

Contains **APRIL** Nurturing Faith Lessons

Baptists ODAY

NEWS JOURNAL



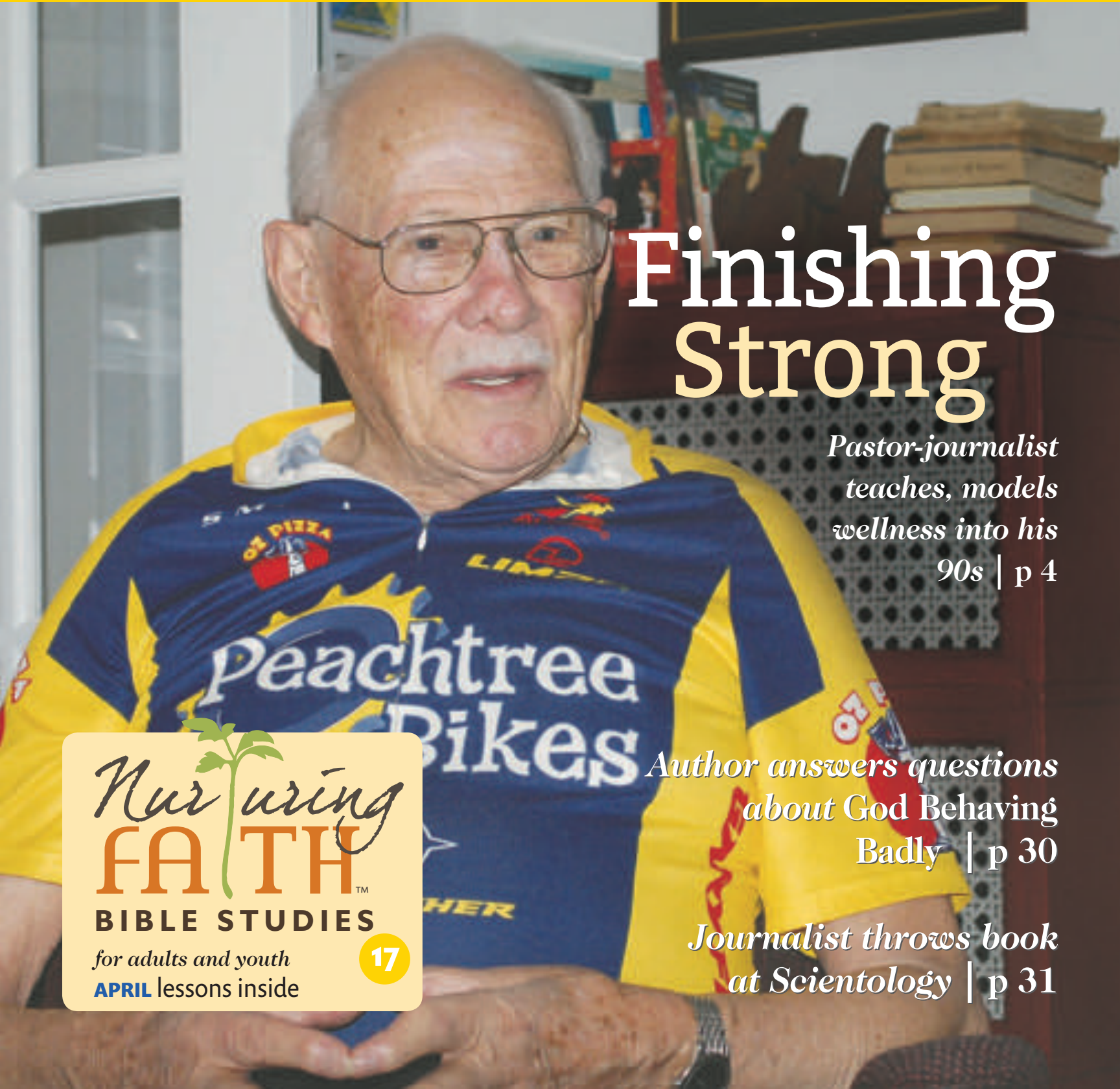
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MARCH 2013

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John D. Pierce
Executive Editor
editor@baptiststoday.org

Benjamin L. McDade
Executive Vice President
ben@baptiststoday.org

Julie Steele
Chief Operations Officer
jsteele@baptiststoday.org

Jackie B. Riley
Managing Editor
jackie@baptiststoday.org

Tony W. Cartledge
Contributing Editor
cartledge@baptiststoday.org

Bruce T. Gourley
Online Editor
gourley@baptiststoday.org

David Cassidy
Church Resources Editor
david@thefaithlab.com

Terri Byrd
Contributing Writer

Vickie Frayne
Art Director

Jannie Lister
Customer Service Manager
jannie@baptiststoday.org

Kimberly L. Hovis
Marketing Associate
kim@baptiststoday.org

Walker Knight, Publisher Emeritus

Jack U. Harwell, Editor Emeritus

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Cover photo: By John Pierce.

John C. Taylor entered his first foot race at age 60, earned a doctorate in health education at 75, and completed a triathlon in steamy Houston at 90. And he's still going.

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Baptists Today to honor physician, missions advocate at April 25 event

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Contact Information

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



STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN PIERCE



Pastor-journalist John C. Taylor has taken his bike all across the country in recent years to compete in the Senior Olympics and various other competitions where he usually wins in his age category. Holding a doctorate in health education and keeping up with the latest studies, he often speaks to seniors about wellness.

Finishing Strong

Pastor-journalist teaches, models well being into his 90s

ATLANTA — He ran his first 10K race at age 60, earned a Ph.D. in health education at 75, and completed a triathlon at 90.

That's how John C. Taylor, now 91, has been winding down after a long career of teaching journalism and serving as pastor to small Baptist churches.

Three generations competed in the Tri-America Triathlon in Clermont, Fla., in 2006, when Taylor was joined by his son, grandson and granddaughter. He conceded being out-paced by his offspring in the swimming and running portions of the competition.

"But I blew them away on my bike," said Taylor, an 85-year-old at the time.

COAST TO COAST

Taylor was born in California and spent most of his early school years in Florida. His father, an educator and basketball coach, then took a job in Chesapeake, Va., where Taylor attended high school.

"That's one reason I got interested in athletics," he said, although his competitive nature kicked into a higher gear later in life.

After one year at Carson-Newman College,

he transferred to the staunchly fundamentalist Bob Jones College, then in Cleveland, Tenn., to finish his degree. That school, he said, reflected his father's beliefs.

Taylor met and married Nancy, a North Carolina girl who had been dating a young preacher boy named Billy Graham.

NEW PERSPECTIVES

Taylor also felt a tug toward ministry. From his brief time at Carson-Newman, he recalled a Southern Baptist pastor who urged young ministers to get theological training.

"That just stuck with me," said Taylor, who enrolled at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

What Taylor found was unlike anything he had experienced at home or Bob Jones.

"My dad was converted in an Aimee Semple McPherson revival," he said, noting the fame of the Pentecostal evangelist. "But he became a Baptist because he liked Baptist doctrines."

But not the kind of Baptist thinking that his son would encounter in Texas.

"He was a fundamentalist and embedded that in me," said Taylor. "When I went to Southwestern Seminary, I broke his heart."

However, Taylor described his seminary experience as a spiritual and intellectual feast, learning from capable and insightful scholars such as Ray Summers who taught New Testament and Greek.

Taylor said he soaked in all that he was taught at Southwestern and concentrated on the rising study of social ethics — learning much from Ralph Phelps. There he confronted the racial attitudes that had been embedded in him as well.

He described his seminary experience as "three of the greatest years of my life."

BIVOCATIONAL

Taylor served as a pastor in Texas for six years before moving to Southside Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, Ala., in 1954. Close proximity to the University of Alabama led him to study journalism — a second calling.

"The deacons let me take one course a semester and two in the summer," he said.

So during his six-year pastorate in Tuscaloosa, he completed a Masters degree in journalism. In 1960 he was called to be the assistant editor of the *Illinois Baptist*, a Baptist state convention newspaper in Carbondale, Ill.

After two years, Taylor left the Baptist newspaper to work on a doctorate in journalism, focusing on “propaganda in presidential campaigns.” Due to the serious illness of one of his three sons, he was unable to complete the program.

So he began his long bivocational career as a journalist and pastor. He joined the staff of the *Southern Illinoian*, the local Carbondale newspaper. Between 1963 and 1986, he also served five rural congregations.

“I was a people pastor,” he said of his good experiences within small Baptist churches.

During that time, however, he moved from the newspaper to campus when new junior colleges were formed in Illinois in 1969. One of the deans who heard him preach learned of his background and his expressed “love for education.”

Taylor, in addition to his pastoral duties, became information aide to the president of Shawnee College where he taught journalism classes also. In 1983 he moved to Southern Illinois University where, in addition to teaching, he managed the *Daily Egyptian*, the largest student newspaper in the U.S. at the time.

THE RACE IS ON

Retiring from education in 1986, he continued to serve as a pastor for a little longer. It was a teenaged member of his congregation in 1981 who brought out Taylor’s competitive edge.

The young man was preparing to run a 10K (6.2 mile) race and asked his pastor to join him. Another member told Taylor of a training program that would ensure that he could.

He took the training seriously and came in third place in the 60-64 age division — and “the competition bug bit me.”

Taylor continued to train and enter races where he started bringing home first place awards in his age group. He also joined a swim team.

His increased interest in fitness led him back to school, too — studying health education at Southern Illinois University. He had completed all of his work — except for the dissertation — when he moved to Atlanta in 1993 to be closer to family members including his sons.

“In 1996 I got my Ph.D. in health education,” said Taylor. “I concentrated on physical fitness, wellness lifestyles, and health and aging.”

And he became Exhibit A for the lessons he would teach to churches, civic groups and anywhere else he is invited to speak.

He credits his mother for teaching him to be interested in many subjects. So the wide range of reading — evidenced by the many books stacked around his house — keeps his mind as well as his body in shape.

COLLECTING HARDWARE

Taylor’s home in the Brookhaven section of Atlanta is filled with evidence of successful athleticism late into life. Ribbons, plaques, trophies and more hang on the walls and fill cabinets and table tops.

The conversion van in the driveway has taken him all across the nation to compete in the Senior Olympics, held every two years, and many other competitions.

“I was doing about seven to 10 triathlons a

year and five swim meets and four bike events,” he said of recent years. “That’s one or two a month sometimes.”

Last June in Houston — yes, June in Houston — he completed a triathlon at age 90. That’s 15 miles on a bike, a 600-meter swim and a 3.1-mile run. Plus he got into some other bike races while there.

“Only one day was it under 100 degrees; it dropped to 99,” he said. “I learned to hydrate.”

And he is still winning races in his 90s — although the competition no longer shows up.

“Now I always get the gold medal,” he said of his age-group competitions. “I’m the only one in them.”

GOING STRONG

Upon moving to Atlanta in 1993, the Taylors joined First Baptist Church of Chamblee that later became Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta. His wife, Nancy, died in 1998, but urged him to find someone to help in the care of their dependent son.

He found his second wife, Sally, jogging up and down the street in front of his home.

Following a recent knee replacement surgery, Taylor said his physical therapist complimented him on having “the best looking 90-year-old legs I’ve ever seen.” His years of physical training are helping him make a quick comeback.

His words and deeds related to wellness have brought wide attention — from recognition by state legislators to an appearance on *The Dr. Oz Show*. (He bumped into Ringo Starr backstage, who was appearing on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. The former Beatle commended Taylor for his success.)

Taylor eagerly accepts speaking engagements — sharing the latest scientific discoveries related to mental and physical wellness and aging. He emphasizes the importance of staying hydrated, especially when the temperature rises.

“People over 50 ought to do machine weights too,” he added. “It strengthens the bones.”

Three bike spills with no broken bones has convinced Taylor that the research on such workouts is right.

He emphasizes nutrition, exercise, stress management, good attitudes, mind development, social engagement and spiritual nature to his audiences.

“I teach that all the time to seniors,” he said.

In a general term, wellness is his goal. And his motto is “to be healthy when I die — mentally as well as physically.” **BT**



Ribbons, medals, plaques and other evidence of John C. Taylor’s athletic achievements late in life fill walls, cabinets and table tops in his Atlanta home.

Lex Horton joins Nurturing Faith book publishing

MACON, Ga. — Strong response to the book publishing initiative of *Baptists Today* has resulted in nine titles being published in the first year and 10 more books currently in process. Lex Horton has joined Nurturing Faith to manage the process from author inquiries through the contract and manuscript submission process.

Horton, former publisher and executive vice president for Smyth & Helwys Publishing, is also assisting with editing and other aspects of book production in this part-time role.

“I appreciate Lex Horton’s continued devotion to local church ministry along with his commitment to producing quality Christian education resources,” said Frank Granger, a *Baptists Today* director and minister of education at First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga. “He combines creativity and vision with thoughtful attention to detail. We are fortunate to benefit from his

knowledge and expertise, and his heart for the local church.”

A Kentucky native, Horton served on the ministerial staff of the Athens, Ga., church before going into publishing in 1997.

“A growing number of churches and authors are discovering that Nurturing Faith’s innovative approach is an ideal fit for their needs,” said Horton. “I’m excited about the opportunity to work for an organization that engenders trust by the way in which it deals with people.”

Nurturing Faith, Inc. was formed as a subsidiary of *Baptists Today, Inc.*, to publish books and other resources for churches. Working in partnership with Faithlab, a creative services firm, Nurturing Faith books are published using the latest technology, author engagement and built-in marketing.

“We returned to book publishing at a time when the industry was changing dramatically,” said John Pierce, executive

editor of *Baptists Today* and publisher for Nurturing Faith. “Our unique approach takes full advantages of these changes — by producing excellent books with a quality design and good exposure through the news journal and other outlets.”

Unlike former methods that print books in large numbers and ship from a warehouse at high costs, Nurturing Faith produces ebooks, and print-on-demand books that are of high quality and have a quick delivery, he said.

“Together, the staffs of Faithlab and *Baptists Today* form an excellent team of copyeditors, designers, marketers and technical experts for book publishing,” said Pierce. “Adding the excellent skills of Lex Horton to work closely with authors along with other needed tasks makes us even stronger. We want authors to be pleased with our services and products.”

Nurturing Faith books are available at nurturingfaith.info, which also provides information for authors interested in submitting book proposals. The Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, inside *Baptists Today*, have online teaching resources at nurturingfaith.net. **BT**



Lex Horton




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Freedom matters; self-perpetuating Board assures it

By John Pierce

Baptists Today, first published as *SBC Today*, was established in 1983 as an autonomous, national Baptist news journal — and each of those descriptors matters. The first, “autonomous,” means that no controlling factors — denominational or otherwise — will restrict or influence the free flow of information.

In his first editorial, founding editor Walker L. Knight proclaimed: “By being autonomous, *SBC Today* can best serve Southern Baptists in presenting news and opinion.”

While the Baptist audience has broadened since those words were printed three decades ago next month, the strong commitment to the news journal’s independent status has not weakened.

To preserve editorial freedom, a self-perpetuating Board of Directors has sole control of the not-for-profit organization that publishes *Baptists Today*. On the news journal’s 10th anniversary in 1993, supporter and statesman Duke McCall affirmed the importance of such independence.

“*Baptists Today* is going to live because it is not a house organ; because the controversy produced not reform but a revolution which did not blow over; because loyalty to denominational structures is declining across the land and a trusted voice for Baptist principles rooted in biblical revelation and Christian experience is needed by the multitudes,” said McCall, former Baptist World Alliance president and retired seminary president.

The *Baptists Today* Board vigilantly protects the editor from any undue, outside influences while setting policies that strengthen the organization.

Explaining the Board’s function to readers in 1991, then-Chairperson Ann Roebuck

of Rome, Ga., noted that directors receive and read the finished product each month along with all others.

“This journal is a celebration of freedom, responsible Christian freedom, and part of its reason for being is that it furnish a forum for opinions of all serious Christians,” said Roebuck. “We are not watchdogs, but supporters who feel a confidence in the integrity and wisdom of its editor and publisher.”

She noted that while directors “certainly feel free to offer advice and suggestions, and do,” the role of the Board is not to determine content, but to strengthen and guide the organization that allows for the journalists to do their work well.

Wisely, the former chairperson referenced “responsible Christian freedom.” Indeed, editorial freedom is not a license to be reckless. It is the freedom to be responsible — while allowing a range of voices to be heard and a variety of ideas to be offered and challenged.

Layman Bob Stephenson of Norman, Okla., a geologist and former professional baseball player, spoke to that need in 2010.

