would include all of Christ’s church.

“Most of us want to preach to the perfect church,” quipped Younger. He described the perfect church as the next church, the last church, an old church that doesn’t exist anymore, a church where everyone looks and/or thinks alike, a church where everyone is thoughtful and loves and agrees with the pastor and appreciates his or her education and training, and so on.

“So why can’t we have a church where everyone wants church to be just like we want church to be? Why can’t the church be everything we dream?” he asked.

After reality sets in, preachers can choose to lower such expectations, walk away or stay irritated, said Younger. However, he offered another alternative: preach to the church you want — Christ’s church.

“If you look carefully next Sunday morning, you’ll see that it’s Christ’s church right there in front of you. Your church is filled with people who heard God call, asked what God wanted from them, and got in line. They heard the Spirit inviting them to a different kind of life. You get to preach, to tell them what it means.” Why wouldn’t you want to preach to that church? Younger wondered.

That church includes people of all ages, backgrounds, occupations, economic and educational levels who show up most Sunday mornings, all wanting to share in Christ’s church — not unlike the assortment of people who joined the church at Pentecost. Younger labeled them as would-be disciples, religious

authorities and surprising saints.

Would-be disciples want to follow Christ but are not certain how far they will actually go for their faith, he noted. He included among that group a 25-year-old Christian of three years who is still trying to figure out who Jesus really is, a wealthy grandfather who is a pillar of the church, a woman in a tattered dress who “sings all the way down to her toes” in celebration of leaving her former life, the mother of an alcoholic who receives little support from her husband, and a man who requires 30 minutes to maneuver his walker from his car to his pew.

It takes real effort for some would-be disciples to participate in the church. They’re overworked, overlooked and often lack the admiration they deserve, said Younger, but through preaching they can hear and interpret God’s call and experience hope.

No doubt, would-be disciples are easier to embrace with grace through preaching than religious authorities. Though empowered by years of church leadership, these church members are hesitant when confronted with decisions that require a leap of faith. Younger described them this way: They seem unusual, undeserving and out of place, and their Pharisaic attitudes drive clergy crazy. They wield a heavy hand in seeking to run the church like a corporation. They resist change and build walls to keep diversity on the outside.

Preachers want to issue a prophetic word against the actions of religious authorities, but confrontation is uncomfortable and, Younger admitted, sometimes they do know more than the proclaimer and may be sticklers for things that matter. He called for a grace-filled attitude toward those church members who may be viewed as difficult. “The wind of the Spirit blows where it wills. The people in our

churches have experienced the grace of God in more ways than we have imagined. God still brings life to Pharisees — even to the ones in your church, even to you and me. The church doors and preaching should be open to all — even the religious authorities.”

While religious authorities may present great challenges to preachers, there is a redeeming element present in most churches, Younger reminded his audience of clergy: “the saints who are at work to help make the church of our dreams come true.”

He described these church members as those who remain faithful even when it doesn’t feel good, who give money they need because they believe in Christ’s church, who reach out to people who aren’t usually welcome and make them feel a part of Christ’s church, who ask questions that don’t always get raised, who act more like Jesus than just talking about him. They are the “sensitive, considerate and plucky people who make the church more of what it should be” (and probably more of what the preacher should be, too). “Be thankful that you get to preach to them,” Younger said of those he called the surprising saints.

He concluded with a fitting challenge to and a benediction of blessing for preachers:

“Be the saints who preach the truth in a world that lies, who preach generosity in a world that takes, who preach love in a world that lusts, who preach peace in a world that fights, who preach service in a world that wants to be served, who preach courage in a world that worships safety. We can preach to Christ’s church and thank God for the privilege.

“May God bless you with distaste for superficial preaching so that you will preach from deep within your soul. May God bless you with anger at prejudice so that you will preach justice. May God bless you with tears for those who sorrow so that you will preach hope. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that your preaching can make a difference in the world. Amen.” **BT**



‘Translator between two worlds’

A conversation about faith and science with physicist **Paul Wallace**

BY JOHN PIERCE

Professor Paul Wallace (at right in dark blue shirt) with students from Berry College where he formerly taught physics and astronomy. The group visited Italy in 2004 including a stop at Galileo’s villa in Arcetri, south of Florence. Galileo spent the last decade of his life there under house arrest after getting in trouble with Church authorities for his scientific theories. Today Wallace writes about issues of faith and science.

Paul Wallace’s published writings are quite diverse — ranging from “An Active Galactic Nucleus Identification for 3EG J2006-2321” (*Astrophysical Journal*) to “Believing in Johnny Cash: An Open Letter to Atheists” (*Religion Dispatches*).

Wallace, 43, holds a Ph.D. in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University. He has an undergraduate degree from Furman University and spent 10 years on the faculty of Berry College where he chaired the department of physics, astronomy and geology.

