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ODAY
NEWS JOURNAL

Q&A with
Tony
Campolo

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APRIL 2012

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Cover photo: By John Pierce. The amphitheater at Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga., site of an annual Easter sunrise service, shows its spring colors.

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quotation remarks



“We both grew up in a Baptist church... It was our private bond.”

—Actor Kevin Costner at the Feb. 18 funeral of Whitney Houston at New Hope Baptist Church in Newark, N.J., sharing how he helped construct the sanctuary where his family worshipped in Paramount, Calif., and at age 6 was caught “knocking back” leftover Communion cups while pretending to be a cowboy (CNN)

“Being Southern Baptist isn’t a problem in Fairhope, Alabama. It’s a proud thing. [But] if we were to say the Yankee Baptist Church here, that would be a real turnoff.”

—Pastor Jerry Henry of First Baptist Church of Fairhope admitting that the Southern Baptist Convention name can be an obstacle in other parts of the country (RNS)

“If we could convert political hyperbole to cash, this debate would have eliminated the national debt.”

—Baptist Standard Editor Marv Knox on strong reactions to an HHS ruling calling for employee insurance plans to cover contraceptive costs

“If we emphasize Jesus’ death, cut out from the whole tapestry of his life, we reduce his crucifixion to perverse ritual rather than a direct consequence of his confrontation with the powers of his day.”

—Greg Carey, professor of New Testament at Lancaster Theological Seminary (Huffington Post)

“Candidates do not have to check their religion at the door of the offices they seek, but they need to understand that they serve people of other faiths and of no faith.”

—Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty

“In the current climate of evangelical higher education, the virtue of courage grows ever more important. Leaders must find ways to educate their colleges’ constituents rather than being obsessed with simply avoiding conflict and, in extreme cases, driving away the more intellectual leaders of their communities. They must balance concern about donor pocketbooks and faithfulness to an institution’s particular heritage with a still deeper faithfulness to the Christian faith itself and its profounder intellectual traditions.”

—Science-and-religion scholar Karl Giberson who conducts a writing workshop at Gordon College in Massachusetts (Huffington Post)

“A healthy, strong and vibrant civil society can only exist where freedom of religion is respected and protected.”

—Baptist minister Suzan Johnson Cook, U.S. Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom, telling Baptist World Alliance leaders that religious freedom creates stability (BWA)

“The only people I had in my place — and you will love this — was my wife’s Bible study group.”

—Jimmy Pierson on a mid-afternoon visit by a Warner Bros. crew preparing to shoot a Clint Eastwood movie scene in his bar (Macon Telegraph)

“Even the animals deserve a day of rest.”

—Director Eddy Aliff of the Virginia Assembly of Independent Baptists, defending the state’s ban on Sunday hunting (Fox News)

“The promise of the SBC’s conservative resurgence was that we would eventually agree on enough to cooperate for global missions. Well, when will that day come?”

—Ed Stetzer, president of LifeWay Research, in a Baptist Press column

“We like to use biblical analogies, and this is a year of biblical proportions. As we would say in Christendom, it’s like an early rapture. We spent 40 years wandering the wilderness. I hope this is our exit.”

—Baylor regent Buddy Jones on the university’s new prominence in intercollegiate athletics (New York Times)

“We are excited about the prospect of being a stronger voice in the community to meet the needs of people and do what churches are supposed to do.”

—Joe Fitzpatrick, worship and music pastor at Nashville’s First Baptist Church, on a newly approved master plan that includes a Christian music venue and additional space for Room in the Inn, a homeless shelter that also offers computer classes (The Tennessean)

“For whatever reason, some U.S. Christians need to think and feel that they are persecuted. Maybe it makes them believe they are more akin to figures of faith in the Bible.”

—Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics (ethicsdaily.com)

Overturning tables — and misconceptions

My parents, other relatives, neighbors, teachers and church leaders taught me to value good manners. I still do (except when driving).

Manners can take on various forms and have evolved since Emily Post's definitive statement on the subject in 1922.

However, basic respect and kindness, more than formal etiquette, marked the behavioral standards that were conveyed to me since table settings were simple and hot tea's only use was to dissolve sugar before being poured over ice.

Those home and community efforts to teach basic social behavior did not totally fail. So, as a result, I try to speak kindly to others, to be gracious in social settings and to be mindful enough to hold the door for the next person.

Manners just matter to me. And I don't like being in social settings where ill-mannered people talk loudly on their cell phones or smoke in non-smoking areas or act like their convenience is more important than the rules everyone else follows.

Such elitism, in my book, conveys poor manners as well. Those who consider it very important to feel important tend to be disrespectful toward those they consider to be less than important. Therefore, being mannerly is not a matter of socio-economic status. One can

be both socially refined and ugly toward others.

So the manners of my upbringing were rooted in the idea of kindness that is expressed by treating all people in considerate ways.

Therefore, it is not surprising that I grew up with an image of a well-mannered, very polite Jesus. Our Jesus was sweet.

"Sweetest name I know." "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus."

Jesus' hard rhetoric toward the religiously pious — though quite obvious in the Bible we read and loved — didn't get a lot of our attention. That would hit too close to home.

But there was one exception: The story of Jesus overturning the tables of the temple merchants was very popular.

It was interpreted as Jesus giving us permission for an occasional angry outburst if directed toward selected "sins." It's that moment in the Gospel story when Jesus shifts characters from Mr. Rogers to John Wayne — before returning to his sweater and sneakers.

Today, some church leaders play up the cowboy image of Jesus in an effort to get men roped into church. Such macho Christianity may involve weight-lifting exhibitions, testimonies by athletes who credit Jesus with their on-field successes, and wild game dinners.



On the other end, Jesus can get portrayed as meek, mild, and accepting of any and all beliefs and behavior. He becomes the quiet philosophical Jesus. However, it became obvious to me long ago that a soft-spoken philosopher who wanders the countryside while telling heart-warming stories doesn't end up on a cross.

Since such various images of Jesus abound, it is no wonder that he was compelled to ask even those closest to him: "But who do you say that I am?" Apparently, the confusion has been going on for a long time.

For us, this is a good season to reflect on the full person of Jesus in the Gospels — passed down through the ages by those who witnessed and recorded his life and teachings. With careful attention to not imposing our predetermined concepts of Jesus on our reading, we might discover something new and fresh about the most remarkable person to walk the face of the Earth.

We just might find: an often kind but sometimes less-than-polite Jesus; a revolutionary whose love and mercy threatens those of us who claim to be loving and merciful; and a savior who not only rescues sinners by our definition, but also reminds those of us who think we are safely on the right shore that we could use a little more rescuing too.

But, then, it's never a bad time to get better acquainted with Jesus — the sweetest name I know. **BT**

Wishing you a
blessed
Holy Week,
and the joy and
hope of Easter.

The Directors and Staff of Baptists Today



“When you start dealing with what Christ really expects from us, you become socially dangerous.”

“What young people like more than anything else is a radical call to obedience to Christ.”

‘A sense of urgency’

A conversation with Tony Campolo



STORY AND PHOTOS
BY JOHN PIERCE

ATLANTA — An ongoing irritant to casual Christianity (which he would consider an oxymoron), well-traveled Tony Campolo flew in from a speaking engagement in Rome, Italy, to address an urban ministry workshop here during the Martin Luther King Jr. National Holiday weekend.

The 77-year-old author, sociologist and Baptist minister has not slowed down — nor toned down his call for selfless, counter-cultural expressions of the Christian faith.

“You get a sponge and dip it in water,” he said to workshop participants gathered at Atlanta’s First Presbyterian Church. “But if you don’t wring it out, what happens?”

His rhetorical question created the desired image of something that is saturated and even souring. Then he compared the dripping sponge to church members who go to Bible study to “grow” — but never put their increased faith into active ministry on behalf of those Jesus loved and served.

