

Contains **MARCH** Nurturing Faith Lessons

Baptists ODAY

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FATH

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for adults and youth
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MOVING AHEAD: Yellowstone Theological Institute adds faculty, consultants with plans for 2014 launch



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Cover photo: By John Pierce.
Wayne Smith, director of Central Baptist of
Bearden's Samaritan Ministry, and his daughter
Annie Acree, a volunteer, get ready for "Faithwalk:
Knoxville Steps Up for HIV" on World AIDS Day.

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Wayne Smith, director of Samaritan Ministry, thanks volunteers for filling food boxes and buckets of personal items for persons and families impacted by HIV/AIDS. Carol-Ann Buchanan (right) envisioned the Buckets of Hope project that is continued in memory of her brother.



Heart of Concern

Wayne Smith's compassionate ways

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — It's a busy Saturday morning as volunteers in one room fill boxes with food while others down the hall pack blankets, gloves and various personal items into bright blue buckets. Quietly directing these efforts is a lanky retired educator named Wayne Smith.

He is the director of Samaritan Ministry, which provides compassionate care and support to those impacted by HIV/AIDS. It is a mission of Knoxville's Central Baptist Church of Bearden where Smith and most of the volunteers are members.

"It's partly about the stuff, but it's a lot about the love," said Smith of these efforts to minister to those impacted by the disease — while challenging negative and judgmental

attitudes toward people with HIV/AIDS, often fostered by church leaders.

On this early-December morn, the big response and well-coordinated efforts bring the massive task to an end in record time. So Wayne pulls the multigenerational volunteers into a circle around some of the many filled buckets that will be delivered to a local hospital that serves AIDS patients. He offers thanks.

"I get charged up...," said Smith, "when we plan a project that could be lots of work and 30 people show up on a Saturday and it just takes an hour."

Carol-Ann Buchanan, who started the Buckets of Hope project a dozen years ago, is present. Her brother Chucky Moyers, who suffered and died from AIDS, inspired the effort.

"My whole dining room was filled up," she said of the project's early days that resulted in, at most, the filling of 60 buckets each year. "It's been a great thing."

With the help of Samaritan Ministry and others, the project has greatly multiplied. With the boxes of food and the Buckets of Hope, patients and families touched by HIV/AIDS receive some tangible expressions of love and care.

BEGINNINGS

Smith traces the church's involvement in AIDS-related ministry back to the mid-'90s when Mack Bingham, minister of education at the time, read Baptist leader Jimmy Allen's book, *Burden of a Secret*. Allen wrote a moving account of how AIDS impacted his family and how the suffering was compounded by the rejection found at church.



Approximately 150 persons participated in the World AIDS Day walk in downtown Knoxville.

EXPANDING

A couple of weeks after the successful AIDS education day, a friend asked Smith to make a hospital visit with him to see a patient with AIDS. There he encountered a 32-year-old man near the end of his life.

He was receiving no visits from family and friends, said Smith, “and his pastor wouldn’t come into his room.” Wayne befriended him and determined that being educated about the disease was not enough.

“I started doing volunteer work and then it got out of hand,” he said.

Someone asked if he could take some food to a family suffering because of AIDS.

The church responded to his call for help.

“Once we did that, people figured out this might be a church that would care for people with AIDS,” he said. So the opportunities multiplied.

Bingham wondered how his congregation would respond if a child with AIDS was brought to church, and wisely noted that the time for such discussions was before the situation arose. So he enlisted a committee of educators (including Smith) and medical personnel within the church to address the issue from a well-informed perspective.

“So we got together and started learning about AIDS,” said Smith, an elementary school principal at the time.

In February 1996, an AIDS education day was held during the Sunday school hour. The information was shared in age-appropriate ways to the various classes from first graders to senior adults.

During worship that day, Larry Fields, pastor at the time, preached on Christian compassion.

“We stood back and waited on the flack,” said Smith, noting the conservative nature of East Tennessee and many within the congregation. “We didn’t get any.”

The church had been educated without negative pushback, and Smith said they “thought the work was done.”

Calls to Smith and the church came in from families looking for help and hope. The greater needs became obvious as Smith responded to these requests — spending considerable time after work and on weekends.

The church added this effort to its mission budget and called it Samaritan Ministry. Then Smith retired in 2001 to give the growing effort his fulltime attention.

Although it has greatly expanded through the years and works in partnerships with other organizations, it remains a ministry of Central Baptist Church of Bearden rather than forming as a separate non-profit organization.

That is by design, said Smith. And current pastor Wade Bibb affirms that decision. In fact, he said, this approach to compassionate ministry is what attracted him to the Central pastorate after years in academia.

“This kind of ministry is something I could get excited about,” said Bibb. “It’s moving to watch.”

At Thanksgiving, the congregation hosted a dinner for families impacted by HIV/AIDS. Two senior adult Sunday school classes served the food this year, said Bibb.

“I call it one of our essential ministries,” he said, noting that Smith’s leadership is what has led to the ministry’s effectiveness and expansion, “and the church has gotten behind it.”

THE FOCUS

The connection between AIDS and homosexuality, though not exclusive, has caused some churches to avoid addressing this ministry need, said Smith. And in worst cases, he added, resulted in offensive proclamations of judgment from some Christian leaders based on bad science and theology.

While Smith and some volunteers have built close relationships with gay and lesbian persons in the Knoxville area, he said the ministry’s focus is also on providing care to those affected by a disease.

Such Christian compassion drives volunteers to cook and serve a Thanksgiving meal and fill boxes and buckets on a Saturday morning. Smith said he and other volunteers provide additional services through Samaritan Ministry such as support groups, hospital visitation, and administering the swab test (through the local health department) on college campuses and even in bars.

Smith said those experiences have opened remarkable ministry opportunities. He describes Samaritan Ministry as a “broad ministry” of caring that emphasizes “the real mission of the church is about people outside the church.”

And those on the outside who are HIV positive are very receptive, he said, to finding Christians who are compassionate rather than judgmental.

PERSONAL TOUCH

Persons infected with HIV are living longer now, though there are still deaths, said Smith. The support groups he started in 2001 now have “more laughing and learning.”

And while the general public is better educated now than when Samaritan Ministry began, “There is still a lot of stigma about this disease,” he added.

Yet volunteers, he said, who get acquainted with those who’ve contracted the virus, “see the human face of this, and put a name on it.”

Jimmy Allen of Big Canoe, Ga., whose book drew Central Baptist leaders to this issue and the ministry opportunities that followed, is pleased with what has developed.

“Seldom have I encountered a group of persons so reflective of the spirit of a compassionate Christ as the group gathered and led



Some participants shared the purposes of the Knoxville Faithwalk on the backs of their shirts.

by Wayne Smith at Central of Bearden,” said Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and a founder of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Allen said that many groups have come and gone since the emergence of HIV/AIDS, but Samaritan Ministry has continued to expand and to minister effectively. He called Smith “a layman with a heart of concern” who “moved into a ministry with courage, compassion and commitment.”

Allen added: “He has been a blessing in his quiet way to multitudes of people.”

In 2005, Smith received the Ryan White HIV Prevention Award from the National Education Association. Smith said he was surprised at the affirmation he received at the event in Los Angeles.

“I got this enormous applause when they announced that I was connected to a Baptist church.”

Likewise, Smith said Samaritan Ministry for many years was the only faith group among the approximately 200 exhibitors at the annual U.S. Conference on AIDS. Christians who worked with various agencies would flood to the display to pick up materials and ask: “Can I take this back to my pastor?”

He began asking agency leaders at the conference: “Do you have any churches helping you?” For years, he said, the answer was always a quick “no.” But more recently, he said, he’s been hearing some reply, “Yes, we do.”

“That is one of the very positive, significant changes,” he said.

One way for churches to begin this kind of ministry is to open current food and clothing distribution to agencies that work with AIDS patients, he said. And Samaritan Ministry (samaritancentral.org) offers a “starter kit” for churches that want to do more.

COLLABORATION

Samaritan Ministry partners with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other national and local organizations. Smith said one of the keys is building trusting partnerships with others in the community who provide services to persons and families impacted by HIV/AIDS.

An example of this collaboration occurred on World AIDS Day in early December, when a diverse crowd gathered at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church for a brief service and a “Faithwalk” through downtown Knoxville to raise awareness and funds.

Bill McConnell, a fellow lay leader at Central Baptist and moderator-elect of the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship who participated in the Faithwalk, spoke admirably of Smith’s close relationships with those who benefit from the support groups and other services provided by Samaritan Ministry.

He noted how Smith has become a most-important listener, encourager and advisor to many persons in the area who are living with HIV — to the point that when something significant happens in one of their lives, the first response is likely to be: “I’ve got to tell Wayne.” **BT**

A ministry of Central Baptist Church of Bearden, Knoxville, Tenn., and numerous partnering churches and other organizations

GOALS:

- To challenge negative and judgmental attitudes towards people with HIV/AIDS
- To increase knowledge and understanding and to decrease fear and misconceptions
- To provide accurate information
- To give practical and pastoral support to people and families living with AIDS
- To engage in prayerful dialogue with other churches, faith communities and secular organizations

RESOURCES (available at samaritancentral.org or 865-450-1000 X827) include:


- HIV Ministry Kit for Churches
- 30 Ideas to Engage Your Church

“We are committed to take every opportunity to advocate, teach, and otherwise seek support in this fight against HIV and AIDS. We are most concerned that Christians and churches respond appropriately to this epidemic with open arms and hearts, living out the model set for us by Jesus Christ.”



Cliff Helton of Central Baptist Church of Bearden moves some of the 50 food boxes prepared.

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Highlights

- **Friday Evening Worship**- Participate in a dynamic and meaningful service
- **Commissioning Service**- Share in a time of blessing for new CBF field personnel and church starters
- **Pre-Assembly Prayer Retreat**- Rest and pray with fellow ministers and lay leaders

BOLDLY RESPOND
to the work of the Fellowship



Highlights

- **Workshops and Business Sessions**- Explore relevant ministry topics and issues related to the work of CBF
- **Leadership Institute**- Find your missional identity through the vision, formation and engagement of the Dawnings Initiative
- **State and Regional CBF Meetings**- Engage and learn about local ministries

Hear from the new CBF Executive Coordinator during the Friday evening worship and stay for a welcome reception afterwards in The Gathering Place.

General Assembly will be hosted and held at the newly renovated Sheraton Greenbore Hotel. Eat, sleep, and attend all under one roof. Amenities include onsite restaurants, free onsite parking and the adjacent Four Seasons Town Centre shopping mall. It's never too early to make plans to attend Assembly. Pre-register for free and find a step-by-step planning guide at www.thefellowship.info/assembly or use your smartphone to scan this code.



Editor's note: Thirty years ago a visionary editor, a horde of volunteers and generous supporters brought to life a uniquely autonomous, national publication now known as Baptists Today. A big celebration (see information below) is planned for April 25 in Gainesville, Ga., for all who can attend. Throughout the year, reflections on the shaping of Baptist life from within the pages of this news journal will be highlighted.

Turning the pages on women in ministry

The first issue of *SBC Today* (now *Baptists Today*), dated April 1983, reported on a recent meeting of 33 women at Louisville's Crescent Hill Baptist Church. Nancy Hastings Sehested, then associate pastor of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., and later pastor of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis, was one of the organizers.

She described the purpose as "more process than product." But reported results included hopes for "a formal organization for women in ministry."

The July 1983 issue reported on a second meeting of approximately 75 women that coincided with the June gathering of the Southern Baptist Convention in Pittsburgh.

A purpose statement was adopted: "To provide support for the woman whose call from God defines her vocation as that of minister, or as that of women in ministry within the Southern Baptist Convention, and to encourage and affirm her call to be a servant of God."

Today that organization is known as Baptist Women in Ministry, and is led by fulltime executive director Pam Durso. The rise of women in ministry within Baptist life has been chronicled by this news journal over the past three decades.

Editors have advocated for gender equality and kept readers informed of the movement.

The publication has provided a forum for expressing opinions on this issue, such as a letter to the editor in 1983 in which

Mary M. Malone of Austin, Texas, opined: "I would leave if the SBC were to take a very verbal, anti-ERA stand."

In the years that followed, Southern Baptist leadership would indeed oppose women sharing equal leadership in the church and home, and violate the historic Baptist principle of congregational autonomy.

In the July 1984 issue, associate editor Susan Taylor wrote: "Women must be submissive in all things because it was the woman of Eden who brought sin into the world. This is the position taken in a resolution by messengers to the 1984 Southern Baptist Convention."

As Southern Baptist opposition — codified in resolutions and creeds, and sometimes carried out through the expulsion of congregations with female pastors — has continued to grow, however, so has the number of Baptist churches ordaining women as deacons and ministers. **BT**



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Graduation for one at Starbucks

Reblog

Selections from recent blogs at baptiststoday.org

By John Pierce

Jennifer Harris Dault received her Master of Divinity degree from Central Baptist Theological Seminary a week and a half after her graduating class — in a bit more casual setting.

Car trouble prevented Jennifer and her husband Allyn from completing the four-and-a-half-hour drive from their home in St. Louis to the seminary campus in Shawnee, Kan., on Dec. 8. Instead of pomp and circumstance, they experienced a leaking radiator and having their car towed to a mechanic.

“It was an emotional day,” said Jennifer.

Kindly, Heather Entrekin, Des Peres Chair of Congregational Health, accepted the diploma on her behalf. And the other graduates, who had traveled the educational road with Jennifer through Central’s new cohort-model program, sent thoughtful messages.

But seminary president Molly Marshall was not satisfied. So when her travels took her toward St. Louis, she made plans to present Jennifer with her diploma in person.

“I wanted to underscore my commendation of her as a woman in ministry,” said

Marshall. “... I know how hard it still is for many women seeking placement as a pastor, so I wanted to encourage her personally.”

Jennifer’s husband works for Starbucks, so why not get a good deal on coffee drinks while celebrating this educational milestone? And her parents could attend the coffee shop celebration as well.

So, in this unusual setting, the M.Div. degree was bestowed upon Jennifer Harris Dault by President Molly Marshall, who offered the same formal words used when conferring the degrees on campus.

Allyn snapped this official graduation photo with the president’s phone — and some caffeinated onlookers unknowingly attended their first seminary graduation ceremony.

“We did get a lot of attention from the other store patrons as we stood for our little service,” said Jennifer.

Having drawn such attention, Molly asked if anyone else there wanted a degree. One man responded that he thought she was giving out marriage licenses.

To which Molly replied: “I can do that too.”

This personalized graduation service was not on the seminary calendar or a part of



anyone’s plans. But it more than redeemed a difficult day for one graduate — who received her diploma and a special blessing from the seminary president.

“I’m deeply thankful for Central,” said Jennifer. “Molly went out of her way to make my graduation special.”

Jennifer said such care for students by faculty and staff was demonstrated throughout her educational experience. For the president, it is just how she chooses to carry out her work.

“I am a rather hands-on president,” said Molly. “Besides, I thought Starbucks would be a good place to recruit students!” **BT**

As rich as Croesus?

By Tony Cartledge

King Croesus (pronounced “kree-sus”) and his riches are still making news. Croesus was the king of Lydia during its heyday in the sixth century, BCE, when it comprised much of the western half of what was once known as Anatolia or Asia Minor, present-day Turkey.

Gold deposits in the Pactolus River and an emphasis on mining filled his coffers to overflowing. He was the first to mint gold coins for trade, and became famous for his love of lucre.

As Cyrus the Persian began to build his empire, Croesus recognized the threat, made some alliances, and sallied forth in 547 BCE to do battle rather than waiting for Cyrus to come to him.

After an inconclusive battle near the Halys River, Croesus disbanded his army

for the winter. Cyrus did not, however, and his forces overthrew Lydia and captured Croesus.

Tales of Croesus’ fortune grew even larger with time, so that in classical antiquity his name was synonymous with great wealth. In English, he became the subject of the proverbial simile “as rich as Croesus.”

I grew up hearing my grandmother use this expression and have often run across it in reading, but it appears to have fallen from use in popular culture.

When I tell my Old Testament students about Cyrus’ conquests en route to defeating the Babylonians and allowing the Hebrew captives to return from exile, I always remark that he conquered Lydia and its wealthy King Croesus along the way.

I pause to point out that this was the very man who gave rise to the expression “as rich as Croesus,” thinking that I have enlightened my students in a delightful way. So far, no student has admitted to hearing

the expression — so I consider it part of their education to add it to their vocabulary.

A huge hoard of Croesus’ wealth was found and looted from burial mounds in western Turkey in 1965, then sold. By the 1980s, much of it had ended up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In 1993, some of the treasure including a beautifully wrought gold seahorse brooch was repatriated to Turkey and put on display.

In 2006, an anonymous tipster alerted authorities that the brooch on display was a fake. The museum director had sold the original to pay gambling debts, claiming the brooch was cursed and was responsible for his losses.

Recently the real brooch was found in Germany and will be returned to Turkey. Who knows if the curse has been broken? But if a few more readers learn the expression “as rich as Croesus,” at least the old king’s legacy will live a while longer. **BT**

quotation remarks

“I don’t give myself high marks on suffering fools. I’m not rude to those I consider foolish, but I strenuously and lamentably evade them. But I do see people who handle fools well. Many members of the clergy do, as do many great teachers.”