Sensing a call to ministry, he entered Emory University’s Candler School of Theology and graduated with a Master of Divinity degree last May. In 2010, he taught astronomy to Tibetan monks and nuns in exile in India through the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative.

Also, he has collaborated with astronomers through the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center to analyze data from the Compton Gamma-Ray Observatory in Maryland and served as a visiting assistant professor at Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia.

Wallace grew up in Atlanta where his family was actively involved in Wieuca Road Baptist Church. His father taught civil engineering at Georgia Tech.

Issues concerning faith and science intrigue him. His training in both physics and theology led *Baptists Today* Editor John Pierce to pose some questions to Wallace, who lives in Decatur, Ga., where he is a member of the First Baptist Church there.

BT: When and how did you come to the conclusion that you would leave a tenured faculty position to begin theological education?

PW: It began, really, in 1997. At that time I was teaching in Virginia and attending a Methodist church. A fellow parishioner told me in all seriousness that she thought I may be called to be a minister.

It was strangely flattering, but at the time I didn't really want to hear it. I was just beginning an academic career and enjoying it immensely.

I shelved the idea, but it returned to me once or twice over the next several years. It was not really a nagging thing, just something that would show up every now and again, sometimes rather powerfully — like a reminder.

I would think about it, talk it out with my wife, Elizabeth, and trusted friends, and say: "No, not doing it." Then it would go away and shut up for another year or so.

In 2007 I was teaching at Berry College in Rome, Ga., and was taking a sabbatical. I was supposed to use the time to work on a book on the history of astronomy — that I had already started and had actually used for several classes.

But my attention wandered. I couldn't focus. So I started writing what I wanted to write — mostly really personal stuff. It was a real working-over of my life to that point.

I wrote nonstop for several months. This precipitated an identity crisis that could only be resolved by starting over — hitting life's big reset button — and for me this meant seminary. There was nowhere else for me to go, really.

Miraculously, my family was ready. Elizabeth, my wife, was willing; the kids were very young and healthy. No problems there. There were no real barriers. No, that's not right; there were plenty, but none that couldn't be breached.

When I enrolled at [Emory's] Candler [School of Theology] I was wide open to whatever surfaced. I had lost any preconceptions about what I would do or be. It was pretty exciting.

BT: How would you describe that sense of calling?

PW: I can't describe it on a deep personal level. It was and has been something I just needed to do. It's that simple.

I could only hope that God had something to do with it, and I can only hope that

today. I'm not a confident Christian — once I say, "God called me to do this," I immediately stop believing it. So I just do what it is I think I need to do and pray that I am somehow not too far outside God's will.

It has been a step-by-step process. I've never had a north-star-in-the-darkness kind of guide. I never had a clear goal, other than to discern my vocation. We took small steps and waited, then took a few more. That's how it's been, and that's how it is today.

Regarding the content of the call, I have always wanted to write, even before 2007. But before and during seminary I never really talked about wanting to be a writer. It seemed a little silly, like a child wanting to be a rock star or a ballerina when they grow up.

It was painful, not really having the confidence to say what I wanted to do. Plus I really had a desire to open myself up to whatever came my way.

But I'm becoming more confident about writing, because that's what I find myself doing today. I was paid some to write in 2011, and more opportunities will come in this year.

And I am teaching physics at Agnes Scott College, so I can feed my family — which I don't take for granted anymore.

BT: How did your theology professors and classmates react when they discovered you had a doctorate in physics from Duke?

PW: I don't know how many of them actually knew about my background. I didn't talk about it much, because I just wanted to be a seminary student.

But of course that kind of thing gets out. My friends thought it was cool, but it wasn't a big deal to them. It rarely came up.

Several professors learned about my past, and most of them were only moderately interested. This is not a slight on them; it's just what happened. Some took special care to ask me about my story, but it wasn't too big a thing.

BT: Few theologically trained persons (ministers, teachers, writers, etc.) are well versed in scientific knowledge. Help us understand how scientists and theologians tend to approach the search for truth differently.

PW: The most basic difference between theology and science is what I might call their fundamental locations.

Walker Percy once described scientists as "gods to their data," and I think this is basically right. That is, the scientist works outside the system of interest, standing outside and above the world she studies. She herself is not a part of it, not really. She as a human being doesn't get involved, is not part of the object.

Now there are times when the scientist may be overwhelmed by the world she studies, overwhelmed really to be found within it. But mostly science moves forward by abstracting the world, not by taking it in its full, face-on concreteness.

Theology, in contrast, is about the utterly concrete. It should never be about abstractions. It is not located outside and above the world, but fully within it.

Theologians, once they disconnect their ideas from the concrete, start talking (often dangerous) nonsense. The kingdom of God is not an idea; it is what is (and what will be), if we could but open our eyes and see it.