The only way to get people to grow in the Spirit, said Campolo, is to get them involved in the neighborhood. Then he offered some tactical advice. Lay off guilt trips aimed at middle and upper-class Christians, he said. “Tell them you want to help them grow.”

Afterward, *Baptists Today* editor John Pierce posed questions to Campolo about issues and opportunities facing Christians today. The conversation below is adapted from that interview.

BT: Tony, you’ve been doing this a long time. What keeps you going?

Campolo: The thing that keeps me going is the sense that I haven’t done what needs to be done in my life. It’s a sense of incompleteness. It’s a sense that there is a long-way more to go.

I think of that poem by Robert Frost: “I have promises to keep and miles to go before I sleep.” There is a sense of urgency, and I think it comes, largely, out of the way in which I conduct my prayer life.

Each morning I take time to just center down on Jesus, and don't ask God for anything. But in quiet and solitude, I wait to feel some kind of infilling of his presence.

And that tends to regenerate the sense of urgency that was there from the beginning. I'd say that I have more of a sense of urgency today than when I first started out.

BT: Back in the 1980s you were invited to speak at conferences and in more-conservative, evangelical churches that you may not get invited to today. What has changed? Have the churches changed? Have you changed? Or are we just in a more divisive time?

Campolo: I think that your analysis is a correct one. I speak just as much, but in terms of being in mainline churches: American Baptist, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches, some Southern Baptist churches — but Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ.

What changed was due to a couple of things. First of all, it became known that I was serving as a pastoral counselor to President Clinton.

It was on the front page of about every newspaper in the country that the president called upon me and another friend to really spend time with the president each week. And we did; it was each week.

[We were] weeping and trying to get him back on track — and trying to revitalize his sense of commitment to the causes of justice and helping the poor and oppressed and living out the work of the presidency in a way that those who Jesus called the least of these would benefit from.

He had a fall in his life, and he needed to recover. When I stepped forward to do that, I knew then that I was going to be in trouble.

So many of my evangelical friends are so Republican that they sometimes forget the Kingdom of God transcends political affairs — but that we are called upon to pray for the leaders, and with the leaders, whoever they may be...

But there was a sense that to be aligned with this man in a spiritual capacity was in fact to become *persona non grata* in certain circles of the evangelical faith. I think that was one of the things that did it.

I think the other thing that did it was this: I tend to have a somewhat conservative view on homosexual relationships. I hold that same-gender erotic behavior does not fit in with my understanding of scripture.

But I am totally committed to justice for my gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. I don't think you can tell these brothers and sisters that you love them and not stand up for justice on their behalf.

Justice is nothing more than love turned into social policy. That's a strong statement with me.

So I've been an advocate for those brothers and sisters. There is seldom a message that I give that I don't work in something calling for justice.

There are like 110 rights that heterosexuals enjoy that homosexuals do not. I don't think we are really serving Christ well when we don't stand up for justice even on behalf of those we don't necessarily agree with. This is a very important factor.

I would say those two things have really kind of created a negative attitude in many evangelical circles — but by no means in all evangelical circles.

As a matter of fact, I think evangelicalism is itself going through a rapid evolution. [Evangelicals] are now as concerned about the poor as mainline churches have been — maybe even more so.

The place where they differ from mainline churches is that they are willing to respond to the poor with charity, but they are not about to raise serious questions about political and economic structures in America that are creating poverty.

That Latin American bishop [Dom Helder Camara] said: "When I fed the poor, they called me a saint; when I began to ask what made them poor, they called me a communist."

I'm a totally committed American, but I get people calling me a socialist and all kind of things simply because I say it's not enough just to feed the poor; we've got to, in fact, change the political and economic structures that are creating poverty. That has caused me a great deal of difficulty.

BT: You're an old guy who connects with young people well. How do you do that, and why is it important to you?

Campolo: Well, I never treated young people any differently than I treated old people. So it wasn't that I had to change my style when I moved from one group to another.

I think that young people don't want to be talked down to. They don't want to be treated as though they are a different species.

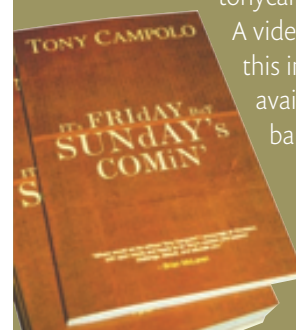
They are progressive in their thinking and, more important than that, they are looking

TONY CAMPOLO is professor emeritus of sociology at Eastern University and a former faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania. An American Baptist minister, he is the founder and president of the Evangelical Association for the Promotion of Education.

He has written more than 35 books, including *It's Friday, but Sunday's Comin'*, *Letters to a Young Evangelical: The Art of Mentoring*, and *20 Hot Potatoes Christians Are Afraid to Touch*. He and his wife Peggy live near Philadelphia.

For more on his books, speaking schedule and other information, visit tonycampolo.org.

A video portion of this interview is available online at baptiststoday.org.



for something they are not finding in many churches. We have this movement called the Red Letter Christian Fellowship — calling people to be Red Letter Christians referring to [Jesus' sayings] in the Bible.

But what we are really saying is: Has the time come for us not simply to be sound in Pauline theology? And that's very important.

If you read Paul, you'll learn about justification by faith — which is at the core of our Christianity. If you read the Gospels, you'll get the lifestyle of the Kingdom of God.

We need both of those things. We need some Pauline theology on one hand. We need directives from Christ on how to live.

When you start dealing with what Christ really expects from us, you become socially dangerous. You begin to raise questions about such things as capital punishment — because Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

You begin to raise questions about militarism because Jesus said, "Love your enemies." When he said that, he probably meant you shouldn't kill them.

He said when you have two coats you ought to give one of them away. I mean, when you go through the statements of Jesus, he is radical. And what young people like more than anything else is a radical call to obedience to Christ.

BT: What would you say to churches that are really serious about reaching young people but don't know how to do it?

Campolo: I think more than anything else we need to listen to what some observers outside the church are saying in answer to that question. Ernest Becker, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning book [*The Denial of Death*] on neo-Freudian sociology and psychology, says this: "When will the church learn that youth was made for heroism and not for pleasure?" That's a profound statement.

Too often we think we are going to attract young people if we can entertain them ... but what the kids who we want to bring into the church are really looking for is an opportunity to do something significant for others in the name of Jesus.

Kids who will never come to a Bible study will join a group to do Habitat for Humanity. When you say: "Would you like to go to Haiti and work with some poor people in a village?" — they'll line up. They want to do something heroic.

We always get the idea that if we can get them into the Bible then we can get them into action. That's true, but it is equally true that if we can get them to do things that are biblical — doing heroic things for Christ and the kingdom — that will make them into people who want to read the scripture and who will have much to pray about.

There is an interactive process at work here. Namely, what we read about and pray about affects what we do. But let us not forget: what we do affects how much we pray and how much we read the scripture. I think we've got to get our young people into heroic actions for Christ and the kingdom.

BT: What is the ethical or social issue that's really in your craw right now?

Campolo: Oh, that's a heavy one. I think that the social issue more than any other that has got me going is the poor and oppressed, of course. But I would think that militarism has got me upset.

I don't care whether you're on the left or the right — both parties are saying that our nation is in trouble.

The national debt has soared. We don't have enough money to take care of elderly people. We're talking about cutting back on Social Security. We're talking about ending a whole

host of entitlement programs that are very, very necessary.

The answer is quite simple: we are spending 40 percent of our income on the federal level for a military establishment. The war in Iraq cost \$250,000 a minute. What's more, almost 5,000 young men and women died over there. And we're asking what was it all about.

When we let our young men and women become cannon fodder and we spend the resources of the richest nation in the world in order to carry out wars that don't seem to have any end to them, which have very little meaning to us, and which we probably shouldn't be in at all — militarism scares me.

I ask the very simple question: Can there be peace in the world unless the Israelis and Palestinians get together? And, yet, we've not listened to the concerns of our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters.