—Columnist David Brooks in
The New York Times

“When I listen to James Dobson and I read the gospel accounts, two jarringly different portraits emerge... For [some conservative Christians] politics, not faith, is their interpretive lens. Christianity becomes a blunt instrument in an ideological struggle. The result is that people of faith explain a brutal massacre by connecting imaginary dots. And the fact that doing so damages the Christian faith seems to bother them not at all.”

—Peter Webner, an evangelical Christian and social conservative, in a blog at *patheos.com* after Dobson attributed the Connecticut school shootings to God’s judgment due to abortion and gay marriage

“I grew up hearing tales of my grandfather, a pastor, praying with President Ronald Reagan at the White House. My father, also a pastor, prayed with George W. Bush in 2000 ... But, like most young evangelical ministers, I am less concerned with politics than with the exodus of my generation from the church.”

—Pastor John S. Dickerson, 30, of Cornerstone Church in Prescott, Ariz. (NYT)

“There’s nothing like a terrible tragedy to bring out the religious, political and hurtful opinions of the ignorant masses.”

—Engineer and Baptist lay leader John P. Land of Macon, Ga., via Facebook

“I believe that it is finally time that I, and others who own guns, face some common-sense reality and lead in calling for the enactment of effective gun laws that meet the constitutionality test. Gun owners need to lead the effort to stop these horrible tragedies.”

—David Currie, Baptist ethicist and rancher in Paint Rock, Texas, who owns more than 20 rifles, shotguns and pistols including antique firearms passed down from one generation to the next

“We were told that some of the students didn’t want to come to school, but when they heard the comfort dogs would be there, they came.”

—Tim Hetzner, president of Lutheran Church Charities that brought seven golden retrievers to serve as “a healing presence” for Sandy Hook Elementary School students returning to class in January for the first time since the Dec. 14 massacre (RNS)

“There’s no such thing as adopted children. There are only children who were adopted. In a biblical understanding, ‘adopted’ is a past-tense verb, not an adjective. So once someone has been adopted into the family, that person is part of the family with everything that that means.”

—Russell Moore, dean of the school of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and father of five children, two of whom were adopted (RNS)

“I’m putting this subject out there as a way of calling myself to this task. I want evangelism to be on our radar again... As much as we delight in baptizing children and youth who have learned of the faith from their parents and teachers, I would like more of us to baptize more adults who have been introduced to Christ by a friend or colleague.”

—Bill Ireland, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga. (Visions)

“We believe when you fill a dome full of people who say they follow Jesus, there should be some tangible action.”

—Bryson Vogeltanz, chief steward of an initiative to combat slavery and human trafficking, funded by gifts of more than \$3 million given by the 60,000 Christians, mostly students, who attended the Passion 2013 conference in Atlanta (CNN)

“Millions of Millennials do not see temptation as something to be avoided, but rather a relatively benign feature of modern life.”

—Barna president David Kinnaman, noting however that young Americans identified their greatest temptations as worrying, procrastination, eating too much and spending too much time on media (RNS)

“I don’t believe there is an age, but a time.”

—Janice Haywood of Campbell University Divinity School and author of *Children and Conversion: How to Talk with a Child About Salvation*, in an Associated Baptist Press story on baptism of children, noting that the younger the child, the stronger the desire to please authority and emulate others

Watching our dissonance

The word “dissonance” appears in a news story in this issue. I’ll not point out which one in case some readers like to play search games.

Dissonance can be defined as an “inconsistency between one’s actions and one’s beliefs.” In this case, it is used by a newspaper reporter in writing about a woman thrust into action by her concern that what her children were being taught was not matching up with the actions of those doing the teaching.

While context matters, the broader consideration of dissonance is greater than the issues of this particular story. It is a deeper, wider and longer concern.

In other words, instead of focusing solely on this one situation we would do well to look at our own. Otherwise, we miss a good growth opportunity.

With some honest confession, we can admit that our claims and even good efforts to be Christian leave us with incongruities between what we sing, say and pray and how we live in relationship with others.

“Dissonance” may not belong to our exclusive spiritual vocabulary, but its reality is an important consideration for those of us who seek to follow Jesus but acknowledge that we often wander down other trails.

We end up doing and saying things that hardly fit our declared model. That’s been the challenge of Christian discipleship through the centuries — to live on Thursday afternoon with the same attitude as when praying on Sunday morning.

The dissonance between the life and teachings of Jesus and the attitudes and actions of those who claim him as Lord has a sad and solid history from the ancient biblical texts to our own experiences.

Another article in this issue of *Baptists Today* is about the recent PBS series “The Abolitionists,” in which high-risk opposition to human slavery in 19th century America was rooted in and driven by Christian

conviction and compassion. And, sadly, the strong and deadly defense of slavery most often came from those who claimed to follow Jesus as well — while getting spiritual cover from their ministers who pounded some of the most prominent pulpits of that time.

Most disturbing is the mindboggling, head-shaking recognition of the deep dissonance between the clear, primary emphasis of Jesus on the value and equality of all persons and the harsh abuses of one human owning another for economic gain.

That such an unimaginable incongruity could exist in the name of Jesus is beyond baffling to us. It brings into question the degree to which even those who feel the tug of the Spirit on their lives will allow evil to override that divine pull toward goodness if the price is right.

Some say: “But that’s all in the past; let’s put it behind us.” Indeed, reconciliation and moving ahead are the right course — but only if we learn well from the past mistakes of dissonance rather than repeat them.

It is one thing to look at such crass failures and wonder, “Oh God, how did that happen?” But it is more constructive to look at our own ways of thinking and living so that those who follow us will not say the same things in the years ahead.

Wallowing in the failings of previous generations of believers or even our own is not the goal. Our proper focus is on striving for faithfulness.

Two other articles in this issue address the growing number of “nones” — those who claim no religious affiliation. My hunch is that people are becoming more comfortable now in admitting that they don’t want to wear religious tags that carry unwanted baggage. So they go without one: choosing to explain what they believe rather than undoing an inherited, embarrassing

reputation created by others.

For that reason and others, looking for the dissonance in our personal, congregational and denominational ways of expressing faith is an important exercise. It impacts both our faithfulness and our public witness.

So what do we do about it?

For one, let us admit more often and clearly that our best efforts at imitating Christ come up woefully short.

Two, that we, like those before us, need to guard against allowing self-interests to shape our beliefs and practices.

And, three, confess our tendency toward claiming divine sanction for those beliefs and practices that are simply the ones we prefer.

Most helpful, however, if we have the guts, might be for church leaders to ask some reflective young people: “Where do you see the dissonance between what we profess as a congregation and how we live that out?”

But be careful: they might just tell the uncomfortable truth — you know, the stuff we need to hear but fear.

Unlike word searches, the dissonance between professed faith and expressed faith is not a game. It is central to our witness and the future of the faith we claim. **BT**



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Nuns to ‘Nones’

Analysis: 10 ways religion shaped the news last year

WASHINGTON — From the nuns to the “nones,” religion dominated the headlines throughout 2012. Faith was a persistent theme in the presidential race, and moral and ethical questions surrounded budget debates, mass killings and an unexpected focus on “religious freedom.”

Here are 10 ways religion made news in 2012:

Suffer the children: Gun violence as a new “pro-life” issue

A shooting rampage that killed 12 and injured more than 50 others inside a crowded movie theater in Aurora, Colo., couldn’t do it. Neither could a gunman who murdered six people at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis.

But a hail of bullets inside Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. — which took the lives of 20 first-graders and six adults — was finally able to mobilize religious activists on gun control after years of failing to gain traction.

“Those who consider themselves religious or pro-life must be invited to see that the desire to prevent gun-related deaths is part of the religious defense of the dignity of all life,” wrote James Martin, a Jesuit priest and contributing editor at *America* magazine.

‘None of the above’

A startling one in five Americans (19 percent) now claim no religious affiliation, up from 6 percent in 1990. The so-called “nones” include unbelieving atheists who staged a massive “Reason Rally” in Washington, but two-thirds of the unaffiliated say they believe in God or a universal spirit.

Almost nine in 10 say they’re just not looking for a faith to call home. An April study found that among the under-30 set, the only religious group that was growing was the

“unaffiliated,” with an increasing tide of young Americans drifting away from the religion of their childhood.

By year’s end, a study from the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that there are about as many religiously unaffiliated people in the world (1.1 billion) as there are Catholics, and they’re the third-largest “religious” group worldwide, behind Christians and Muslims.

Nuns on the bus and in the spotlight

The “nones,” however, shouldn’t be confused with the other big newsmaker of 2012: the nuns, who found themselves facing a Vatican crackdown and accusations that the umbrella group of most U.S. sisters was embracing “radical feminist themes” and not working strongly enough against abortion and same-sex marriage.

The reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious was seen as a hostile takeover by many rank-and-file Catholics, who rallied to the sisters’ defense.

A separate group of sisters, meanwhile, dubbed themselves the “Nuns on the Bus,” and embarked on a 2,700-mile tour to advocate for the poor.

Sister Simone Campbell, whose group NETWORK organized the tour, landed a prime-time speaking slot at the Democratic National Convention, where she slammed the budget drafted by GOP vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan, a fellow Catholic.

“Mormon moment”

Even though he ultimately lost his White House bid, Republican Mitt Romney nonetheless made history as the first Mormon to win a major party’s presidential nomination. He also exceeded in overcoming significant evangelical wariness of his Mormon faith — he won more evangelical support (79 percent) than Sen. John McCain did in 2008 (73 percent).

What’s more, evangelicals dropped some of their long-harbored suspicion of Mormons, according to surveys, and some even

viewed the faith more positively as a result of Romney’s campaign.

Even ailing evangelist Billy Graham made a late and somewhat surprising entry into campaign politics, vowing to “do all I can to help” Romney and later scrubbing his ministry’s website of all references to Mormonism as a “cult.”

Despite frosty ties with the U.S. Catholic hierarchy, President Obama carried the critical Catholic swing vote, largely on the support of Hispanic Catholics. The largest share of his “religious” coalition came from an unexpected source: religiously unaffiliated voters, at 23 percent.

Strides for gay rights

Gay rights made unprecedented strides in 2012 when voters in Washington, Maryland and Maine approved gay marriage, while Minnesota voters rejected a constitutional amendment to ban it.

But a series of events in May showed Americans’ mixed feelings on the issue: North Carolina approved a constitutional ban while President Obama finished his evolution and endorsed same-sex marriage.

The United Methodist Church upheld its teaching that homosexuality activity is “incompatible with Christian teaching,” while a Gallup Poll found that a majority (54 percent) of Americans now see homosexual relations as “morally acceptable.”

All eyes are now on the U.S. Supreme Court, where justices will consider challenges to a 2008 California referendum that stopped gay marriage, and the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act that prohibits the federal government from recognizing legal same-sex marriages performed in nine states and District of Columbia.

Contraception and religious freedom

One of the more unexpected entrants into the 2012 campaign was a fierce debate over birth control, centered around Catholic and evangelical resistance to the Obama administration’s

mandate for free employee coverage of contraception.

Even as Obama vowed to carve out exceptions for religiously affiliated institutions such as hospitals and universities, Catholic bishops and evangelical colleges launched a full-throated assault on the mandate as a threat to “religious freedom.” Multiple lawsuits have been filed to stop the mandate.

But a LifeWay Research poll showed that almost two-thirds of Americans believe businesses should be required to provide the coverage for free, even if contraception conflicts with the owner’s religious ethics. Earlier polling found that 58 percent of Catholics support the mandate; another found that Catholics rejected the idea that religious liberty is under siege.

The long shadow of sexual abuse

As U.S. Catholics marked the 10th anniversary of the clergy sex abuse scandal that erupted in Boston, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops was confronted with two landmark criminal convictions.

Monsignor William Lynn was found guilty of child endangerment for shuffling abusive priests around the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and Kansas City, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn was convicted of failing to tell police about a priest suspected of sexually exploiting children.

Even as the Penn State abuse scandal showed that abuse is not just a “church problem,” popular Franciscan priest Benedict Groeschel was forced to retract statements that seemed to defend priests who sexually abuse children and blamed some victims for “seducing” them.

The chairman of the bishops’ National Review Board warned the prelates: “If there is anything that needs to be disclosed in a diocese, it needs to be disclosed now. No one can no longer claim they didn’t know.”

New threads in America’s religious tapestry

The 2012 campaign marked the first time that neither major party ticket included a white Protestant, but there were other signs of America’s growing racial and ethnic diversity.

New Orleans pastor Fred Luter was elected the first black president of the Southern Baptist Convention, which was formed in 1845 in the defense of slavery. Rep. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii, becomes the first Buddhist member of the Senate; her House seat was won by Democrat Tulsi Gabbard, the first Hindu

member of Congress.

The number of mosques in America has jumped 74 percent since 2000, up to 2,106. “Islam,” said David Roozen of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, “is one of the few growth spots in America’s religious mosaic.”

Boldface names

Among the big names topping the religion headlines in 2012:

Evangelist Franklin Graham apologized for questioning President Obama’s Christian bona fides in February, when he couldn’t say whether Obama was a Christian, in part because, “under Islamic law, the Muslim world sees Barack Obama as a Muslim.”

ABC canceled its short-lived saucy church drama *GCB* after viewers lost faith in the bedazzled desperate housewives in choir robes. Then-candidate Newt Gingrich called the show “anti-Christian.”

Crystal Cathedral founder Robert H. Schuller left his California megachurch and lost a bid to recover assets as part of the church’s bankruptcy. The iconic glass building is scheduled to become a Roman Catholic cathedral.

The Dalai Lama won the prestigious \$1.7 million Templeton Prize for his efforts to bridge the divide between science and religion.

Southern Baptist public policy guru Richard Land lost his radio show, and later announced his retirement, after he was accused of plagiarizing racially and politically charged remarks in the Trayvon Martin case.

Former Alabama Supreme Court Chief Justice Roy Moore won his old job back, nearly a decade after losing it when he refused to remove a 5,200-pound granite Ten Commandments monument from his courthouse.

Yale theologian Sister Margaret Farley was publicly rebuked by the Vatican for her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, which was deemed “not consistent with authentic Catholic theology.”

Metropolitan Jonah, the leader of the Orthodox Church in America, was sacked for failing to report or remove a priest accused of rape.

Jesus may or may not have had a wife, at least according to a 4th-century papyrus fragment that includes the cryptic line, “Jesus said to them, ‘My wife...’” The Vatican dismissed it as a “clumsy fake.”

Paolo Gabriele, the trusted butler to Pope Benedict XVI, was sentenced to 18 months in a Vatican jail for leaking private papal

documents in an attempt to rid the Vatican of corruption out of his “visceral love” for the church and the pope. Gabriele was later pardoned by the pope.


The U.S. got its first Native American saint, Kateri Tekawitha, a 17th-century Mohawk woman who practiced extreme acts of religious devotion despite torment for her baptism and conversion.

Justin Welby will be the next archbishop of Canterbury, and the first task of the former oil executive will be finding a way for the Church of England to reconsider its vote this year not to allow women to become bishops.


Passages

Year 2012 saw the passing of several leading religious figures, including: William Hamilton, the theologian behind *Time* magazine’s famed “Is God Dead?” cover story in 1966, at age 87; Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III, at age 88; Christian artist and “painter of light” Thomas Kinkade, at age 54;

Watergate felon and evangelical icon Charles Colson, at age 80; Leontine T.C. Kelly, the first black woman to be elected a United Methodist bishop, at age 92; March for Life founder and anti-abortion activist Nellie Gray at age 88; and Unification Church founder Sun Myung Moon at age 92. **BT**



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Moving ahead

Montana seminary adds faculty, consultants with plans for 2014 launch

BOZEMAN, Mont. — Yellowstone Theological Institute (YTI) has taken big steps recently in its move from a dream to the reality of providing theological training, continuing education and collaborative learning opportunities in Big Sky Country.

“If you were to encapsulate the mission statement of YTI, it would be ‘... equipping those in Christ to serve, learn and lead in a postmodern world,’” said Jay Smith, pastor of Bozeman’s First Baptist Church and YTI’s principal who envisioned the new school and nurtured its strong initial support.

Theologian John Franke has been named professor of missional theology and academic dean.



John Franke

“The hope is that YTI will become a progressive/ecumenical/missional institution in the evangelical tradition that provides innovative theological and ministerial education, training, and resources in support of the church and the mission of God in the world,” said Franke, who previously served as theologian in residence at First Presbyterian Church in Allentown, Penn.

Smith also announced that Bill Leonard, founding dean of Wake Forest Divinity School, where he continues to hold the Dunn chair of Baptist studies, is now serving in a consulting role. Leonard is helping develop academic strategies and policies, as well as networking with other theology schools to find mutual benefits.



Bill Leonard

Leonard said he was honored to serve as a resource person for YTI.

“A new theological school in the West is a particularly exciting possibility, and the

energy behind the project is quite impressive,” he said. “I think it has great potential for theological exploration in its region and beyond.”

Donors have provided 80 acres of prime land, to be developed in future years next to Montana State University, and the start-up funding for the school that will highlight the region’s interest in outdoor adventures and the fine arts as well as innovative theological education.