At its best, theology does not operate from the location of science's detached and universal observer; it cannot presume to possess what one clever soul once called science's "view from nowhere."

BT: Now that you've completed your theology degree, has your calling to ministry been crystallized? How do you see your unique training and gifts being used?

PW: I am a peacemaker. The war between science and religion is not necessary. It's bad for science, and it's bad for religion.

So I see myself as a translator between these two worlds. And "translator" is a good word for it. To a surprisingly large degree, misunderstandings arise — on both sides — from fundamental language problems.

I still teach, but writing is the new vocational element. This is a very exciting thing for me. I have also begun to teach science in the church, something I never did before. And I do mean science. The whole deal: evolution, cosmology, etc.

My ministry training comes in handy at the church, when I am writing, and even online. For example, before I waded through the sometimes-angry comments my articles generate, I get quiet and review the pastoral counseling skills I was taught at Candler.

The anger is coming from somewhere real. It's legitimate. I can't ignore it or laugh it off.

Continued on page 35

Editor's note: This commentary first appeared in the online Huffington Post and is used by permission of the writer. Paul Wallace, who writes and teaches about issues related to faith and science, can be followed at twitter.com/psnt_net.

How atheism can help Christians avoid false idols

By Paul Wallace

Recently, ink was spilled about a new campaign started by a group of enterprising college students. Dubbed “We Are Atheism,” the campaign encourages those who are atheists to just come on out and say so.

There is significant societal pressure to not come out, of course, but the atheists’ momentum has picked up, and I think the forces of both history and the Internet are with them.

Don’t get me wrong; I don’t think atheism is a convincing position. In particular I find its most recent manifestation to be naïve, overly optimistic, and poorly-matched to life as I know it. But people ought to be able to say what they think is true.

I know many who have been damaged by religion; I also know many who simply are not religious. These folks should be free to speak frankly without fear of being cast into the outer darkness.

But there is another reason that I wish the best to the campaign, one grounded in my own Christian faith: Atheists do us religious types a service by reminding us that “God,” as a concept, is a non-starter.

In particular, and to put it theologically, atheists are hard at work cleansing our temple of idols. We should thank them.

Theologian Jean-Luc Marion, in his book *God without Being*, addresses idols. An idol, for Marion, is that which consigns the divine to the measure of the human gaze. It is not mysterious or unknown or evasive.

The idol “never deserves to be denounced as illusory since, by definition [that is, by the word’s etymology], it is seen. It even consists only in the fact that it can be seen, that one

cannot but see it. The idol presents itself in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it.”

Here, the term gaze refers not only to the physical eye but also to the eye of the intellect; therefore, idols can be conceptual as well as physical: “When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God,’ this concept functions exactly as an idol.”

Marion also notes that evidences or proofs (for God’s reality) are not distinct from denials, for they both depend on the conceptual idol: “God.”

*This does not mean
a loss of the divine.
On the contrary,
without a little deconstruction
the divine
remains gray, flat and
thoroughly boring.*

He writes, “Proof [of God] uses positively what conceptual atheism uses negatively. In both cases, human discourse determines God. The opposition of the determinations, the one demonstrating, the other denying, does not distinguish them so much as their common presupposition identifies them: that human [subjectivity] might, conceptually, reach God. The idol works universally, as much for negation as for proof. Only on the basis of a concept will ‘God’ be, equally, refuted or

proved, hence also considered a conceptual idol, homogeneous with the conceptual terrain in general.”

So the God-concept is idolatrous. Where does that leave us Christians? It leaves us at the exact center of our faith, which is not primarily conceptual, but incarnational.

A story may clarify the distinction. Several years ago, on the first day of one of my introductory astronomy courses, I mentioned a modest fact: Under a dark and transparent atmosphere, with an unobstructed horizon and keen vision, one can see at most about 3,000 stars. And if we could remove our home planet from under our feet, we could see perhaps 6,000.

I began to introduce the constellations but was brought up by a look of near-trauma that had fallen upon a student’s face — I’ll call him Greg — two rows back. He was scarcely breathing. I actually stopped the lecture, such was his appearance.

I asked him if he was OK and he began to grin. Sheepishly he explained himself: “It’s just that you said that there are stars under my feet, and I had never really thought of it like that before. Wow!”

The student in question was very smart. He must have been about 20 years old. Could he have possibly missed something so obvious? It is unlikely.

I suspect something more interesting happened that day. Greg had known the concept for years: The spherical Earth is surrounded on all sides by stars. But until that day this was merely a concept for him, a kind of husk encasing a bit of green actuality.

But while he was sitting in class that day, minding his own business, the husk fell away and reality was recovered. The stricken look on his face suggested that the stars far beneath his seat became tangible to him in that instant,

that the words up and down lost all content. In that short span of time the absolute became relative and the strangeness of the world was recovered in all its simplicity.