We act as if the Arabs are all Muslims. They're not. Huge numbers of Christians are Arabs — and they feel themselves oppressed militaristically.

And they look at the United States and say: "You are equipping those who are, in fact, oppressing us and destroying our dignity ... You're our Christian brothers and sisters and you don't seem to care what's happening to us."

So, militarism has all kinds of effects. I think it has an eroding impact on our young people. I think it has a frightening effect on our economy.

BT: As a sociologist and as a minister, you have helped churches over the years to read sociological shifts. What is happening sociologically that church leaders should be aware of now?

Campolo: What I think we are moving into is an era of the church taking on new forms. I'm amazed at how many church groups of young people are meeting in ways I never imagined.

One of the guys in the Red Letter Christian Fellowship has a church in Manhattan that meets Sunday mornings in a large bar.

He said: "Why build a building? I went to the bartender and asked, 'Do you have much of a crowd here on Sunday morning?' He said, 'No.' 'What if I brought a church in here and I gave you a hundred bucks?' 'Great!'"

So they are there. People come in the bar ... and listen in. There are about 150 squeezing in this bar on Sunday morning. I never imagined that kind of thing would happen.

My son Bart runs a program he doesn't

even call a church. But he's in a very, very high-risk neighborhood. If you ever saw an area that was dangerous and slummy-looking, it's his section of Walnut Hills, Cincinnati.

He has a group of about 70 people who come together on Monday night and they have a dinner. They'll play some games, and then he'll share the message.

I always thought the church was to be, you know, a call to worship and hymns. But we play some games, eat a meal and talk about the Lord.

I could give you 15 different forms of the ways in which the church is spreading out and growing and experimenting with models. And I think I'm seeing that as a viable option to the traditional ways in which we have conducted church.

But let me also say that I'm very optimistic about the church.

A lot of Southern Baptist churches, which I love dearly, have gone into great difficulty, for instance, over the issue of women pastors. And then I see churches that heroically stand up against the broad mainstream of their denomination and say: "I'm sorry, when I read the scripture I see women in key roles of leadership — like Junia in the book of Acts. I see women preaching — like the four daughters of Philip who were preachers and prophets of God. I see too much of this; I affirm women in ministry."

And they get shot down and hurt. But in the end, when the final judgments are made about the church, there will be great respect for those who stood up for the hard issues.

Let me just say this [during MLK weekend]: Right now, Martin Luther King is a hero of white people. But I'm old enough to remember when the churches were calling him a communist. And you're old enough.

BT: ... and a troublemaker

Campolo: Yes. A troublemaker, an agitator. All of a sudden it's in retrospect that we begin to see him in his heroism.

In the end, I'm not so concerned as to how many members we have in our church as I am concerned about how heroic the church has been in times when the great questions of our age were raised.

And I see so much heroism and so much courage among ministers who ... say with Martin Luther: "Unless I am persuaded by conscience or by scripture, I cannot and I will not recant."

I've got to be optimistic about a church that stands on biblical grounds for justice. **BT**

— that call for taking Jesus seriously

The next generation speaks

By Tony Campolo

This new column in *Baptists Today* will be written by and for young people, but those of us who are not young will want to read it, too, because it will be about what young people are thinking as they view the Christian faith and how they believe the church has to change.

These authors are more able than I am to express the concerns of today's youth — and they have a better handle on what the church might do to respond to them. These authors likely will offer expressions of their faith that look different from what we older Christians are used to, and will state their convictions in ways that may disturb and even challenge how we think about what we believe.

Probably, they will replace many of the “hot button” issues that dominate our present-day discussions with new ones, and the language they use may be confusing and perhaps even offensive to us. But as one of our old hymns tells us, “New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth, they must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.”

Many of these young authors may no longer want to call themselves “evangelicals” or, for that matter, even “Christians.” For the vanguard of a coming generation of young people, these labels carry “image baggage” they want to unload.

For instance, “evangelical” often conjures up in their minds an image of churchgoers who hold an array of values and attitudes they sometimes find offensive and contrary to the ways they read the red letters in the Bible (those words of Jesus highlighted in red). Even the time-honored title of “Christian” may pose problems for some of them.

This is because “Christian” has become,

in the secular media, an adjective describing militia groups in Africa, Zionist movements bent on taking land away from Palestinians, and those who too easily martyr Christianity to specific political parties — usually right-wing parties that sanctify nationalism. They also have suspicions about left-leaning Christians who would make Jesus into an advocate of the platform of the Democratic Party.

When asked about party affiliation, they are prone to answer: “Name the issue.” They shy away from making any political party into the “God Party.”

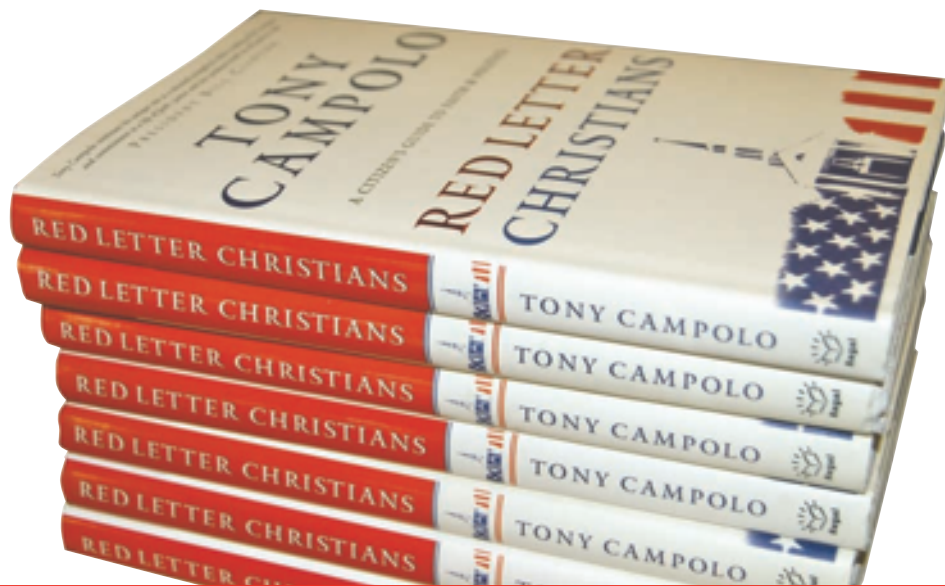
High on the list of the concerns of these writers will be the promotion of an activism that addresses the needs of the poor and oppressed directly, rather than through a political process they view with cynicism. They will propose building houses for poor people with Habitat for Humanity and traveling to Third World countries to learn from indigenous people what they can do to make “the world that is” into the world that ought to be.

They will advocate going to people living on the streets to give them the food and blankets they need, rather than talking about homelessness at conferences and forums. For them, formulating what they believe is something to be done in the context of reflection in action.

I am not suggesting that these authors will represent the vast majority of young people in today's churches, but I do propose that more and more of our young people will be drawn to what these authors say and will find in their words something with which they can resonate.

What you read in this column sometimes may cause cheering and sometimes shuttering.

You probably realize, however, that the time has come when lecturing young people is over and a time for dialoguing with them is at hand. This column will give some of them a chance to say their peace to us, after which we will have to figure out how to answer them. This may be just what we need. **BT**



EDITOR'S NOTE:

Often we limit our hearing to voices similar to ours. This new column will allow for some other, usually more-youthful voices to speak about faith and the living out of Christianity in contemporary times. Writers will come from various denominational backgrounds and church experiences. This series is provided in partnership with the Red Letter Christians Fellowship (redletterchristians.org). Tony Campolo, who suggested the idea, sets the stage.



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In the Know

Laura A. Barclay received the Bill J. Leonard Distinguished Service Award from Wake Forest University Feb. 16. The 2008 divinity school graduate is social ministries coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina. Her work involves addressing poverty, justice, compassion and reconciliation issues.

Steve Dominy is pastor of University Baptist Church in Shawnee, Okla., coming from the pastorate of First Baptist Church in Gatesville, Texas.