“To be a good journalistic publication, you’ve got to have complete and total freedom to print what you want to print and

not what somebody else wants you to print,” he said. “When I read *Baptists Today*, I know I’m reading the truth as far as those people who wrote it know it.”

Baptists Today eagerly collaborates with other organizations to better serve congregations. But such voluntary partnerships are built on trust and mutual benefit, never a compromise of autonomy.

Former Cooperative Baptist Fellowship moderator Bob Setzer, then a Georgia pastor who now serves in North Carolina, affirmed that philosophy and practice.

“It offers cogent, insightful commentary on the trends and movements within the larger Baptist family, but *Baptists Today* is not a house organ of CBF,” said Setzer. “Thank God, it is the voice of a free Baptist press, which CBF — along with many others — helps support.”

While the news journal’s name, look and content have changed much over the past 30 years, the commitment to responsible editorial freedom has not wavered. Above all else, it assures readers that the information they read has not been restricted or shaped by any outside forces, but is, as the old shortstop from Oklahoma said, “the truth as far as those people who wrote it know it.” **BT**



Why come to Gainesville, Ga., on Thursday, April 25?

- Celebrate 30 years of *Baptists Today* on this joyful evening of good food, friends and memories.
- Share in the presentation of the Judson-Rice Award to 100-year-old pioneer physician and missions advocate Dr. Virginia Connally of Abilene, Texas.
- Enjoy the inspiring music of Kate Campbell.
- Meet Suzii Paynter, the new executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.
- Check out the latest resources from Nurturing Faith with book signings by authors.
- Preview a new video that reflects on the history and evolution of the news journal.
- Receive a copy of Bruce Gourley’s commemorative gift book, *Baptists Today at 30: Enabling, Recording and Shaping a Baptist Movement*.
- Hear how the nation’s only independent, national Baptist news journal is looking ahead to a hopeful future.

See details on how, when and where on page 9.

Pioneering physician Virginia Connally to be honored

By John Pierce

Dr. Virginia Connally, who opened her medical practice in Abilene, Texas, in 1940, has spent her long life caring for others and advocating for the causes of missions and ministries. In December, she celebrated her 100th birthday.

She will be presented with the annual Judson-Rice Award during a dinner event April 25 at First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., celebrating the 30th anniversary of *Baptists Today* news journal.

The Judson-Rice Award was created in 2001 to commemorate the contributions of early Baptist mission leaders Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, and to recognize a current Baptist leader who has demonstrated important leadership while maintaining the highest integrity.

The first female physician in Abilene, Dr. Connally continued in her practice until retirement in 1981. Yet she paid no attention to the groundbreaking significance of her work.

“I never thought about it,” she said in

an October 2009 feature story in *Baptists Today*. “The war was just starting, so it was a good time to be here — especially for a woman.”

After graduating from LSU Medical School, she completed an internship and residency in New Orleans. There she was impressed by the Catholics’ concern for the poor and suffering.

Over the years she bonded with many missionaries, both during her extensive travels and when she and her husband, Ed Connally, would bring missionaries to Abilene. They purchased the home next door to serve as a missionary residence.

At her alma mater, Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, she has established an endowed chair and missions center. The university hosted her 100th birthday party in December.

Dr. Connally had a close friendship with veteran missionary Bertha Smith who

lived to be nearly 100. She would visit “Miss Bertha” at her South Carolina home where the two would pray together. “She was a precious thing; so devout,” Dr. Connally remembered.

Ed Connally’s involvement in Texas politics also produced friendships with state and national leaders including President and Mrs. Johnson.

Always active, Virginia assumed the presidency of Connally Oil after her husband’s death in 1975 while continuing to serve as chief of staff at a local hospital.

Her travels included a tour of cathedrals with Quaker writer Elton Trueblood and tea with British writer Malcolm Muggeridge. She bravely smuggled three Russian language Bibles into Russia during forbidden times.

In 2005 she traveled with a group to Birmingham, England, to participate in the Baptist World Alliance Congress celebrating a century of bringing together worldwide Baptists for fellowship and ministry.

On April 25, *Baptists Today* will honor Dr. Connally for her own century of giftedness and goodness. **BT**



Virginia Connally

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quotation remarks

“It’s hard for a woman, but I just refused to settle. I knew what God had called me to do. If he can call a rock to cry out to him, surely he can use a woman.”

—*Billie Cox, a graduate of Mercer’s McAfee School of Theology and the new pastor of Macedonia Baptist Church, a historic African-American congregation in Conyers, Ga. (Rockdale Citizen)*

“Church conflicts usually spring from a small group of antagonists, perhaps even a single person, who start with a conclusion, largely intuitive and emotional, and then search for reasons. Those reasons tend to be moving targets that defy better information. Deal with one reason, and two more take its place.”

—*Religion News Service columnist Tom Elbrich*

“I do not make decisions based on guilt by association. I grew up in a culture that was all about that . . . I have people in my congregation who have far more disturbing views than he does. I preach to them every week!”

—*Atlanta mega-church pastor Andy Stanley on being criticized by some conservative Christians for preaching at President Obama’s pre-inaugural worship service (Christianity Today)*

“Seeing *Les Misérables* may do more to build up adoption than any article or policy discussion.”

—*Former Southern Baptist Convention president Bryant Wright, pastor of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga.*

“I find these files to be brutal and painful reading. The behavior described in these files is terribly sad and evil.”

—*Current archbishop of Los Angeles, Jose Gomez, on the release of internal church documents showing the cover-up of sexual abuse of children by clergy in the nation’s largest Catholic diocese (RNS)*

“Sadly, we see the church acting ethically in these matters only when its actions become known.

—*Terence McKiernan, an advocate for victims of clergy sex abuse, on recent actions against leaders of the Catholic Diocese of Los Angeles after documents revealed extensive efforts to cover up the crimes (RNS)*

“Churches have a responsibility to show respect for the dignity of all persons, including those with disabilities. They also have an obligation to advocate for these persons who form 10 percent of the world’s population.”

—*Neville Callam, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA Connect)*

“There’s got to be an element of hope here. We want to hear from someone who has gone there, done that, seen it. That there is something beyond this life, which is miserable, even for those of us who are happy.”

—*Editor Phyllis Tickle, who had her own near-death experience 50 years ago but didn’t write about it, on the popularity of recent books about previewing heaven (RNS)*

“Where traditionally it was Catholics who were more opposed to abortion, that’s changed in a dramatic fashion. Now it’s white evangelical Protestants who are most opposed.”

—*Daniel Cox of the Public Religion Research Institute, on how Americans’ overall opinions about abortion over the past 40 years have shown little statistical change, but a big shift within some religious groups (RNS)*

“The world is not full of good and bad people. That is not what our scriptures teach us, (but that each individual is both good and bad). And when we are bad or isolated or angry or furious or vengeful or politically agitated or confused or lost or deranged or unhinged, and we have the ability to get and use weapons only designed to kill large numbers of people, our society is in great danger.”

—*Jim Wallis of Sojourners, responding to NRA spokesman Wayne LaPierre’s claim that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” (RNS)*

“He taught me how to spell my name in Morse code, to play pool and ping-pong, to bait a fish hook, but the important things he taught me were by his example. He was compassionate, caring and respectful. I never heard him say a negative word about another person. What a lesson that was.”

—*Singer Amy Grant, writing for Guidepost about her father, a respected oncologist, as her family struggles with his dementia (HuffPo)*

Fear and the future

Why we need alternatives to Fundamentalism

Thirty years ago next month, the first issue of this news journal made its appearance. Preparing for some proper recognition of that milestone — including a commemorative book, a video tribute, an anniversary issue and a big celebration dinner — has been both demanding and intriguing.

Flipping every page of every issue from the past three decades, as well as digging through photos and seeking the reflections of those closest to the experiences prior to my editorship, has provided needed perspective. It has brought much appreciation as well.

One indisputable fact is that this publication — as well many good things to follow — was birthed in response to growing political and theological fundamentalism within Baptist life.

Despite the good efforts of many (in waves rather than mass), fundamentalism won handily in the earlier denominational home of those who brought the news journal to life and have sustained it through the years.

Early on, much of the publication's content, understandably, focused on the issues and actions at the heart of the battles for Baptist identity and institutions that were raging.

Navigating the "next steps" for the news journal required looking beyond the ashes (despite some continuing pain) for new ways of being true to one's deeply-held convictions — while looking for a broader Baptist family to embrace.

The new possibilities and realities that have arisen since that time make it hard for many of us to imagine life in the old home place — much less to desire it.

The editorial challenge since that time, however, has been to determine how much attention to give to those who have advanced the fundamentalist cause successfully. Some readers have called for none.

"Let it go!" "Move on!"

Indeed it is wise and healthy not to focus on losses when so much opportunity is at hand. However, others, especially those with a historical bent, have warned against a blank memory.

Wisely, they remind us that lessons learned from such struggles should not be forgotten. The context of our current Baptist life together has roots that cannot be ignored.

During my 13-year editorship I have tried to hear the value in both voices and to respond appropriately. Obsessing over the past is unhealthy. That good reminder first came to me as a child, when hearing repeatedly about "spilled milk" and "water under the bridge."

Therefore, the focus of *Baptists Today* has shifted to the trends and issues impacting Christian living and congregational life. Feature stories introduce readers to inspiring persons and organizations, in hopes that others will be moved to courage and service. The platform for sharing and challenging ideas remains open — with never a hint that any one of us has complete clarity.

However, there is a difference between "fighting old battles" and continuing to address

the ongoing dangers of fundamentalism wherever it is found. Fundamentalism is not bad news for one moment in one cause; it is a destructive force at all times and in all places.

While flipping through the stacks of past issues, I found a couple of quotes that reminded me of what fundamentalism is about and why it must continually be challenged.

In the October 1985 issue, then-pastor Roger Lovette of First Baptist Church of Clemson, S.C., wrote: "Fundamentalism sees the future as the past. No issue illustrates this as clearly as does the women's issue."

And the late Peter J. Gomes, a Baptist minister and professor of Christian morals at Harvard, was quoted in the September 1992 edition saying: "The chief reason that fundamentalism is dangerous is that ... it uses scripture and the Christian practice to encourage ordinarily good people to act upon their fears rather than their virtues."

There is nothing hopeful about a future that reflects only a romanticized, well-edited view of yesteryear, driven by fear of what might lie ahead. Such a perspective skews much of the freedom, mercy and love at the very heart of the Gospel.

Alternative understandings of Christian faithfulness are not only appropriate, but also much needed. **BT**



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March 1 start

Suzii Paynter takes her place as new CBF executive coordinator

ATLANTA — Susan (Suzii) Youngblood Paynter, executive director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, assumes the top leadership position in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) on March 1. She is the first layperson, first woman and third Texan to serve as the executive coordinator of the 21-year-old moderate Baptist organization that formed following the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.

“I feel like God has brought me here with gifts from my times in the past...” said Paynter, when introduced at a January press conference. “I promise to give my gifts to this body through leadership, service and organization.”

Paynter, who has been active in CBF since its founding, spoke of how her networking and advocacy work in Texas have prepared her for the tasks ahead — and her hopes that CBF will be more involved in advocating for causes of justice on a national level.

She noted that the start of her new job comes just as CBF is implementing a new governing plan based on an extensive report by the Fellowship’s 2012 task force. The newly adopted structure reduces the size of the current governing body (Coordinating Council) and creates two additional councils to focus on ministries and missions.

Paynter was recommended for the executive coordinator position by a search committee chaired by Dallas pastor George Mason, who introduced Paynter at the press conference on Jan. 17 at the CBF headquarters in Atlanta. Her hiring was approved by the CBF Coordinating Council on Feb. 21.

“This has been the culmination of a joyous journey,” said Mason, pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church, of the search process.

Mason said the committee did not seek out a woman in particular, but believes the selection of a woman — who is a layperson as well — reflects the Fellowship’s identity and values.

Mason said a thorough search included consideration of many good candidates, but



NEW CBF LEADER: Suzii Paynter of Austin, Texas, speaks during a Jan. 17 press conference. She was recommended as the new executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship by a search committee chaired by George Mason (left), pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas. Photo by John Pierce.

“it was clear to us that Suzii Paynter is the person of the moment,”

Of her longtime involvement with the Fellowship, Mason said Paynter “shaped the way we have done business.”

In her previous position Paynter worked out of offices in Dallas and Austin, Texas, leading her organization to address ethics and public policy issues and to petition and equip state lawmakers to better curb social ills such as illiteracy, poverty and injustice. Her husband, Roger Paynter, is pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin and serves on the *Baptists Today* board of directors.

He said Suzii has a temporary place to live in Decatur, Ga., and that the two will make frequent trips to spend time together during this transition.

Earlier in her career Paynter worked as an educator, advocate and consultant in the field of literacy — with an emphasis on teaching high-risk children. She has received numerous awards for her work including the Distinguished Service to Social Welfare award from the North American Association of Christians in Social Work.

A San Antonio native, she is a graduate of Baylor University and Stephen F. Austin University, and received an honorary

doctorate from Dallas Baptist University. At CBF, Paynter succeeds Daniel Vestal, the second coordinator, who retired last year. The first coordinator was Cecil Sherman.

“I’m thrilled about this announcement today,” said CBF moderator Keith Herron, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., who holds the top elected leadership position.

He spoke of the Fellowship being in a time of hopeful transition. The search committee, he said, focused on the possibilities of CBF becoming a seamless cooperative movement that shares resources and focuses on the abundant resources available rather than scarcity. **BT**

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By Mark Wingfield

Comfort food

There are some rules everyone needs to understand about death and funerals. For starters, funerals call for a certain kind of food.

There had better be chocolate cake involved, or the family is going to be left to scramble on their own for comfort foods.

We had an experience a few years ago with a death in the family, and all the food the widow's friends brought to the house was health food. There was no green bean casserole, no fried chicken, no homemade rolls, no chocolate cake. Finally, someone in the family drove over to KFC to bring home the kind of food we all needed in the moment.

And did I mention there wasn't even a single piece of chocolate cake brought to the house?

Kate Campbell recorded a fantastic song a few years ago titled "Funeral Food." Being a good Southern girl and the daughter of a Baptist pastor, she knows a thing or two about this subject. She says, "It's so good for the soul,

funeral food fills you up down to your toes."

Of course, in reality, food brought to the house after a death or even the food served to the family before or after a funeral can't cover the emotional loss felt at times like these. But funeral food does symbolize a more important point; it really is good for the soul.

What's nutritious about funeral food is the love that's cooked into it and the memories associated with it. Comfort foods like these recall family meals around the Thanksgiving table or birthday parties or family reunions.

And in Southern culture, to be sure, certain foods take on almost sacramental meaning. In Texas, we're fond of a particular type of chocolate sheet cake that's almost as common at church gatherings as communion elements.



Is it wrong of me to think of chocolate cake as heaven-sent? I don't think so. Too often, we think of food for the soul as what's bland or even bitter. The Bible says, though, that we are to "taste and see, the Lord is good."

What families need at times of loss — and what all of us need in times of distress — is a portent of the goodness of God.

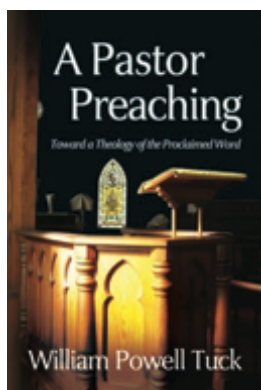
If the dinner table serves up a symbol of the heavenly banquet to come, we may draw strength in the reminder that there is comfort to be found as we gather around the heavenly host, whether in worship or in fellowship, whether in comfort or in sorrow.

Now, please pass the cake. **BT**

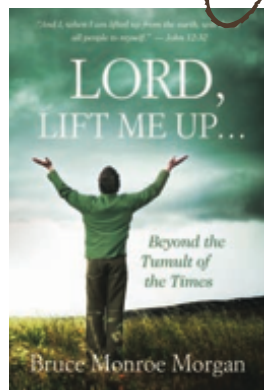
—Mark Wingfield is associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas. He wrote this column for *Associated Baptist Press* not knowing that it would appear at the time he and his family were grieving the death of his mother. He reported that chocolate cake was indeed served.

New releases

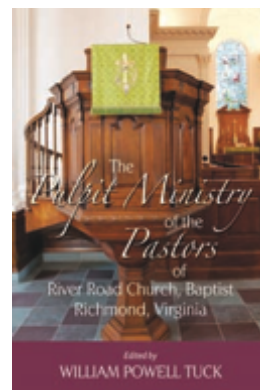
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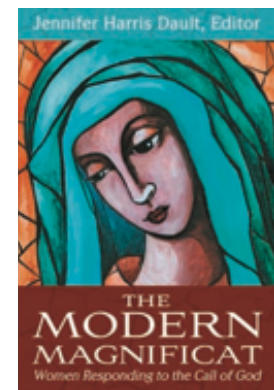
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BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

As winter gives way to warmer temperatures and longer days, generals plot strategies and restless soldiers pack up winter quarters and prepare for impending battles.