What had for years been conceptual became incarnational; that is, it became profoundly present in a way that Greg himself got involved. He was no longer playing with an idea; he himself was being played by reality.

The incarnational contains the conceptual, but the conceptual does not contain the incarnational.

God is incarnational and not conceptual. That's what we Christians say. But in truth we prefer God as a concept, because then we're in charge.

It's not easy to let go of the steering wheel, because then we have to stop talking and thinking and be a certain way and do certain things.

We Christians call God "good" and "loving" and "wise." Which is fine, but insofar as these remain mere concepts, we are idolaters. Insofar as these concepts are incarnated in our actions and attitudes, however, we are being true to our calling.

I am convinced that atheists — at least the ones I have read and the ones I know — are working largely with conceptual idols when it comes to their rejection of God. They are not rejecting God; they are rejecting ideas.

What is more, they are rejecting idols of Christians' making: a God who deals in rewards and punishments; a God who created the world in six days about 6,000 years ago; a God who shames their sexual desire and shuts down their intellect, imagination and curiosity.

It is easy for Christians to lament the fact that atheists never seem to go after real theology, but we can hardly criticize them for not looking beyond our own idols.

It's a good thing for atheists to clear out our conceptual idols. We surely don't need them. Such idols are precisely what Christians also must reject.

This does not mean a loss of the divine. On the contrary, without a little deconstruction the divine remains gray, flat and thoroughly boring.

Atheists, rightly understood, are doing nothing less than prying the husk of our misunderstanding from the brilliant, living actuality of the divine. They're helping us recover God. It's hard work, and we've been putting it off for a long time. We should just let them do it. **BT**



Through an interpreter, Paul Wallace (right) teaches astronomy to Tibetan monks in exile in India through the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative.

BT: Evolution seems to be the most popular issue where science and religion come together and often divide. How do you resolve and respond to that widely perceived conflict?

PW: The first thing to understand is that "evolution" is not a synonym for "Godless." Many Christians and many scientists disagree and assume that God is somehow superfluous wherever science has explained something. As in, "the Earth doesn't need God to orbit the Sun, it only needs gravity." But that's a content-free statement.

What is happening is that folks tend to over-interpret science. They're overawed by it. They actually think it can displace the divine.

But, as John Polkinghorne recently pointed out, science has "achieved its success by the limit of its ambition." It is not as powerful as we think it is.

Admittedly the gravity example is a simple case, but the same fallacy runs through a lot of contemporary thinking about God and nature, including evolution.

If you can bring yourself to imagine the possibility that evolution and God are not mutually exclusive, everything changes. New avenues of inquiry open up. Hard questions arise. And that's really good.

But the problem is more than the simple getting-past of the contemporary either/or mentality of the science-religion debate. It has to do, of course, with scripture and how it is to

be read.

The importance of this cannot be overstated. One must be willing to abandon a literal reading of the Bible in order to accept evolution. At least Genesis cannot be read literally. Once that's done the problem becomes, "So, what's literal and what's not? Is it all up for grabs?"

This is the slippery slope literalists avoid, and it's not an easy problem to deal with. But we must deal with it.

BT: What do scientists need to hear most from theologians? And what do theologians need to hear most from scientists?

PW: Scientists need to see that the world, as beautiful and surprising and rich as it is when viewed from a strictly scientific point of view, is only made more so when good theology is added to the mix.

Not theology that blurs and closes down vision, but that clarifies and opens it up. Most of the theology they encounter is really awful — creationism and the like — and they are right to call that stuff silly.

But there's a different theological world out there: a less obvious one, a richer one, one that brings a stunning new light to the natural world.

Theologians need to see that science, instead of just being something theology has to accommodate or otherwise "deal with," offers entirely new avenues for theological reflection.

In merely tolerating science or ignoring it entirely, theology misses a great opportunity to draw closer to the God it already knows. Or that it presumes to already know.

BT: Atheists often turn to science and logic to state their case. Your writing seems to attract passion from atheists. Why do think that is happening, and how are you responding?

PW: Simone Weil once said that perhaps atheists are simply those who identify most strongly with God's impersonal aspects. I think she's right.

The large majority of God's creation is radically impersonal — "majestically indifferent," as C.S. Lewis once wrote.

Christians don't have to be afraid of this.

You mention science. Many atheists look to science to prove their point that there's no God. But that's just bad philosophy. The facts of science do not speak for themselves, as many atheists seem to think.

It may be my critical evaluation of atheism that stirs up passion. But, in truth, I just draw it out of them. Where the passion comes from, originally, is at least twofold.