Ida Mae Hays will retire as registrar and financial aid director of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in June. She served as a Southern Baptist missionary for 31 years in Brazil. She is pastor of Crossroads Baptist Fellowship in Weldon, N.C.

Gary Gunderson is vice president of faith and health ministries at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, N.C. He will oversee spiritual care services to patients, families, staff and management as well as marketing and public relations services to Baptist churches. His areas include chaplaincy and the Center for Congregational Health.

Ida Mae Hays will retire as registrar and financial aid director of the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond in June. She served as a Southern Baptist missionary for 31 years in Brazil. She is pastor of Crossroads Baptist Fellowship in Weldon, N.C.

Fred Loper, M.D., will end his service May 31 as executive director of the Baptist Medical Dental Fellowship. A former Southern Baptist home missionary, he will work with a charitable Christian medical clinic in Oklahoma City.

Rodger Murchison will retire in July from First Baptist Church of Augusta, Ga., where he has served as associate pastor for 25 years. It has been his only full-time ministry position.

David Sapp will retire April 14 as pastor of Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta where he has served for 13 years. **BT**

BUBBA, others rejected

*Southern Baptists to stick
(mostly) with same name*

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

A task force unanimously recommended that the Southern Baptist Convention maintain its official name but give members of the nation's largest Protestant denomination the option of calling themselves "Great Commission Baptists."

The recommendation, approved overwhelmingly by the SBC Executive Committee Feb. 20, determined that changing the convention's name was fraught with legal and logistical problems.

Southwestern Baptist Seminary President Paige Patterson, a former SBC president and a member of the task force, had long favored a name change but said it is likely too difficult to pull off — citing the "enormous legal fees" involved in changing congregational and state convention names as well as trusts and other documents.

He hopes the proposal, which will come before the SBC's annual meeting in June in New Orleans, will satisfy those who wanted a name change: "I think that, if anything, it's a case of our having our cake and getting to eat it, too."

Pastor Micah Fries of St. Joseph, Mo., another member of the task force, agreed: "This is probably the best-case scenario."

As the task force weighed a possible name change, denominational leaders were bombarded with hundreds of suggestions, most avoiding the word "Southern."

But one hinted at the denomination's regional flavor: Baptist Ultimate Bible Believing Alliance, or BUBBA.

Other intriguing, but rejected, names included: Association of Thriving Baptist Churches, Baptist Southern Convention, Christian Synergy Convention, Ends of the Earth Baptists, Eternal Baptist Convention, Friendly Family Church of America, Global Association of Immersing Christians, Jesus Christ is Lord Baptist Convention and League of Baptist Messengers. **BT**

Seven million pennies

Coin gathering grows, benefits children in poverty

VALLEY FORGE, Penn. — The Penny Project was started by the children of First Baptist Church of New London, N.H., as a regional project in 2007. Two years later, it gained national appeal through the American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

Today, American Baptists have collected more than 7 million pennies to support programs aimed at improving the lives of children living in poverty. That milestone marks the halfway point to the ultimate goal of 14 million pennies.

Why that goal? According to the National Center for Children in Poverty and the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 14 million children living in poverty in the United States and Puerto Rico (where American Baptists form a regional body) in 2008.

More than 225 organizations — many of them American Baptist-related youth groups — have joined the effort to collect pennies and other coins to help children in poverty.

Recently the children of New Creation Baptist Church in Wheaton, Md., were honored with a proclamation by Maryland's Montgomery County Council for donating more than 300,000 pennies to two charities in their area.

Earlier their penny collection

had been stolen when it reached 40,000, but they began collecting again and surpassed the original amount. To view a video from the proclamation ceremony, visit youtube.com and search "The Penny Project."

Other Penny Project stories can be found at abhms.org, by clicking on "The Penny Project."

Groups interested in helping The Penny Project reach its goal — still 7 million pennies away — can join the effort at the American Baptist Home Missions web site as well.

—Adapted from an American Baptist
News Service release.



CBF task force reveals work, seeks input

By John Pierce
Baptists Today

DECATUR, Ga. — A 14-member task force charged with recommending changes to the structure of the 20-year-old Cooperative Baptist Fellowship shared its work Feb. 23 with the CBF Coordinating Council and other leaders.

A key component of the extensive, initial report calls for carving down the governing council from its current size of 64 to 16. Two additional councils, without governing duties, would work with CBF staff in the areas of mission and ministries.

Describing the Fellowship as his "heritage and hope," task force leader David Hull said the 20-month experience

of listening to and discussing various suggestions and drafting and refining the recommendations "was holy stuff for us."

However, the pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., was not defensive about the report — encouraging feedback that would clarify and strengthen the document.

The task force has gone back to work with the many and various responses to their presentation and will make a follow-up report to the council in June, prior to the CBF General Assembly. If approved, the report will be recommended to the larger assembly gathered in Fort Worth.

The current report including explanatory videos may be viewed at thefellowship.info/2012taskforce. **BT**

Name change?

Re-branding religion hard to do, and not always successful

NEW YORK — Did leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention hurt their missionary cause by opting not to change the denomination's name to something a bit more, well, marketable?

Maybe, but as the advertising executives of Madison Avenue could attest, as tempting as it is to try to solve a missionary slump with a marketing campaign, religious groups — like commercial businesses — should think twice before undergoing a brand overhaul.

An SBC task force recommended against an official name change, an idea that has been bandied about for more than a century.

Advocates argued that the name wasn't helping reverse a decline in baptisms and church plantings. One reason, they said, was the "Southern" part of their name made it hard to expand beyond its largely white base in the Bible Belt, and racial and ethnic minorities often balk when they see the Southern Baptist name.

"There is so much to celebrate in the heritage of our beloved denomination, but there is also a deep stain that is associated with slavery," President Albert Mohler of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary wrote as the debate heated up. "If these issues can be resolved, even to any significant degree, by a name change, a Gospel-minded people would never hesitate to consider such a proposal."

There were also strong currents running against a change, however.

"We believe that the equity that we have in the name Southern Baptist Convention is valuable," said Jimmy Draper, head of the task force. "It is a strong name that identifies who we are in theology, morality and ethics, compassion, ministry and mission in the world. It is a name that is recognized globally in these areas."

Makeovers are not only expensive and fraught with potential legal problems — factors

that were raised by the SBC task force — but they may not work. Exhibit A: Coca-Cola's failed 1985 effort to introduce "New Coke," or Tropicana's updated but deeply unpopular package design for its orange juice, or Gap's swift rejection of a poorly received new logo.

"Brands that play against consumer behavior always lose," said Josh Feldmeth, head of the New York office of Interbrand, an international brand consultancy business.

Even so, religious groups won't stop trying if they feel their "brand" isn't working.

Campus Crusade for Christ, the worldwide ministry started in 1951 by the late Bill Bright and his wife, is this year introducing a new moniker, "Cru," that some worry could become the "New Coke" of evangelical Christianity.

Elsewhere, evangelical leader Tony Campolo has taken to calling himself a "Red Letter Christian" because he worries that the evangelical brand has become too politicized. (See related story on page 6.)

The rock-ribbed Christians at Bob Jones University in South Carolina have been looking — so far in vain — for an alternative to the "fundamentalist" label that they once wore so proudly.

Mormon leaders are also making a push to have the church called only by its formal name, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, because they feel the "Mormon" label can be derogatory or raise undesirable associations with polygamist splinter groups.

But Feldmeth, who was raised an evangelical and graduated from Wheaton College, said LDS leaders might want to think twice.

The word "Mormon," like "Southern Baptist," has strong name recognition and immediately conveys a clear image — both valuable assets. If that image is not the one you want to project — for example, a LifeWay Research survey showed that 40 percent of Americans have a negative impression of Southern Baptists — then you have to figure out why rather than just slapping a new label on the same old product.