United States military forces, determined to control the western theater of war, continue a slow but relentless drive to Vicksburg, a strategic city on the banks of the Mississippi River. Further to the west, Union soldiers in the Battle of Glorieta Pass thwart Confederate attempts to conquer New Mexico.

In the heart of the Confederacy, southern forces on the defensive successfully engage Union troops in several minor battles. The Confederate capital of Richmond, safe for now, is a bustle of activity. As war casualties have mounted, many hospitals for soldiers have been established in the city, including a Baptist hospital, of which a news reporter speaks glowingly:

The hospitals of Richmond are many of them models of comfort and cleanliness, and their good management is due to the untiring energy and administrative capacity of the noble women of our city, ladies of gentle birth and high culture who are proud to give their time to the holy work, and who ask no earthly remuneration, whose reward will be on high ... Colonel P. W. Alexander ... testifies to the admirable routine of the hospital kept in the Baptist Institute building under the matronly superintendence of Mrs. Lewis N. Webb, of Richmond.

Also headquartered in Richmond is the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, now cut off from its missionaries due to the Union blockade of the southern coast. A provisional mission board office operating out of Maryland has found but little success, so this month the FMB hires blockade-runners, an expensive, risky, and largely futile endeavor.

Further to the South, Atlanta is a busy commercial center of the Confederacy. As in Richmond, Baptists are a significant presence. A news correspondent this month describes the First Baptist Church of the city:



Brandy Station, Second Corps Hospital, Virginia

150 YEARS AGO

March 1863

Decidedly the best filled pulpit in Atlanta is the Baptist, a very pretty church, under the pastoral charge of the Rev. Dr. Brantly, a son of the loved minister of the First Baptist Church in Charleston. All who listen to his terse and well-written sermons come away well pleased, and weekly crowds attest his popularity...

Along the coast, Sylvanus Landrum, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Savannah, praises his congregation's efforts in support of the Confederacy.

... there are, beside the regular Sabbath services, a prayer meeting on Tuesday afternoon, and a lecture on Thursday evening at 7 ¾ o'clock. At all our meetings soldiers are ever welcome.

Then, the Board of Baptist Missions have two missionaries here, whose whole time is devoted to the religious interests of the soldiers, Rev. D. G. Daniell, long and well known in Georgia as a pastor and agent, and recently a chaplain of the 29th Regiment, and Rev. A. D. Cohen, formerly a pastor at Newbern, N. C., but driven from his home by the enemy, and recently a chaplain in the

Army of the Potomac. These ministers of experience, intelligence and unquestioned piety, devote their time to preaching in the camp and hospitals, and distributing tracts, hymn books and Testaments. They have circulated thousands and tens of thousands of pages of printed truth...

Meanwhile, slaves — many of whom are Baptists — are escaping from bondage in increasing numbers near areas controlled by the Union army. Baptist freedmen are now serving in black Union regiments, as both soldiers and chaplains.

Competing views of the Christian faith are hardening all the more South and North. While white southerners seemingly exhibit more zeal in their religious sentiments, faith empowers black Baptists' determination — and that of many northerners at large — to abolish slavery.

As the month draws to a close in a war-weary nation, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, raised in a Calvinistic Baptist church, proclaims a national day of humiliation, fasting and prayer to be held in April. Acknowledging that blessings and punishments alike are bestowed upon nations by a sovereign God, Lincoln calls upon his fellow Americans to recognize that victory lies beyond self-reliance, concluding that:

It behooves us, then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness. BT

Classifieds

Pastor: First Baptist Church of Claxton, Ga., is seeking a full-time pastor. 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 fbccpastorsearch@aol.com or to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 607, Claxton, GA 30417.

Minister of Music: Bethany Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., is seeking a part-time minister of music with 3-5 years experience to plan, direct, and coordinate worship for both contemporary and traditional services. For details, see bethanybaptistws.com.

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.

Choral Director: Immanuel Baptist Church is seeking a part-time choral director to continue and build upon our strong heritage of music ministry. This person will lead and direct choirs and music education opportunities for children, youth, and adults and coordinate and direct special music presentations. A bachelor's degree in music is required. Direct inquiries and résumés by March 15 to Immanuel Baptist Church, 3465 Buckner Ln., Paducah, KY 42001 or jsnook@vci.net or (270) 443-5306.

Associate Pastor for Students and Families:

First Baptist Church of Williamsburg, Ky., is seeking a dynamic associate pastor for students and families. We are a growing body of Christ seeking to be faithful witnesses in our community. We are seeking a person who has familiarity with and experience in leading a variety of types of programs for youth and children. A degree from an accredited seminary is considered optimum. Submit résumés to familyministrysearch@gmail.com.

Minister for Youth and Outreach: First Baptist Church Rutherfordton, a 400-member congregation in the foothills of Western North Carolina, seeks a full-time minister for youth and outreach. Ministry experience and strong relational skills are required. A master's degree from an ATS/SACS-accredited seminary or divinity school is preferred. This church values traditional worship, affiliates with CBF and SBC, and affirms women in ministry. Submit résumés by March 30 to Personnel Committee, P.O. Box 839, Rutherfordton, NC 28139, or to office@firstbaptistrutherfordton.com.

Minister of Youth: Bethany Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., is seeking a part-time minister of youth to plan, direct and coordinate its youth ministry. For details, see bethanybaptistws.com.

Minister to Children and Youth: The Oaks Baptist Church, a moderate congregation in Lyons, Ga., is seeking a full-time minister to children and youth. The preferred candidate will possess a seminary degree from an accredited institution and a minimum of two years working with children/youth in ministry. Interested candidates should send a résumé to Personnel Team, The Oaks Baptist Church, P.O. Box 388, Lyons, GA 30436. For more information about the church, go to theoaksbaptist.com.

In the Know

Nick Carter, president of Andover Newton Theological School since 2004, will retire in June of 2014.

Chris Copeland has left the staff of the Alliance of Baptists where he has served for 10 years. Since 2007 he has been minister for leadership formation.

Jay Kieve is the new coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of South Carolina, effective March 25. He succeeds Marion Aldridge who retired in February. Kieve comes from the pastorate of Crosscreek Baptist Church in Pelham, Ala. Earlier he was pastor of First Baptist Church of Allendale, S.C., and associate pastor of University Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C.

Arthur J. Munson of Phoenixville, Pa., received the 2013 Judson Press Ministry Award from the American Baptist Churches USA Mission Center.

Ed Rollins died Feb. 5 in Brentwood, Tenn., at age 85. He retired in 1992 as manager of National Student Ministries with LifeWay Christian Resources, formerly the Baptist Sunday School Board. Earlier he served in campus ministry in California.

Frank Upchurch died Dec. 28, 2012, at age 65. He was president and CEO of the Georgia Baptist Health Care Foundation.

Harrison E. Williams died Jan. 24 at age 93. He retired in 1983 as deputy for regional operations for American Baptist Churches USA, and, in recent years, was a member of Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church, Oakland, Calif. **BT**

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April lessons in this issue

Truth in Mystery

Revelation 1:4-8 – Look Who's Coming!
APRIL 7, 2013

Revelation 5:1-14 – Songs of Angels
APRIL 14, 2013

Revelation 7:9-17 – Transforming Terror
APRIL 21, 2013

Revelation 21:1-6 – No More Tears
APRIL 28, 2013

Youth Lessons are on pages 22–23.



Adult teaching plans by **Rick Jordan** of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina are available at nurturingfaith.net

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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Revelation 1:4-8

April 7, 2013

Look Who's Coming!

Do you love it or hate it – or just avoid it? The Book of Revelation inspires all three responses. John's "apocalypse" was written to provide both challenge and encouragement to believers, but its message is shrouded in mystery and metaphors that leave it open to multiple – but not necessarily responsible – interpretations. ↓

Revelation can't be read in the same way as other books of the New Testament. It is not a historical account, like the gospels and Acts, or a personal letter, like the epistles. Though framed by elements common to first century letters (a greeting and blessing [1:4-6] followed by the main body of the letter [1:7-22:20] and a closing [22:21]), the "body" of the letter is very different from other New Testament writings. [See the online "Hardest Question" for more.]

The bulk of the book belongs to a literary genre known as "apocalyptic," a particular type of "crisis literature" that emerged during desperate times when traditional beliefs ran afoul of present reality and a new worldview was needed to make sense of life. When one has always believed that God is both in control and concerned for God's people – but the horrifying situation on the ground leads one to think God has gone missing – one possible explanation is that the present age is crashing to an end, but God is about to bring in a new age in which enemies will be vanquished and those who currently suffer will be vindicated.

Revelation fits clearly into the apocalyptic pattern with the exception that its



Rev. 1:7a –
"Look! He is coming
with the clouds; every
eye will see him ..."

author does not write in the name of an ancient hero, as was often done, but identifies himself as a man named John. ↓

Since they arise from times of persecution or crisis, apocalypses rely on metaphorical language and images that would be known to believers but not to their enemies. Unfortunately, sometimes they are also a mystery to modern readers. Even so, many readers regard Revelation as a programmatic text designed to predict the end times in graphic detail. Combining numbers and symbols from the books of Daniel and Revelation, they seek to relate various characters to the current day and predict a spiral of events leading up to a final world war centered in the Middle East (Armageddon) and the resulting end of the age. ↓

This interpretation fails to recognize that the book was initially intended for a particular time (the late first century) and a particular people (the believers in Asia Minor) who faced a particular set of circumstances (persecution by the Romans, both real and perceived).

It also fails to appreciate the unique characteristics of apocalyptic literature. ↓

Understanding Revelation is less about decoding information and more about sharing John's experience of an almighty God who rules over all things and all times. For this reason, reading passages aloud and sensing the power of the imagery can sometimes be more helpful than trying to dissect inscrutable puzzles. ↓

The purpose of books such as Revelation is not so much to forecast future events as to assure believers that God is in control of the future.

A message for a prophet (vv. 1-3)

John begins his testimony by putting readers (or hearers) on notice that what follows is no ordinary writing: it is a revelation (*apocalypsis*) both from and about Jesus Christ. ↓

The purpose of the revelation, John says, is to show Christ's servants "what must soon take place." This may bring us pause when we stop to realize that the

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epoch-changing events John spoke about did not take place “soon,” unless one rationalizes that “soon” in God’s time may seem like forever in our time. ⬇

John apparently believed that the persecution of Christians was increasing, evil was ramping up its influence, and the only solution would be for God to bring about cataclysmic, world-changing events. That nearly 2,000 years have passed without such events does not change the core message of the book: Christians are challenged, in whatever circumstances, to remain faithful to God. As Mitchell Reddish puts it, “The importance of John’s message lies not in chronology, but in theology” (*Revelation*, Smyth & Helwys Commentary [2001], 33).

John claims to have received his revelations from Christ or a direct representative (vv. 12-18), and to have written a faithful testimony to the words he heard and “even to all that he saw” (v. 2). This is a reminder that John’s revelations came in a series of visions, experiences that often stretch language to and beyond its limits.

Grace for the churches (vv. 3-6)

Verses 1 and 2 serve as an extended title of the book, after which John offers a blessing for those who read aloud and hear its “words of the prophecy” and keep them (v. 3). Few people in John’s time would have a personal copy of the book, but they would have heard it read, appreciating the dramatic nature of its content. John’s contemporaries would not have a copy of the book to parse and analyze in an attempt to construct a timetable for the second coming. They would simply be overwhelmed by the imagery and reminded that God is Lord of the present and the future, the living and the dead.

As mentioned above, the introduction and conclusion of the apocalypse have the form of a letter, and in v. 4 we find the address: John writes to “the seven churches that are in Asia,” the western part of what used to be called Asia Minor (now Turkey), near the

coast of the Aegean Sea. ⬇

To the churches, John extends grace from God, from “the seven spirits who are before his throne” and from Jesus Christ. The reference to God as the one “who was and who is and who is to come” is repeated in 1:8 and 4:8.

Some readers think of the seven spirits as seven archangels who do God’s bidding, but it is probably best to think of the seven spirits as a rough equivalent of the Holy Spirit, of God’s divine presence at work in the world (compare the use of sevens and the “seven eyes of the LORD, which range through the whole world” in Zech. 4:2, 10, which has an apocalyptic flavor). Seven is an important number in religious thought for a variety of reasons, and is the most significant of several numbers that play important roles in Revelation, where 3, 10, 12 and 24 also figure prominently.

John describes Christ as “the faithful witness,” “the firstborn of the dead,” “the ruler of the kings of the earth,” the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father” (vv. 5-6a).

This latter imagery is drawn from Exod. 19:6, in which God promised to make Israel a “kingdom of priests.” Other Exodus themes will follow: the Roman emperor is like a new Pharaoh who must be deposed through plagues, signs, and wonders so that God’s people may pass safely through the sea. Christ, as ruler over all other kings, could accomplish this. ⬇

Good news for believers (vv. 7-8)

Apocalyptic literature, as we have noted, grew from troubled times when believers perceived their position was so dire and the world so evil that their only hope was for God to intervene in history and usher in a new age.

John saw his era as such a time, when the best news he could offer was that Christ would soon be “coming with the clouds” so that “every eye will see him” (v. 7).

This mental picture, though immensely popular in hymnody and pulpit rhetoric, should be understood as a metaphor rather than a specific description of the manner of Christ’s return.

The image of Jesus sky-boarding through the heavens on a billowy cloud is appealing, but such theatrics would only be visible within a limited horizon. Like all people of his day, John envisioned a flat earth that would allow all people a common plane of vision to the highest reaches of the sky. The point of the metaphor is that when Christ returns, in some fashion everyone on earth will know it – friend and foe alike. ⬇

John’s double affirmation (literally “Yes! Amen!”) is reinforced by one of the few statements directly attributed to God in the Apocalypse. God self-identifies, according to John, as “the Alpha and Omega . . . who was and is and is to come, the Almighty.”

Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters in the Greek alphabet. When John uses the same expression in 21:6 (attributed to God) and 22:13 (attributed to Christ), he adds “the first and the last.” This expression, a literary device called a “merism,” uses the beginning and the end to indicate everything in between, an artistic way of insisting that God’s presence pervades all times and all places.

What does this curious text have to say for modern believers who don’t live under persecution, but who do face daily difficulties and the constant temptation to assimilate fully to a culture that has no place for God?

When we face violence, poverty, terrorism and other threats that seem to make the world a desperately forlorn place, we too can trust in a God whose rule is supreme, and who offers the hope of a brighter future where justice will prevail and the righteous will be vindicated. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Revelation 5:1-14

April 14, 2013

Songs of Angels

“God’s in his heaven – all’s right with the world!”

That famous line from Robert Browning’s “Pippa Passes” (1841) is stark in its innocence compared to some of the sordid scenes in the lengthy poetic play.

But is it true? If God’s in heaven, is all right with the world? The Book of Revelation has a lot to say about God’s heavenly throne room, but John’s comforting vision was given to people who knew very well that all was not right with the world.

Writing in the late first century, when Christians were a scorned minority and sporadic outbreaks of persecution could make life fearful and despairing, John’s apocalyptic visions declared that despite the world’s wrongness, God remained on the throne and would one day make things right.

With few exceptions, Christians in today’s world do not live under oppression, but even so we perceive a world gone wrong. Global warming, international conflicts, tribal warfare, religion-inspired terrorism, economic disasters, senseless gun violence, domestic abuse, and countless personal crises can make for a gloomy outlook.

If all is not right with the world, is there still hope?

John thought so.

A scroll (vv. 1-5)

The official lectionary text for today covers only vv. 11-14, but we can hardly appreciate those verses without


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




Rev. 5:12 –

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”


giving some attention to the context in which they belong. After proclaiming Christ’s message to the seven churches of Asia (chs. 2-3), John turns to an elaborate description of the heavenly throne room, stretching language to the breaking point in his attempt to portray its glittering grandeur.


God’s throne was guarded by four exotic creatures and surrounded by 24 elders on lesser thrones, with all in the room engaged in constant worship of God as the creator of all things (4:11). 

In chapter 5 the scene remains the same, but the focus shifts from the praise of God as the worthy creator to the need for someone worthy enough to break the seven seals of a mysterious scroll containing an itinerary of things yet to come. 