First, I think many — but not all — of today's atheists were hurt terribly by religious people and institutions. That has a way of coming out, and we religious folks have a responsibility to take it very seriously.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, atheists — as a group — have an unmatched passion for the truth. They really have ants in their pants. I could only wish that Christians, as a group, had the same ants in theirs.

science represents a large slice of reality.

The basic problem is that we equate what we think with what's real. But we can't know what's real until we open our minds to reality, until we become willing to let go of some cherished ideas.

But God is not an idea, yours, mine, or anyone else's. God is reality. So there is nothing to lose.

But that doesn't really answer your question. Aside from reminding students that Jesus has commanded all of us to think honestly about things, I would point out that Christianity is a far larger tent than one may suppose upon looking out at popular 21st-century American Christianity.

Not only the variety you see across the world today — from the emerging Southern church to the Eastern traditions to the monasteries that dot our own landscape — but also the rich historical intellectual tradition of Christianity will help one to see that Christianity is an enormous and variegated thing. It is flexible.

So I would say, you are free to think your thoughts. Others have gone there before you, most likely, and the result has only been a greater tradition. So be bold.

BT: What issues are you writing and speaking about now — or will likely be addressing in the near future?

In December, I was asked to write a yearend science-and-religion piece that really got me thinking. I decided to list my own top-10 peacemakers in the science-and-religion wars.

Writing that piece changed the way I think about the issue. I began to be amazed at the richness of the middle ground and the great weaknesses of the warfare model of science and religion.

Those who think that science and religion are fundamentally opposed don't really have anything interesting to say; it's all black-and-white for them, very static and very boring. Meanwhile, the center — composed of those who do not see science and religion as fundamentally opposed — is growing and developing in new and exciting ways.

These folks have a lot of interesting things to say. And this is true whether they are atheists or evangelicals or Muslims. In short, the intellectual future belongs to the middle.

You may still hear the war going on, and it even may be getting louder, but the noise is coming from hard-line atheists and creationists who are becoming progressively alienated. **BT**



But God is not an idea, yours, mine, or anyone else's. God is reality. So there is nothing to lose.

If God is anything like what we say God is, he's a lot bigger than we can imagine.

It would be folly to presume that atheists, many of whom know a great deal about science and therefore about God's creation, have nothing to say to us. Our tradition reminds us that it is often those on the edges who speak most prophetically. And atheists have been on the edges for many years.

I don't mean to say that I think today's atheism is just fine. I don't. I think that it's far too optimistic about the human condition and embarrassingly naive about religion.

It is, in its popular form anyhow, terribly flatfooted. But I do think atheists are on to something, something we Christians should listen to. That's the point of my *Huffington Post* article (on page 34).

BT: What would you say to Christian students who are experiencing doubts as they find conflicts between what they have learned in church and what they are studying in science classes?

PW: I would tell them something very simple: (1) you are commanded — not politely requested or invited — to love God with all your mind, and (2) you have nothing to fear.

The mind is so often locked up, and what's more, it prefers to be locked up. It's safe that way. It knows what to expect. Everything coheres, or seems to.

So much effort is spent trying to keep the chains from breaking, or, to change metaphors, to keep light from entering into the mind's box. But reality has a way of breaking in, and

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

As snow blankets the ground in the Upper South, ebullience over last year's southern battlefield victories slowly fades. Prospects of an alliance with England and France, a union of nations that would almost certainly guarantee Confederate victory over the United States, are dimming.

Soldier deaths from illness are mounting. The Union blockade of southern ports has brought southern exports to a halt, crippling the region's economy. Nashville has fallen to Union forces. Prospects of a financial collapse loom ever larger. In the face of a pervasive uneasiness, the South hopes that the resumption of battles in spring will renew Confederate momentum.

Seeking to rally the South, Southern Baptists ratchet up their nationalistic rhetoric. *Christian Index* editor Samuel Boykin declares:

Warriors of Jesus! can ye sleep in times so perilous to the cause of your master, and dangerous for your own souls and so prostrating to vital Christianity?

Awake! awake! shake off your slothfulness, and let our southern Zion, like Samson of old, burst asunder the chords with which our subtle adversary has bound us, and, by our attention to duty, by our holy zeal, by our earnestness in religion, by our stern opposition to all wickedness in ourselves and others, and by our interest in all that pertains to the Kingdom of our Blessed Savior; seek to reform the nation, promote vital godliness in all classes, extend the borders of Zion, and draw down upon our churches and Confederacy the blessings of Almighty God....

[Southern Baptists']

Opportunities for benefiting themselves, their race and the cause of God, must not be allowed to flit by and be lost forever.

Within Zion, however, Boykin's hint of internal wickedness is perhaps understated. An anonymous correspondent writing to the



This 1922 artwork depicts the sinking of the Confederate ship CSS Alabama after her fight with the USS Kearsarge (seen right).
By Xanthus Smith. U.S. Navy photo.