"I think you should stick to your mission and just work harder to explain why your mission matters," said Feldmeth, who is now a practicing member of the Episcopal Church, which was forced to re-brand after the Revolutionary War made associations with Anglicanism dicey.

"Brands exist to change behavior," he said. "That applies to the religious world as much as it does to the business world."

It's also not easy to find a good alternative. "Mormon" is memorable and short, while the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a mouthful.

The "American Baptist" name was taken in 1950 by the Baptists' northern branch, and black Baptists snagged the "National Baptist" brand way back in 1895. In the end, all the Southern Baptist task force could do was offer an unofficial alternative, "Great Commission Baptists," for congregations that want at least something a little different.

It seems unlikely the "GCB" moniker will win out, but an evolutionary approach to re-branding can work; International Business Machines effectively reinvented itself as IBM, and General Electric did the same by switching to GE.

If all else fails, Southern Baptists and Mormons can take heart from historical precedent. The early followers of Jesus were disparagingly referred to as "little Christs" — hence the term Christians, a brand few churches are eager to give up.

Likewise, the name "Lutheran" was first used to mock the Protestant reformer Martin Luther, who didn't much like the term either. But it stuck, and worked.

And in the 18th century, followers of John and Charles Wesley were derided for their "methodical" approach to spiritual growth — but thanks to those cultured despisers, we now have Methodists.

"In the end," said Feldmeth, "they made the brand what they wanted it to be." **BT**

"Brands exist to change behavior. That applies to the religious world as much as it does to the business world." —Josh Feldmeth, head of the New York office of Interbrand

Mormons warned against baptizing Holocaust victims, celebrities

By Peggy Fletcher Stack
Salt Lake Tribune

SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — Anne Frank, Simon Wiesenthal's parents, Gandhi, Daniel Pearl, Elvis. Mormon leaders are fed up.

On March 2, the LDS church's governing First Presidency issued an unequivocal mandate to its members: Do not submit names of Jewish Holocaust victims or celebrities for proxy baptism. Doing so could cost Mormons access to their church's genealogical data or even their good standing in the faith.

"Without exception, church members must not submit for proxy temple ordinances any names from unauthorized groups, such as celebrities and Jewish Holocaust victims," LDS President Thomas S. Monson and his counselors wrote in a letter to all Mormon bishops, dated Feb. 29.

"If members do so, they may forfeit their New FamilySearch privileges (access to the church's genealogical holdings). Other corrective action may also be taken."

The letter, which was to be read over pulpits and posted on bulletin boards in every Mormon congregation on March 4, reminds members that their "pre-eminent obligation" is

to their own ancestors, and any name submitted for proxy rituals "should be related to the submitter."

The crackdown could help LDS officials put an end to overzealous Mormons sidestepping the rules or mischief-makers bent on embarrassing the faith.

The Mormon practice known as "baptism for the dead" involves living people being baptized on behalf of their dead relatives. Mormons believe it is their moral obligation to do the temple rituals, while those in the hereafter can either accept or reject the ordinance.

In the early 1990s, Jewish representatives complained about the practice, arguing that it disrespected Jews who died in the Holocaust. Mormon leaders agreed to remove them from the list of candidates for baptism, unless they were related to living church members.

The task, however, proved difficult, and many of the names continued to pop up in the database. In 2010, the Mormons assured Jews that a new computer system would help solve the problem.

But it exploded again in recent weeks as reporters published accounts of proxy baptisms for several well-known figures, including the deceased parents of famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal, and slain *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl.

LDS officials reacted swiftly and decisively to the news, issuing an apology and saying in several cases they had removed the submitters'

access to their genealogical records.

"We consider this a serious breach of our protocol," spokesman Scott Trotter said in a statement, "and we have suspended indefinitely this person's ability to access our genealogy records."

The letter from the church's First Presidency is an emphatic step, said Philip Barlow, an expert on Mormon history and culture at Utah State University. "It says 'we really mean business' and the imprimatur will etch more deeply on (Mormon) minds."

When the First Presidency speaks, Barlow said, "LDS ears hear that with a louder microphone than a university president would have. It has the added resonance of prophetic authority."

And it also "signals a seriousness to outsiders," he said.

In a statement, Abraham Foxman, national director of the New York-based Anti-Defamation League, welcomed the hard line from Mormon leaders.

"Church members should understand why proxy baptisms are so offensive to the Jewish people, who faced near annihilation during the Holocaust simply because they were Jewish, and who throughout history were often the victims of forced conversions," Foxman said.

"As two minority religions who share histories as the target of intolerance and discrimination, we will continue to work with each other to bring greater understanding and respect to both of our faith communities." **BT**

Richard Dawkins says he's not entirely sure God doesn't exist

By Al Webb
Religion News Service

LONDON — A controversial Oxford University professor billed by many as the world's "most famous atheist" now says he is not 100 percent sure that God doesn't exist — but just barely.

In a 100-minute debate with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams on Feb. 23, Richard Dawkins surprised his online and theater audiences by conceding a personal chink of doubt about his conviction that there is no such thing as a creator.

But, to the amusement of the archbishop and others, the evolutionary biologist swiftly added that he was "6.9 out of seven" certain of his long-standing atheist beliefs.

Replying to moderator Anthony Kenny, a noted English philosopher, Dawkins said, "I think the probability of a supernatural creator existing (is) very, very low."

Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion* and other best-sellers, is a leader of the "New Atheist" movement that aggressively challenges belief in God and criticizes harm done in the name of religion.

"What I can't understand is why you can't see (that life started from nothing and) is such a staggering, elegant, beautiful thing, why would you want to clutter it up with something so messy as a God?" Dawkins told Williams, according to *The Daily Telegraph* account.

The archbishop, who heads both the Church of England and the worldwide Anglican Communion, replied that he "entirely agreed" with the "beauty" part of Dawkins' statement — but said "I'm not talking about God as an extra who you can shoehorn onto that." **BT**

By Elizabeth Evans Hagan

Baptists at the White House

Delegation discusses partnerships beyond politics

When a group of Baptist pastors and denominational leaders from across the country are invited to the White House for dialogue during an election year, one might assume a political conversation awaits. Or, that there is some hidden agenda on the part of organizers.

Or, perhaps, that the room filled with Southern Baptists, American Baptists, Cooperative Baptists, Progressive Baptists and Alliance Baptists might soon erupt like kids in a schoolyard fight. Or that party loyalties would determine the quality of the experience of the day. But, think again.



When a delegation of more than 60 “good-will Baptists” gathered for conversation with senior and associate White House staff on March 7, partisan politics took a back seat to a unique opportunity for partnership building.

Even as we knew that others in the room would have different opinions on just about everything — we are Baptists after all — our personal narratives connected us. “I want to hear your story and I want to share mine” was the motto of the day.

Here are some of the stories shared by the gathered Baptists and government leaders:

I want to tell you about a 10-year-old Latino boy from my community in the Midwest. Suffering from sleep apnea and a swollen tonsil so large that he was having trouble breathing, his options

for medical care are sparse. With parents having neither documentation nor insurance, the life-saving operation that would allow him to go back to school to continue his education is out of his reach. What might this administration say to him?

I want to tell you about one of our staffers who is currently facing a severe allergic reaction and can't attend our debriefing this morning. Could one of you offer a prayer for him? I know he'd appreciate it.

I want to tell you about the men I know in my predominantly African-American neighborhood. So many of our families are suffering because a son, an uncle, a father is in jail, going to jail or on probation. How might this administration seek to speak to the pipeline-to-prison phenomenon that prevails where I live?

Ministry leaders and administrators mutually shared stories in the absence of cameras or the press, and a funny thing happened: doors opened for relationship. I was pleased to join several of my D.C.-area Baptist colleagues among others as we listened in.

On countless occasions throughout the three-hour briefing session, White House presenters offered personal, direct and enthusiastic suggestions to topics such as immigration reform, the housing market crisis, credit fraud, human trafficking and disaster relief.