No one “in heaven or on earth or under the earth” proved able to open the scroll, leading John to weep bitterly that the contents of the scroll would remain a mystery (v. 4). John’s despair builds dramatic tension, but soon one of the elders told him to stanch his tears, for

“the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the seven seals” (v. 5).

Both images are drawn from the concepts found in the Hebrew Bible. Jacob’s blessing to his son Judah in Gen. 49:9-10 describes Judah as a “lion’s whelp” to whom the kingship would belong: “the scepter shall not depart from Judah.” David was descended from the tribe of Judah, and God promised him that his descendants would always sit upon the throne (2 Samuel 7). After the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the Hebrews held to the hope that God would raise up a scion of David to rule again, speaking of him as the “root” or “branch” of David, or from the stump of Jesse, David’s father (see Isa. 11:1, 10; Jer. 23:5, 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12). 

The “lion who has conquered,” of course, is a reference to Jesus. But when John looked for the approach of a powerful carnivore who wins victories by strength and violence, he was overcome with amazement: the lion was a lamb. 

A lamb (vv. 6-10)

Without comment on the shocking switch between what he heard and what he saw, John describes the appearance of a lamb standing in the midst of the heavenly council, but it was no ordinary lamb. It stood “as if it had been slaughtered” – bearing the marks of slaughter, but clearly alive and still standing.

The reader has no doubt that the lamb represents Jesus Christ, who had stood amid his disciples with the marks of execution still painfully evident.

For a lamb, the mark of slaughter would be a slit throat, but John does not dwell on specifics, and we have no more need to try visualizing that gory image than we do trying to fit seven horns and seven eyes on the lamb’s head.

Once again, John uses metaphorical language. A lamb with seven horns and seven eyes would be beyond freakish, though people have tried to portray it graphically (as a quick Google search can show).


We gain nothing by dwelling on how the curious collection of eyes and horns might look upon a lamb’s head. The purpose of John’s imagery was to signify the power and pervasiveness of Christ. From ancient times, horns have been symbolic of power. In the Babylonian traditions especially, powerful gods and earthly kings were routinely portrayed with several sets of horns wrapped around their heads.

The appearance of the lamb resolves the dramatic problem that no one was found able to break the seven seals and reveal the scroll’s secretive contents. The lamb’s worthiness is seen in the marks of its willing sacrifice and the strength symbolized by the seven horns. The number seven indicated completeness, showing that Christ had full power to accomplish the task.

The eyes, John says, are “the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” We have indicated previously that the “seven spirits” before the throne appear to be a rough equivalent to the Holy Spirit, and we may understand the lamb’s “eyes” in the same way. The


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vision declared that the lamb standing ready to unseal the scroll was worthy enough, powerful enough and perceptive enough to accomplish the task, as evidenced by the “new song” of the living creatures and the elders in vv. 9-10. 

The most surprising aspect to readers is that the lamb’s worthiness and victory did not come through brute force, but through self-sacrifice. The hymn of praise says nothing about the lamb’s powerful horns or all-seeing eyes, but centers on Christ’s willingness to die for the sake of the people “from every tribe and language and people and nation.” This is the source of his power and the secret to his victory.

A chorus (vv. 11-14)

The voices of the living creatures and the 24 elders were soon amplified by innumerable angels (“myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands”) who joined the chorus.  Try to imagine the bone-chilling sound of such a heavenly chorus “in full voice” singing “Worthy is the lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and glory and honor and blessing!” (v. 11b).

As if the hosts of heaven could not proffer sufficient praise, to their voices were added every creature in heaven, on the earth, under the earth and in the sea. Not only all people, but also every creature in the universe joined to sing an eternal blessing “to the one seated on the throne, and to the Lamb” (v. 13).  

While the song addressed both “the one seated on the throne” and the lamb who stood before it, the emphasis is on the lamb, who is declared worthy because of his atoning death. As the song reaches its crescendo, the scene arrives at its climax as the four living creatures cried “Amen” and the elders prostrate themselves in worship before God, the author of all creation, and the lamb, who had been found worthy to

open the scroll (v. 14).

We should not forget the context. The heavenly praise engenders enthralling thoughts, but remains an accompaniment to the dramatic action in which the lamb has been revealed as the only one worthy to break the seven seals of the mysterious scroll.

The entire chapter, then, serves as an introduction to what will follow the opening of the scroll, a series of catastrophic judgments and descriptions of suffering that will encompass chapters 6-19, the largest part of the book. The lamb’s ability to break the seals does not simply allow the scroll to be opened and read, but sets in motion the events it describes.

We’ll have more to say about this in next week’s lesson. For now, we should ask ourselves what profit there is in studying a text like this. How might it speak to our needs in our time?

To answer that, we return to our opening thoughts. All is not right with the world – not with our world any more than John’s world. Yet, we can hold the belief that God is on the throne, that all is not lost.

While the imagery of the creator God’s rule over the universe is powerful and encouraging, John’s vision also exalts Christ as one who triumphed through suffering, ensuring eternal security for the believer.

The lamb’s wounds, still evident from slaughter, are a reminder that suffering is ongoing. Eternal security does not equate to present protection. We face many obstacles in this life, some of our own making, some beyond our control. Trouble comes, even to the righteous. The world can be dark and hard and evil, and sometimes it seems to be spiraling into oblivion.

Yet, in the midst of our trials, John insists, God is on the throne. Christ has won the victory. Like people in bondage who dare to raise hope to the heavens, we can sing a new song of praise to the one who was, who is and who is to come, trusting that God holds both the universe and our future in faithful and worthy hands. **BT**

YOUTH

April 7 - April 28, 2013

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

Clues and puzzles?

Revelation 1:4-8

Popular movies such as *National Treasure* connect with the fun of discovering hidden clues and solving puzzles. It's fun to believe that there are unearthed meanings in items and symbols we see each day. What if we figured out the clues? What would it mean?

The Book of Revelation tempts us with clues and mysteries and unusual symbols. Is it a puzzle waiting to be solved?

The word revelation literally means "uncovering that which is hidden" or "making something known that was previously a secret." When we talk about God's revelation, we consider the ways we discover and know God.

The Book of Revelation, written by John, offers chapters full of colorful imagery and symbolism. There are dramatic visions, seven churches, seven trumpets, seven seals and

conflict between great powers. Such writing is also called apocalyptic or "crisis" literature.

John was a prisoner on the island of Patmos, and was writing Revelation to a people who were eager to be free of the restrictions and rule of the Roman Empire. For them, the power of the empire was mighty, and it was difficult for them to see a way to freedom. It is likely that John wrote in such mysterious terms as a way of hiding his message from the authorities.

Many scholars see Revelation as a way of helping these tired and oppressed people find hope in the inevitable victory of God. Today's passage, the introduction to Revelation, underscores the idea that God's power is supreme and will prevail over the powers of darkness.

In the face of struggles, fear and darkness, we can find hope in the knowledge that God is with us, and in the end, nothing is greater than the love of God in our lives.

APRIL 7

Think About It:

The revelation that John offered had to be shrouded from the Roman authorities of his day because it highlighted God's overwhelming power over this world. How do you reveal God to those you encounter daily?

Make a Choice:

The Book of Revelation was presented by John to show a God who is supreme and offers hope even on the darkest day. How do you choose to reveal the light of Christ to a dark world?

Pray:

God, please open our eyes so that we might see your light instead of the darkness that pervades our world.

Who's going to clean up this mess?

Revelation 5:11-14

We all make messes, and usually we get to be part of cleaning them up. How many times have your parents first expected a clean room or chores completed before you could spend time with your friends or play your favorite video game? Sometimes we are even expected to help clean up messes we did not make.

The world is not right. It's a mess. From warfare, terrorism, climate change and economic turmoil to violence against children, the world has a lot of problems. Who is going to clean up this mess?

In the time when the Book of Revelation was written, the world was in bad shape. The Romans ruled with an iron fist, and the early Christians lived in fear of what might happen to them if their faith was revealed.

In today's passage the question is asked:

Who is worthy of the task of making the world right again? A scroll is presented that no one seems able to open. Who is worthy to break the seal that holds the scroll?

There are angels, creatures and elders considering the question, and they quickly identify the Lamb as the one worthy of the task. Of course, the Lamb is Jesus, and he is the one worthy to open the scroll and thus accept the task of overcoming the darkness in our world. The passage ends with the angels and all the people and creatures of the earth celebrating the Lamb.

Why is Jesus seen as a lamb? To tackle the problems of this world, we might expect a mighty lion or tiger. But the power of Jesus is in his willingness to sacrifice himself for us.

The world is a mess. Can we find hope in Jesus that things will be made right? Can Jesus count on us to be helpful in healing this world?

APRIL 14

Think About It:

How do you feel when you think about the problems of our world? Do you think they can be overcome? Where do you find hope for dealing with the troubles you face each day?

Make a Choice:

How do you continue to choose hope when all is not right with the world? How can you be part of Jesus' work of healing the world?

Pray:

O God, may we notice the work of your hands in our world. May we accept that we are called to build your kingdom around us each day.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



A glimpse

Revelation 7:9-17

Mercy Me's song "I Can Only Imagine" suggests that one can only imagine what it is like to worship God for an eternity. The song's lyrics offer a series of situations in which the singers imagine what the worship will be like, but realize that for now it truly can be only in their imagination. The seventh chapter of the Book of Revelation gives us a glimpse into what worship is like with God and the Lamb.

The passage picks up back in the throne room after the vision leads John through the first of the seals. What awaits John now is a "great multitude that no one could count ... from every nation and people." The hearers must recall the promise made to Abraham by

God, and John's revelation now shows that the promise has come true. The multitude that gathers cries out together, claiming salvation is God's alone and can only be gained through God.

Who is this great multitude that has gathered? The elder explains that those who gather have been washed white, or clean, by the blood of the Lamb. It is because of the sacrifice of Jesus that they stand before the throne of God.

The metaphor of the Lamb is then turned upside-down: The Lamb becomes the shepherd to the people who gather, and the shepherd will lead the people to the water of life where "God will wipe away their tears from their eyes."

APRIL 21

Think About It:

The revelation John presents shows God with God's people, even wiping away the tears from their eyes. Where do you see God caring for God's people in your daily life?

Make a Choice:

Churches sometimes debate styles of worship, but here we see a multitude worshipping God in unity. When you come to worship, is your main question how you worship or who you worship?

Pray:

Thank you for all you have done for me, and may my worship be a sign of my praise to you, O God.

A new home

Revelation 21:1-6

We all love new things: new clothes, a new gadget, a new experience, a new friend. We enjoy changes that bring newness in our lives. Sometimes new things bring real improvements over what they replace. A new smartphone is faster and offers more features than an old one. A new game looks better and offers better challenges than the old one.

In today's passage we hear that God will create a new heaven and a new earth, bringing an end to the brokenness and darkness that are so much a part of this world. It is a powerful message for John's audience. They are living in dark times, oppressed and well aware of the faults of the world.

What will that new reality be like? John uses "word pictures" to help the people understand the weight of the new world God will bring. He sees that the earth as we know it will "pass away" so that a new heaven and earth can become a reality. Those who have strayed from God will find their way home. No one will have a reason to be afraid, and all sadness will be gone. Even death will be a thing of the past. The source of this newness is the very presence of God with us.

Even today the world is full of fear, violence, unfairness, suffering and death. Revelation reminds us that in the end, God will have God's way. God is the beginning and the end. In the beginning of the Bible we read of God creating life. In Revelation we see God coming to renew all of creation.

APRIL 28

Think About It:

God has given us freedom to make choices, and people have made a mess of the world with poor choices. How can our faith help us make better use of our freedom to choose?

Make a Choice:

We can choose to be depressed by the darkness and unfairness of this world, or to work with God toward a new reality. Which will you choose?

Pray:

O God, may we fully live in your presence until the day comes when a new heaven and earth are revealed.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Revelation 7:9-17

April 21, 2013

Transforming Terror

We use the word “terrorism” a lot these days, and news reports of various atrocities give us a second-hand taste, at least, of terror.

Today’s text comes as an interlude in a section of Revelation so terror-laden that John’s hearers and modern readers need a break from the horror just to find hope enough to continue.

Last week’s lesson (from Rev. 5:1-14) introduced a special scroll bearing seven seals and the search for one who could break the seals and reveal its contents. Christ was introduced, first as a lion and then as a slaughtered-but-living lamb, as the only one qualified for the task. The section closed with uncountable angels praising God the creator and Christ the redeemer.

That happy note comes to an end with the breaking of the first seal and the awareness that the opening of the scroll will unleash terrible judgments upon the earth, ranging from famine to pestilence to war and cosmic catastrophes. ⚡

Careful hearers or readers who absorb such horrors may find themselves emotionally exhausted, hardly able to bear any more. The interlude, then, is welcome.

A vision on earth (vv. 1-8)

Between the sixth and seventh seals, John relates two parenthetical accounts, each introduced by “After this I saw ...,” John’s way of indicating separate visions (see also 4:1; 7:1; 15:5; 18:1).

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



Rev. 7:10 —

They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

The first vision is set on earth (7:1-8) and the second in heaven (7:9-17).

The earthly vision declares that God will halt the horrors, here symbolized by destructive winds, and send an angel bearing a seal with which to mark 144,000 persons — 12,000 each from the 12 tribes of Israel. ⚡

This text is used by Jehovah’s Witnesses to contend that only 144,000 people will attain heaven, and is employed by dispensationalists to argue that 144,000 Jews will be marked for a special evangelistic purpose during the last days. ⚡ Both positions require a literalist manipulation of the texts that is not supported by an understanding of the apocalyptic (and hence highly metaphorical) nature of the texts.

John’s word pictures were probably designed to indicate a large but not necessarily specific number of believers who would be “sealed” during the coming tribulation, which he believed had already begun. The reference to the 12 tribes of Israel could indicate an understanding of the church as the “New

Israel” and does not necessarily refer to Jewish persons only (cf. Jas. 1:1).

The protection of the seal did not remove the 144,000 from suffering, as some contend, but marked them as belonging to Christ. It is likely that the number refers to the martyrs who had died for Christ, a number that was still incomplete in 5:11. As a multiple of both 10 and 12, the 144,000 may have symbolized the complete number of those who would die in the time of trial.

A vision in heaven (vv. 9-12)

The second parenthetical vision — our text for today — shifts John’s focus from earthly tribulation to heavenly splendor. As in last week’s text, John is shown the heavenly court where God sits on a great throne, accompanied by Christ as a lamb with seven eyes, which represent the pervasive Spirit of God. The throne is guarded and served by four supernatural “living creatures” and surrounded by 24 crowned elders on lesser thrones. These were joined by countless

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angels who united in singing praise to God and to the lamb.

Now, John sees before the throne “a great multitude that no one could count.” John emphasizes the crowd’s inclusive nature: The people come “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (v. 9a). This recalls God’s promise to Abraham that all nations of the earth would be blessed through him and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-3, see also Isa. 49:6).

Some interpreters think of the multitude as an image of the entire church through the ages, but John probably saw them as an uncountable host of martyrs. They wear white robes and bear palm branches as symbols of victory, but “they have ‘won’ only from the heavenly perspective of the Lamb’s definition of winning; on earth they have been killed” (Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation [John Knox Press, 1989], 131).

Although the multitude of martyrs gave their lives for Christ, that did not gain them salvation they could call their own, for salvation is God’s alone. The multitude testified: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

As in chapter 5, where the song of the living creatures and the elders was joined by a host of angels, the cry of the martyrs swells with the addition of all the inhabitants of heaven singing a seven-fold blessing to God.

The human celebrants seem to be singing a responsive hymn in conjunction with the heavenly beings who devote themselves to serving and praising God. Their function is described in v. 15 with the Greek word *latreuō* which means both “worship” and “serve.”

In biblical thought, and particularly in John’s apocalypse, seven is an especially significant number, and the heavenly hosts celebrate seven specific attributes that belong to God: blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power and might. The same list is found in 5:12 and serves as a sort of doxology.

Now, all of this is fine for John, the reader may think, but what does it have

to do with me?

Let’s consider two things. First, this glimpse of glory leads us to imagine what it might be like to dwell eternally in the presence of God. It is an image of security and perfect harmony with God and all who stand before the throne.

Secondly, the picture may also suggest how God would have believers to live while on this earth: how the church of the present ought to look.

We are familiar with a multitude of churches that cater to different preferences with regard to denomination, theology, worship style or culture. In our world that may be the best we can do, but the text suggests a day will come when all that separates us is overcome by the common desire to glorify the God who created all things and who saved us all in Christ Jesus.

We don’t have to wait until we get to heaven to hold forth the ideal of Christian unity.