Biblical Recorder peels back the curtain to camp life in the Confederate Army:

[the camps are] wholly given up to wickedness... the number of apostacies, when this war closes, will astonish and mortify good men everywhere... Those who go into camp without firmly established moral principles, in fact, without a heart full of vital godliness, rarely escape being plunged into the vices that surround them....

... the subject is made still more gloomy because christian people seem not to know how to check this flood of iniquity...

In the midst of nationalist fervor on the one hand and concern for sin in the camps on the other, Baptist editors, denominational leaders, pastors and laity of the South alike debate the future of the Confederacy. Most are convinced that their nation, despite any shortcomings and in spite of setbacks past and yet to come, is ultimately invincible because it is blessed of God.

Yet voices of caution persist, casting shadows over prophetic certainty. One Baptist writer, acknowledging northern successes in blockading the Confederate coast and threatening communication lines within the South, reflects on what might happen.

We believe that truth and right and justice and God are on our side, but fighting in such a sacred cause as this, we can not hope for success, unless we

150 YEARS AGO

February 1862

use the legitimate ends for its attainment. We can not expect God to crown us with victory, if we are careless and indolent, and forgetful of Him. It is only when we acknowledge and realize our dependence on him, and make faithful use of the means of defence which he has placed in our hands, that we can over come our foes. If we do this for the future, we may expect success; otherwise we may look for the mortification and humiliation of defeat.

Such words of concern are not without merit. Many Baptist congregations in the South are closing their doors. The *Tennessee Baptist* newspaper ceases publication this month, its demise brought about by the Union occupation of Nashville. At the same time, the Southern Baptist Convention, acknowledging a steep decline in funding, scales back mission efforts and focuses attention on work among Confederate soldiers. The rapid retrenching of Baptist life in the South, in short, portends a long and troubled struggle for the soul of God's chosen nation. **BT**

—For a daily journal along with references to source material, visit civilwarbaptists.org.

Delightful Humor

‘Nothing sinister about a woman minister’ — or a comedic librarian

PITTSBURGH — Ingrid Kalchthaler has stood in front of many different audiences and spoken just the right words.

As a youth librarian, she helps children to appreciate reading and other good things. She has stood in front of a Baptist congregation and used her words to deliver sermons.

Most recently, she used her oratory skills in front of a different crowd — at a comedy club — where she delivered humorous words as a stand-up comedian.

CALLING

Ingrid grew up in western Pennsylvania and, at an early age, felt drawn to ministry. But one event confirmed what she was feeling.

“I had always felt something calling me to service, but what really solidified it was when my parents took me a flea market at a Jewish Community Center. In a dollar bin were assorted buttons, and one caught my eye.

“It read, ‘There’s nothing sinister about a woman minister.’ I bought it. I still have it. I had thought about other professions, but that call was always there and it grew as I grew in my faith and in my walk with the Lord.”

Ingrid graduated from high school in 1989 and then attended Duquesne University. She earned a degree in sociology with a concentration in criminal justice, while considering prison ministry.

She then attended Pittsburgh Seminary under the sponsorship of a Presbyterian congregation.

“I grew up in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and was very happy there. It was what I knew, and I have a great deal of respect for the tenants of Presbyterianism. When I was in my second year of seminary we were given fieldwork assignments, and mine was in an American Baptist church.

“As soon as I learned more about the history of the Baptists, the four freedoms — soul, church, Bible and religious — I knew I was home. Baptism as an ordinance celebrated by believers made perfect sense to me. I thought



Ingrid Kalchthaler dreams of traveling the country “doing old-school revivals, needing nothing but the clothes on my back and gas for my car...”

maybe I was a closet Baptist all along and now I could make it official.”

After graduating from seminary, Ingrid became the associate pastor at the North Hills Community Baptist Church in Pittsburgh — where she served for several years.

“My time in the church was precious and holy,” she said. “I feel that I was so blessed to minister to and be with so many amazing men and women of God.”

She described the North Hills congregation as a service-centered church that emphasizes reaching out and taking the Gospel to others.

CHANGE

“Unfortunately I didn’t heed the words of my senior pastor,” she recalled. “I still remember him telling me that ministry is a marathon and not a sprint. I had sprinted the whole way and burned myself out.”

She made the hard but difficult move to resign from the church position on her 30th birthday.

“It was the most difficult decision I ever had to make, but I made it prayerfully and believe it was God’s will for me to do ministry in a different context,” she said.

Pastor Tim Spring of North Hills has many fond memories of Ingrid’s time as a minister at the church.

“She has a real gift for public speaking,”

he said. “Ingrid always had such a delightful sense of humor and was very beloved by all members of the congregation.”

He described Ingrid as someone who would always take the time to listen to people’s stories and make them feel special. And whenever a project arose, he added, she would jump in to see that it was done well.