Often agency names, phone numbers and websites were offered to specific problems with the shared response of Baptists: “I’ve never heard of that before. I’m glad to know that policy or program exists.”

Together in an “I’m not trying to win your vote” and “I’m not going to be hateful

to you even if I don’t like our President” posture, we could peacefully talk about issues that touch all of our families in one way or another.

The longer we sat with White House staffers, the more apparent it became that this meeting was important. The entire experience felt like a rare opportunity for person-to-person dialogue among my Baptist family and those within earshot of the president to bring about tangible change.

Even with all of the security procedures and bag checks required to get through doors and gates, even with the time away from pressing work responsibilities, and even with all of the personal stress I felt in answering the question of “What am I going to wear?” on the morning of the visit, our time together forged relationships. Certainly such a view couldn’t come from watching Fox News or CNN or reading the newspaper or even writing a concerned letter to my congressman hoping to get a reply.

If we are going to move forward as a nation without constantly playing the blame game no matter who is in the Oval Office, then open lines of communication, mutual respect and commitments to person-to-person meetings have to continue. I hope this delegation of “good will” Baptists is only the start of a dialogue that we as a particular faith community can have with those we elect to lead us.

Together, as we keep talking on- and off-line about our hungry kids, broken schools and flooded townships, I trust we’ll begin to see the human face in every complex social problem at our nation’s doorstep. Most of all, my trip to the White House reminded me again that we can never have too many friends — among each other and in some high places, too. **BT**

—Elizabeth Evans Hagan is pastor of Washington Plaza Baptist Church in Reston, Va.

Church's future tied to interactive communication

By Natalie Aho

Two billion people (or 30 percent of the world's population) are connected to the Internet. It is imperative that the church finds ways to be present online as well.

When the Internet was introduced to the general public in the early 1990s, we were at the height of living in an isolated society. Clive Thompson called it "the modern American disconnectedness that Robert Putnam explored in his book *Bowling Alone*."

The Internet was released to the public as a way to share information — a way to move a document from point A to point B. But now it is how people connect, collaborate and share life. It is interactive. It is community.

"If you look at human history, the idea that you would drift through life, going from new relation to new relation, that's very new. It's just the 20th century," said Thompson. "Psychologists and sociologists spent years wondering how humanity would adjust to the anonymity of life in the city, the wrenching upheavals of mobile immigrant labor — a world of lonely people ripped from their social ties. We now have precisely the opposite problem."

The Internet provided a way for us to connect out of our isolation, from the convenience of our own homes.

The church must accept that interactive communication, especially through social media, is a foundational shift in the way we communicate and even form relationships. We now have the opportunity and resources to communicate with the world and interact with people in a unique and instant way.

We should not and cannot avoid online platforms such as websites, social media, blogs, podcasts and videos. The world needs us to have an online presence. We can worship, minister and live there.

Of course, we have some concerns about this digital world: privacy, security, being misrepresented or misunderstood, a loss of reality or connection to the physical world, bullying (from both children and adults), predators, the need for discernment, moderation and

accountability. We are all still working out this medium together, and there will be challenges, mistakes and pitfalls along the way.

However, they do not outweigh the requirement for us to be there. Churches need to learn how to have an effective, engaging and welcoming website — a front door to the online world. Churches need social media community. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and Pinterest are about engagement, collaboration, activity and connection. Congregational leaders should know about blogs, YouTube and podcasts — and determine which is most helpful for connecting with their communities.

The world is still crying out for the truth. That has not changed through all the various "ages" of society, nor is it any different now. People still hurt and need love. Through the Internet and social networks, we can make these connections faster, wider and deeper than ever before. **BT**

—Natalie Aho of Mobile, Ala., is communications specialist for the Center for Congregational Health, Associated Baptist Press and Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.



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Thanks sponsors!

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

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Acts 8:26-40

May 6, 2012

What Hinders Me?

What do we do with the resurrection story? It's one thing to get all inspired on Easter, but another thing altogether to carry that Easter excitement onward. This was not, apparently, an issue for the earliest believers.

This month we will explore their growing engagement with the resurrected Christ and a world in need of resurrection as we continue taking our texts from the book of Acts. These memorable stories emphasize the truth that God's love, Christ's work and the Spirit's blessing are for all people.

The aftermath of Christ's post-resurrection appearances turned the disciples' lives upside down. No longer plagued by doubt but confident in their call, they proclaimed the gospel not only in Jerusalem, but also on into Judea and Samaria. Encounters such as the one we study today propelled the gospel even into faraway lands. The message of salvation through Christ is a borderless gospel offered to all who need the Savior's grace, and no one exhibited that belief more clearly than Philip, an early believer and a powerful witness for Christ. ↓

Hearing God's call (vv. 26-29)

Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, reports that Philip was called of God to go into the countryside and meet an Ethiopian eunuch who was returning to his home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (v. 26). The story is told so matter-of-factly that the appearance



of an angel garners little attention: the heavenly messenger's function is simply to convey God's direction to Philip.

Philip, possibly one of the "seven" chosen in Acts 6:1-6 rather than the apostle, was called to meet an official in service to the queen of Ethiopia. ↓ Luke says that the unnamed administrator was in charge of the royal treasury, which would make him a person of considerable authority (v. 27).

Surprisingly, the official had not come to Jerusalem on diplomatic business, but to worship. This indicates that he was a "God-fearer," a term used to describe Gentiles who worshiped Yahweh, the God of the Jews. Having completed his mission, the man was returning home in a stately chariot large enough to include a bench on which he could sit and read (v. 28) while a driver handled the horses.

Ironically, while the Ethiopian worshiped the God of the Jews, he could never become a Jew. First-century Hebrews had rituals designed to incorporate proselytes from among the Gentiles, but they also remembered Deut. 23:1, which insists that no man

could enter the house of Israel if his testicles were not intact. ↓

Although an angel had sent Philip to meet the Ethiopian, Luke says "the Spirit" prompted him to run along side the chariot (v. 29).

Explaining God's message (vv. 30-40)

Philip found the eunuch reading something that clearly puzzled him. He knew he was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8. He knew it spoke of a suffering servant of God, but he did not understand the significance of what he was reading.

Try to imagine how the Ethiopian felt. Let's say that you are a plumber by trade, and someone has handed you a textbook on quantum mechanics — or that you are a computer engineer who thinks in digital code, and someone encouraged you to read a book on Eastern philosophy. Or, for that matter, imagine that you grew up in a home that practiced no religion at all, and someone asked you to interpret the book of Revelation.

Any of those tasks would be quite a challenge. You need a certain amount

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of background and context before you can begin to grasp what is going on. Otherwise, what you're reading might as well be written in Hebrew or Greek.

The eunuch was probably reading from a Greek translation of Isaiah, because Greek was the language of commerce and politics. A Greek translation of Hebrew scriptures, now called the "Septuagint," was widely known. He probably had little difficulty in reading the words of his scroll, but was finding it troublesome to interpret them.

Isaiah 53:7-8 speaks of one who "was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth." The suffering one was humiliated and deprived of justice, the prophet said, and "his life was taken from the earth" (see also vv. 32-33).

The eunuch had learned much of the law, and apparently he loved the law, despite the fact that it pointedly excluded him from full acceptance within Judaism. But this text from the prophets was beyond him.

Seeing his confusion, Philip asked if he understood what he was reading, and the eunuch admitted he had no hope of comprehending without someone to guide him (vv. 30-31).

Isaiah 53:1-8 is one of four texts that are often called "Servant Songs." They are found in the part of Isaiah that is sometimes called "Second Isaiah," because it seems to have been written during the exile, long after the original Isaiah was dead. The song speaks of a servant of the Lord who would willingly suffer and die in behalf of others. The whole concept was so far removed from the law with which the eunuch was familiar that he was rightly puzzled.