The people in this text are marked by the white robes they wear and the palm branches they bear. Is there anything that sets us apart from those who do not claim the name of Christ? ↓

**A question and a hymn
(vv. 13-17)**

After observing this beautiful scene of the multitude singing together God’s praise, the account moves to a question, as one of the elders asked John to identify the white-robed multitude. Like Ezekiel before him (Ezek. 37:3), John responded by confessing his ignorance: “Sir, you are the one that knows.” ↓

The elder offers a seemingly paradoxical statement: they are persons who have come through time of struggle, having “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (v. 14). ↓

Anyone who has tried to wash bloodstains from a white shirt knows that blood is not a bleach; it does not

turn things white. ↓ Again, John is speaking metaphorically. The people have trusted in Christ, whose atoning death – through the shedding of his blood – effectively cleansed the stains of their human failings and set them right with God, no longer tarnished or torn or twisted by the world.

In modern churches, persons being baptized often wear white robes. In the early church, baptism was often a major, solemn ceremony. In some traditions, candidates engaged in a long period of preparation prior to baptism, usually on Easter. In ceremonies separated by gender, they would remove their old clothes and step naked before God into the baptismal waters. When they emerged from the water, they were given a new white robe to wear as a symbol of their new life.

Who are those dressed in white? They are those who have trusted Christ for forgiveness, who have remained faithful through the trials and tribulations and temptations of this world, even though it cost them their lives.

The elder went on to describe the life of those who worship and serve before the throne of God. They will be secure in God’s protection and free from hunger, thirst, and the desert sun.

In another paradox, the lamb will become the shepherd, guiding those he has redeemed “to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (v. 17).

The last three verses appear as three three-line stanzas. They sound more like the Hebrew prophets than the later apocalypics and bear a striking resemblance to the promises of Isaiah 49:10. ↓

John’s vision offers the assurance of a time and a realm where God is at home with his people, dwelling with them, caring for all their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. ↓

This picture holds not only the hope that lies before us, but also a challenge to the life that lies around us. When the church rises up to offer shelter, proclaim good news and wipe away tears, we might just catch a glimpse of heaven on earth. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Revelation 21:1-6

April 28, 2013

No More Tears

Heaven: it's not a place most people think about very much until someone we love dearly dies, and then it is all we can think about.

The truth is, we have no real idea what heaven is like, though our imagination runs wild, and the images we have from Revelation are not much help. In the first place, John's apocalyptic writing is highly metaphorical and symbolic, so we should probably not regard his language-stretching vision of jeweled walls and pearly gates and golden streets as a literal description but as a place of beauty beyond our wildest imagination.

Secondly, what John describes in Revelation 21-22 is pointedly denoted as a "new heaven and a new earth." Whatever heaven might be like now, John suggests, it is not the same place or dimension that believers will enjoy in eternity. What the present heaven and the new heaven have in common is that God is at the heart of them.

The Bible does not tell us all we want to know about heaven, but it tells us all we need to know. It tells us that we can hold to the hope that life for the believer does not end with death but continues with joy.

A new dwelling (v. 1-2)

We can imagine that heaven had been on John's mind for a long time. He had experienced persecution. No doubt he had lost friends to death in some of the more severe outbreaks and had heard of others. Sporadic episodes of persecution



Rev. 21:5a —
And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

reportedly included public torture, with Christians being burned as torches or fed to the lions in the Coliseum. One early church legend says that Roman officials tried to kill John, but could not, and so they just banished him to the island of Patmos. 📖

It is easy to see why John thought so much about heavenly things. The Hebrew Bible testifies that God created the earth so that everything was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), but that humankind turned against God's way and misused the earth, leaving it cursed (Genesis 3).

When injustice reigned or enemies threatened and the situation looked particularly bad, the prophets sometimes spoke of a new or renewed earth where closeness to God would be restored. Isaiah of Jerusalem envisioned a new age of peace in which all creation would live in harmony with God (Isaiah 11), and a later prophet writing in Isaiah's name predicted an entirely new creation: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind" (Isa. 65:17).

John was certainly familiar with

these ancient hopes, and he believed they were about to be fulfilled. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth," he said, "for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (v. 1).

John was convinced that God would soon draw earthly history to a close and set everything right. All that had become cursed and crooked would be restored and made straight, for there would be a new earth. The reasons for a new heaven are less obvious, but the ancients often thought of the two together. "A new heaven and a new earth" is John's way of emphasizing God's creative power to make all things new.

A new heaven and earth are necessary, John says, because the old heaven and earth "have passed away." In the previous chapter, while describing the last judgment in which God would sit on a great white throne, John said "the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them" (Rev. 20:11b).

Of special significance is John's insistence that "the sea was no more." The sea was a prominent source of fear

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in the ancient world. Maritime travel was dangerous and uncertain. Sea dragons or serpent-like monsters such as Leviathan were thought to inhabit the depths (Job 26:12; Isa. 27:1, 51:9-10), making the sea a fearful place.

The sea symbolized chaos and the threatening power of un-creation, which could only be held in check by God. In the new heaven and earth, the sea would be no more. ↓

In addition to a new heaven and earth, John's vision included a new Jerusalem: "and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (v. 2).

The Jerusalem of old was the city of David, the home of the temple, the heart of every major religious festival. But it was also a city that could stone prophets and crucify Jesus. In an earlier lesson we saw how Jesus wept for the recalcitrant people of Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-35). Perhaps the new Jerusalem's descent from heaven is a reminder that only God can restore the city's holiness and transform it into a dwelling place fit for eternity. ↓

At first – and maybe, at last – this text seems confusing. But it is helpful to remember that John is using word pictures, metaphorical language that often shifts its boundaries.

John speaks of a new heaven and a new earth. He speaks of a new and holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to the new earth. After this, however, the distinctions fade, and the new heaven, earth, the city, and believers seem to meld together. The new Jerusalem is not only a city but also the bride of Christ, the body of believers. Surely the author does not intend for the reader to think that in eternity the faithful will live on earth and God will continue to live in heaven. The whole point is that in the new age, God's dwelling will be with God's people.

A new presence (vv. 3-4)

John describes a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them

as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Here is the most important aspect of John's message. What the new heaven and new earth look like or where they are located or how big they are is immaterial. God will live among God's people; that is what truly matters. ↓

That God's "tent" or "dwelling" would be among mortals is an incredible concept. To imagine God's presence, we will no longer need a tabernacle or an altar, the Ark of the Covenant or the holy of holies, a cross on a steeple or stained glass windows. Rather, God will dwell among us in some way beyond our present ability to imagine. The covenant relationship so longed for between God and Israel will finally be fulfilled (Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 7:23). ↓

Living in the full presence of God will mean living in the absence of death, John says. Mourning and crying and pain, in one way or another, have a connection with death: the death of relationships, the death of dreams, the death of innocence, the death of trust, the death of loved ones, the death of self. Death, in some form, is at the heart of every pain. ↓

The Bible has nothing good to say about death. ↓ That's why it is such good news to hear that God will do away with it. Without the deathly fear of darkness and separation, there is no more cause for mourning or tears or pain. The ultimate sign of the presence of God is the absence of death.

A new word (vv. 5-6)

God's final word is always a word of hope. "See, I am making all things new." The New Testament speaks of

how Christians become a "new creation" when we trust in Christ and ask Christ's spirit to live in us (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). We do not become immediately perfect, but despite human weakness, we grow in the "inner person" as a new creation, secure in Christ until the day of his appearing (2 Cor. 3:18, 4:16-18; Col. 3:1-4). John now envisions this same transformation on a cosmic scale as all things are redeemed and made new.

As G.B. Caird described John's vision of a corrupt world's miseries giving way to a future hope, "the agonies of earth are but the birth-pangs of a new creation" (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine* [New York: Harper & Row, 1966], 266).

John declares God's own testimony that "these words are trustworthy and true" (v. 5). There will come a day when all the former things are past, when God, who is both beginning and end, will bring all things to an eternal conclusion in which the greatest needs of his children are eternally met: "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (v. 6).

John has more to say about the believer's eternal home (Rev. 21:7-22:21), but the most important thing has already been said. God is present. Death is absent. The noise of running water is not the sound of tears but the eternally bubbling spring of the water of life. **BT**

A personal meeting: If asked to imagine one person in all of history you would most like to meet, which one would you choose? Albert Einstein? George Washington? Alexander the Great? King David? John says that one day we will not only meet but also live in the very presence of God. Try to picture what that would be like!



Hold on or shake off the dust?

By Christopher R. Gambill

How does your congregation respond when it discovers it made a poor decision? What is the response when a project or ministry becomes ineffective or outright fails?

The logical response to situations like these, where a change is needed, seems self-evident at first glance: Do something different.

However, if you've been around congregations very long, you know that logic does not always drive decision making. A congregation and its leaders have difficulty sometimes in recognizing a truth that might seem self-evident to an outsider.

The result is that instead of changing direction, correcting a bad decision or trying a new course of action, we double-down on what we were already doing that was either wrong or ineffective. Our actions reflect an assumption that if we just hang in there, just try harder, just devote more resources to it, things will improve.

Do they? Based on my experience, not often.

Why do we refuse to let go of a bad decision or a failed approach to a ministry? Why can't we try something different instead?

This is actually a well-documented phenomenon both inside congregations and in the world at large. There is even a specific term for this in psychological literature. It's called "escalation of commitment (EOC)."

According to the *Dictionary of Psychology* (1999), EOC is "a tendency to become increasingly committed to bad decisions even as losses associated with them increase, exemplified by the behavior of some compulsive gamblers."

Most congregations would not want to share characteristics with compulsive gamblers, but in fact we do. In our unwillingness to let go, change course, admit we were wrong or try something new, we are acting like an addict.

It is interesting to note that Jesus did not exemplify this kind of addictive, self-defeating behavior. When things didn't work out as he hoped for in one town or village, he moved on to another. He even tried to teach the principle of "letting go" to his disciples.

In Mark's gospel Jesus said, "And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them" (6:11). Matthew and Luke portray Jesus teaching the same principle. According to Jesus, escalation of commitment is not always the answer when things don't go as planned. Sometimes (often?) we need to simply let go and move on to something else.

Most congregations seem to have latched on to other attitudes taught by Jesus or by Paul. When outsiders don't respond positively to our attempts to minister or evangelize, we excuse it as the natural consequence of the world "hating us" as Jesus mentioned in Luke 21:17 and other places.

When trying to decide whether or not to make a change and try something different, we often discern the right course of action to be patience, along with believing and hoping for the best. This is the essence of love as Paul described it in 1 Corinthians 13: "Love is patient, love is kind ... it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs ... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."

However, it is not that a leader or a congregation must adopt a "shake the dust off your feet" approach or a "love is patient, love is kind" approach. Clearly there are times and places where both courses of action might be appropriate.

The challenge is in knowing when to adopt which attitude.

If a congregation has just begun a new ministry, a new way of worshipping, a

different approach to Christian education, etc., then such fundamental shifts in a congregation will take time (and patience) in order to know whether they are good changes or not.

Similarly, if a congregation has tried to institute a change but really only did it half-heartedly or with inadequate resources to start with, then patience and perseverance are needed to know if the changes are good.

On the other hand, if a program, ministry, decision, etc., has been fully implemented, resourced and attempted for a significant amount of time but has still not produced good results, then it may be time for the congregation to "shake the dust off its feet" and move on to something new.

In my experience the biggest danger for most congregations is not a lack of patience or perseverance but escalation of commitment to the wrong choices. Leaders have to be as objective as possible in making good decisions.

They have to admit that there are times when the only thing left to do is to let go and let the Spirit lead the congregation to something fresh and new. **BT**

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



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words

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Praying by the book — or not

In his 1646 work, *The Dippers Dipt*, Anglican clergyman Daniel Featley published a scathing attack on the “Dippers” rampant in England. “Dipper” was an early name for Baptists and their practice of immersion baptism.

Featley denounced such baptismal rites, including their implicit promiscuity since “both sexes enter into the River and are dipt ... with a kind of spell containing ... their erroneous tenets.” Other objections included the group’s refusal to baptize infants, their failure to distinguish appropriate ecclesiastical boundaries between clergy and laity, and their hesitancy to take oaths or hold public office.

Featley deplored “Dipper” insistence “that there ought to be no set form of Liturgy or prayer by the Book, but only by the Spirit.”

A repudiation of prayer “by the Book” meant that Baptist conversations with God — public or private — did not conform to the rubrics of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as mandated by the Act of Uniformity, a law approved by Parliament in 1559.

Ministers who refused to conform to the Prayer Book were liable to fines and sentences of six months in jail for the first offense. A second offense brought a year’s imprisonment; a third required a life sentence.

Since dissenting “Dippers” refused to abandon their non-conformist practices, they faced continued harassment from the church/state establishment. Religious dissenters could neither pray nor participate in governmentally sanctioned events because their actions did not conform to the political/religious regulations of the day. Their prayers and practices were not “by the Book.”

In 21st century America, First Amendment-mandated religious liberty may be the order of the day, but praying by or outside “the book” can still create controversy. Such was the case when Louie Giglio, pastor of Atlanta’s Passion City Church and leader of a movement to eliminate sex trafficking, declined an invitation to offer the benediction at President Obama’s second

inauguration.

Giglio was found wanting for a 1990s sermon critiquing what he called the homosexual “agenda” in America. Concerns over those remarks and the planners’ lack of proper “vetting” led many to question the inaugural committee’s invitation. In his letter of withdrawal, Giglio acknowledged that while he may at times differ with Obama, “I will continue to pray regularly for the president, and urge the nation to do so.”

Giglio is not the first preacher to experience controversy related to sermon comments and governmental sensitivities. During the 2008 presidential campaign candidate Barak Obama was forced to distance himself



from his longtime pastor, Jeremiah Wright, when that preacher’s homiletical critiques of America were revealed. Neither Giglio nor Wright, clergymen occupying either end of the political spectrum, seemed acceptable for governmental-occasioned prayer.

In pluralistic America, multitudes of clergy from varying faiths have probably prayed or preached outside the boundaries of “the book,” disappointing or offending local or national coalitions, left, right or center. Prayer can be at once comforting, inspiring and communal, as well as divisive, disturbing and abrasive.

The invocation at this year’s inauguration was given by Myrlie Evers-Williams, a civil-rights activist whose husband Medgar Evers was murdered in 1963 as a result of his fight against segregation. Yet her presence was a profound reminder of the prophetic power of prayer in the Jim Crow South half a century ago.

The prayer vigils that typified many civil rights demonstrations often generated brutal attacks, actions that galvanized the nation. Although her inaugural prayer was sensitive and inclusive, in an earlier segregated

America neither she nor her martyred spouse prayed “by the book.”

These events provoke a very personal response, informed perhaps by the dissenting side of the Baptist tradition. Surely it is time to rethink the way state co-opts religion for prayer at public occasions — local, state and national.

First, when the government feels it necessary to “vet” my theology before inviting me to pray at a state-sponsored event, I don’t need to be praying there in the first place. Whether clergy are liberal or conservative, mainline or evangelical, right or wrong, the government does not need an implicit Act of Uniformity to determine who should pray at its public proceedings.

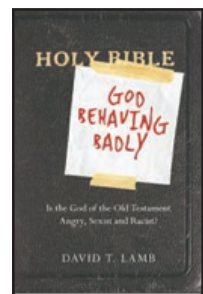
Second, in religiously pluralistic America, prayers at government happenings can no longer be representative enough to reflect all the traditions present throughout the culture. There are simply too many diverse religious communions to accommodate every voice. As a Baptist, I cannot in good conscience participate in such an implicit religious privilege at the expense of other voices, so I won’t pray if invited by the state.

Third, if public prayer is necessary, might it involve a moment of silence during which individuals can pray as their traditions suggest, or choose not to pray at all? Then only God does the vetting.

Finally, these events may compel religious communions to re-examine their own participation in governmental prayer-moments, not because prayer is unimportant, but because it is far too important to be trivialized by political or media establishments.

These ideas are no doubt a minority opinion. Since at least 1646, we “Dippers” have never had much church/state credibility. **BT**

—Bill Leonard is the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Baptist Studies at Wake Forest University Divinity School. This column is distributed by Associated Baptist Press.



Yes and No

Author answers questions about *God Behaving Badly*

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Evangelical theologian David Lamb tackles some of the Bible’s most troubling passages in his book, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?*

His answer: yes and no.

The book has received mixed reviews in the Christian blogosphere, but Lamb was well received when he recently spoke at a Missouri church. Religion News Service asked Lamb, an Old Testament scholar at Biblical Seminary in Hatfield, Pa., about how believers’ long-held views of a wrathful Old Testament God might waver with his findings.

Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: You write about how God “strikes, smites, slays and slaughters.” Why is it important to understand why God is angry?

A: I think the biggest thing that God gets angry about is injustice: when poor people are being oppressed, when widows are not being cared for, when orphans are not being provided for. And those are really good things to get angry about.

And let’s face it: When people are angry, it gets our attention.

Q: You write that while God “may seem sexist, [God] is affirming of women.” What is one example to sum it all up?

A: The very first thing we learn in the Bible is that women are divine — they are God-like. Now, men are too, but I think most men think this already.

The man and the woman, when God creates them in Genesis 1, they are made in his image. And there’s nothing more positive you could say.



David Lamb is an associate professor of Old Testament at Biblical Seminary in Pennsylvania. He is the author of the 2011 book *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist and Racist?* RNS photo by Kellie Kontraba/Columbia Faith and Values

Q: You also write that while God “may seem racist, he is hospitable.” What do you think is key for people to know about cultural context in trying to understand this?

A: We need to go to Genesis 12, where we encounter God first talking to Abraham. He is calling the father of the nations. He wants to bless them, but he wants to bless them to be a blessing to all nations.

God gets angry when foreigners are not being cared for. God wants his people to be concerned about people that are different from them.

Q: You talk about the distinction some people make between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. How do you unify the tension between the two?

A: If one looks at texts in the Old Testament where God seems to be mean or violent, and people look at texts in the New Testament where Jesus is compassionate and caring for people and healing people, you can see kind of a dichotomy.

I see God in both testaments doing the

same things. Jesus bases his teaching, as does Paul, on the teachings of the Old Testament. And the things that Jesus does in the New Testament — healing people, forgiving people, caring for people — we see God in the Old Testament doing the same things.

Q: You give several examples of negative depictions of God. What are some of the biggest cultural contributions to people’s perceptions of God?

A: The classic I look at is this “Far Side” cartoon where God is at his keyboard, and there’s an innocent-looking guy walking down the street, and God’s got his finger over one key — the “smite” key.

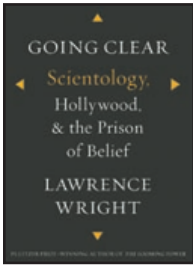
I talk to a lot of college students, and a lot of people read, or are at least familiar with, books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, the so-called New Atheists. So, you’ve got these New Atheists out there writing about some of the most problematic texts in the Bible and the Old Testament, and it shapes culture.

Q: You respond in the book to the New Atheist movement and to atheist writers such as Dawkins and Hitchens. What kind of responses have you received from atheists?

A: I sent an email to Richard Dawkins and got no response, which is perhaps not surprising. I’ve had some great interactions with atheists, and they love to talk about this. Some of them feel very strongly about it, which I think has been fantastic.

A lot of Christians, we do the same thing that Dawkins is doing — Dawkins just focuses on the negative texts, and Christians just focus on the positive texts. And I think Dawkins needs to acknowledge the positive texts in the same way that Christians need to not ignore these negative texts. **BT**

—Kellie Kontraba is the editor of Columbia Faith & Values.



Going Clear
 Scientology, Hollywood,
 & the Prison of Belief
 By Lawrence Wright

By Daniel Burke, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

Going Clear

Renowned journalist throws the book at Scientology

After winning the Pulitzer Prize in 2007 for his exposé of al-Qaida, journalist Lawrence Wright turned his eye toward another secretive and controversial religious movement.

The Church of Scientology boasts a glittering roster of celebrity adherents and landmark real estate. But beneath that surface, Wright says, sits a troubling web of deceit, violence and paranoia.

His new book *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, & the Prison of Belief*, uncovers a church in which the founder lied about his wartime exploits, top executives are regularly abused and children sign billion-year contracts to work for low wages under poor conditions.

The Church of Scientology emphatically denies Wright's charges, calling them "ludicrous" and "unsubstantiated." The church has also dedicated a website to correcting what they see as errors in the book.

Wright spoke recently to Religion News Service. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why did you write this book?

A: In America you can believe anything you want, unlike in a lot of other countries where there's only one religion. So why would people be drawn to Scientology, one of the most esoteric and stigmatized religions?

Q: And what did you find?

A: Oftentimes people who go into Scientology are dealing with a personal problem. If you enter a Church of Scientology building you'll be asked, "What is your ruin?"

That is, what is standing in the way of your financial, spiritual and emotional success?

And they will talk through things with you and offer a menu of courses designed to

help. And many people do feel that they are helped by the courses or therapy.

Q: Can you describe Scientology's secret camps in the U.S.?

A: There are re-education camps in different locations for Sea Org members (Scientology's clergy) who have offended the leader or committed some infraction against the Church of Scientology.

On one of them, Gold Base, there's a place called "the hole": two double-wide trailers married together, where people are sent, often without being told of their crimes.

Q: Why hasn't the government done anything about this?

A: At one point the FBI told my sources, former Scientologists, that they were planning a raid on Gold Base. They were going to open the hole and liberate the people there.

But my sources told the FBI not to bother. The people held in the hole would only tell them that everything was sunlight and seashells there — that they were there for their own good.

Q: Why would someone agree to stay in those camps?

A: Many of them joined as children; some were born into it. Many, if not all, of their friends and family are Scientologists. If you left, they would never talk to you again. They are only paid \$50 a week, so they don't have any income or education to fall back on.

From the very beginning, when you go into Scientology your world narrows down very quickly. You're also taught that your salvation is at stake and if you bring disgrace on Scientology nothing could be worse.

Q: You write that fame is actually a spiritual value for the church. How so?

A: Hubbard set up the Church of Scientology in Hollywood in 1954 for a reason. He understood that celebrity was increasingly a feature of American public life, and celebrities themselves were going to be worshipped as minor deities were in the ancient world.

The idea was: if you could get them, think how many people would follow.

Q: Do you think celebrity members like John Travolta and Tom Cruise know about the abuses perpetuated by church leaders?

A: If they don't, I think it must be willful blindness on their part. It's not as if people in the public don't know, or that you can't find out about these abuses.

But Scientologists are trained to avoid noticing any kind of public criticism, and I think that's especially true of celebrities.

Q: Is Tom Cruise implicated in the church's misdeeds?

A: I think he bears a moral responsibility to look into the abuses. The public sees him as the primary spokesperson for the Church of Scientology. The church has exploited him and rewarded him, and because of his membership, more people have heard about and joined the church.

There are not many avenues for change in the Church of Scientology, and Tom Cruise might be able to affect more change than anyone else.

Q: The church has been a bit more critical, calling your book "error-filled" and "unsubstantiated." How do you respond to that?

A: I spoke to more than 250 people, many of them current or former Scientologists, and some of them were at the top levels of the church. We sent more than 1,000 fact-checking questions to the church. I tried to present the church's perspective as much as possible. **BT**

Compassionate dying?

Three ethicists respond to hard questions about tough end-of-life decisions

Euthanasia (from the Greek, meaning “good death”) shows up on most lists of contemporary ethical issues. But it doesn’t usually top more-heated discussions currently about moral concerns related to sexuality, poverty, war or the environment.

However, advances in medical technologies and other factors resulting in longer life spans are leading those who may not have considered the issue in the past to do so — in a personal way. Those who filter life’s challenges and choices

through a Christian commitment are asking how such decisions fit within the context of their faith.

Recently a reader sent an affirming note about the varied content found in *Baptists Today*, and added: “Are we ready yet to explore ways to deal with the idea of ‘choosing death with dignity?’ ... As we become a nation of many ‘elders,’ it may be time for some thoughts about the subject.”

Some speak of this controversial topic in other terms such as mercy killing, assisted suicide or compassionate dying.

Questions were posed to three ethicists:



Bill Tillman retired from Logsdon Seminary at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, Texas, where he was T.B. Maston Professor of Christian Ethics. He now directs theological education for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.



Paul Simmons is a long-time Baptist ethicist who now teaches at the University of Louisville. His book, *Faith and Health: Religion, Science and Public Policy* (Mercer University Press, 2008) addresses end-of-life issues.



Cameron Jorgenson is assistant professor of Christian theology and ethics at Campbell University Divinity School in Buies Creek, N.C. While completing a Ph.D. at Baylor University, he co-taught a course on Christian spirituality and health care.

Q: Is this an issue you feel Christians should be considering? If so, why?

Tillman: The legal status is pretty clear for most of the country. The Supreme Court ruled on such a case several years ago and came out with basically a states’ rights position... [Euthanasia is illegal nationally, although physician-aided dying is legal in Washington, Oregon and Montana.]

That the question does come up — and it did during my days in the classroom and being in churches — tells me there is certainly interest and the need to do some further conversation. Many ministers run into

the need of providing pastoral counsel to a parishioner, so they need to have thought through some of this.

There has been an essential cloud put over all this, though. It is a really legalistic one that suicide is never right and that one can’t ask for forgiveness for such an act. The assumption is: Leave well enough alone and don’t do it!

Simmons: Yes, I believe strongly that it is an issue we need to address and to do so sympathetically. With Baby Boomers about to make their impact on American demographics, the issue of how older and/or impaired people will deal with their impending death

will affect a wide range of people.

Already, the Katrina tragedy in New Orleans confronted caring people with the ethical challenge of how to deal with those trapped and unable to escape the rising waters in which they would drown.

Almost every day carries a story in the news about a married partner who compassionately killed a lifelong partner suffering from a terrible dementia or slowly dying from an incurable but painful disease.

I have two chapters in my most recent book, *Faith and Health: Religion, Science and Public Policy*, that address this issue. (Actually, there

are other sections of the book that are also relevant to this topic, such as “Aging as an Assault on Human Dignity.”)

I leave open the question of the legal vulnerability of those who assist another person to die, since the variables at stake are so many that it seems to me impossible to make a general rule like “no physician who assists a person to die” should be prosecuted. That would assume we could trust the motives in every case to be clean and above reproach.

The law would have the role of education (killing is wrong), while leaving open the question of mitigating circumstances that would excuse the doctor or loved one who acted openly and without malice to relieve another who had requested such assistance and who was in unbearable pain or suffering from incurable disease or injury.

Sigmund Freud was euthanized (and I think mercifully so) and Saul, after suffering debilitating wounds in battle, was apparently euthanized at his request by his armor bearer. (Or, did Saul fall on his own sword in an act of suicide?) The story has relevance to our debate, though yields no definitive conclusion.

Jorgenson: Recently I saw a story that lit up social media. It told about a pair of deaf identical twins in Belgium who chose euthanasia when they were diagnosed with a condition that would inevitably render them blind.

According to the report from Reuters, it was the thought of being separated from one another that led the twins to choose death. Although I routinely engage the topic of physician-assisted suicide in my introductory Christian ethics course, the story of these twins and the choice they made in the face of their suffering caused me to look again at the question of physician-assisted suicide.

Q: Do you see a clear “Christian position” on this issue, or is it more complex?

Tillman: There really isn’t “a” Christian decision on this one, just like about everything else in life! I have found this “quality of life” and “quantity of life” discussion has been pretty beneficial, though.

We may well move along the continuum depending on where we are in life. All of this requires some choice making out of the character we bring to the table. And, there are plenty of Scripture passages talking about character. The fruit of the Spirit would be a good one to start with.

“The issue is among us, and enlightened, thoughtful discussion is absent for the most part.” —PAUL SIMMONS

Simmons: As to a clear “Christian position” on this issue, the answer must be “yes.” But that is not in the form of an absolute or dogmatic rule. The answer is that we must give account to God, guided by a clear and informed conscience and dedicated to the well being of others as we are to our own well being.

If one can imagine that one would want a certain response from a loved one or compassionate physician in our dying, then that impulse formulated into a guiding principle would be true for every Christian.

Jorgenson: I just had an engaging conversation with a brilliant roomful of students exploring early Christian theology.

One of the texts under consideration was the Didache, an important summary of early Christian ethics and worship written in the late first century, around the same time as the Gospel of John. The document begins by saying, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death; but a great difference between the two ways.”

From there the Didache goes on to explore the Ten Commandments as a baseline of Christian morality, but the common thread woven throughout is the command to pursue, preserve and promote life.

To me, that summarizes the Christian position on the issue. In the Christian DNA there is a conviction that life is sacred — which is to say, it is a good gift of God — and it is not to be thrown away.

Having said that, the slogan “choose life” doesn’t answer some of the complexities of the euthanasia debate. For instance:

There is some ambiguity about what constitutes euthanasia. What has been erroneously called “passive euthanasia” is not euthanasia at all.

Refusing “heroic medicine” — like jumpstarting the failing heart of a 93-year-old whose body is shutting down, or sustaining life by way of an array of machines when the body is trying to let go — should not be confused with offering a lethal injection to a patient with a terminal diagnosis.

The former rejects (sometimes brutal) attempts to resist death at all costs; the latter chooses to willfully end a life. A clear distinction should be made. (See Glen Stassen and David Gushee’s *Kingdom Ethics*, pp. 245-56).

Another complexity that is not obvious when the sanctity of life is the driving concern: how to navigate the principle of “double effect” — especially when engaging in palliative care. For example, a well-known side effect of morphine is a depression of respiration rates and other vital signs — things that can hasten death.

For those committed to “choosing life,” the fine line between pain management and causing death can be difficult to discern.

Q: What are the theological/ethical contexts for this discussion?

Tillman: Because of the dynamic of not only people living longer but being able to live longer because of technologies we have now inevitably runs into the matter of assisted suicide.

It has taken awhile for the DNR — “Do not resuscitate” — principle to get into place, as well as advanced directives. But you probably can’t have surgery anywhere now unless you have signed off on the DNR or not, as well as have an advanced directive on file with the hospital.

The DNR is really a passive form of euthanasia, the term that probably should be used instead of suicide. Things [needed to sustain life] are withheld from the patient, with prior patient approval, when the judgment can be made there is not any recovery possible. And, here the continuum of quality of life and quantity of life has to come into the conversation.

You and I probably could give a statement regarding when our sense of quality of life has been diminished so much that we should just be allowed to die. Too few people have worked through that, though.

I think this conversation is one that pastors and others should be having with their people. We are quick to jump on the “If you were to die tonight...” bandwagon, but have little discussion with people about their dying, their mortality.

Some of these “helping people die” decisions would not be necessary if the parties had talked through some of the matters. By majoring on living as long as we can, we don’t have enough conversations about how well we are living, too.

Simmons: The relevant ethical considerations are found in several areas:

(1) Medical data — how severe the wound, what the prospects for cure or treatment that would provide an acceptable life?

(2) Ethical principles — respect for the person and commitment to preserving life unless there are extreme countervailing requirements (such as mercy toward a person who begs to be shot when trapped and is burning to death; recall the scene in *The Last of the Mohicans*?)

(3) Theological principles — such as life as the gift of God and ordinarily to be preserved but always to be respected; the value of life as a secondary, but not absolute value; only God is of absolute value

(4) Stewardship — acting rightly with the powers entrusted to us

(5) Contextual factors — such as availability of assistance, capacity for changing or managing human situations, threats to one's own life, etc.

“Whatever the approach, we need to engage these issues in a congregational context. It is important that we find ways to resist cultural currents that make it difficult to ‘think Christianly.’”

—CAMERON JORGENSON

These are complex questions with no obvious or absolute resolutions, except those of the sovereign love of God and the absolute human obligation to love as we would be loved.

Jorgenson: First, the cultural context: There are many reasons why euthanasia and assisted suicide are on the rise (the Reuters article mentioned that there have been more requests for euthanasia every year since it was legalized).

As you mention, developments in medicine have enabled those with access to first-rate health care to fend off death much longer than ever before. This inevitably raises questions about how we make decisions about these ultimate issues.

But there is more at work here than medical advances. There are also cultural shifts that cannot be overlooked. As the example with the twins indicates, assisted suicide is not only an issue that is growing out of the new dilemma of people living longer lives; it also has to do with a shift in perception about what type of life is worth living.

This perception of the meaning and significance of life is where the theological/ethical contexts become especially important.

Now, the theological context: Why does life — especially human life — matter so greatly? Because we are created in the image of God.

If we lose sight of our significance as creatures made to be God's image bearers, and all we can see is the immediacy of our own pain and suffering, then we cannot possibly see what is at stake with taking a human life — even a human life experiencing suffering.

The Apostle Paul says that “these three remain: faith, hope, and love.” These three virtues, tied so closely to the character and nature of God and God's work in the world, are the highest goods for human life.

Suicide, however, is the ultimate expression of despair. It is a rejection of these good things. Of course, there are situations so full of pain and suffering that one can easily see the allure of ending it all.