Smith said enlisting experienced and innovative leadership to help birth the school is essential.

“Leonard and Franke bring years of academic achievement to a young, visionary institute for theological education,” he said. “Both are concerned about the state of theological education and believe that YTI has an opportunity to change the manner in which theological education is delivered in a postmodern and increasingly post-denominational culture.”

Smith said Leonard will also assist YTI in developing strategies that reflect links between theological education and trends in American religion — including shaping curriculum to respond to declining participation in religious institutions, the needs of Millennials, and the renewing of church life.

“YTI is still in its developmental stages,” said Smith, noting that funding and administrative attention this year is focused on developing educational programs, recruiting students and marketing the new venture to a wide audience. Future gifts will go toward building facilities and adding needed faculty as the school grows and expands.

“More than anything, YTI is committed to becoming a part of the theological conversation in North America today for the benefit of the gospel and the church,” he added.

Smith said he, along with Franke, Leonard and Bruce Gourley (who lives in Bozeman and will teach church history and Baptist studies), will develop a Master of Divinity curriculum “that will be



YTI founding principal Jay Smith

comprehensive and innovative.” Additionally, there are plans for a Master of Arts degree with a variety of concentrations, as well as the Th.M. degree and certificate programs for second-career ministry students.

Continuing education and other classes, in cooperation with other institutions, will be designed to bring ministers, laity and students from across the country to learn in the unique culture of scenic Montana.

Also joining the faculty are A.J. Culp, who will do student recruitment as well, Tracie Jernigan and Ken Mottram.

While giving primary attention this year to developing the programs and structure of the unique school, Smith said some conferences will be offered to introduce those in the region to YTI and to help communicate its mission. The first class of students seeking a theology degree is expected to matriculate in the fall of 2014.

“Our professors will not only lecture, but serve alongside students in local and global ministries,” said Smith. “Our students will become critical, lifelong gospel learners and each will emerge from their studies as leaders in the best possible sense.”

One uniqueness of YTI (yellowstone-theology.org) will be the incorporating of adventure and arts into the studies for both those who come to Bozeman for a degree in theology or participate in a short-term educational experience offered in partnership with another seminary or organization. **BT**

(Disclosure: Baptists Today staff is providing communication and networking consultation to YTI.)

Weather

Poll: more than one-third of Americans see end times in natural disasters

WASHINGTON — More than a third of Americans believe the severity of recent natural disasters is evidence that we are in the “end times” described in the New Testament — a period of turmoil preceding Jesus’ Second Coming and the end of the world.

“There is a significant proportion of Americans who see these phenomena through a theological lens,” said Daniel Cox, research director at the Public Religion Research Institute, which released a poll on religion and climate change in December in partnership with Religion News Service.

“It’s hardly a fringe belief. It’s nearly four in 10 Americans who are embracing this,” Cox said.

The conviction is particularly strong among white evangelical Protestants (65 percent), and less common among Catholics (21 percent) and the religiously unaffiliated (15 percent). Overall, 36 percent of Americans see signs of the end times in Mother Nature’s fury.

But a majority of Americans connect recent extreme weather to climate change, according to the poll, which was conducted between Dec. 5-9, about six weeks after Hurricane Sandy wrecked havoc on the mid-Atlantic coastline.

More than six in 10 Americans (63 percent) say the severity of recent weather is evidence of global warming, compared to one third (33 percent) who disagree.

Cox noted religious divisions among Americans on recent destructive storms, floods, snowstorms and heat waves. Seven in 10 (69 percent) religiously unaffiliated Americans link dramatic weather to global warming, compared to 60 percent of Catholics and 50 percent of white evangelicals.

“They’re experiencing the same weather, but how they perceive it is very different,” he said.

The differences among Democrats and Republicans are even starker, with

70 percent of Democrats and 65 percent of Independents holding that brutal weather patterns are evidence of global warming, compared to 43 percent of Republicans.

The findings may buoy those who bemoan the nation’s unwillingness to make global warming a political priority — despite overwhelming evidence that burning fossil fuels and other human activity has led to rising global temperatures that threaten increasingly violent natural disasters.

Even so, advocates for action express concern about the large minority of Americans

“If you simply say, ‘It’s God’s will,’ it absolves people of taking serious responsibility for their actions.”

who see the severe weather in eschatological terms. These believers, according to the poll, are less likely to accept the human causes of climate change.

Peter M. J. Hess, the director of outreach to the religious community at the National Center for Science Education, said such a belief stymies progress.

“It’s theologically incoherent, scientifically wrong and weakens efforts to get public policy changed,” Hess said. “If you simply say, ‘It’s God’s will,’ it absolves people of taking serious responsibility for their actions.”

“I’m a Roman Catholic fairly well-educated in science, and any earthquake on the West Coast is to me not reflective of divine judgment,” said Hess, who lives within the Hayward Fault Zone, which includes cities and towns east of San Francisco.

On divine judgment, the survey found nearly one in three Americans (29 percent) believe God sometimes punishes nations for the political decisions of their leaders, though nearly two-thirds of Americans (65 percent)



reject this idea.

When it comes to addressing climate change, 67 percent of Americans want the government to do more on the issue, with nearly seven in 10 young people (ages 18 to 29) favoring more robust government intervention, compared to 54 percent of seniors (age 65 and older).

While attitudes toward global warming have changed dramatically in recent years, the most recent trend is greater acceptance of the phenomenon.

Cox noted a 2006 study that showed 77 percent of Americans believed there was solid evidence of the rising temperature of the Earth. That majority dropped precipitously to 57 percent in a 2009 study. In 2011, another PRRI study showed it at 69 percent.

In the recent poll by PRRI, 75 percent of Americans said they agreed that the earth’s climate is getting hotter.

In other findings, the PRRI study revealed that:

- 15 percent of Americans believe that the end of the world, as predicted in the Book of Revelation, will occur in their lifetimes.
- College graduates are four times less likely to believe the world will end in their lifetimes than those with a high school education or less.
- About three in 10 white evangelicals (29 percent) and minority Christians (27 percent) believe the end of the world will occur in their lifetimes. That belief is held by only 10 percent of Catholics, 8 percent of white mainline Protestants and 7 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans.

The poll of 1,018 Americans had a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points. **BT**

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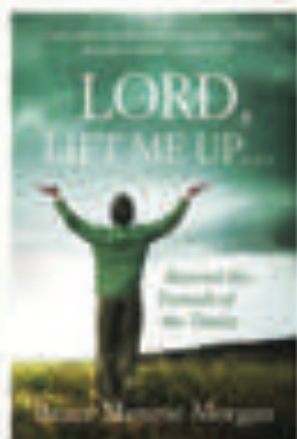
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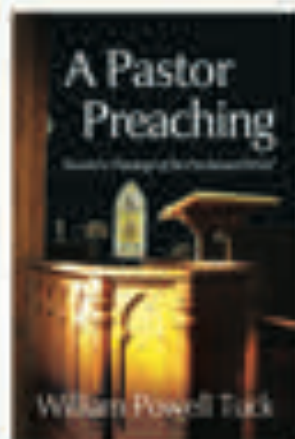
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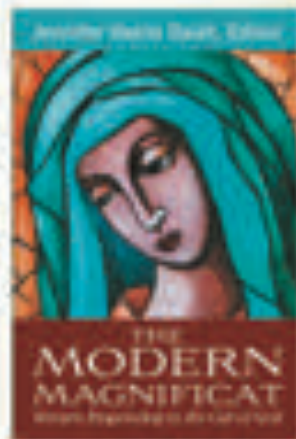
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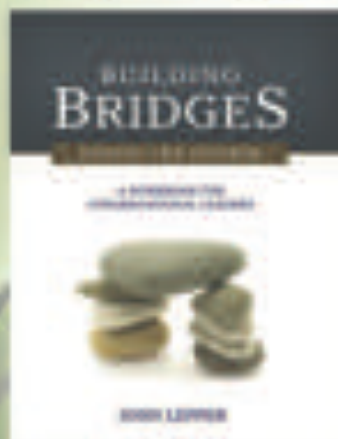
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Lent on the Loose

Luke 13:1–9 — The Year of No Fig Preserves
MARCH 3, 2013

Luke 15:1–3, 11–32 — Prodigals, All of You
MARCH 10, 2013

John 12:1–8 — Better Than a Pedicure
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Luke 19:28–40 — A Day for Shouting
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John 12:1–18 — The Power of Persistence
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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Luke 13:1-9

March 3, 2013

The Year of No Fig Preserves

Have you ever wished you could ask someone who should know — someone like Jesus, perhaps — why bad things happen? Do you sometimes wonder, especially, why innocent people suffer or die? Most of us, I suspect, could resonate with the man who said: “When I get to heaven, God will have a lot of explaining to do.”

In today’s text there are people asking Jesus just that sort of question. As is often the case with Jesus, however, the response we get is not the one we expect.

The Galilean massacre (vv. 1-3)

During Lent we’re spending time with Jesus during the last weeks of his life in human, earthly form. According to the previous chapter, Jesus had been calling on his followers to be prepared for a coming judgment, and this theme continues into chapter 13.

As Jesus made his final journey to Jerusalem, “some who were present” brought a recent tragedy to his attention. We do not know who asked the question. It could have been people in the crowd wanting Jesus to explain why trouble comes, Pharisees looking for a reaction, anti-Rome zealots hoping to engender Jesus’ support, or even some who were concerned for Jesus and warning him of danger. However the question was posed, everyone present would have listened closely for Jesus’ response.

Someone reported that a group of men from Galilee had come to worship



Luke 13:8 —
He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.” (NRSV)

at the temple and offer sacrifices. In an act of government-sponsored terrorism, a band of armed Roman soldiers had burst in and slaughtered the worshipers, mingling human gore with the blood from their sacrifices. Many people in Galilee strongly opposed Roman rule, and it is possible that the men were targeted as suspected members of a revolutionary party called the “Zealots.”

This event is not mentioned elsewhere, but Josephus, a Jewish historian of the period, detailed similar atrocities. In fact, Herod Antipas was removed from his position in 35 C.E. after ordering the massacre of Samaritan worshipers and religious leaders at their temple on Mt. Gerizim.

Those who brought this news to Jesus would have held the traditional belief that the victims must have been sinners who deserved their fate. Instead of affirming the popular dogma, however, Jesus’ response caught his listeners off guard. “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all

other Galileans?” (v. 2).

Of course they did. That was the common wisdom.

By reframing the question, however, Jesus rejected the false notion that God directly causes every event — a view that denies both human freedom and the natural freedom of creation. Jesus refused to buy into the *quid pro quo* folk theology, but he still saw an important lesson in the tragic deaths: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did” (v. 3).

Jesus did not deny that the murdered Galileans were sinners, but he refuted the idea that their gruesome deaths were proof of some great sin. All are sinners, Jesus insisted, and judgment is coming: Everyone needs to repent if they do not wish to perish in the judgment.

The Siloam disaster (vv. 4-5)

To further illustrate his point, Jesus raised the issue of another recent tragedy. A stone tower near the pool of

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Siloam had collapsed, killing 18 people. The tower was probably part of a wall that was built to protect Jerusalem's water supply. Were the persons killed there construction workers or passersby or children resting in the shade? We don't know, and the point is largely found in the ambiguity. Who knows whether these persons were great sinners or not?

Jesus' comment was identical. The people who died beneath the tower were no worse than the other inhabitants of Jerusalem. All people are sinful and in need of repentance, lest they perish when judgment comes. The manner or timing of one's death is not a commentary on his or her level of personal righteousness, but every untimely death is a warning to all "that life is uncertain, death is capricious, and judgment is inevitable" (R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX [Abingdon, 1995], 270).

So, when Jesus had a chance to explain why bad things happened, he passed. He rejected the idea that God causes everything, popularly expressed today by the folk belief that "everything happens for a reason."

Still, we may ask, why does God even allow bad things to happen? We have a natural tendency — sometimes mistakenly encouraged by out-of-context scriptures — to think God should step in and protect us from harm. But human freedom to choose our own paths and the freedom of natural events to run their course mean nothing if God is constantly intervening. We may want God to explain God's self to us, but the real question is how we will explain ourselves to God.

Fruitless faith (vv. 6-9)

Jesus reinforced his call to repentance by telling a parable about a fruitless fig tree in a vineyard. When the landowner noticed that the tree had not produced figs for three years running, he instructed his gardener to cut it down and plant something else. The gardener

interceded, asking permission to cultivate and fertilize the tree for another year before giving up on it.

In the Hebrew Bible, Israel was commonly compared to as a vineyard or fig tree that disappointed God by not producing good fruit (cf. Isa. 5:1-7, Joel 1:12). Some have interpreted the story, then, as an allegory in which the landowner is a figure for God and the fig tree represents faithless Israel. The gardener who intercedes might be Jesus, offering Israel one last chance to repent and do right.

The story, however, is a parable, and not an allegory. Parables generally have one main point, and the point is this: We all are faced with the option of repentance that leads to life or of rebellion that leads to death. God is patient, but judgment is coming.

While the main point is clear, there is something else about this parable that is very interesting, and it wouldn't be right for us to ignore it. This parable is full of manure. The gardener asked for time to dig around the tree and pile manure on it. The Greek word used here (*koprion*) is not even a polite word. It is a crude description of dung that we would not let children use at the dinner table.

In the ancient world, as today, manure was commonly used as fertilizer. It may not be a lot of fun to work with, but it is very effective, and in this parable it is very significant. Have you ever considered the thought that there is mercy in this manure? The landowner wanted to chop the tree down, but he relented and showed grace when the gardener promised to dig the soil around the tree and treat it with manure.

In the parable, Jesus seems to point to a debate in God's own mind: whether to give us what we deserve ("Cut it down!") or to offer what we do not deserve ("Give it more time"). The gardener's request for the landowner to "let it alone" for another year employs

the same Greek word (*'aphes*) that is usually translated "forgive." In essence, he asked forgiveness for the tree and patience for another year.

Is there hope for us, unfruitful as we are? On one side is the justified judgment we all deserve. On the other side is the miraculous, manurified mercy we don't deserve. Between the two stand both believers and unbelievers, with an opportunity to repent and produce fruit while there is still time.

How will the story end? Will the dung do it? Will the formerly barren trees produce fruit?

The Bible is filled with stories where that happens: Sarah, Rachel and Hannah were barren, yet they all bore children when everyone else had given up on them.

Maybe you've given up on your life producing any fruit for God — the fruit of obedience, the fruit of goodness, the fruit of new believers coming to Christ because of your witness — but if you're still living, it's not too late.

Jesus' story, we note, is open-ended. We don't know if the gardener's attentions had the desired effect and the tree produced fruit the next year or not. The story has no ending, because it's not really about a fig tree. It's about every person who lives under God, and we all have to write our own endings to the story.

Jesus came into our world preaching a gospel that called for the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of life. Like John, Jesus called people to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Instead, the gospels declare that some of those same people nailed him to a cross and went back to their lives. Just before the earth shook and the heavens grew dark as if preparing for a last burst of judgment, Jesus said "Let it alone" (*'aphes*) — "forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34).

Jesus gave himself for us, his blood dripping onto the ground, his love reaching out to our roots, offering us grace and hope and another chance to become faithful and fruitful before the landowner comes again. Will we?

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

March 10, 2013

Prodigals, All of You

Do you ever feel resentment when you see someone getting something you think they don't deserve? Maybe you've watched as someone was promoted at work when you believed there were others (such as you?) who were more meritorious. Or maybe you get mad thinking about young, unwed mothers getting government benefits from your tax money while fly-by-night fathers take no responsibility.

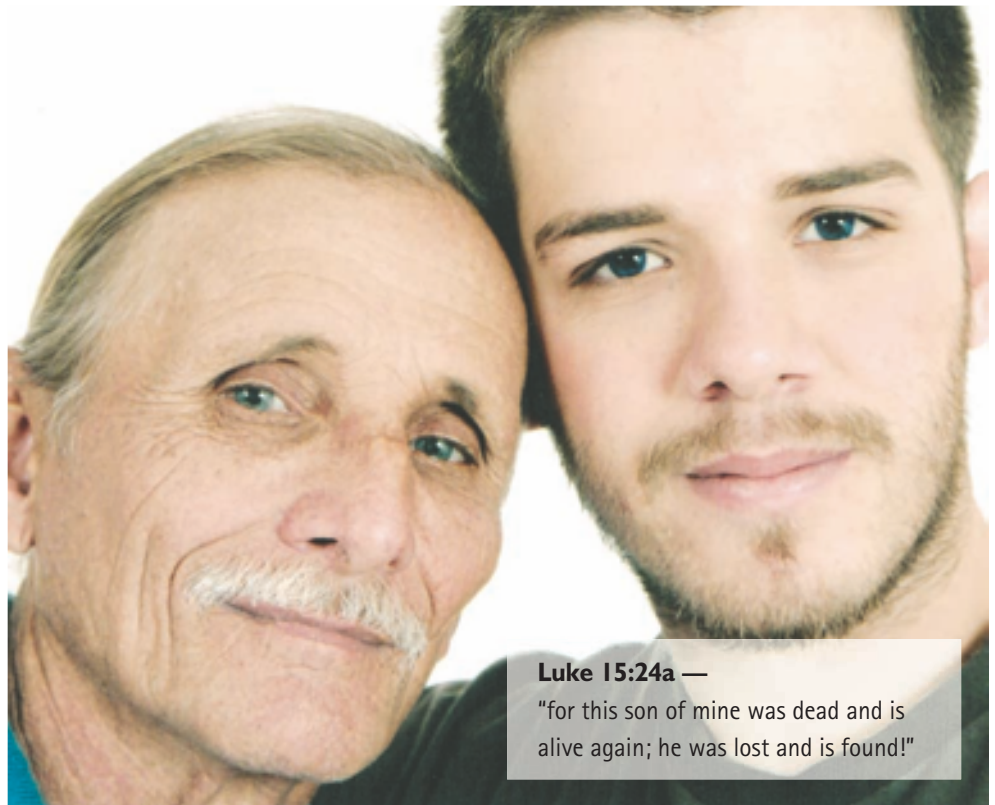
Thoughts like that might help us get a clearer grasp of today's text, one of those stories that's so familiar we can let it walk right past without even bothering to invite it in for a chat.