‘MARRYIN’ LIBRARIAN’

While serving as associate pastor, Ingrid worked part time at the local library as well. A fellow librarian once asked her to officiate at her wedding.

Ingrid agreed and was sometimes referred to as the “Marryin’ Librarian.” After leaving her church staff position, she increased her work at Bethel Park Public Library — soon becoming head of youth services.

“I found that we were able to do a great deal of ministry,” she said. “We helped families to read together and to succeed together. We also placed libraries in each of the homeless shelters in the county.”

Today Ingrid is the head of youth services at Shaler Library, a place where she worked when she was 14-years old as well as during high school and seminary.

GOTTA LAUGH

A unique opportunity came her way recently to do stand-up comedy. Using ideas from her

many experiences, Ingrid took the stage to share her perceptions of life.

She admits to having a strange way of looking at things but feels there is always humor to be found. This was a big step for someone who struggled to talk to people or even look them in the eye as a child.

"In the fall of 2011 I turned 40, and doing stand-up [comedy] was always on my bucket list of things to do before that big day," she said. "When auditions rolled around for the community talent show, I went for it and made it into the show."

But Ingrid was in for a surprise.

"I got there and discovered I was one of only three adult acts," she said. "So I was up against an adorable 5-year-old baton twirler and 7-year-old child piano prodigies."

She lost the contest but a woman in the audience was a member of Gilda's Club, a group that supports people and their families living with cancer. Every year they do a fundraiser called "Laughing in the Face of Cancer."

"She asked me to try out, so I did and made it through to the finals," she said. "I now had a chance to perform at the Improv Comedy Club."

Ingrid said she had a great time even though she took home no prizes.

"It was wonderful to do something for

such a great cause," she said. "I would love to use my sense of humor in any way that God will present."

UP NEXT

Ingrid doesn't know where God will lead her next but is very happy where she is right now and is excited about the future.

"I would love to work again in some kind of professional ministry, but I will wait for God's call," she said. "I will go wherever he calls me."

Ingrid said she has a dream of someday traveling the country "doing old-school

revivals, needing nothing but the clothes on my back and gas for my car while spreading the Word."

"Right now I feel I am the most blessed person alive," she said. "I have such a wonderful and amazing group of family and friends. My parents have always been my best supporters, and my friends are gifts from God."

And her work at the library is very fulfilling. "The families and the community make it a joy to come to work every single day." **BT**

—J. Michael Krivyanski is a freelance writer in Allison Park, Penn.

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By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Religion News Service



Tebow scores again

High-profile quarterback top religion author of 2011

Critics have hammered Denver Broncos quarterback Tim Tebow for everything from his throwing style to his trademark professions of evangelical faith. But this much is now beyond dispute: the guy has a gift for selling books.

Tebow's Christian life story, *Through My Eyes*, was the top-selling new release of 2011 from HarperOne, a leading religion book publisher.

With 220,000 copies sold between its June launch and mid-December, *Through My Eyes* even outsold Rob Bell's best-seller *Love*

Wins, which sparked intense debate with its unorthodox views about hell.

As soon as *Through My Eyes* hit bookstores, it was a hit with Christian football fans, especially in the Southeast where Tebow won the Heisman Trophy for the University of Florida. But an uncanny series of late-in-the-game Broncos wins last fall fed a blitz of national attention and fueled curiosity about one of the most outspoken Christian athletes.

Readership "is beyond the evangelical world and NFL fans now," said Mark Tauber, senior vice president and publisher at HarperOne. "There's just sort of a general intrigue about what drives this guy."

With scriptural quotes introducing each

chapter, *Through My Eyes* tells the back-story of an unlikely athlete whose coaches said he'd never make it as a quarterback.

Home-schooled as a child, Tebow wasn't allowed to watch TV until he'd memorized a set of verses from Psalms and Proverbs. And because humility was a virtue, boasting was forbidden. The Tebow kids could discuss their playing field feats only if someone asked about them.

Such wholesome tidbits seem to be striking a chord with readers. Despite publishing such big names as Brian McLaren and John Dominic Crossan, HarperOne hasn't had a book do this well since Sidney Poitier's *The Measure of a Man* was anointed by the Oprah Book Club in 2007. **BT**

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Romans 12:2

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‘Nostalgic journey’

N.C. man’s collection of church fans prompts stories

WILMINGTON, N.C. — William McNeill remembers two things about sitting in the pew at Singletary United Methodist Church in Dublin, N.C. as a boy.

He can still hear the choir singing the old gospel hymn “Bringing in the Sheaves,” which the young McNeill thought was actually “Bringing in the Sheeps.”

The other: his mother’s hand-held fan, painted with a Sunday school primer painting of Jesus the good shepherd, surrounded by air-brushed children and lambs.