One can also see why a compassionate Christian would want to relieve the suffering of another. However, if we are to avoid a tragically misguided compassion, we must ask: Is euthanasia an expression of faith, hope or love? Is it consistent with faithful discipleship of Christ?

An often-overlooked dimension of the issue is the theological significance of suffering. It is a common mistake: we either tend to rush to the resurrection and skip over the unpleasantness of the crucifixion, or we fixate on the crucifixion but limit the significance of Christ's sufferings to a “payment for sins.”

In either case we miss the implications of the startling reality that the Son of God suffered for our sake. He entered into the human experience fully, enduring its agony, faithfully, to the end. In doing so, Jesus gave new significance to our trials as well.

All of this leads me to two conclusions: 1) because Christ suffered with us, we never suffer alone; and 2) Jesus shows us how to die well.

And the second point raises a significant

pastoral question: How do we learn how to face suffering and death well? What must we do to meet our end faithfully?

That is an exciting challenge of spiritual formation that ministers should contemplate.

Q: How would you recommend that Christians explore this issue? Where are the traps? What would allow for constructive conversations, good biblical interpretation and helpful exploration?

Tillman: One way for a congregation to work on this is to have a discussion involving the pastor, a physician and a funeral director. Probably some persons from the congregation who have gone through this struggle — of “Do I help or not help my spouse, friend or other family member die?” — would be good inclusions on a panel.

The discussion could be one session or more than one. I guarantee people would come to hear and contribute. Once they get permission to talk about life-and-death issues, they will chime in.

Simmons: Discussions among Christians should proceed with a clear knowledge of Scripture and commitment not to settle thorny issues with a single verse which would likely be taken out of context.

People whose stories include tragic instances in their own experience with loved ones or animals that were euthanized would be helpful, though not definitive. Thoughtful, deliberative consideration of written materials by respected ethicists, physicians, friends, etc. should also be woven into the tapestry.

Medical doctors like Quill, Nuland, Kevorkian should be respectfully studied; and ethicists who broach the subject on Christian grounds should be honestly and openly studied. Biblical passages such as that of Saul and Paul, who in Philippians 1 speaks of “which option I will choose,” should allow every member to express a point of view.

The traps are many. It will be difficult to bracket off the strong emotions expressed in the current social debates. Choosing a text will be all-important — perhaps more than one to get different interpretations. It will require a skillful leader to avoid the major traps of intolerance and belligerence toward those who disagree.

The discussion should be done. The issue is among us, and enlightened, thoughtful discussion is absent for the most part.

Jorgenson: Churches need to address this issue directly. Address it from the pulpit. Offer a class based on a resource like *Christian Reflection* — a publication from Baylor University’s Center for Christian Ethics that includes small-group discussion tools.

Whatever the approach, we need to engage these issues in a congregational context. It is important that we find ways to resist cultural currents that make it difficult to “think Christianly.”

We live in a world that tends to assign value to life on the basis of our beauty, our earning power or our productivity. We also live in times when even short-term suffering seems unacceptable and unbearable.

These competing values threaten to dislodge important aspects of the “good news” that:

Every human being is a beloved creature made in the image of God.

God, who is love, responded to our suffering by entering fully into our situation.

Jesus conquered suffering, death, and the estrangement between God and humanity through the resurrection, a reality that will one day be ours when all things are made new and every tear is wiped from our eyes.

In the meantime we are called to persevere faithfully, come what may.

Biblical themes to explore:

Genesis — We should look closely at the vision we are given of God’s intent for humanity, especially the statement that we are created in the image of God (1:26-27). We should also note the repeated theme of life flourishing throughout Genesis, especially as it is contrasted with death.

1 Samuel 31 and 2 Samuel 1 — Here we see the puzzling account of Saul’s death. In 1 Samuel 31 we see the wounded Saul ask his armor bearer to kill him lest he fall into the hands of the Philistines. In 2 Samuel 1 we see the rest of the story: evidently Saul’s attempt at suicide was incomplete, and he asked an Amalekite man to finish the job. He did as he was told, and then he reported the incident to David. In a surprising turn, David holds the Amalekite responsible for Saul’s death. Granted, this is an odd verse to attempt to apply to modern situations, but we do see a fascinating moral judgment:

“By majoring on living as long as we can, we don’t have enough conversations about how well we are living, too.”

—BILL TILLMAN

David held the Amalekite accountable for Saul’s death in this “mercy killing.”

John — All throughout John’s gospel, life is a characteristic theme of the mission of God and the identity of the Messiah. Clearest of these is Jesus’ proclamation about abundant life in John 10:10.

James 1:2-4 — James starts his reflections on Christian wisdom with a call to perseverance. Surely this has some importance for a Christian picture of fortitude in the face of suffering.

Gospels — All of the accounts of the crucifixion offer a window into the faithful sufferings of Christ.

Traps — Sometimes in our encounters with those who suffer we act as though our objective is to help people feel better about themselves and their choices, whatever those choices might be. Even though this approach is driven by compassion, it is misguided.

After all, it is neither compassionate nor pastoral to help a person self-destruct. Our job is to be the hope of Christ for people who’ve run out of hope.

Constructive conversations — Lately I’ve been thinking about big societal questions like assisted suicide through the lens of the virtues.

I’ve wondered how we might think differently about these issues if we ask questions like: How should a follower of Christ handle suffering or adversity? Who do I need to become to endure the challenges that I know await me? How do I get there?

There’s also a communal dimension: What can churches do to help believers grow and persevere? How can we stand with one another in trying times? Reframing the issues in terms of virtue can help us avoid the unproductive, politicized conversations that often preoccupy us. **BT**



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Africa rises, China falls on Christian persecution list

By Lauren Markoe

Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — The persecution of Christians “vastly rose” in 2012 as radical Islamists consolidated power in Africa, according to Open Doors, a Christian missionary organization that publishes an annual list of offending nations.

Increasing threats to African Christians can be seen in focused attacks, such as the killings of Christians in Nigerian churches by the radical Muslim group Boko Haram, but also in the greater prevalence of radical Muslims in government, according to the California-based Open Doors.

In Mali, for example, which made the biggest leap on the “World Watch List,” from unranked in 2011 to No. 7 in 2012, a coup in the north brought fundamentalist Muslims to power.

“The situation in the north used to be a bit tense, but Christians and even missionaries could be active,” said Open Doors spokesman Jerry Dykstra.

Now, he said, Christians there are in grave danger.

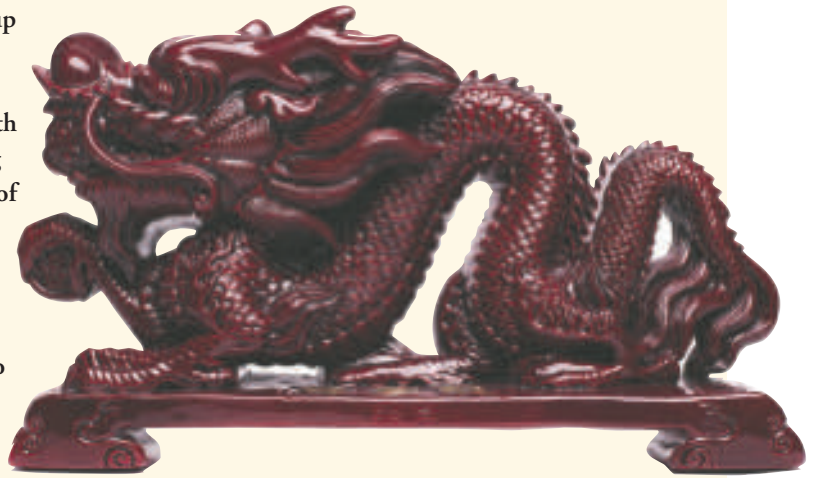
North Korea topped Open Doors’ list for the 11th year in a row, and was followed by Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Iraq

and Somalia. The group estimates that as many as 70,000 Christians are imprisoned in North Korea simply for being Christian, and the act of carrying a Bible can result in execution.

In neighboring China, the picture for Christians continues to improve, as that country slid from No. 21 in 2011 to No. 37 in 2012 — a stark difference from its Top 10 ranking five years ago.

More than 100 Chinese Christians still languish in prison, and the government still keeps close tabs on church officials, but “house searches, and the confiscation of Bibles and Christian books no longer occur on a large scale,” according to Open Doors.

Syria, now in the throes of a bloody revolution, became a country of particular concern for the group, which pegged it at No. 11 in 2012 and No. 36 the previous year, the report’s second-biggest jump. Under President Bashar al-Assad, who is now waging a ruthless campaign against



Syrian rebels, “Christians were allowed the freedom to worship but not evangelize,” according to Open Doors.

Ron Boyd-McMillan, chief strategy officer for the organization, said Syrian Christians have been hit with a “double whammy,” in that they are under pressure from rebels fighting against the regime and from radical jihadists who have entered Syria with an anti-Christian agenda.

“The good news in Syria is those Christians who are left behind are showing a great unity among different denominations,” Boyd-McMillan said. “The suffering has drawn them together.” **BT**

Fewer Americans view homosexuality as a sin

By David Gibson

Religion News Service

Americans’ acceptance of gays and lesbians is continuing to grow, with a new poll showing that just over a third of Americans view homosexuality as a sin, down from 44 percent a year earlier.

These findings come from LifeWay Research, formed by LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention.

“The culture is clearly shifting on homosexuality and this creates a whole new issue: How will America deal with a minority view, strongly held by evangelicals, Catholics, Mormons, Muslims, and so many others?” said Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research.

“The culture is clearly shifting on homosexuality, and this creates a whole new issue.”

Stetzer said that President Obama’s own shift in embracing same-sex marriage and other gay rights in the past year may have played a role in the change in public opinion.

“The president’s evolution on homosexuality probably impacted the evolution of cultural values — there is a real and substantive shift, surprisingly large for a one-year time frame — though this was hardly a normal year on this issue,” Stetzer said.

LifeWay’s survey last November found 37 percent said they believe homosexual

behavior is a sin, down from 44 percent in September 2011.

The percentage of Americans who do not believe homosexuality is a sin remained nearly the same, at 43 percent in September 2011 and 45 percent in November 2012. There was an increase in the percentage of those who said they were unsure of what they believe.

Not surprisingly, the new LifeWay survey found that those who identify as “born-again, evangelical, or fundamentalist Christian” are the most likely to say that homosexual behavior is a sin (73 percent). Conversely, those who never attend religious services are the most likely to say they do not believe homosexual behavior is a sin (71 percent).

The survey of nearly 1,200 adults has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.9 percent. **BT**

Different faith, same goals

Virtual public schools draw interest of religious families

Worried about exposure to foul language, immodest dress, peer pressure, and other inappropriate behavior, Susan Brown didn't want her two daughters attending public schools — even though she's a substitute teacher in a public school in Minnesota.

Brown initially home-schooled her daughters until a friend told her about the Minnesota Virtual Academy, an online public school that is fully accredited. She liked the curriculum, and as a single mom relying on substitute teaching income, she preferred how the school provided the supplies instead of having to buy supplies herself as a home-school parent.

"You can't give your kids an effective moral and religious upbringing if you only see them a couple of hours a day," said Brown, a Catholic whose daughters, now in the 10th and 12th grade, started virtual school in the second and fourth grade. "When you're at home with them, you can incorporate your beliefs into the day."

Since Florida became the first state to try them in 1996, virtual public schools have enjoyed dramatic growth, with at least some of it coming from religious families.

In the 2011-2012 school year, 275,000 students were enrolled in online K-12 programs, up from 50,000 a decade ago, according to "Keeping Pace with Online and Blended Learning: A Guide to Policy and Practice 2012," a report from the Colorado-based Evergreen Education Group. Currently, 32 states and the District of Columbia offer virtual public schools.

A growing number of private religious schools are also seeking religious course developers to develop virtual courses for them.

"There's a lot of interest about online learning in the faith community," said Matthew Wicks, chief operating officer for the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

Brown said she had considered a Catholic virtual school for her daughters, but thought the academics were not as strong as at the Minnesota Virtual Academy.

Virtual schools are different than home

schooling in several ways. They are part of the public school system, employ state-certified teachers, administer state assessment tests, and follow standardized curriculums. There are also report cards and transcripts.

In a typical week, students spend about 20 to 25 hours on textbook reading and class work, and another five to 10 hours per week attending online classes with a teacher and fellow students.

The largest virtual school operator is K12 in Herndon, Va., followed by Baltimore-based Connections Education, which was recently acquired by Pearson, the British textbook publisher. The rest of the industry consists of smaller operators and some nonprofit virtual schools.

These schools generally cater to students who have had problems succeeding in traditional school environments, but also attract students who need extra flexibility to devote several hours a day to athletics, music, art or other pursuits. That flexibility also attracts families of faith who want their children to be able to attend daytime prayer services or be involved with other religious activities.

Jomana Al-Hinti of Toledo, Ohio, whose daughter Reema is a second grader in the Ohio Virtual Academy, gives her daughter daily Arabic lessons and twice-weekly Quran lessons that would be much harder to do if she attended a regular school.

"Education is not just math and reading, but teaching kids to grow as individuals, and teaching them about their faith," said Al-Hinti, 39. "I can teach her Islam the way that it should be taught."

Jennifer Bell, a Mormon mother of four in Kuna, Idaho, said: "We liked the lifestyle that it brought to our family. We had so

much more time to spend with them, and to instill our values in them."

While virtual school providers develop secular curriculums, religious parents like that they can interject their own religious views into the courses. When her daughters' history course came to the Protestant Reformation, Brown said she gave the lesson a "Catholic slant."

"I wasn't bashing Martin Luther, but just saying, this is how we do it, and this is how they do it, and why," Brown said.

On chapters involving evolution, some religious parents stress that evolution is a theory, and also raise creationism.

Parents of faith also like virtual public schools because they don't have to worry about their children hearing foul language or seeing a racy music video on a classmate's iPod.

"That's one of the things we appreciate — our daughters are not exposed to things we try to keep them away from," said Debbie Slawinski, a Jehovah's Witness from Buford, Ga., whose two girls are in kindergarten and third grade.

"You don't know what they'll be exposed to when they're so little. I feel like they need a stronger foundation in their values before they're thrown into the world. I want them to be prepared and to have a sense of themselves so they know how to make good decisions when the time comes," said Bell.

Parents of virtual school students also say they have bonded with other virtual school parents, fostering interfaith relationships.

"Every meeting we talk to parents who feel the same way we do," Slawinski said. "They're of a different religion, but their goals are the same." **BT**

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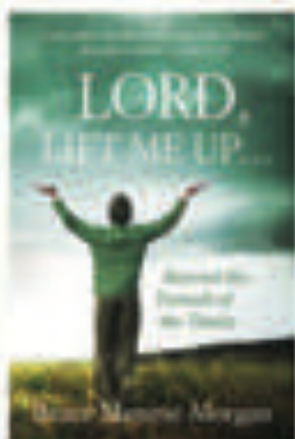
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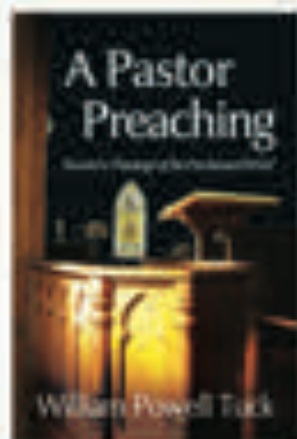
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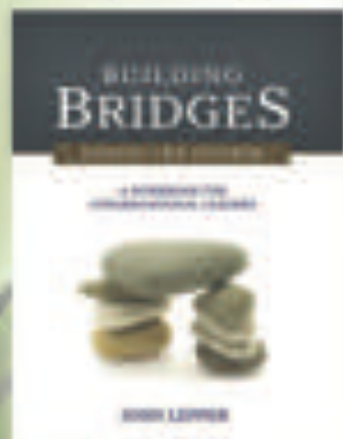
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Scattered, smothered and covered 24/7

If you got to take Jesus to lunch, where would you go? WWJD? Where would Jesus dine? If you went to a fancy restaurant, Jesus might think you were showing off. A hamburger place could indicate a lack of appreciation. You should take Jesus to Waffle House. Waffle House does good things for your soul.

Everybody is welcome — young and old, good and bad, upper crust and bottom dweller. Waffle Houses are filled with drunks, drag queens, police officers, truckers, high school students who like calling it “Wa-Ho,” college students studying in the middle of the night — “Keep the coffee coming” — and hipsters tweeting #hashbrowns. They don’t sell beer, so my mother likes it. It’s open on holidays when everything else is closed. Do they even have locks on the doors?