It's usually called "the parable of the prodigal son," though some prefer the title "the parable of the forgiving father." Both titles overlook the cantankerous and resentful older brother who's the real target of Jesus' story.

One helpful way to experience the story is to try putting ourselves in the picture. There's an impatient and immoral runaway son, a loving and forgiving father, and a hardworking but begrudging older brother. Can you envision the story from each character's point of view? With which character do you resonate most readily? ↓

"Saints" and sinners (vv. 1-3)

This familiar parable appears near the end of Luke's "travel narrative," which has been the setting for the past few lessons. The story itself has no geographical setting and needs none, though we should note that it is the third



Luke 15:24a —

"for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"

in a sequence of three stories in Luke 15 that deal with something that has been lost: a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. ↓

What we often overlook is that all three stories are set against the backdrop of a party at which Jesus was eating with "tax collectors and sinners" (vv. 1-2), much to the chagrin of certain scribes and Pharisees who complained, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

So, who do you think was the target of Jesus' three stories about people who went out of their way to find what was lost?

Exactly.

If the first two stories don't make it clear, the resentful and self-righteous older brother who appears near the end of the third parable leaves no doubt that Jesus has a message for sanctimonious folk who take offense when the undeserving get a little grace.

Jesus loved all sinners, however, including the holier-than-thou. To help

them get past their smugness and contemplate such love, he talked to them about what it means to be lost and found.

The three parables are purposefully sequential. They move from the parable of the lost sheep (one out of a hundred), to the parable of the lost coin (one out of ten), to the parable of the lost son (one out of two). The first two parables have the same basic point: The shepherd in search of the sheep (vv. 3b-7) and the woman in search of the coin (vv. 8-10) are clear images of God, who persistently searches for the lost and rejoices when they are found — as opposed to the moralizing men who seemed to resent the notion of unclean sinners receiving grace.

The parable of the lost son (vv. 11-32) goes beyond the first two. It also speaks of the Father's concern for the lost and his joy over the prodigal's return, but goes on to explore the attitude of the angry elder brother who cannot accept his penitent sibling.

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



A boy and his father (vv. 11-24)

Hebrew tradition mandated that property be passed on from father to son, with the oldest son receiving a double share. If a widow survived her husband, she would not inherit the property. The father's goods would be divided between the sons, and they would be given responsibility for the mother's care.

It was customary, then as now, for property to be distributed after the father's death, but it could be done earlier. Once the inheritance was parceled out, however, recipients had no further claim on the estate.

The younger brother in this story is portrayed as having grown tired of the farm and longing to experience the world. He pressed for his share of the inheritance, and the loving father granted it. With money burning a hole in his pocket, the shiftless son left home and took off, severing ties with the father.

While we don't usually recognize it, as Malcolm Tolbert has noted, this is precisely the situation of everyone whose stubborn self-will leads them to take control of their lives into their own hands, leaving God out of the equation ("Luke," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* [Broadman Press, 1970], 125).

Once in a "far country" and away from his familial and religious roots, the prodigal quickly squandered his inheritance on a newly riotous lifestyle. 📌 The young man clearly behaved irresponsibly, and Jesus pointed to the natural results of profligate living: poverty and isolation.

As the prodigal ran out of money, the land ran out of rain, producing a famine. As one pundit observed, "Forlorn and forsaken, he found himself a feed-flinger in a filthy farmyard." 📌 Hebrews considered pigs to be filthy and unclean (cf. Lev. 11:8), but tending swine was the only job the young man could find, and the hogs ate better than he did. Carob pods contain bitter beans and gelatinous goo that provide some meager nutrition, but they were only eaten by the poorest people and in the worst of times.

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As the young man hit bottom in a pig wallow, we notice a sharp difference between this story and the earlier ones. The lost sheep and the lost coin could not find themselves, but the lost son was different. Eating from the same trough with the hogs helped him to face reality. He "came to himself" and realized that the mess he was in was his own doing.

Thinking he would rather feed his father's sheep than some heathen's hogs, the prodigal decided to return to his father, confess his failure before God and his father, and ask for a job as a hired hand.

Some writers consider his plea to be a skillful ruse by a scheming son who never truly repented, but the whole story rests on the fact that he did repent. He left the far country of rebellion and returned to his father. That is what the word "repent" means: to return. In returning to a father who loved him, the penitent prodigal became a model for others who needed to repent.

As we know, the lost boy returned to find that his father had been out looking for him already. Dismissing the son's desire to slink into the bunkhouse as a hired servant, the father called for a ring and a robe to symbolize continuing sonship, new sandals to replace his old traveling shoes, and a fatted calf to celebrate his return.

Did you notice the irony? The dishonorable young man had left home so he could party, but returned home to be greeted with a party in his honor.

The prodigal brother (vv. 25-32)

We tend to slide by the last part of the parable, but the elder brother's reaction sums up the point of all three "lost" stories. He had remained hard at work while his selfish sibling abandoned the farm and was enraged by the thought that his father would honor the scoundrel's return. Sulking and pointedly

snubbing the party, he was as close to rejecting his father as the younger brother had been.

The elder brother was a prodigal, too, but could not see it, blinded by his self-righteous contempt of his brother and his refusal to accept the father's love for them both.

What we must not miss is that the father did love them both. Just as he had gone out looking for the younger son, so he went in search of the older brother and assured son number one that his faithfulness was well known and his inheritance secure.

The father urged his eldest to join the festivities and extend a caring welcome to his brother. There were places of honor for both at the father's table, but also a need for both to repent and accept the father's love.

One might call the father a "prodigal" because he acted in a way that is outside of the accepted norms. He gave to the younger brother the acceptance he needed instead of the hired servant position he requested. And, he gave to the older brother the reassurance and responsibility he needed rather than the party of his own that he wanted. When the father said "All that is mine is yours," that included the younger brother, who would one day be dependent on his older brother's willingness to keep him on as a supportive member of the family. 📌

Comprehending a radical father like this might require an attitude adjustment on our part, especially those who adopt an Ayn Rand-like philosophy of self-sufficiency and self-interest as a primary virtue, dismissing any notion of altruism and leaving the less competent to fend for themselves or fail.

Like the parable of the fruitless fig tree in last week's lesson, this story is open-ended. We don't know if the older brother relented and welcomed his brother home or if he remained on the porch, nursing his offended ego. The intent of the story is that we put ourselves in the older brother's indignant sandals, leaning against the doorpost and staring hard at the stars ...

Would you have joined the party? **BT**

YOUTH

March 3 — March 31, 2013

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



The Bible Lessons by Tony Cartledge.

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

Why God?

Luke 13:1-9

Have you ever thought, "Why would God let this happen?" We usually make this comment about an event that seems unthinkable bad. Do you have memories that make you shake your head and ask again, "Why would God let this happen?"

In Luke 13.1-9, those persons with Jesus ask this same question. They have the Son of God before them, but in essence they ask: "OK, Jesus, why did God let this happen?" If anyone were to know the answer, it would be Jesus. So what does Jesus say?

As Jesus often does, he asks a different question in response. It is as if he is saying, "Here is the real question you should be asking." When Jesus responds with a different question, he is pushing aside the common thought that God caused these

events to happen. It is not God who causes these things to happen, but it is because of the freedom God gives each of us that they occur. And because we are free to make choices, we have the ability to do good or cause harm.

If those listening didn't get it the first time, Jesus tells a parable to get his point across: A tree hasn't produced fruit for three years, and the master calls for it to be cut down. The caretaker asks for one more chance; he'll even do some work on it and spread some fertilizer around it. If all that work doesn't produce results, then he'll cut it down.

There are seasons, maybe even years, when we don't produce good fruits, but we are graciously given chance after chance to produce. Jesus continues to work on us to help us produce good fruit.

MARCH 3

Think About It:

When we witness evil we want God to explain God's self, but why don't we take the plank out of our own eyes? How will you explain to God the things you choose on a daily basis?

Make a Choice:

God gives us freedom to make choices. How do you make your decisions so that they reflect God's ways and hopes?

Pray:

Dear God, may we choose as you would choose, and when we don't, may we turn back to you for guidance and a new beginning.

It's Not Fair!

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

"Life's not fair!" How many times have you heard this? It's even better when the phrase is followed by, "And you better get used to it!" Whoever says this to you is saying it in what he or she thinks is your best interest. What if that person is right? And what if all of this unfairness is a good thing?

In today's lesson, Jesus is with the Pharisees and scribes, but he is also with the tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees voice their displeasure with the company Jesus keeps, just as he begins to tell a parable.

The parable Jesus tells is one we all know. Although it is most often referred to as "The Prodigal Son," some teachers have called it "The Forgiving Father." But with the text mentioning the Pharisees and scribes before the parable is told, there may

be one other character who is the focus of the parable: the older brother.

The older brother is hardworking, loyal and does everything his father asks him to do, but he is disgusted with how his father continues to treat his other son. The parable never mentions whether the older or younger son is loved more or less, and this is what annoys the Pharisees and scribes. God loves everyone the same all the time.

The Pharisees and the scribes can't understand why Jesus eats, travels and lives with sinners. They have followed the rules of the Father, but the Father continues to love those who have turned their backs and disobeyed commandments. It is easy to see how the Pharisees and scribes feel this is unfair — that they should be treated as well or better than the sinners. Could it be that God is more concerned with loving all people than in meeting our notions of fairness?

MARCH 10

Think About It:

Is it good that life isn't fair? What if God did judge us on the basis of what we deserved? What if God didn't offer grace or show love even when it is undeserved?

Make a Choice:

It's not our choice to decide who we love and who we push aside. Is it hard for you to love everyone, much less love everyone the same? How can you work to love and care for everyone you meet?

Pray:

May we offer the grace we receive daily to all those we encounter in our lives.

In Love

John 12:1-8

Have you ever received a gift that you knew was a sacrifice for the giver? Have you ever sacrificed something so that you could give a gift?

In both situations there were probably people around the giver saying, "Are you sure about this?" and questioning the sacrifice that was being made. But to the one who gave the gift, the joy of honoring the other drowned out all of those complaints.

In today's lesson, Mary breaks a pound

of costly perfume and pours it over the feet of Jesus. With her hair she wipes his feet, anointing him with this selfless and expensive act. Judas screams out about the waste, but Jesus hushes him with the tale of what is to happen. The response by Judas shows that again the disciples do not understand what will happen to Jesus.

Mary seems to understand and is validated by Jesus' approval of her generous act. Jesus asks her to keep the remainder of the perfume so that it can be used at his burial.

MARCH 17

Think About It:

Mary served the most urgent need around her: anointing Jesus and honoring his presence. What urgent needs do you see that call for acts of selfless love?

Make a Choice:

Mary did an act of selfless love when she washed the feet of Jesus. What generous act will you choose to do today?

Pray:

May our lives be acts of selfless love.

Come Marching In

Luke 19:28-40

The brass section is blaring. There is high stepping in the streets. The bass drums are dancing in beat. The trombone has a solo. The crowd is dancing and singing along: "O when the saints come marching in!"

Parades are joyous occasions because they usher in something important. But as joyous as they are, there are always naysayers who stand on the sidelines with their arms crossed and shaking their heads.

On the first "Palm Sunday," you can guess who the naysayers are as Jesus

comes riding into town on a donkey: the Pharisees.

He rides into town on a colt he had sent two of his disciples after earlier that day. As he enters the town, cloaks are laid on the colt and then on the road before him. The crowd shouts, "Blessed be the Lord!" and the Pharisees ask Jesus to stop them. Jesus just looks at them and says, "I can't, and if I did these rocks would start shouting."

Everyone in town recognizes Jesus, and in this statement he points out that everything — including the stones — also know who he is.

MARCH 24

Think About It:

The Pharisees didn't recognize Jesus for who he was. What keeps you from recognizing Jesus for who he is?

Make a Choice:

What do you do to show that you recognize Jesus?

Pray:

Dear God, may we recognize you as you move in our lives, and may we welcome you with joyous praise.

Good News

John 20:1-18

Have you ever been the one to deliver good news? Do you remember the feeling? There was an eagerness to quickly share what you knew, an excitement about the good news and a joy in bringing that excitement to others. It is as exciting to give good news as it is to hear it!

On the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene gets to deliver the greatest news ever given: Jesus has risen! We know the impact her news has had throughout history, but the disciples must witness it

first before they can begin to comprehend it.

When Peter and the other disciple return, Mary stays and is overwhelmed as she turns to see Jesus standing there. It isn't until Jesus says her name that Mary recognizes him. She wants to hold on to Jesus, maybe so he can never leave again, but Jesus says no. He tells her to go and tell the others that he is to ascend to heaven to be with the Father.

So Mary goes and tells the good news. Can you imagine the expression on her face and the feeling in her heart as she shared?

MARCH 31

Think About It:

How do you think it felt for Mary Magdalene to be the first person entrusted to tell the good news?

Make a Choice:

How will you share the good news of Jesus with others in the days and weeks ahead?

Pray:

Thank you, dear God, for trusting us to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

John 12:1-8

March 17, 2013

Better Than a Pedicure

Have you ever had a pedicure? The answer is likely to vary by gender. Many women get regular pedicures and consider them a real treat. Men are less likely to put their toes in the hands of a stylist.

I've had the experience once: A few weeks after having a hip replacement several years ago I wasn't allowed to bend far enough to reach my toes, so I took a deep breath and limped into a nail salon. I've rarely felt more self-conscious, even though no toenail polish was applied.

Imagine how it would feel to have someone kneel and give your feet his or her undivided attention, washing them, massaging them, rubbing in an expensive and fragrant ointment from ankle to toe — and do it for love.

Would you be self-conscious, especially if most people around you held harsh opinions of the person pouring such soul into your soles?

Try putting yourself into that vulnerable, public, and potentially prickly situation and maybe you'll catch a small sense of the spot Jesus was in when Mary showed up with a jar of perfume and proceeded to treat his feet with deep adoration.

Someone Jesus loved (vv. 1-2)

The placement of today's text is significant. 📖 It follows the account (John 11:1-43) of how Jesus' friend Lazarus died and was buried while Jesus was away. It's interesting to note that the first part of that story identifies Lazarus'



John 12:8 —
"You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

sister Mary as "the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair" (11:2), even though that story doesn't appear until the next chapter.

Jesus' closeness to Mary, Martha and Lazarus is seen in his use of the term "friend," (11:11), his empathic interaction with Mary and Martha after Lazarus' death (11:17-34), and his own tears of shared grief (11:35). After declaring to Martha that "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25a), Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, pointing clearly to his own coming death and resurrection.

That story is followed by a reference to the religious leaders' plot to kill Jesus, a pointed reminder of Christ's impending death that helps to set the stage for the story of the anointing, which Jesus would mark as being "for the day of my burial" (12:7).

Thus, chapter 12 picks up the story and returns to the setting of Jesus' fellowship and friendship with Mary,

Martha and Lazarus. Their home village of Bethany was only a few miles from Jerusalem. As Jesus neared that eminent city and his imminent death, his friends hosted a dinner party for him.

The text paints a Norman Rockwell-style portrait of a family meal with a beloved guest, relaxing and enjoying each other's company. We normally think of Jesus as being so driven and committed to his mission that we miss the many hints in scripture that he spent a lot of time having fun at dinner parties — so much so that the scribes and Pharisees criticized him for it.

Jesus knew how to be a friend: he understood that true friendship involves both giving and receiving. As he gave of his time, energy and compassion to others, he also allowed others to show love and kindness to him. Try to imagine having Jesus as a faithful friend you can call on when in need, and help out when he needs you — then remember that Jesus still lives and wants to be in relationship with us. 📖

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



Someone who loved Jesus (v. 3)

There seems to be little question that Lazarus, Mary and Martha all felt close to Jesus, but the text portrays Mary as being most expressive in her feelings. We recall the story of another time when Martha complained that Mary was sitting with Jesus instead of helping with dinner (Luke 10:38-42), but Jesus pronounced a blessing on Mary for her attention. In John 12:1-8, Martha is again occupied with serving food, while Mary demonstrates her love more extravagantly.