Just a few years earlier Philip would not have understood it, either. But Philip had met Jesus. And, like other early Christians, Philip soon interpreted the puzzling texts as prophecies pointing to Christ, and because of that he could do what we read about in v. 35: "then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus."

And, because the official understood the good news that Philip declared — the incredible good news that he could be fully accepted into Christ's family despite his ethnic background and his wounded gender — the eunuch believed. He believed, and he wanted to act on his new belief. So, when they came upon a small body of water, he asked Philip if there was anything to prevent him from being baptized. Philip, seeing no reason not to proceed, baptized him (vv. 36-38).

Living as God's example (vv. 39-40)

Once the evangelist had accomplished his purpose, as Luke tells the story, "the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away," leaving the eunuch to continue homeward, rejoicing in his newfound faith (v. 39). The word for "snatch" is quite emphatic, suggesting the speed with which Philip was removed and set down in a place called Azotus, where he went on throughout the region and "proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea" (v. 40).

Azotus is the New Testament name for the old city known in the Old Testament as Ashdod, one of the five major strongholds of the Philistines. It was located in the coastal plain of southern Palestine. To get from there to Caesarea, on the northern coast of Palestine, Philip's preaching tour would have followed the main coastal highway and brought him into potential contact with several large population centers.

Reflecting on this story, which clearly portrays Philip as a model for evangelistic emulation, suggests several patterns of behavior that are worthy of a second look.

First, Philip was a faithful follower of Jesus. Again, we note that he was not the apostle Philip, since 8:1 says all

the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, while this man was in Samaria when the story began. He may be the Philip named as one of the seven men who were appointed in Acts 6 to lead the social ministries of the church in Jerusalem. If so, he would have been a man of compassion who shared the characteristic of being "filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom" (6:3).

Secondly, Philip listened for God, and paid attention when God spoke. Perhaps it was because he was filled with the Spirit that Philip was so spiritually perceptive. We don't know how he recognized the angel of God in v. 26, or how he sensed the message of God's Spirit in v. 29. But, because Philip was apparently open and listening for divine guidance, he recognized when God was speaking to him.

Third, Philip obeyed God, even when it was not convenient. God's call sent Philip well out of his way. He had been in Samaria, in the northern part of Israel, but God's call put him on a road that led southwest from Jerusalem and through the desert to Gaza, where it met the main north/south caravan route.

It required some effort for Philip to get to the place of his appointment, and even more effort to keep it. He was told to "go to that chariot and stay near it." The chariot, of course, would have been moving. Philip would have had to jog (at least) to keep up.

Fourth, Philip reached out without prejudice. God called Philip to relate one-on-one to a total stranger, a totally different kind of person. The Ethiopian had darker skin and wore a different style of clothing. He came from a foreign land and had been raised with different customs. Greek would have been a second or third language to him, and his altered gender would have been offensive to observant Jews. But none of that hindered Philip from reaching out to him or baptizing him.

Do we allow cultural, ethnic or gender-based differences to become obstacles to obedience as we hear Christ's call?

What hinders us? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Acts 10:44-48

May 13, 2012

Could It Be?

Following lectionary texts can sometimes be confusing because the church calendar overrides the thematic calendar. So, while all four lessons from Acts this month concern the growth of an unhindered gospel that welcomes all nations, they don't follow chronological order.

Last week's lesson concerned Philip's baptism of an Ethiopian official, followed by a preaching tour up the coast to Caesarea (ch. 8). Today's lesson takes Peter to the coastal port of Joppa and then northward, also to Caesarea, where he experienced what is often called the "Gentile Pentecost" (ch. 10).

Next week, however, we will drop back to the first chapter of Acts, followed a week later by the Acts 2 account of the first Pentecost. While this sequence seems out of order, it will serve the purpose of having us study Acts 2 on May 27, which is celebrated as Pentecost Sunday.

Today's passage is a short text from within a larger story. To fully appreciate it, we need a taste of what comes before and after, too.

An act with seven scenes (9:32-11:18)

Acts 10:44-48 could be seen as one scene within a two-act play in which the main character is the temperamental Peter, a faithful Jew who had become a leader among Christ's disciples — the same Peter of whom Jesus said "upon this rock I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18).



It was one thing for Philip to proclaim the gospel and baptize uncircumcised Gentiles. It was another thing — a much bigger thing — for the more influential Peter to endorse the full inclusion of Gentiles in the nascent church. Thus, Luke provides a lengthy account of how Peter came to embrace Gentile believers as full participants within the church.

Act One of Peter's story (9:32-43) includes two scenes in which Peter works among Jewish believers, effecting miracles and drawing many to faith in Christ. ↓

Act Two (10:1-11:18) moves into the Gentile world and plays out in seven scenes. Scene one (10:1-8) leaves Peter in Joppa, staying for a few days in the home of a man identified as Simon the Tanner. The reader, meanwhile, is taken north to Caesarea, where a Roman centurion was granted a vision from God. ↓

Cornelius is described as a God-fearer, a Gentile who worshiped the God of the Jews but had not fully converted through circumcision. The text emphasizes Cornelius's piety as a

man who prayed constantly and gave generous alms for the poor. One afternoon about 3:00 p.m., as he knelt for Judaism's regular mid-afternoon prayer time, an angel instructed him to send messengers to find Peter and bring him to Caesarea.

We shift back to Joppa for scene two (10:9-16), which Luke says took place about noon on the following day. ↓ As we look in on Peter, he is praying alone on the flat roof of his host's home. Peter also sees a vision, one that he finds troubling.

Noon was neither a scheduled time of prayer nor a normal mealtime for first-century Jews, but the text observes that Peter was both prayerful and hungry when he saw a large sheet filled with four-footed animals, birds and reptiles descend to the roof. A voice told him to "kill and eat," but Peter immediately objected, insisting that he had never eaten any profane thing. This suggests that all of the creatures before him were considered "unclean" or non-kosher, and thus off-limits to Jews (see Leviticus 11).

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



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The heavenly voice, however, insisted that “what God has made clean, you must not call profane” (10:15). The vision was repeated three times, apparently to make sure the stubborn Peter got the point. 📖 The Old Testament law clearly associated eating unclean food and having fellowship with unclean people (Lev. 20:24-26), and Peter was about to be challenged to do precisely that. 📖

Three messengers from Cornelius show up in scene three (10:17-23a), and the Spirit instructs Peter to accompany them without hesitation. Employing a lesson learned from the vision, Peter invited the men to come in and rest overnight, something that strictly observant Jews would not have done.

Scene four (10:23b-33) relates Peter’s arrival and opening conversation with Cornelius and others who were gathered with him. Recognizing the odd nature of his visit in a Gentile’s home, and accompanied by other Jewish Christians, Peter sought to explain himself: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (10:28). Cornelius then described his own vision and asked Peter to proclaim “all that the Lord has commanded you to say” (10:33).

Peter’s sermon (10:34-43) comprises scene five. In it, he proclaimed the basics of the gospel message, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the command to proclaim the good news to all, calling for repentance and promising the forgiveness of sins.

The running theme of this section finds emphasis in Peter’s opening words, in which he relates what he has learned: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34-35).

Peter’s sermon was quickly interrupted, however, for scene six (10:44-48) relates how the Spirit of God was poured out on all who were gathered. The Gentile believers spoke in tongues and praised God, demonstrating

the same evidence of the Spirit’s blessing that Jewish believers had experienced in Acts 2. Some of them had apparently accompanied Peter, and “were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,” the text says (10:45). Still, no one objected when Peter called for the Gentile believers to be baptized just as they had been.

The last scene in the lengthy story (11:1-18) provides Peter’s recounting of his experience when he got back to Jerusalem and spoke with other church leaders. Some criticized him for having lodged and presumably eaten with the Gentiles, but Peter’s forthright defense silenced the critics: “If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (11:17). Unfortunately, the silence did not last, and the issue would have to be revisited (Acts 15).