The paper fans with wooden handles that were in every church, tire store and tobacco warehouse of his 1950s youth “resurrect sweet memories of a vanished world, a warmer



William McNeill’s collection of vintage church fans were on display earlier this year at the Cameron Art Museum in Wilmington, N.C. RNS photo by Amanda Greene.

world before air conditioning,” McNeill said.

Those early church experiences ignited a passion — McNeill calls it a “gentle madness” — for collecting paper fans, many of which were on display earlier this year at the Cameron Art Museum in the show “William McNeill: My Life as a Handheld Church Fan, a Rhapsody on Sweat, Sweet Tea, and Salvation.”

His collection now includes about 400 secular, religious, woven, pop culture and instructional fans that date from the 19th century to the 1970s.

In some communities, “the church fans were the first introduction to art imagery for a lot of people in the same way stained glass serves in churches to tell stories,” said the museum’s executive director, Anne Brennan. “The fans are the launching pad for his storytelling.”

For many years, McNeill has woven his fans into musical presentations sponsored by the North Carolina Humanities Council at senior centers and churches, telling stories about his upbringing and then playing rollicking gospel hymns and other piano tunes.

“I see them as an invitation for an excursion through a nostalgic past, a world of two- and three-digit telephone numbers,” McNeill said.

In a video of his performance, McNeill tells a story about one summer when he was five on his family’s farm. He stood on

his front porch fanning his Aunt Susie with one of his mother’s fans that depicted Jesus ascending to heaven.

Next he quietly sits at his piano and launches into a lively rendition of “I’ll Fly Away.” A later story about his father’s signed baseball paddle fan leads to a “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” sing-along.

His fans are historic documents themselves, a reflection of idealized American life. McNeill has an entire collection of instructional fans guiding 1950s children to look before crossing the street, saying: “Stop a minute, save a life.”

One advertisement fan for a drug store shows a young boy holding a lollipop. The text: “You get the best at the drug store Drugs-n-Everything.”

His faith fans show images from every part of Jesus’ life, from Mary’s pregnant journey to Bethlehem on a donkey all the way to Jesus’ Ascension.

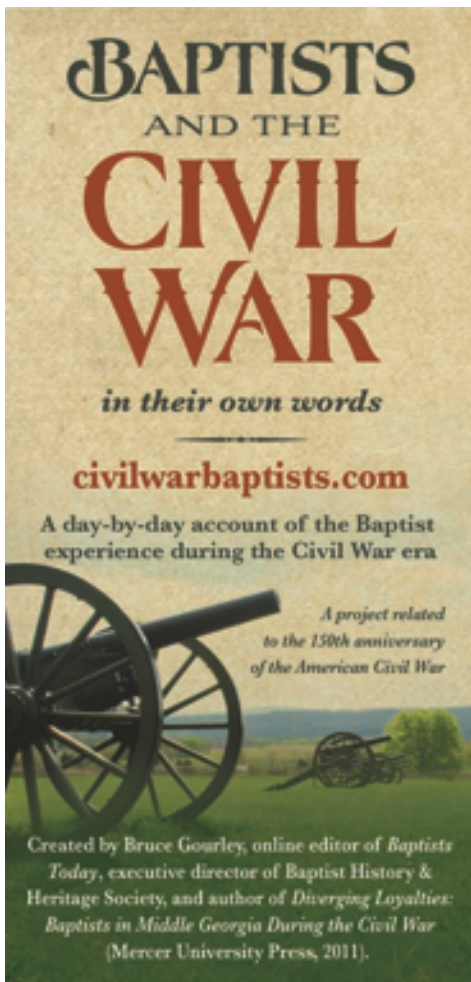
Some of the fans are scribbled, spotted or have fuzzed edges from so much hot afternoon fanning. That’s all part of the charm for McNeill.

“It’s the paint loss, the paper loss, the tears and sweat stains he has reverence for,” Brennan added. “That God in every one, for him, is transferred to the fans.”

McNeill is nervous his vast collection of religious fans will paint him as “religious or a goody-goody two shoes, which I’m certainly not,” he said of his complicated faith relationship to his fans. “Many people will dismiss the religious imagery as kitsch, and I just hate that because religious art can bring comfort and solace to people of faith.”

The artist admits his faith has changed from those early days of adoration next to his mother in the pew.

“I would label myself as an aesthetic Christian. It is the poetry of the liturgy, the music, the poetry of the King James Version and the Book of Common Prayer, hymns ancient and modern,” McNeill said. “It’s a nostalgic journey for a sense of community which has been lost.” **BT**



Now all glory to God, who is able... to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. - Eph. 3:20

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- Significant report from 2012 Task Force on the Fellowship's future
- Carrie Newcomer in Concert
- Leadership Institute - Faith Church: Finding a Way Forward in Crazy Times
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