Waffle House feels like Waffle Home. Eating there is like eating in the kitchen — nothing pretentious. The vinyl booths are comfy and well-worn. The laminated menus are as colorful as the characters who keep the juke box playing.

In the movie *Tin Cup*, Kevin Costner’s Roy McAvoy says, “I’m a Waffle House guy, you gotta stay in touch with that.” His caddy Romeo adds, “Plus he needs his carbohydrates.”

In more than 1,700 locations in 25 states as far north as Ohio and as far west as Arizona, people tell their stories of despair and hope. They laugh at Waffle House more than at other restaurants. Busy folks come to slow down. Weary people come to be renewed. Couples fall in love at Waffle House, but are often too shy to say so. Not a lot of judgment goes on at Waffle House.

Waffle House serves hearty, authentic, real food. If you ask for Quiche Lorraine, the waitress will laugh. No crêpes, no croissants,



Brett Younger pictured with Waffle House waitress Aneeja. Photo by Loyd Allen.

no French pastries, no Parisian Eggs Benedict, no espresso, no yogurt parfait, no tofu, no sushi. Instead of reduced-fat fare, Waffle House serves butter, powdered sugar and chocolate chips. Instead of flavor-gutted lite, they offer tasty, scrumptious and delectable. Filling a waffle’s indentations with maple syrup is the prelude to the music of delicious goodness.

All the food is comfort food. Hash brown potatoes are more than a side dish. They come “scattered” (spread on the grill), “smothered” (with sautéed onions), “covered” (with melted cheese), “chunked” (with diced ham), “diced” (with grilled tomatoes), “peppered” (with jalapeños), “capped” (with mushrooms), “topped” (with chili) and “all the way” (recommended for only the most courageous).

Jesus spent a lot of time at the Waffle House in Nazareth. Joanna, the waitress, knew how to pour a cup of kindness. She was chemist enough to recognize how much NaCl is just enough, gymnast enough to balance three plates on each arm, psychologist enough to land “Do you want more coffee,

honey?” between topics of conversation, and mathematician enough to figure out when the tip seemed a little on the cheap side.

Simon Peter loved Waffle House because they didn’t serve fish. Martha went when she didn’t want to worry about the dishes. John the Baptist didn’t eat out much, but when he did he went to Waffle House for something tastier than his normal fare.

The Syrophenician woman brought her daughter for the dollar hamburgers. When the widow gave her two mites at the temple, she thought she was giving up her daily sausage biscuit, but Joanna gave it to her at no charge. The first time Bartimaeus came in after he could see, Joanna was afraid he might be disappointed when he saw her for the first time, but Bart broke into a grin and hugged her: “You’re even more beautiful than I imagined.”

Nicodemus liked to go late at night. When Lazarus was brought back to life he said, “Four days without Waffle House is too long. Imagine how much better it would have been for the rich fool if instead of building barns he had bought a Waffle House.”

Some ancient manuscripts tell of Jesus saying to the paralytic, “Stand up, take your bed, and go to Waffle House.”

The Pharisees almost asked, “Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners at Waffle House?”

The Sadducees wouldn’t trust a \$4 breakfast, but Jesus did.

Waffle House feels like a church fellowship hall on Wednesday night. The tables are filled with the poor in spirit, those who mourn and the merciful. Like the best churches, Waffle House caters to those who hunger and thirst for goodness. Toast and coffee taste a little like communion. Every supper is, in some ways, the Lord’s Supper. Every shared meal is a foretaste of glory divine, the hors d’oeuvres, and the appetizer for heaven’s banquet. **BT**

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

Buzzards and Baptists

By Tony W. Cartledge

Having spent 40 years on the “professional” side of the Baptist world as pastor, journalist and professor, I’ve seen my share of “Buzzard Baptists” — the sort of folks who seem to enjoy dragging up things that stink, flocking around, and generally making life miserable for those who are more interested in congregational life and health.

Any church that’s been around long enough to go through a couple of growth cycles and several pastors is likely to have a few vultures on the roll: They hold to the vision of a former golden age — which has probably grown far better with the telling than it ever really was — and prefer to pick over the past than to participate in the present.

Buzzards are generally found inside the church (unless they’ve slipped outside for a smoke). But the good folk at Bethlehem Baptist Church on Gum Branch Road near Jacksonville, N.C., had a different problem.

They weren’t plagued with metaphorical

vultures, but with a whole flock of real buzzards roosting on the roof. The unsightly critters weren’t just messing up the place, but actually chewing on the shingles and causing real damage, according to Jacksonville’s *Daily News*.

To discourage the carrion-lovers, the church got some help from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and obtained an unappealing decoy — a taxidermist-prepared buzzard carcass with an artificial head (since unfeathered real ones don’t last very long). They mounted the carcass on the roof — hanging upside down so it’s obviously post mortem — and voila! The local vulture population wanted nothing to do with it and found other places to hang out — like in trees, where they belong.

I don’t want to suggest that church folk should adorn their sanctuaries with effigies of deceased grouches suspended from the chandelier; that would probably send the entire congregation flying to a friendlier roost.

My experience has been that angry birds need love, too, and the best way to deal with

Selections from recent blogs
at baptiststoday.org



“Baptist buzzards” is to care for them and include them and to honor their picture of the past while steadily encouraging them to join the party of the present.

Even buzzards can sing. It’s true. **BT**

Kaylie’s dad and the rest of us slobs

By John Pierce

In a recent TV commercial the kids in a classroom are unimpressed by Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers’ visit. He just plays football.

“That’s not a job,” one kid says.

When Rodgers mentions being last season’s MVP, another kid quotes his embarrassed teacher saying that trophies are for people with self-esteem issues.

Instead, the students praise the insurance agent who is there — because he provides discounts to their families.

That ad reminded me of a time when my daughter Meredith, now a University of Georgia student, was in

preschool in Atlanta. Fathers were invited to the classroom to talk about their various and fascinating vocations.

One dad was an OB/GYN at nearby Northside Hospital — the “baby factory,” where both of our daughters were born, that each year welcomes enough newborns to populate a small city. He spoke delicately of how he “helps mommies have their babies.”

We all took turns at explaining our work — in hopes of educating these young minds to the variety of skills and functions needed to make the world go ’round and to provide income for food, homes, churches, schools, streets and especially vacations.

Honestly, there were some very impressive vocations

represented. But Kaylie’s dad stole the show.

He worked at the Frito-Lay plant and brought along samples.

For days, even weeks, little Meredith said nothing about her friends’ dads who helped birth babies, investigate crimes, run municipalities or practice law. And her classmates were certainly not impressed that her dad just writes stuff that is printed in papers.

But over and over again we heard: “Kaylie’s daddy makes Cheetos!” “Kaylie’s daddy makes Cheetos!”

Both the recent TV commercial and that earlier experience with my daughter remind me that we are widely gifted — and when those gifts match opportunity, we can discover the value of vocation. And it is wise to be very careful about assuming which tasks are most important.

It takes a lot of people doing a lot of different things to make the world go ’round. **BT**





After Sandy Hook

Churches taking closer look at security measures

The Sandy Hook school massacre terrified parents nationwide and sparked a debate on gun control and school security. But it's also led to some soul searching on church staffs worried about how to best protect worshipers and school children in their buildings.

"For me it's a reminder that these kinds of things can happen anywhere," said Christopher Chapman, pastor of First Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C.

While violence in school is nothing new, incidents such as the Connecticut shootings and the child sexual abuse case at Penn State University call ministers to revisit existing security measures and consider new ones, Chapman said.

But it's not as easy as simply making a decision or writing a check — assuming the funds are available — to add security guards or cameras.

"Often there is very little will to actually do anything," he said. "Once you get away from the emotion, people start hemming and hawing — there's a pretty small window of time to act."

But act they must, church security experts say.

"It's not a subject you can ignore," said J. Phillip Martin, deputy chief executive officer at the National Association of Church Business Administration.

Martin said churches should at least be asking questions about who's at risk in their buildings, and at what times. Some hire armed security guards or encourage members to carry guns. Others use electronic security systems or have ministers and ushers trained to alert authorities and lead evacuations.

"There is no particular model that's right for everyone," Martin said. "The important thing is: Do you know what you will do? Do you have procedures in place, and are you training your first responders?"

That also applies to small congregations and those without schools meeting on their

properties. Those ministries are often lulled into a sense of false security when only the major shootings make headlines, Martin said.

A simple Internet search on church shootings will reveal that this isn't just a big-church problem, Martin said. He cited a 2008 event in which two were killed and several injured in a shooting at a Unitarian church in Knoxville, Tenn.

An October 2012 church shooting in Atlanta, which killed one person, has all but been forgotten — especially in the wake of Sandy Hook.

Martin advises churches not to let tight budgets limit their creativity on this issue. They can ask their insurance companies about existing programs to help with security.

"There are many congregations that still do not take this as seriously as they need to," he said.

Christians often 'too nice'

Another trap congregations fall into is planning for shootings while overlooking more common security issues, said Rolando Lopez, a former FBI agent and Texas-based security consultant who once led televangelist Benny Hinn's security detail.

Church security needs to extend into parking lots and playgrounds, which are common places not only for violence but also kidnappings by strangers and estranged family members, he said.

Background checks on staff and volunteers who work with children can always be beefed up, said Lopez, the founder of Orphan Secure, which provides security assessments for orphanages around the world.

"You need to wait at least six months to let someone volunteer (with children)," he said. "If they are serious about helping kids today, they'll be serious about it in six months."

Congregations also are victims of

burglary, theft and other crimes on campus, like rape.

And while no security systems are perfect, they can often be undermined by Christians who don't want to be rude to visitors, Lopez said.

"That's our biggest problem," he added. "We as Christians are taught to be nice to everybody, and even if I should question this guy, I don't know how."

Balancing ministry, security

Hence churches' constant struggle to find the balance between security and hospitality, Chapman said. At First Baptist in Raleigh, where the building is in constant use by school children and their parents, and also ministries to the homeless and others in need, entry points are limited and accessible only after being buzzed in, Chapman said.

Background checks are routinely conducted as well, and plans for fires and natural disasters also are in place. Sandy Hook has the church discussing how improvements can be made, Chapman added, but "planning for a more difficult scenario doesn't mean it won't happen."

In Asheville, N.C., First Baptist Church is about to install keycards to further lock down areas where school children are present, said David Blackmon, the congregation's coordinating pastor.

"Because everybody's got their eyes open again in a different way because of Sandy Hook, you are going to see vulnerabilities you never saw before and ask if you are doing all that you can," Blackmon said.

But security must be weighed against the church call to ministry in the community, he said.

"We must continue to be an open and caring congregation that reaches out to everyone and realize that makes you somewhat vulnerable," he said. "That's just part of being present in the world and being present with those people who are deeply broken and hurting." **BT**



Above: Annah Awartani (left) and Monica Vaughan, widows who created a close bond in Greensboro, N.C., both wear hijabs during a mission to Jordan. **Left: MEMORY TREE:** (Left to right) Greensboro team leader Steve Pressley, Annah Awartani, Habitat Jordan Global Village coordinator Mohammed Malkawi and local contractor Abu Dirar share in planting an olive tree at a new home in memory of Masoud Awartani.

Joining *the* conversation

Jordan experience leads N.C. church to build homes, interfaith relationships

GHOR AL SAFI, Jordan — The Habitat for Humanity Global Village team from First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C., knew something magical had taken place when Monica Vaughan showed up for dinner wearing a hijab.

It is the common headwear for women in the Middle East, including the Kingdom of Jordan, with the exception of the most westernized parts of major cities.

The team was in no major city, but in the town of Ghor al Safi (“Safi’s valley”), tucked neatly into one corner of the southern basin of the Dead Sea.

Safi is a true Arab backwater, a warm, dusty town with no hotels and no sit-down restaurants. Yet Safi and its immediate vicinity boast what the local sheik estimates to be 25,000 residents.

Safi is a conservative Muslim community, with mosques and minarets adorning every third and fourth city block. All of the women in Safi wear the hijab, and only western women, such as those who come to help the local Jamaya (Muslim social cooperative) build houses, expose their hair.

Another of the women on the 12-person team from North Carolina had arrived already wearing the distinctive head covering. She is Annah Awartani, who owns and operates a restaurant and food business in Greensboro.

Team members first met Annah when she and her late husband Masoud, long-time

friends of the Habitat for Humanity of Greater Greensboro, offered to assist the church’s first team in learning a few Arabic words and expressions.

As of this recent trip in January, teams from First Baptist Church of Greensboro have conducted three Global Village trips to Jordan. As a result, these volunteers have built three small houses with concrete blocks for poor families living in Ghor al Safi.

Using money donated by the congregation through its Christmas Eve offerings, the first mission was dispatched in January 2008.

A second came in March 2010, when the team invited Masoud and Annah to join them. They knew the language, and they could translate.

Masoud and Annah were both chefs, so they could direct the preparation of meals for team members as well while in the work camp. Most importantly, they could interpret Islamic religion and Arab culture for their fellow team members who were American Christians.

Natives of Israel’s West Bank, the Awartanis first met when both attended classes at the University of Jordan in the capital city of Amman. Masoud remembered the very park bench where he proposed to the former Annah Laymoun.

“You are so gorgeous,” he recalled saying, as he looked into her dark eyes.

“Masoud!” she retorted. “You must not speak to me in this way!”

Masoud was full of life, gregarious and outgoing. He was able to talk honestly, openly and meaningfully with anyone. He debated the Israeli-Palestinian issue with our local rabbis, and he once taught a class on Islam to a gathering at First Baptist.

The *Greensboro News & Record* called him “Greensboro’s public face of Islam.”

Every person — Jew, Christian or otherwise — entering his Zaytoon (“olive”) Mediterranean Café received the same familiar greeting: “How are you, my friend?”

Annah, on the other hand, was different: reserved, introverted and traditional.

Their three children grew up in the U.S., and everything about them seems American. But their mother resisted westernization.

Early in her American experience, Annah tried going without the hijab. But a few years later she donned it again, determined to retain a generations-old tradition that meant much to women who had meant much to her.

So Masoud, in his western attire, and Annah in her native dress accompanied the 2010 venture, with plans not only to cook, build and interpret for the team, but also to follow up with a visit to their respective home villages back in the West Bank.

The mission was accomplished, with another four-room house built for another needy Jordanian family. Yet it ended sadly for the Awartanis.

Masoud, whose health had long been



The Greensboro team joins Jordanian workers, local children and homeowner Hager al Ashoosh (bottom center) to celebrate the completion of her new home.

compromised by an apparently successful battle with stomach cancer, fell ill while touring his homeland. About two months after returning to Greensboro, he succumbed to renal failure.

But the Greensboro team had learned much from Masoud while working side-by-side, laying blocks for the walls of that second house in Safi. He would talk openly and honestly about everything — health, politics or religion.

Masoud exemplified the ideal of “inter-faith dialogue.” He would state his own

convictions about the most important truths in life. Then he would listen respectfully as others articulated their own.

As a third trip to Jordan came together, Annah was asked if she would like to accompany the team once again, as a guest. She had only one request: that she might do something or leave something behind in Ghor al Safi that would honor the memory of her husband.

The team quickly agreed and nicknamed the “Habitat Jordan 2013” venture “The Masoud Awartani Memorial.” Before leaving, the team planted a tree in Masoud’s memory.

The team consisted of three single individuals and four married couples. None were skilled builders, but all were ready to learn, to serve, and to grow — and to become well-acquainted with Annah Awartani, with her native culture, and with the authentic humanity of the personalities who inhabit it.

Annah’s roommate for the mission was Monica Vaughan, a lifelong Baptist, recently-elected deacon, and a very traditional person herself.

Also a widow, Monica visited Annah at her restaurant. The two women developed a surprisingly warm friendship. Throughout the mission experience the two of them were inseparable, with Monica serving in the kitchen as Annah’s sous chef.

Then came the evening when the whole team was invited to a Jordanian home for dinner, and Monica appeared in one of Annah’s pretty hijabs.

“It’s comfortable,” she said, “and you don’t have to worry about your hair!”

Monica hadn’t changed her religion. But clearly she had joined an important conversation. **BT**

—Steve Pressley is in his 21st year as associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C. He has planned and led three Habitat Global Village trips to Jordan.

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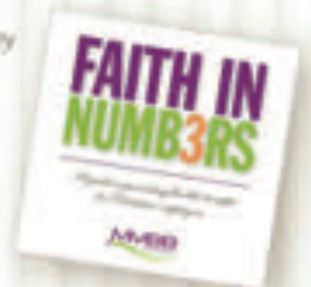
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