As they dined, Jesus and any other men would have been reclining on cushions spread around a low table while the women served. It's likely, then, that when Mary approached Jesus and knelt at his feet with her container of ointment, she would have been largely behind him. Mary brought with her a substantial quantity of "nard," an expensive imported perfume. 🇺🇸

If Judas' estimate of 300 denarii is valid (v. 5), the fragrant ointment could have been worth as much as a common laborer's annual income: the minimum wage was typically one denarius per day.

How would Mary have obtained such wealth to lavish on Jesus? No husband is ever mentioned. Since her brother Lazarus was living, it is unlikely that Mary would have received any inheritance. This seems to represent money Mary had worked for and saved. As such, her gift was a great financial sacrifice and display of devotion to Jesus.

Expositors often note that Mary sacrificed not only her money but also something of her dignity. Her behavior would have been considered shocking in first-century Palestine. In Luke's gospel, the woman is described as a "sinner," so her actions might not have been so surprising — but Mary was an upstanding, respectable Jewish woman. For her to lavish expensive ointment on the humblest parts of Jesus' body and then to wipe them with her own unbraided hair (the most "glorious" part of the body, according to 1 Cor. 11:15) was nearly unthinkable in her cultural

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setting — but that did not stop her from demonstrating her love to Jesus.

We often think of our service to Christ as growing from duty or obligation. How often do we show real generosity in Jesus' name simply for love? 🇺🇸

Someone who didn't love Jesus (vv. 4-8)

Mary's actions — and perhaps the strong smell of perfume — may have set several of the guests back on their heels. Matthew and Mark say the disciples were offended by their perceived waste of a valuable commodity, while Luke says it was the host who took umbrage. John, in an intentional preview of Judas' character, names the troupe's treasurer as the one who criticized Mary for "wasting" the ointment and Jesus for allowing it.

John apparently had no sympathy for Judas. He makes no attempt at naming anything but the basest motives, describing the disciples' money-man as a thief, a double-crosser and a false disciple who thought only of personal gain.

Judas, like those who took offense in the other gospels, complained that the ointment could have been sold to help the poor, but John's parenthetical statement leads us to believe that Judas wanted to sell the perfume so he could skim some of the price for himself (v. 6).

Responding to Judas, Jesus again brought up the subject of his coming death. "Leave her alone," he retorted. "Leave her alone. She has kept it for the day of my burial. For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me!" (vv. 7-8, NET).

Jesus' charge to Judas that Mary should be allowed to keep the ointment for his burial implies that she had not used the entire amount, which is certainly reasonable. Mark's version says the woman "broke open" the jar, and

preachers often wax homiletic on the notion that Mary gave it all and didn't hold anything back (I've done it, before I read the text more closely). It's not necessary, however, to assume that Mary poured out the entire contents of the container.

Think about it: Many of today's perfumes come in bottles holding two ounces or less, and they last a long time. None of us would use a full 12 ounces of cologne or perfumed body lotion at one time. Unless Mary was being intentionally extravagant, she would have used some of the ointment but not all of it. Jesus' prophetic admonition to let her keep it for his burial suggests that plenty of ointment was left and she could use it for his burial. This could have been done when Jesus' body was initially prepared (John 19:40) or on the third day, when women were first at the tomb bearing spices designed to mask the odor of decomposition (Luke 23:56, 24:1).

The other disciples seemed to be in denial over Jesus' continued predictions that he would be killed. Perhaps John wants us to see that only Mary understood, that her profligate gift was not only an outpouring of love but also of grief and a desire to spare no expense in showing love to Jesus while she could.

Jesus' statement that "the poor you have with you always" must not be read as any encouragement to ignore their needs. If anything, Jesus pointed out that there would always be a need for Christians to help those who live in poverty. At the moment, however, Jesus' need was most urgent, and Mary was perceptive enough to see it. Her gift was as prophetic as it was generous.

While Mary's immediate intent was to demonstrate pure love for Jesus, she accomplished far more than she ever knew. Many Christians through the years have learned from Mary and have been inspired to demonstrate greater love for Christ and those Christ loves. In the same way, our own self-giving love can accomplish far more than we know — provided we're willing to open our jar and our hands to those who need it most. 🇺🇸

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Luke 19:28-40

March 24, 2013

A Day for Shouting

Crank up your imagination for a bit. Travel 2,000 years into the past and more than 6,000 miles to the east. Lean back against a dusty wall in Jerusalem's eastern gate, and listen: Do you hear the commotion working its way down across the Mount of Olives and through the Kidron Valley?

The everyday noises of the city's bustling streets are giving way to the sound of distant cheering. A rumor has drawn the city's pilgrim crowds away from their eating and into the streets: "The Messiah has come!"

Can you imagine the stir? For more than 500 years the Jews had longed for a descendant of David to arise and defeat their enemies and restore the nation. Now word is spreading like a wind-whipped fire through the festival throngs: "The Messiah has come! He is riding into town on a donkey, just as the prophets said!"

Could it be real?

The crowd presses tightly against you as they squeeze through the gate. You can smell the dust and the donkeys and the unmistakable odor of too many unwashed people in too small a space.

But there's something else in the air. You can sense an attractive electricity rippling through the crowd, and soon you find yourself joining the march, straining to see the man at the center of it all and even shouting "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

After the parade goes by, though, if you are the kind of person who thinks



about things, you may wonder how you got so caught up. Who is this plain-looking man that the people are calling the Messiah and treating like a king? Hasn't Jesus been around for a while now? What has changed? If he really is a new king, am I supposed to be his subject? And if I am, what will he expect of me?

An unsuspecting animal (vv. 28-34)

The story of Jesus' "triumphal entry" is very familiar, known in some form from all four gospels (Matt. 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-40, John 12:12-19).

In Luke's version, the setting has Jesus traveling from the valley city of Jericho up the mountainous road to Jerusalem when he told a parable about a king who had high expectations of his servants (Luke 19:11-27). Luke develops the theme of kingship throughout the chapter, noting that Jesus' followers "supposed that the kingdom of God

was to appear immediately" (v. 11b). Soon after, Jesus rode into Jerusalem in the fashion of a king, but one clothed in humility rather than pride (cf. Zech 14:4-5).

The extensive dialogue concerning the disciples' fetching of the donkey seems designed to emphasize Jesus' foreknowledge of the events (vv. 28-34). This may have been intended to underscore his supernatural abilities and to connect him with the Old Testament prophecies.

Jesus' words must have been surprising, for he typically referred to himself as the "son of man" or some other title suggesting humility. But here he boldly uses the title "Lord" in telling the disciples that if the animal's owner objected to him taking it, they should reply "The Lord needs it" (v. 31).

Even this surprising term, however, should not lead us to assume that Jesus was equating himself with God: the Greek word *kurios* could also mean "master," as one in authority over

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students or servants. Jesus was clearly exercising authority to claim use of the animal, but not yet claiming divinity. 📖

The disciples may have been most surprised by the fact that Jesus wanted to ride. The gospels imply that Jesus typically walked among his followers and expected no special privilege. His surprising desire to ride must have special meaning.

Riding into a city, surrounded by adoring followers, would certainly call to mind a royal procession. A conquering king might prance into the city on a fine stallion, but Jesus rode a common beast of burden. Though the crowds called him king, Jesus emphatically refused to portray himself as the military messiah the people (and even his disciples) wanted. The odd combination of royal trappings and humility must have been confusing to the disciples and people alike: Though Jesus accepted the acclaim of a king, there remained an aura of mystery about his intentions.

That mystery was compounded by Jesus' insistence that the colt obtained for him be previously unriden. In Hebrew thought, only animals that had never been used as beasts of burden could be considered suitable for sacred purposes (Num. 19:2 and 1 Sam. 6:7). Despite the royal overtones, Jesus considered the occasion more sacred than political. 📖

An adoring crowd (vv. 35-38)

After the disciples found the animal precisely as Jesus had predicted, the text says they threw their cloaks over it, presumably to provide Jesus with a cleaner and more comfortable seat, as well as to give the colt a more festive appearance.

It's a bit surprising that, although we think of this as a Palm Sunday text, Luke says nothing about the people waving palms or any other leafy branches, as do Matthew and Mark.

All three synoptic gospels have the people shouting an excerpt from Ps. 118:26, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Perhaps because Luke wrote to a primarily Gentile audience, he

omits the Hebrew expression "Hosanna," so prominent in the other gospels, and substitutes "blessed is the king" for "blessed is the one," but without reference to Jesus as a descendant of David, as in Matthew and Mark. 📖

The gospels describe a scene of near chaos as throngs of people pressed to be near Jesus. They tossed their cloaks onto the ground before him, perhaps in hopes that the Messiah's donkey might tread upon their clothes and make of them holy relics.

Why did they cheer with such abandon? Luke explains: "The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen" (v. 37).

It was the miracles that brought them. Jesus had healed sick people when no one else could help. He had fed multitudes with a boy's bag lunch. Rumors abounded about his ability to walk on water, to whistle fish into nets, to calm a storm, to raise the dead.

John's gospel offers a slightly more elaborate description: "So the crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him" (John 12:17-18).

A man with powers like that could finally stand up to the Romans and restore Israel to its place as a leading nation on the earth. A man like that could become a king.

The people sought Jesus as a military messiah, but were disappointed. By the time Luke's gospel was written, the Romans had ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple during a Jewish rebellion, and it was quite obvious that the kingdom of God Jesus talked so much about would not be cast in the model of any typical human kingdom.

Luke understood that Jesus' kingdom would be spiritually rooted.

Perhaps that is why he emphasized its heavenly aspect more than the other gospel writers, having the people shout: "Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 📖

An unhappy audience (vv. 39-40)

While fawning multitudes of everyday folk praised Jesus or watched with excited curiosity, a smaller group watched with pointed animosity. While John points to the Pharisees' fear at Jesus' growing popularity (John 12:19), only Luke includes a tradition that some Pharisees in the crowd tried to persuade Jesus to halt the parade, saying "Teacher, order your disciples to stop!" (v. 39, NRSV). A more accurate translation would be "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" (NET).

The Pharisees' primary interest was not only in calming the crowds but also in trying to reverse their newfound belief in Jesus as the Messiah. The Pharisees didn't want Jesus to simply say "Be quiet." They wanted him to openly retract any claim to being the longed-for messiah or any sort of king.

Jesus said he couldn't do it. "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (v. 40). The Pharisees sought for Jesus to reprove his followers, but Jesus' response was a reproach to the Pharisees: The image of stones shouting praise to Jesus suggests that something as dumb as a rock could recognize Jesus as Lord while the Pharisees could not see it. 📖

What do we see in this story? What would we have done had we been there? Would we have joined the throng in going bananas and shouting praise because the Messiah had come? Or would we have skeptically stood to the side and shook our heads at all the religious fanatics who'll believe most anything?

There's little point in asking the question now, of course, because we weren't there. But there is another question we can answer and must answer: Where are we now? Are we keeping close to Jesus or keeping our distance? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

John 20:1-18

March 31, 2013

The Power of Persistence

Easter is the highest and holiest day of the Christian calendar. We remember it as the day Christ rose from the dead, conquering death and in some mysterious way beyond our comprehension freeing us from death, too.

Easter is a day of stories about an early-morning garden and angels robed in white and brave women who come to the tomb despite their fear and tell the news with breathless wonder.

When we compare the four gospels, we discover that all of them relate the discovery of the empty tomb differently. ⚓ Each gospel has a slightly different cast of characters, but all of them agree that one of those present was Mary Magdalene. ⚓

In the Fourth Gospel, Mary Magdalene is never mentioned until we meet her at the foot of the cross, but she becomes the first witness of Jesus' resurrection and the first to declare the good news.

An unlikely witness (vv. 1-13)

How much do you think Mary had slept between the late afternoon when Jesus had been carefully placed in the tomb and that dawn hour on Sunday when she returned? Mark and Luke suggest she came with others, laden with spices for Jesus' body. John portrays her as coming alone, perhaps rushing ahead of the others, drawn to the tomb even as we might feel pulled to stand by a casket or a fresh grave of a loved one. Whatever the reason, she seems to have come



John 20:18a –
"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord!'"

as soon as soon as the law and light allowed. ⚓

We don't really know much about Mary, called "the Magdalene" in reference to her hometown of Magdala, which lay near the Sea of Galilee between Capernaum and Tiberius. She appears to have been the leader of a group of women who followed Jesus and provided financial support for his ministry (Mark 15:40, 47; 16:1; Matt. 27:55-56; Luke 8:2-3; 24:10). Among the stories of Jesus' ministry and last days, Mary Magdalene features more prominently than any other woman. ⚓

Jesus' earlier predictions that he would die and rise again are not as clear in John as in the synoptic gospels, where each one includes three specific pronouncements (e.g., Mark 8:31-33; 9:31-32; 10:32-34). In contrast, John's gospel contains one mysterious reference to Jesus' dying and being lifted up (12:23-34), and a cryptic prediction that the disciples should anticipate a time of grief and mourning that would be followed by joy (16:17-20).

All the gospels agree, however, that the disciples were shocked by the resurrection. Even the faithful Mary Magdalene did not expect to find Jesus alive. When she found the tomb empty, she assumed that his body had been stolen, and ran back to the disciples to report "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (20:2).

When Peter and John bolted for the tomb to check her story, Mary followed again, her story vindicated only when Peter and John saw the empty tomb. ⚓ Despite the hollowed-out and carefully arranged grave clothes that the Fourth Evangelist describes — which should have alerted them that the body had not been stolen — the fearful followers did not yet appear to understand that Jesus had arisen from the dead (v. 9).

Though the men returned home, John tells us, Mary remained at the tomb. Still thinking that someone had stolen the body, she had little to do but weep over loss upon shocking loss. ⚓

After a while, the story suggests,


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Mary crept inside the small tomb, where she saw something Peter and John had not seen. Two men were there, clad in brilliant white, sitting at the head and foot of the rock-cut shelf where Jesus had been laid. John clearly calls them angels (v. 12), as opposed to Mark, who speaks of a single young man dressed in a white robe (16:5).

Mary was too grief-stricken to be impressed with or to recognize angels, however, and she answered their question about her weeping as she would have any person. Even today we can sense the hollowness in Mary's heart as she replied: "They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him" (v. 13). 

**A tearful witness
(vv. 14-17)**

Mary's grief soon came to an abrupt and surprising end. It's not clear whether Mary had left the tomb when she "turned around and saw Jesus standing there" (v. 14), but the author of John's gospel insists that Mary did not recognize the man she had loved and followed so closely.

How could Mary be so confused as to think Jesus was a man who had come to work in the garden? Was she too numb with grief or too blinded by tears to see clearly? Had Jesus' resurrected body taken on a different appearance? Could she simply not wrap her mind around the idea that Jesus could be standing up? 

A brief conversation between Jesus and Mary followed her interaction with the angels almost verbatim — until Jesus said one word, one magical word: "Mary." In hearing the familiar way Jesus called her name, Mary's eyes and heart were opened. Can you imagine all she wanted to say in that moment of recognition? But all she could get out was "Rabbouni!"

Although the Fourth Evangelist describes it as a Hebrew word to his Greek audience, "Rabbouni" is actually the Aramaic form of a word also known in Hebrew. While the author explains that it means "teacher" (v. 16), the word

is an intensive and personal form of the word, which can also mean "master," and could be rendered here as something like "my dear lord."

Of course, Mary would have wanted to do more than speak. Can you imagine how she must have yearned to run into Jesus' arms for a big hug filled with happy tears? Wouldn't you? Clearly, Mary must have wanted to hold onto Jesus, but he would not allow it.


This seems troublesome to us. Surely Jesus knew how much Mary longed to touch him, perhaps to confirm what her eyes had seen as much as to express affection. Why did he keep her away?

The language is ambiguous, because the Greek verb used in v. 17 could mean either "touch" or "hold." Jesus' first post-resurrection command could be interpreted as "Don't touch me," or "Don't hold on to me." Did Jesus sense Mary's intent and wave her away before the first touch? Or had she already taken hold of an arm or his feet, so that he was indicating she could not keep clinging to him?

Later, Jesus did not object to being touched and even invited Thomas to inspect his wounds (v. 27), so the latter option may be more likely. In either case, Mary had to learn that Jesus' reappearance in physical form was only temporary. Both she and the others would have to let go of his physical presence and to depend on his spiritual reality after his ascension.

The Fourth Evangelist considered the ascension to be particularly important, as seen in the instructions he has Jesus give Mary: "I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (v. 17).

In these astonishing words, Jesus indicates that his death, resurrection and ascension have created the possibility of a new relationship in which human

disciples can know God even as Jesus does: Jesus speaks of the disciples as his brothers. 

**A joyful witness
(v. 18)**

An earlier part of the text told us that when the apostle John had entered the tomb and saw the empty grave clothes, "he saw, and believed" (v. 8). Whether John yet believed Jesus had risen from the dead or just that his body was missing is not clear. There's no question, however, that Mary's newfound belief, spawned by hearing as well as seeing, included Jesus' new life.

Jesus not only lived but also gave her a command to go and tell the other disciples important news. Surprisingly, she was not to report simply that Jesus had risen from the dead and would meet them again, but that "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (v. 17b — see "The Hardest Question" online for more on this).

With her fear transformed to giddy joy, Mary tore herself away from Jesus and obeyed his command, running to tell the other disciples: "I have seen the Lord!" (v. 18).

John's insistence that the resurrection news was first entrusted to Mary Magdalene is an amazing thing. In first-century Israel, a woman's word was not considered as trustworthy as a man's (cf. Lu. 24:11). In addition, certainly Mary was over-tired, over-stressed and possibly blubbing with tearful excitement. Why should anyone believe her? A committee of humans might never have selected Mary to be the bearer of such life-changing, world-changing news, but God chose her.

Mary's experience implies a profound truth for modern disciples. Although we may feel like the least of God's children, we may become harbingers of hope to a world that often feels lost in darkness. Like Mary, we may shed tears of fear, of grief, of despair — but through it all the Lord Jesus calls our name, beckons us to believe, and turns our tears to joyful faith. **BT**

Classifieds

Senior Minister: First Baptist Church, Greenville, S.C. (FirstBaptistGreenville.com), an autonomous 2,000-member Baptist church affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Alliance of Baptists, seeks a senior minister to lead a diverse congregation and a talented staff. We seek a minister who is an inspirational proclaimer and a collaborative leader who will challenge, nurture and inspire; one who affirms and develops the gifts of others. We are mission-oriented, value Christian education, and have a strong history of leadership in moderate Baptist circles and in the community. Preferred applicants will have an advanced theological degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school. Please direct a cover letter and résumé by March 15 to Ed Good, Chair, Senior Minister Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 847 Cleveland St., Greenville, SC 29601, or to fbcgvlsearch@gmail.com.

Senior Pastor: Second Baptist Church of Little Rock, Ark., is seeking a female or male pastor who is a gifted communicator of the Gospel, a shepherd to the congregation, and mission-focused, and has the ability to lead staff and members to live out their Christian faith. Second Baptist is a downtown, vibrant, progressive church with a focus on worship, mission, discipleship and community. A seminary degree is required, and previous pastoral experience is preferred. Send résumés to Pastor Search Committee, Second Baptist Church, 222 E. Eighth St., Little Rock, AR, 72202 by March 1.

Pastor: Augusta Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., is seeking a pastor with a minimum of 5 years ministerial experience. A Master of Divinity degree from an accredited seminary is preferred. Qualified candidates may submit résumés by Feb. 28 to mtaylor@dp3architects.com.

Senior Pastor: Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church in Sanford, N.C., is seeking a senior pastor with strong leadership skills and capable of leading a pastoral staff of four members. JHBC is a diverse, intergenerational congregation of 400-plus member, dually aligned with CBF and SBC. We are very mission-minded both internationally and locally, and focus on building relationships and family ministry. We require ministry preparation credentials from an accredited university or divinity school. We offer a competitive salary and benefit package. Send résumés to Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church, 316 W. Main St., Sanford, NC 27332 or to pastorsearch@jhbc.org. For more information about the position, see jhbc.org.

Pastor: First Baptist Church of Claxton, Ga., is seeking a full-time pastor with five or more years of ministry experience in a pastoral position and who holds a master's or doctorate degree. The ideal candidate should be an effective communicator with leadership and well-developed vision for the future of our church. First Baptist Claxton has a membership of 300 and is located in southeast Georgia, 50 miles west of Savannah. Interested candidates should submit résumés to fbcclaxtonsearch@aol.com or to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 607, Claxton, GA 30417.

Minister of Music: First Baptist Church of Jasper, Ga., a CBF congregation, is seeking a full-time minister of music. Submit résumés by March 30 to fbcjasper@ellijay.com or to First Baptist Church, 198 E. Church St., Jasper, GA 30143.

Minister to Students: River Oaks Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, is seeking a minister to students (7-12th grade) to develop and implement discipleship and ministry events. The student minister will assist in outreach ministries to River Oaks Baptist School. Some ministry experience is desired. Send résumés to mmiley@robc.org.

Minister to Children

Job Description:

- Design a ministry to enhance spiritual growth of children (babies-6th grade) and their families and leaders.
- Annual compensation \$27,500. Workload not to exceed 30 hours per week.

Qualifications:

- Personal relationship with Jesus Christ and a strong work ethic
- Love for interacting with children and their families
- Excellent leadership, organization, communication, teaching skills

Education:

- College degree in elementary education or equivalent acceptable
- Seminary degree desired; continued theological education required

Information: wilkesborobaptist.org /
Ministry Position Opportunity

Résumés due Feb. 15:
childrenfirst@wilkesborobaptist.org
Chair, Minister of Children Search Committee
Wilkesboro Baptist Church
P.O. Box 61
Wilkesboro, NC 28697

In the Know

Kelly Belcher of Asheville, N.C., is manager of spiritual services for Hospice of the Carolina Foothills. She serves on the *Baptists Today* board of directors and writes the weekly Nurturing Faith Children's Sermons at nurturingfaith.net.

Tim Marsh is pastor of First Baptist Church of Rutherfordton, N.C. Previously he was pastor of First Baptist Church of Taylorsville, N.C.

Wallace C. McGill died Jan. 9 at age 84 in Chattanooga, Tenn., where he was a member of First Baptist Church. He spent more than 60 years in pastoral ministry, serving churches in Indiana, Kentucky and Georgia — including First Baptist of Cartersville and Flintstone Baptist Church. He then served two churches in Chattanooga, retiring from East Ridge Baptist Church. He is survived by his wife of 61 years, Marjorie, three children and their families.

Glen Stassen was named Baptist of the Year for 2012 by *EthicsDaily.com*. A Baptist ethicist, professor and author, he has been active in peace-making for more than 35 years.

Tom Wiles is executive minister for the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island, coming from First Baptist Church of North Platte, Neb., where he had served as pastor since 2004. **BT**

Practicing Resurrection:

"The Call of the Mountain," a **retreat** for ministers and lay leaders at Shenandoah National Park, **April 1-4**. Begin the great 50 days of Easter with us. Explore the wonder of God's good earth at Graves Mountain Lodge. Sponsored by the **Cooperative Baptist Fellowship**; co-hosted by pastors Mike Clingenpeel (morning prayers) and Jim Somerville (evening vespers). Learn more and register at thefellowship.info/easter2013.

Henry Crouch had an eye for the future

William Henry Crouch, who died Dec. 29 in Asheville, N.C., at age 84, saw potential where others did not. His legacy, beyond a wonderful family and an abundance of friends who carry on his good ways, is tied to that unique ability to take a needed step of faith rather than wring one's hands or sit on them.

Henry was a visionary leader as the longtime pastor of Charlotte's Providence Baptist Church where he was named pastor emeritus. Earlier he led congregations in Kentucky and Mississippi.

The son of an influential Baptist leader who served as pastor of Asheville's First Baptist Church and as executive secretary-treasurer of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, Henry knew the benefits of denominational life.

But he also could see clearly when a system started breaking down. Such was the case when political and theological fundamentalists began a systematic takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention and eagerly imposed rigid doctrinal boundaries.

While others buried their heads to this reality, Henry stood up and spoke up. Then he joined efforts to rally against abuses of the Baptist tradition and to create alternatives when the battle was lost.

He served as the first president of one of the first groups to form during the SBC controversy, the Southern Baptist Alliance (now Alliance of Baptists), and was active in the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as well.

Henry educated the church membership in Charlotte about the real issues and found support for his leadership in emerging Baptist entities. When the Alliance announced plans to launch the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Henry hit the road to build the initial support.

When sharing a meal at Cracker Barrel or traveling with Henry in recent years, I always found him to be supportive and encouraging. Never was there a word about how things were done better in the past.

He talked about family and friends, including the good work his son Bill was doing as president of Georgetown College in

Kentucky, and the possibilities for good that lie ahead for Baptists.

His son-in-law, Keithen Tucker, when working with *Baptists Today*, asked Henry to give an endorsement of the news journal that we could print.

His good words were: "I may not agree with everything that is written in *Baptists Today*, but I appreciate the effort to show me another viewpoint. This is what freedom provides you."

That was classic Henry; always looking for freedom over full agreement. Those of us who find meaning in 20- to 30-year-old organizations in Baptist life owe a lot of gratitude to Henry Crouch and others who stepped out and took some heat not only to defend the historic principles of Baptists, but also to ensure that Baptists of the future have places to cooperate freely.

It took foresight and faith to leave a familiar though radically changing denominational home for an uncertain future. But Henry was always near the front of those who did. He was among the dedicated and determined leaders who sensed the right time to move ahead and did so with conviction.

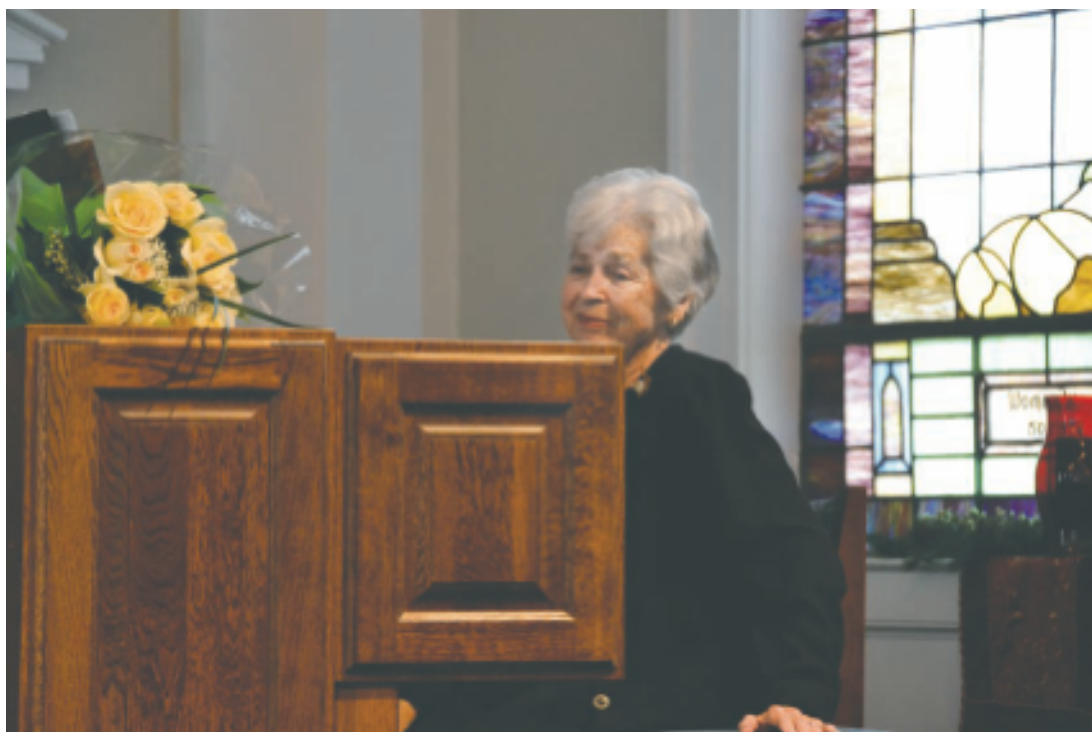
He had a forward-looking faith — and saw opportunities where others saw obstacles. **BT**

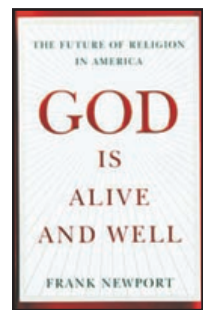


Henry Crouch

DEDICATION to SERVICE

Sarah Watts served for more than 62 years as organist at the First Baptist Church of Myrtle Beach, S.C., retiring the end of last year. The church held a dinner last month in her honor. Photo by Patricia Miller Haslauer.





Religious Renaissance?

Gallup chief says 'God is alive and well' in America

Grounded in more than a million Gallup interviews, Frank Newport's new book, *God is Alive and Well*, argues that the aging of the baby boomers, the influx of Hispanic immigrants, and the links between religion and health could portend a bright future for faith in America. He is editor-in-chief of The Gallup Poll.

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: I think religion is extremely important in America today. All of our research shows that, and I wanted to get empirical data about religion out there, rather than just speculation.

We here at Gallup have had a tracking project since 2008. We do 350,000 interviews a year, which is a huge and unique dataset that nobody else has. And personally, I grew up in a religious background and always found it interesting.

Q: What's the most important trend in American religion today?

A: One trend that I'm asked a lot about is the rise of the "nones," about which there's a huge amount of publicity, but which is often misinterpreted. When Gallup asked the question about religious identity back in the 1950s, almost zero would say they have "none."

People would say "Baptist" or "Catholic" even if they were not particularly religious. Now, 18 percent of Americans, according to Gallup polls, say they do not have a particular religious identity. That doesn't mean that 18 percent are atheists — only 5 or 6 percent say they don't believe in God — but people are changing how they express their religiosity.

Q: Despite the rise of the nones, you say that religion is poised for a renaissance in America.

A: Well, I wouldn't predict it. But it certainly is a possibility that, rather than continuing

to decrease, religious identity could increase. We've been analyzing data from 350,000 interviews since 2008, and 2012 showed the lowest increase in the percentage who said they have no religious identity, so that might be leveling off.

Q: Do other trends point to a religious revival?

A: If you look at age, the baby boomers are approaching 65-85 years old, which we've seen as the most religious age group for decades. It's a reasonable expectation that the huge group of boomers is going to become more religious, and because they are so big, they'll make the country more religious in the aggregate.

In addition, the country's increasing Hispanic population tends to be more religious. Religion has been correlated to health, so more people may seek out religion because it's good for them. And Americans are migrating to states that are more religious, which tends to make (the travelers) more religious.

Q: Gallup uses worship attendance as a key barometer of religiosity. But haven't studies shown that Americans often overstate how often they attend religious services?

A: That's probably true that people overstate how often they go to church. But it's a generalization. It doesn't mean that someone attends church 52 weeks a year. But we've found that church attendance is a good surrogate for religiosity.

People who report to an interviewer that they attend services often are in fact more religious than others, even if they don't actually attend services as often as they say they do.



Frank Newport

Q: You write that mainline Protestants are pretty much doing everything wrong in terms of growing their churches. Why's that?

A: For any group to grow, whether it's a country or a church, you have to have more people coming in than going out. For example, the Catholic Church holds its own in terms of percentage of the American population because of the in-migration of Hispanics. But there is no massive in-migration of Protestants.

Secondly, there's been no evidence that they've been able to evangelize effectively. And thirdly, one way you grow is to have high fertility rates.

Mormons are doing that well because their theology encourages big families. But Presbyterians, for example, have [fewer] children on average (than other Americans). So, if you look at all the ways churches could grow, the mainline Protestants haven't been able to hit the nail on the head with any of them.

Q: Why do you propose that the government and companies promote religion as a means to reduce health-care costs?

A: That certainly is controversial. We have separation of church and state in this country. But the correlation between religion and wellbeing has been established by Gallup and many other organizations.

The question is causality: Maybe healthier people choose to be more religious. But it's clear that religious (people) are less of a drain on our mental and physical health systems. So, a company may want to give discounts for employees who attend church four or five times a month, just as many give discounts for employees who go to the gym.

If America were to become more religious, and this is controversial, it would become healthier. **BT**

Surviving Valentine's Day

On February 13 I will realize that whatever big ideas I had about theater tickets or a day at the spa are not going to happen. I will go to Kroger where they have tables covered with chocolates waiting for schmucks. Heart-shaped balloons float toward the ceiling. The line at the floral department winds through the frozen food.

Valentine's Day was set aside to honor St. Valentine, a priest arrested by the Roman Emperor Claudius for marrying Christian couples. Claudius condemned Valentine to death. He was beaten with clubs and stoned, but he did not die. So they cut off his head. This sweet and sentimental holiday began with a prisoner being executed.

My friends in line at Kroger look like they are waiting for the guards to tell them it is time and offer them a blindfold, imagining how some of us ever got married in the first place.

At the end of the first quarter, the Atlanta Hawks are losing. The announcer says with his first hint of excitement, "Would you please turn your attention to the jumbotron for a special message?"

In big letters it says, "Jessica, will you marry me? Christopher."

The camera zooms in on section 104 to Christopher kneeling in front of Jessica. The crowd starts chanting, "Say yes," but I cannot join in. I have performed dozens of ceremonies to join Jessicas and Christophers who did not stay joined. I try to start a new chant: "Think hard." But it is too late. Jessica may be having second thoughts by now. Would you marry someone who takes marriage no more seriously than to propose at a ballgame?

The internet is filled with obvious suggestions on how not to propose. If your bride-to-be is shy, do not go for a big show. (Although a Hawks game wouldn't qualify as a big show.) If you plan to pop the question on Valentine's Day, do not go to a romantic restaurant or you may find yourself upstaged by someone else with the same idea and a better haircut. Think twice about surprising your girl by tucking the ring inside a dessert.

You might guess that the Bible would be



a good place to look for help on how to propose, but you would be wrong. Have you read how husbands find wives in scripture?

Boaz buys land and gets a wife as a throw-in, so presumably the proposal would have been addressed to a realtor.

God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute, so the offer would have been surprising.

King Solomon may have sent out a mass text message to all his female contacts.

In the Book of Judges, the men in the tribe of Benjamin are instructed to go to a party and hide in the tall grass. When the women come out to dance, the men are to grab one and carry her off.

One law in Leviticus says that if your brother dies and you are a male, then you have to marry his widow. Though my brother is in fine health, my sister-in-law and I are still pleased that the church ignores this law.

Somehow couples keep making it to the church. The relatives gather. The organist plays. The mothers nervously light the candles.

The minister asks, "Who brings the blessing of these families?"

The father of the bride struggles to remember his line. The minister speaks, knowing that no one is listening. Someone reads an Apache blessing that no Apache

would recognize.

The minister asks, "Will you?"

The handsome prince says, "I will."

The beautiful princess says, "I will."

They promise "for better, worse, richer, poorer, joy, sorrow, sickness and health, to love and to cherish, as long as we both shall live."

God calls these couples to keep their promises and offers forgiveness when they do not. God gives us love to stay together and mercy when we fail. God gives us grace to be kind long after the wedding bells have stopped ringing, to be as polite to our spouse as we are to our friends, and to joyfully fulfill our vows.

Historians claim that the first valentine was written by Margery Brews in 1477: "Unto my right well-beloved Valentine squire, right reverent and worshipful and my right well-beloved valentine, I recommend me unto you full heartedly."

My right well-beloved valentine is smarter, kinder and better looking than I am and hardly ever points it out. On Valentine's Day I hope I will find a good way to point it out. **BT**

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

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The course of the war is now clear: Whereas virtually everyone north and south from the beginning of the great conflict acknowledged African slavery as the war's cause, the United States is now on record as fighting for the cause of liberty for blacks. On the other end of the spectrum, the Confederacy ignores Abraham Lincoln's legal emancipation of Southern slaves and trumpets white liberty and black bondage as the Revolutionary War heritage to which they alone are truly committed.

Voices north and south appropriate God and Bible for their respective freedom agendas, resulting in ever more politicized sermons. While anti-Confederacy views are rarely openly expressed in Southern Baptist congregations, dissenting voices are not uncommon in the North. This month, a member of the First Baptist Church of Canton, Ohio is dismissed for his "differences of opinion" with other members regarding the war.

On the battlefield the United States army continues its slow and relentless advances southward. Against the backdrop of minimal military activity in the heart of winter, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, is now under Union control, while federal troops utilize the First Baptist Church of Nashville as a Union hospital. In the winter camps Union generals address the problem of desertions by constructing better winter huts, improving medical care, and including fresh fruits and vegetables with rations. In addition, a conscription act is passed.

Economically, the U.S. passes a National Currency Act to help finance the war, while currency in the Confederacy falls to a mere 20 percent of what it was at the beginning of the war. Against the backdrop of runaway inflation, Southern Baptist newspapers routinely rail against extortion as the national sin of the Confederate States.

Meanwhile, Southern Baptist attempts to evangelize Confederate soldiers are gaining traction. In their winter camps soldiers are a captive audience, while Southern Baptists' missionary efforts are now almost exclusively funneled toward the troops. The growing angst and escalating deaths brought about by the brutal war prey upon the minds and souls of many soldiers.



Tennessee, Nashville, the State Capitol ca. 1835

150 YEARS AGO

February 1863

J.J. Hyman, Baptist minister and soldier and chaplain in the 49th Georgia Regiment, offers his account of the moving of the Spirit among the troops:

Finding that we had gone into winter-quarters, I commenced preaching regularly three times a week to each regiment in the brigade. About the 1st of February, 1863, the good Lord poured out His Spirit upon us; hundreds were seeking the Lord for pardon of sins; almost daily there were some going down into the water, being buried with Christ in baptism.

An assistant surgeon in the 1st Georgia Confederate, on the other hand, offers a rather different view of a Baptist chaplain serving at Camp Cummings near Mobile, Alabama:

In one respect I dont like our present Camp as well as the first one. We are four miles from the City. Most too far for Church + I dont go so often.

There is an ignorant conceited old Baptist brother who acts as Chaplain to the Battalion. He rants + foams + murders grammar at a terrible rate every Sunday. He has the characteristic unctions, [?] appearance, manners + language that I admired so much in the association that dined at your Fathers soon after we were married. He is a good meaning old man though + I have no doubt Suits the congregation much better than [some] would.

New spiritual beginnings also take place apart from the Confederate camps. Last month's Emancipation Proclamation, understood by both free and enslaved blacks as their Exodus moment, brings about a revival in black Baptist life of the North. Established churches grow, and new congregations are birthed. One of the new black Baptist congregations born this month is the Second Baptist Church of Burlington, New Jersey, organized by former black members of the biracial First Baptist Church of that city.

The spirits of both white and black are thus on the ascendancy. While the Confederate army is on the cusp of what will be viewed as a time of great spiritual revival, black Baptists' journey from the biblical Egypt to the promised land will yet be long and arduous. **BT**

Emancipation Motivations

Filmmaker discusses the religious drive of American abolitionists

Canadian Rob Rapley wrote and directed the three-part series, “The Abolitionists,” that appeared on PBS last month. Adelle Banks of Religion News Service talked with him about the role religious faith played in the efforts of those seeking an end to slavery. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.



Q: How would you sum up the role of faith in the work of American abolitionists?

A: It was a time in which religion played a central role in American life with the Second Great Awakening. Every one of the abolitionists was shaped very much by their faith. In fact, they would have defined themselves first by their faith before any other category.

Q: Many of the abolitionists were driven by the notion that slaveholding was sinful. How did their opponents respond?

A: One of the most difficult things to comprehend about this story is the degree to which slavery was an accepted part of American life. It was sanctioned in the Bible, certainly all over the place in the Old Testament, so slaveholders used that as justification.

Q: Some abolitionists talked about “moral suasion.” How did that affect their arguments against slavery?

A: They really resorted to this idea of converting people. Since that was a central part of the evangelical movement that was sweeping the country at the time, they thought, “Well why not? If people can be converted to faith, then why can they not be converted to anti-slavery?”

Q: How would you describe some of the religious views of abolitionists such as John Brown?

A: As John Brown saw it, God had a plan for him, that life was predestined and, especially, that you had to make sense of your afflictions. As John Brown’s afflictions mounted, he took that as a message from God that he had to take up arms.

Q: You pointed out the role of women abolitionists, such as Angelina Grimke’s appeal to Christian women of the South. Was she at all successful?

A: She said explicitly, “I know that you do not make the laws, but your husbands and brothers and fathers do.” She urged them to advocate ending slavery to their kinfolk who were in positions of power.

She thought that if the women of the South turned against slavery, it would lead very quickly to the end of slavery, that men would follow suit. That was roundly rejected. The gentle appeal to her kinfolk resulted in a violent backlash.

Q: Despite their differences, Frederick Douglass hailed William Lloyd Garrison for challenging the power of both church and state. What was Garrison’s greatest charge against the church?

A: A lot of the established churches just said, “We don’t want any part of this,” where they had initially hosted anti-slavery meetings.

Garrison said, “You are not being faithful to the Word. We are. Therefore, we must come out of the churches.”

It was actually called come-outerism: come out of the churches, come out of the government, separate ourselves from this unclean society. That was the essence of Garrison’s charge. The churches were part of the evil.

Q: What about Douglass? Did he have similar problems with the church?

A: Douglass had grown up in slavery surrounded by very outspokenly religious slaveholders who were the pillars of the Methodist church in Maryland. So he just felt from the beginning that the established

church was just unredeemably corrupt. But he also was a profound, faithful man.

Q: Before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln had a different view on what to do with the U.S. slave population. What did he suggest to black ministers?

A: He invited five black ministers to the White House in the summer of 1862 and he basically said, “If it weren’t for your people, we wouldn’t have this war.” He tried to recruit them into an effort to lead colonization.

These prominent ministers would lead their people and, with the aid of the government, would take [the slaves] back to Africa to Liberia or to Haiti. Everyone in the abolitionist movement was absolutely stunned by this. Once he had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, he never mentioned it again.

Q: As the country marks the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, what message do you hope viewers will walk away with from your series?

A: I think it’s really a testament to the power of the individual. These characters were up against overwhelming odds.

In hindsight, it seems like the end of slavery was inevitable, but it was in fact about the most unlikely thing in the world. And a very small set of people set this vortex in motion, which eventually swept up the country and changed our history for the better.

It really is so easy to lose sight of the fact that if you’re dedicated enough and if you have a clear vision of something right and true that you can, in fact, effect change. **BT**

‘Something clicked’

Tension thawing between gays, Mormons

SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — After years of tension between Mormons and gay rights activists — with political action and theological pronouncements on one side, protests and pain on the other — the gulf between the two groups has begun to narrow.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has acknowledged that homosexuality is neither a choice nor a sin. It has supported anti-discrimination ordinances in Utah communities, stayed away from the 2012 battles against same-sex marriage in four states, and launched a website to soften the rhetoric about homosexuality and allow gay Mormons to tell their stories.

In the midst of that warming trend came more than 300 straight Mormons in their Sunday best, marching in Utah’s 2012 Gay Pride Parade, right behind *Milk* screenwriter Dustin Lance Black and before the drag queens.

They called themselves Mormons Building Bridges. They were not out to debate politics or doctrine, organizers said, but to promote love and listening.

Still, their simple yet potent gesture echoed around the globe, setting an example for fellow believers who then took up the style, if not the name, in 15 other gay pride parades.

“It feels like something clicked in June 2012,” says John Gustav-Wrathall, an excommunicated gay Mormon who nonetheless regularly attends weekly LDS services in Minneapolis. “This was a galvanizing moment. It fired everyone up.”

Mormons typically view gay pride parades “with loathing and disdain,” says Gustav-Wrathall, who became involved early on with Bridges. “It was electrifying that there would be a large contingent marching in Salt Lake City. And I figured if they can do that there, we can do it anywhere.”

Attending church feels different now, he said. “The mood has shifted, a new tone has been struck. It is now safe for Mormons to talk openly about homosexuality, and Mormons Building Bridges played a key role in that.”

Erika Munson, a straight, married Mormon mom who moved to Utah from Connecticut in 2009 and came up with the Bridges’ idea, is a reluctant revolutionary.

Like other Mormons, Munson was troubled by her church’s highly publicized push for California’s Proposition 8 in 2008, defining marriage as exclusively between a husband and a wife. She watched helplessly as gays left the faith, resigned to the fear that there seemed to be no place for them in the pews.

And she saw her children struggle with the dissonance between the church’s teachings about love and what they saw as its rejection of LGBT fellow believers.

In January, Munson decided she needed to do something. So when she learned that the pride parade was the second largest in the state, she impulsively reserved a space.

As the date drew nearer, Munson enlisted award-winning Mormon filmmaker Kendall Wilcox and his co-producer Bianca Morrison Dillard to help with strategy and organizing.

Wilcox, a well-respected gay Mormon who last year began filming interviews with LGBT members, sensed Bridges’ potential. He helped Munson clarify the group’s mission and became an invaluable liaison with the LGBT community.

“There is an exponentially growing number of Mormon hearts that are turning toward compassion,” he says. “We turned that into action.”

Dillard, a straight, active, married Mormon in Provo, also signed on enthusiastically, bringing grassroots organizing skills to the movement.

During the Prop 8 campaign, Dillard “didn’t know what to make of all the gay Mormon stuff, so I ducked and covered. I kept my distance,” she says. “But it didn’t sit well.”

Organizers knew there might be push-back against Bridges from the gay community — for years, the LDS church considered homosexuality itself a sin, encouraged young gay men to marry women and supported efforts such as “reparative therapy” as a way



of changing same-sex orientation.

Wilcox, who worked at church-owned Brigham Young University for years, had a well of empathy, but knew that, without gay participation, Bridges would have been a bridge to nowhere.

“Mormons are coming in peace,” he told them. “We don’t have all the answers.”

Dillard also worried about the gay response.

For some pride participants, Mormons showing up at their parade and not advocating for marriage equality “is not enough,” she said, “and I get that.”

The LDS church’s new website — mormonsandgays.org — reaffirms that “same-sex attraction is not a sin ... acting on it is,” and Mormon leaders still insist that sex should be only between a husband and a wife.

Well aware of the gay community’s concerns, Munson attended a planning meeting about a week before the parade. She listened politely and finally raised her hand and said: “A bunch of Mormons are planning to march in our Sunday dress. Is that OK? Will we be intruding?”

Troy Williams, radio host, writer and Salt Lake City gay rights proponent, warned Munson, “You’ll be booed and harassed.” Even so, he backed the idea at the Utah Pride Center and with grand marshal Black, who embraced it and insisted on putting Bridges at the front of the parade.

In the end, the positive response proved overwhelming. Up and down the parade route the crowd cheered, clapped and, yes, cried.

“It was,” Williams said, “one of the most beautiful moments of my life.” **BT**

U.S. executions grow rarer as 300th person exonerated

WASHINGTON — Though the number of death-row inmates executed in 2012 remained unchanged from 2011 at 43, death penalty opponents said the year still showed capital punishment is on the wane.

In 2012, Connecticut upped the number of states to repeal the death penalty to 17. Some states that have had relatively high numbers of executions in the past executed no one, or issued no new death sentences.

“Capital punishment is becoming marginalized and meaningless in most of the country,” said Richard Dieter, executive director of the Death Penalty Information Center, which released a new study on the death penalty in December.

“In 2012, fewer states have the death penalty, fewer carried out executions, and death sentences and executions were clustered in a small number of states. It is very likely that more states will take up the question of death penalty repeal in the years ahead,” Dieter said.

Nine states executed death row inmates in 2012, led by Texas, which executed 15 people. Overall this year, four states — Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi and Arizona — carried out more than three-quarters of all state executions.

In 2011, 13 states used the death penalty.

After the Supreme Court reinstated capital punishment in 1976, the execution rate reached a peak of 98 executions in 1999. Since then, the trend has been downward, and attributed in part to some high-profile cases in which death row inmates have been found innocent after DNA testing.

After serving 15 years on death row, Damon Thibodeaux was freed in September from Louisiana State Penitentiary after DNA evidence

cleared him of the crime. He was the 300th person exonerated by DNA evidence in U.S., and had the help of the Innocence Project, a non-profit that labors to free the wrongly convicted.

Such cases “open the eyes of everyone that there are some mistakes in the system that need to be fixed,” said Paul Cates, spokesman for The Innocence Project. “And this has critical consequences when you are talking about the use of the death penalty.”

Polls show falling public support for the death penalty, which, until recently, had enjoyed strong support. In an October 2011 CNN poll, 50 percent of respondents said they would prefer a sentence of life without parole over the death penalty for murderers — the first time that happened in CNN polling.

The poll also found that a large majority of Americans — 72 percent — believed that an innocent person had been put to death in the past five years.

Though some victims’ rights groups say fewer execution rates have more to do with falling murder rates than with growing revulsion with the death penalty, the Catholic Church, a strong opponent of the death penalty, hailed this year’s DPIC report as a strengthening of the anti-death penalty movement.

“The trend away from use of the death penalty is a hopeful sign that we are moving in the right direction on this issue,” said Anthony Granado, a policy adviser in the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“The Church will remain unequivocally pro-life in its advocacy and continue to urge our nation to turn away from use of the death penalty,” he said. “We reaffirm that as a society we cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing more people.” **BT**

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By Julie Pennington-Russell

Lessons from Stone Mountain

It all started with my teeth. A couple of years ago I was reclining in the chair of my dentist, Dr. Uetsuki, waiting for the nitrous oxide to kick in.

“Are you doing anything special for New Year’s?” he asked through his blue paper mask.

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” I said. “Just black-eyed peas for luck.”

“Have you ever climbed Stone Mountain?”

“Well, I’ve been meaning to.”

“My wife and I climb Stone Mountain every New Year’s Day,” he said, “to watch the sun rise.”

I listened with interest as he described the ancient Japanese custom of marking the “firsts” in any given new year. Every

first of January, throngs of Japanese men, women and children travel to the coast or to a mountain to observe Hatsuhinode — the first sunrise of the new year.

In that moment an idea was born. With my 50th birth year just days away, I found myself wondering: “Could I make it up Stone Mountain 50 times?”

Twelve months later my 50th birth year passed into history as I completed climb number Five-O in the afternoon of New Year’s Eve.

During that year I stood atop Stone Mountain beside pools of ice and I stood there under a sun so hot, I swear you could fry bacon on that rock.

I climbed at sunrise, sunset, noonday and once under a full moon. I climbed alone and I climbed with kinfolk, church friends, neighbors and houseguests from around the world.

I spent a year schlepping myself up and down Atlanta’s most famous piece of granite, and I have news: Stone Mountain is a treasure. Climbing the mountain gave me some marvelous gifts that year, among them these three lessons:

Lesson One: There is big value in feeling small.

Standing on a piece of rock that pre-dates me by a few million years and will still be there long after I’ve entered the cloud boat, as Mary Oliver puts it, has a way of putting perspective on some things.

Like the size of my troubles, for instance. The shape of my priorities. The difference between the truly important and the merely urgent. My place in God’s bigger picture.

Lesson Two: Everyone needs to stand on top of something.

A mountain can be a great metaphor for life. The physical act of ascending a mountain brings a sense of overcoming not only

the rock itself but also other obstacles.

Some challenges we face are relatively minor: irritating people, frustrations at work, everyday stress.

Others are more daunting. In May, on the day when my husband’s brother took his life, I stood on the summit, shook my fists in the air and shouted at death: “You don’t get the final word down here!”

In some mysterious way, my feet seemed planted not only on the crest of that mountain but also on the neck of everything that wants to break us down here: depression, cancer, addiction, death.

Lesson Three: Some moments are meant to be savored, not seized by the lapels.

I lean toward the sin of workaholicism. Sometimes I’m so busy maximizing the moment that I lose sight of this cardinal rule: When it comes to life, you must be present to win.

During one of my climbs early last spring I was marching up the stone trail, iPhone in hand, fielding calls and sending text messages. Somewhere near the top, during a water break, I caught sight of a Red-Tailed Hawk circling overhead, every movement of his wings so effortless, so graceful.

As he swooped near the place where I stood hunched over my phone, I thought I saw him shake his head and roll his steely eyes at me, as if to say, “What’s the point?”

I heartily recommend the practice of marking each year in some intentional way: Plant a garden. Run a marathon. Finish writing that book. Try talking to God.

Try listening to God. Forgive somebody. Forgive yourself. Climb a mountain.

There are a million ways to bow your head and say thanks for the gift of life. **BT**

—Julie Pennington-Russell is pastor of First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga. This column, distributed by ABP, was originally published by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.



Pennington-Russell



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The ‘third baptism’ of Felix Manz

Felix Manz is not exactly a household name for most people, although he is widely known in Anabaptist circles. (The family name is sometimes spelled Mantz, as in the name of the library named in his honor at Bethel College in Newton, Kan.)

A man of strong faith and conviction, Manz was martyred 486 years ago, on Jan. 5, 1527. On that fateful day, Felix was bound, taken to the middle of the Limmat River in the heart of Zürich (Switzerland), and executed by drowning.

Manz was born around the year 1498, the son of one of the priests at the magnificent Grossmünster Church in Zürich and the priest’s concubine, who lived (at least later) in her own house on Neustadt Lane very near the church.

Ulrich (Huldrych) Zwingli became the head priest at Grossmünster at the end of 1518 and soon began to preach about reforming the Catholic Church. The young man Felix became one of Zwingli’s ardent students. But by 1524, Felix and a few others — such as his good friend Conrad Grebel — became increasingly dissatisfied with Zwingli, whose reforms did not go far enough, they thought.

Finally, a group of people met in the house where Felix lived with his mother, and they formed a new faith fellowship on the basis of baptism following an open confession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Grebel baptized an older man, George Blaurock (c. 1491-1529), and then Blaurock baptized Grebel and the others gathered there that day, Jan. 21, 1525.

The group called themselves the Swiss Brethren — but their opponents, mainly Zwingli and the leaders of the Grossmünster Church along with the Zürich city



During a 2005 visit to Zürich, Leroy and June Seat stand before the Limmat River where Felix Manz was martyred in 1527. The towers of Grossmünster Church are in the background.

council, derisively called them Anabaptists (re-baptizers).

In March 1526 the city council passed an edict making re-baptism punishable by drowning. And on Jan. 5, 1527, Manz was sentenced to death, “because contrary to Christian order and custom he had become involved in Anabaptism.”

About 3 p.m. that afternoon he was taken by boat onto the Limmat River, which runs not far from the front of Grossmünster Church. His hands were bound and pulled below his knees, and a pole was placed between them — and then he was shoved into the river to die by drowning.

Manz was the first person to be martyred by Protestants. Some referred to his watery death as his “third baptism.”

In 2004 the Evangelical-Reformed Church of Zürich had a six-month commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Heinrich Bullinger (1504-75), Zwingli’s successor as the head priest of

Grossmünster. On June 26 that church confessed the sins of the 16th century and asked for forgiveness by the descendants of those first Anabaptists.

That evening, a historical marker was unveiled on the bank of the river where Manz was martyred 477 years earlier. My wife June and I were quite moved when we visited that spot and saw the marker in May 2005.

The issue for Manz and the other early Anabaptists was not just the rejection of infant baptism. The larger issue was the question about the nature of the church and the meaning of Christian discipleship. Those are topics that still merit serious consideration today. **BT**

—Leroy Seat, a retired Baptist missionary to Japan, lives in Liberty, Mo. His upcoming book is titled *Thirty Things Every Christian Needs to Know Now*. He blogs at theviewfromthisseat.blogspot.com, where this commentary first appeared.

“Manz was the first person to be martyred by Protestants.”



Clemson University senior Kelli Callahan, center, is part-time youth minister at Trinity Baptist Church in Seneca, S.C., after serving summer congregational internships. Photo by Tony Vincent.

Students as Ministers: Collegiate internships put fresh, young faces in church leadership

SENECA, S.C. — Young ministers have no interest in serving local congregations. That's the word on the Baptist street.

But some students, such as Kelli Callahan and Preston Cooley, apparently didn't get the word. These two Clemson University students have served as congregational interms and are continuing in ministry at nearby Trinity Baptist Church in Seneca, S.C.

"My brother, Casey Callahan, the campus minister for Cooperative Student Fellowship at Clemson, based at Clemson First Baptist, told me about the program," said Kelli who does youth ministry at Trinity. "I have always been interested in part-time ministry, and he thought that this would be a great opportunity to get my feet wet in ministry."

In the summer of 2010, she served an internship at Greenville's Pelham Road Baptist Church "and absolutely loved every minute of it." When the summer ended, she continued to work with the church some throughout the year and then returned for the following summer.

"Going into my junior year at Clemson and the work load that was ahead of me, I decided I could not keep driving back and forth to Greenville to continue working there after the summer of 2011," she said. "In early February 2012, my brother told me about Trinity Baptist and how they needed a part-time youth minister. I felt like God laid this opportunity on my

heart at just the right time."

She credits the internships with preparing her for the ministry she is doing now and for opening her eyes and heart to the possibilities ahead.

"I am a senior graduating in May as a special education major," said Kelli. "I love teaching and I feel that that is what I am really called to do full time, but I really love what I am able to do at Trinity as well. I think part-time work is definitely a great option for me because I know that I can make a difference as well as still teach."

At 40, pastor Ryan Wilson leads a young ministerial staff at Trinity. He welcomes the energy and enthusiasm.

"Kelli brings a fresh perspective on youth ministry that has been vital," he said. "The youth see her juggling schedules and priorities and know that one's faith and church commitments are important."

Wilson, who grew up in Clemson's First Baptist Church, where his father was pastor, said that a current minister there, Tiffany Hamilton, recommended Preston Cooley to work with children.

"Through the [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's collegiate congregational] internship program ... we got in touch with Preston," said Wilson. "He grew up at Clemson First Baptist and had been helping Tiffany with Bible

studies for middle school boys."

At Trinity last summer, Preston helped with programs for both children and youth. When the summer ended he applied for the part-time children's minister position that was open.

"I was surprised at his interest, but having a male in that role at Trinity has been a neat thing this year," said Ryan. "He brings a willing spirit, Clemson attitude and a wonderful speaking voice to our staff."

That voice is one reason Preston is studying communications and has an interest in sports broadcasting. He did an internship with a radio station that put him on the air during football tailgate shows.

And while he still is sorting out his vocational plans, Preston said he sees some form of ministry in his future — as well as communications. And working with children at Trinity, he said, has been helpful to his own spiritual journey.

"They love unconditionally," he said of the children under his care on Sundays and on Wednesday evenings. "They're pretty insightful even at a young age."

Wanda Kidd, a veteran Baptist campus minister in North Carolina, coordinates the CBF collegiate congregational internships (thefellowship.info/collegeternship) and expects many more students to be placed in churches this summer.

Aesthetics can enhance our congregational life, our faith

“In three years we placed 275 students in churches from Connecticut to Florida to California and hundreds of churches in between,” she said. “The feedback from the students and the churches was exactly what we had hoped for.”

Funding for the project came to CBF initially through a grant from the Lilly Foundation aimed at encouraging young people to serve in congregational ministry.

“The internship guidelines encouraged the churches to have the students serve in a variety of ministry positions within the church [and] not the typical youth ministry role where we usually asked students to serve,” said Wanda. “They attended worship planning, deacons meetings, finance committee meetings, and visited hospitals and nursing homes as well as attending a myriad of camps.”

As a result, the interns expressed surprise at how much “behind-the-scenes” effort was required for worship planning and church programs, she said. And they gained knowledge about the financial aspects of church life.

While the students often clarify their vocational callings through these internships, so do some congregations, she added. Trinity Baptist is one of those, sensing its important role as a “mentoring and encouraging church.”

“Young adults are looking for people to affirm and recognize things in them that they are afraid to give voice to” — such as a ministerial calling, she asserted. **BT**



Pastor Ryan Wilson, left, enjoys serving alongside young ministers such as Preston Cooley who, after serving as a summer intern, became Trinity’s part-time children’s minister. He is a junior at Clemson University with an interest in sports broadcasting as well as church-based ministry.

Have you noticed how Wal-Mart is looking more like Target, and McDonald’s may now resemble Starbucks? How a place looks and feels affects our experience.

Virginia Postrel wrote, “Aesthetics or styling has become an accepted unique selling point on global bases.”

We live in a day when price matters, and McDonald’s and Wal-Mart lead the way for value shoppers. Yet they feel pressure from the dark wood of Starbucks and the wide aisles of Target to keep customers — which shows that even in tough times, aesthetics matter.

A Michigan hairdresser joined a humanitarian mission to Kabul a few years ago — along with doctors, dentists, nurses and social workers. The hairdresser went to assist the medical professionals. But once word got out that she was a hairdresser, she had appointments every 15 minutes. There was thirst for the good feeling that accompanies beauty.

Technically, aesthetics is the philosophy of art, beauty and taste. In practice, it is about how someone feels or senses the experience. For example, the church welcome center may be, by professional standards, well designed, staffed with wonderful people, stocked with updated materials and feature great tasting coffee. But this may not make it a pleasant experience.

We are good at asking the first questions: How does the space look? Do the people look inviting? But the next question is equally important: How does this space make people feel?

How does the church café or youth suite or parking lot make people feel? Beauty can be seen and felt.

Harvard professor Howard Garner has defined beauty as “something that’s interesting, that has a memorable form, [and] that invites revisiting.” As a bonus, he added, it gives you a tingle. This means we know beauty when we see or feel it, and when we don’t.

We do business all the time with establishments that make no attempt at beauty: the dry cleaners, the elementary school, the diner with gravy as good as our mother made. We make these choices for a variety of reasons.

There are no dry cleaners with an inviting storefront, so beauty is not a choice. Our child’s teacher is wonderful, so we forgive the ugly sign and narrow hallways. Mama lives too far away, and the gravy is so good that we put up with street parking and small tables.

Yet when given a choice, we migrate toward beauty. Beauty is the option we prefer.

Congregations survive without beauty or paying attention to elements of style for the same reasons “The Gravy Boat” survives. People have sentimental ties to the people and place — but both restaurants and churches will one day run out of sentimental people.

We need to move beyond the flat screen monitors installed at entrances and the gardens manicured like a country club. These are our efforts to make our place visually pleasing. But beauty and style are much more.

Style uses beauty and aesthetics to create a place where God speaks before the choir sings or the preacher says a word. It is thinking intentionally about the feelings, responses and needs of those who come to commune with God.

It takes more time and energy and more intentional decision making to create an atmosphere where beauty is valued and enhanced. The result is not prettier gardens or fresher restrooms.

When we intentionally create spaces of wholeness, harmony and brightness, we create beauty. Thomas Aquinas called these the “three requisites of beauty.”

When we care about how a place makes people feel, the result is that pleasure and meaning are associated with God’s kingdom. **BT**

—John Roy is pastor of Pelham Road Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C.

Why?

Answers to Baptist questions from a historical perspective



QUESTION: Why do Baptists go to Sunday school?

Chances are, your weekly church calendar includes a Sunday morning time for Sunday school — whether or not the name is utilized. Yet few persons sitting in Baptist Sunday school classes know how these sessions came to be.

The story begins in late 18th-century Britain, in the early decades of the Industrial Revolution. In those days, as had been the case in human history thus far, all able-bodied members of working-class families typically labored to support the family. Most lived on farms, where husband, wife and children tilled the ground together, often working from sunrise to sunset. It was a hard life, and most people barely eked out a living.

When the Industrial Revolution led to factory jobs in big cities, many poor families left the farm for jobs in the city. But once again, all family members found themselves working hard for poverty wages — this time inside the walls of large buildings with machinery.

In some instances farm parents sent their children to the cities to work in the factories. Regardless, in the big cities of Britain, children typically worked in the factory six days a week, for up to 15 hours a day. Their only day off was Sunday, a day when gangs of poor children would roam city neighborhoods looking for fun and sport, and often causing trouble.

Robert Raikes, a British newspaperman

and Anglican from Gloucester, came to realize that the growing poverty of the cities was contributing to high incarceration rates. He believed that education of poor children could reduce crime, but the city's children could not read, and worked every day but Sunday. Thus, in 1780 he started a school on Sunday for boys, teaching them how to read.

Recruiting laymen as teachers, using the Bible — the most available book in Britain — as a textbook, and later including girls, “Raikes’ Ragged School” quickly grew. Parents of school children were appreciative of the schooling, yet the movement was criticized by some as violating biblical laws against working on the Sabbath, and subverting home-based Christian education.

Over time, the curriculum expanded but retained moral teachings and some religious instruction. By the 1830s, some 25 percent of Britain's children were enrolled in Sunday schools. Meanwhile, the movement had also taken root in America's cities and was slowly embraced by Baptists of the North.

On both sides of the ocean the movement was a forerunner of universal, compulsory state education enacted by the 1870s. With the growth of state education and gradual regulations placed on child labor, Sunday school changed, becoming limited to religious education.

While some non-denominational Sunday schools for illiterate adults had been in place

since the early 19th century, not until the turn of the 20th century did Baptists truly revision Sunday school as religious education instruction for all persons — including adults. By the 1930s, Sunday school in its contemporary format was in place in many Baptist churches: Bible study in graded classes for all ages.

Sunday school thus configured in America has served for about a century as both an evangelistic and church growth tool for local Baptist congregations. In Southern Baptist life a standardized Sunday school curriculum from about the 1930s through the 1980s helped to solidify denominational identity. Today, however, the collective churches within most Baptist groups in America utilize a wide range of Sunday school literature — and in some congregations, Sunday morning Sunday school has been replaced with various types of Bible studies conducted at other times during the week.

Not all Baptists, however, have embraced Sunday school. Primitive Baptists, birthed in the 1820s, have always opposed the practice, believing that only that which is expressly evidenced in scripture should be utilized by congregations. Sunday school does not meet this criteria.

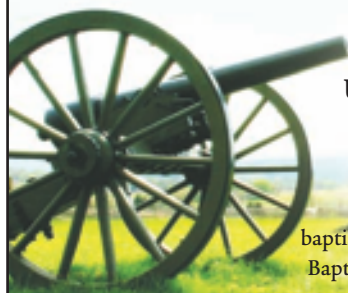
Ironically, the modern version of Sunday school lacks any semblance of the reform-minded social ministry that was the focus of the original Sunday schools, at the very time that America houses by far the most criminals of any nation in the world (some 25% of the world's criminals are in American prisons).

At the same time, a widely-acknowledged dearth in Bible knowledge among Baptists (and other denominations) in a nation believed by some to be a “Christian nation” may indicate that Sunday school as religious education is less effective than many have hoped.

Meanwhile, younger generations are clamoring for Christian education that is both spiritually authentic and socially minded. Perhaps these new realities will lead to the continued evolution of the Sunday school concept. **BT**

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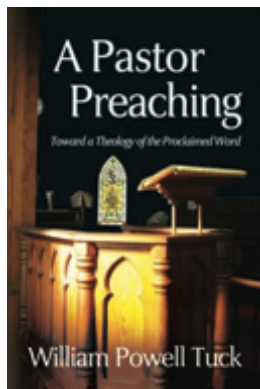
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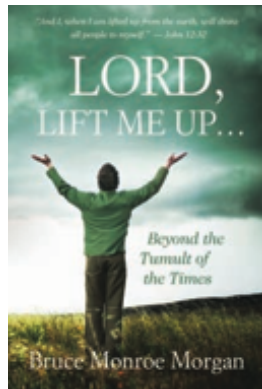
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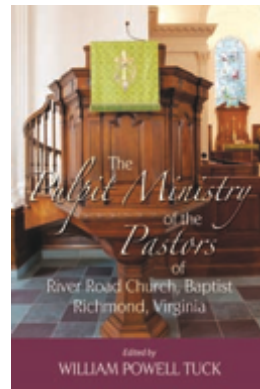
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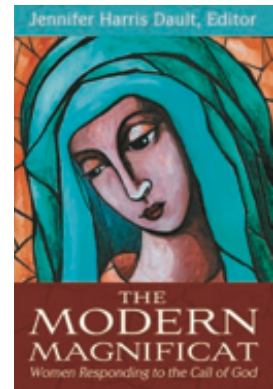
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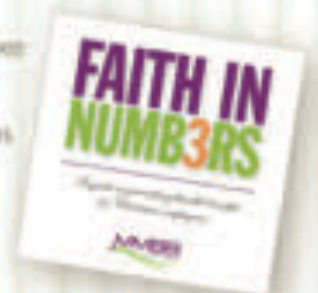
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