Scene six redux (10:44-48)

With the larger context in place, let’s take a closer look at our text for the day. “While Peter was still speaking,” Luke says, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word” (v. 44). There were no magic formulas involved, no official words of invocation to prompt the Spirit’s presence. Luke’s language suggests that the manifestation of the Spirit was at God’s initiative, not caused by anything Peter, Cornelius or the others had done. Believers may be blessed by the Spirit, but cannot invoke the Spirit’s gifting at will.

Some have wondered whether the gift of tongues in Caesarea — where everyone present probably spoke Greek — mirrored the miracle of Pentecost, where people from many lands were gathered and the gift of tongues appears to refer to known languages, thus facilitating the spread of the gospel.

Whether the tongues of Acts 10 refer to spoken languages or the “tongues of angels” of which Paul later spoke (1 Cor. 13:1) is unclear, but also beside the point. Whatever their flavor, the gift of tongues was interpreted as clear evidence of the Spirit’s acceptance of and blessings upon the Gentile believers.

Peter ordered the new believers to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ,” just as Jewish believers had been baptized, and with no indication that they were required to be circumcised or to restrict themselves to kosher food before fully entering the family of faith.

As we contemplate this passage, we rejoice in Peter’s newfound knowledge and the courageous obedience he showed in listening to the Spirit and extending acceptance to the Gentiles. Yet, we know that Peter later came under pressure to retreat from this bold position, leading to a public conflict with Paul, who charged that Peter had segregated himself from Gentile believers (Gal. 2:1-14).

Where do we stand when it comes to showing acceptance to others? Are there people who would not be welcome to join our church due to their ethnicity, their background, or some other aspect of their identity?

Even within the membership of our churches, are there some who are considered “insiders” and “outsiders”? Think personally: are there people you’d never volunteer to sit with at homecoming or a family night supper, preferring to stick with people who are more like you?

Some of us might be able to relate stories of specific encounters that helped us overcome prejudice and become more inclusive, while for others it may have been a growing thing — or not. Peter’s experience reminds us of how hard it can be to accept Christ’s command to show inclusive love to all people. It takes intentional work to overcome our cultural, institutional and even supposedly biblical prejudices — but it is work worth doing, work God’s Spirit will help us to accomplish. **BT**

Youth

May 6 — May 27, 2012

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

Are You Serious?

MAY 6

There aren't a lot of people in our lives for whom we will drop whatever we are doing and do what they wish. The rare exception might be a coach, our best friend, maybe even a boyfriend or girlfriend. In our passage for today, Philip drops everything when an angel of the Lord speaks to him.

As if starting his day off with an angel speaking to him isn't enough, Philip runs into a court official of the queen of the Ethiopians who is reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip doesn't have to ponder what to do for long because the angel instructs him to go and join the chariot.

Philip's day gets stranger when he sits down in the chariot with the official. The official who usually deals with money is reading one of the Servant Songs from Isaiah. This would be like you reading Shakespeare when your favorite subject is calculus; you know

what the words say, but you don't know what they mean. Philip wouldn't have understood the Servant Song either if he had not had an encounter with Christ. The passage comes alive to Philip, and he shares its meaning with the Ethiopian man.

This man had been to Jerusalem to worship. He was a God-fearer (a name for those who were not Jewish but still worshipped Yahweh) and knew of the laws that would not allow him to be a Jew (check out Deuteronomy 23:1).

None of this stopped the man from asking Philip to baptize him right there in the river, however. His encounter with Christ led him to throw all that he knew out the window and to believe! Philip also knew that the man could not become a Jew, but that didn't stop him either. They went down to the water together, and Philip baptized him.

Think About It:

Philip went! He didn't just go and serve the Ethiopian man, but he continued to serve afterward in Azotus. How willing are you to go and serve where God calls you?

Make a Choice:

We take for granted that Philip chose to follow what the angel of the Lord called on him to do. Sometimes we even say no by ignoring what we hear. Make the choice to act on what God has called you to do.

Pray:

Pray that your ears will be open to hear and that your hands and feet will be willing to act when God calls.

They're With Us

MAY 13

Who's your biggest rival? What team do you cheer against whether or not your home team is playing them? What team do you circle at the beginning of the year and say "we have to beat them"?

Now imagine that you are attending the game against your rivals and your coach stands up, points at the opponents and says, "From now on we are all on the same team!"

The roaring crowd would probably come to a complete stand-still, the cheering would be cut off to silence, and murmurs might start among the fans asking if the coach had lost his or her mind. The "they're with us?" mindset of the crowd is the mindset that the early Jews would have had as they heard this story of Peter recounted to them.

Peter was Jewish. He was also an active defender of the faith — to the point that he cut off a soldier's ear when they came to

take Jesus away. Peter was also the one Jesus called "the rock" that the church would be built upon. Peter would be like the coach who gets up and gives the impassioned speech. As Peter was giving his speech, the Holy Spirit was poured out — even onto the Gentiles.

The Jews who were with Peter were shocked and were probably rubbing their eyes in disbelief. To silence the speculation of what was being seen, Peter cleared the air by acknowledging the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Gentiles. He didn't just give the event lip-service, but called them to action: to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ; to be one people in the name of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we look for magic words that will bring about the Holy Spirit, but there were no magic words for Peter. It's not our responsibility to decide who will hear and who will not hear; it is our responsibility to speak.

Think About It:

It would have been a lot easier for Peter to stay and preach among people he knew and who accepted him. How is God calling you out of your comfort zone?

Make a Choice:

The gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people. Peter reminds us that sometimes we need to not choose who we share the love of Christ with, but share it with everyone around us.

Pray:

Ask God that you might have eyes to see how God sees others instead of how you choose to see others. Pray for courage to share when it is uncomfortable.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



Act Two

When you watch a sequel on TV, it always starts by referring back to what happened at the end of the previous episode. TV shows make this blatantly obvious when someone says, "Last time on ..." Movies also may do this in trailers for upcoming sequels. The writer of Acts does the same thing in the first five verses of Acts as he connects back to what he was telling in the Gospel of Luke: Jesus taught, was taken to heaven, and presented himself alive to many people for 40 days.

Imagine what the disciples were thinking when Jesus presented himself to them again. Some doubted, others were relieved that their leader was among them again, and probably some were ready to take back the Kingdom. So, Jesus had to convince them again. But in all of this Jesus told them to wait.

How hard would it have been to wait? Many of the disciples had been hiding for the past three days fearing that their fate may be the same as that of their Christ. What were they waiting for? Jesus was back among them. How long would they have to wait?

We know what happens because we have the rest of the book of Acts, but the disciples were living it. Think about what it is like to wait for Christmas or your birthday ... the anticipation you have — and you know when and what is to come. The followers of Jesus didn't know when it was coming or what it would look like.

At least Jesus had told them what was coming: the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit would bring them power so they might go and be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

MAY 20

Think About It:

We don't know the rest of our story, just as the disciples didn't know what would happen after Jesus ascended to heaven. How will you choose to share Christ even when you don't know where you will end up?

Make a Choice:

The fear of the unknown can bring some people to a standstill. How will you choose to overcome the fear of the unknown to follow where Christ leads?

Pray:

Pray that you will not follow blindly but that you will follow the will of God with the eyes of Christ.

Bring It On!

Hopefully you've never been in the path of a tornado, but those who have said it sounds like a train is rushing toward them. Even if you haven't been in the path of a tornado, you have been outside when the wind is blowing so hard that you can actually hear it. The whistle of the wind can sometimes even turn into a roar.

When you begin to read the passage for today, imagine being gathered for a celebration. This celebration would have been Pentecost, which would have been a week of feasts. As you are gathered with your friends and family, a wind blows so violently that the sound surrounds you and tongues of fire rest on each of you. Through the wind and the fire you are filled with the Holy Spirit.

On the day of Pentecost, the group was

not small. Jews from every nation were present in Jerusalem. Many of them spoke their native tongues, but after being filled with the Holy Spirit they understood each other — regardless of the language being spoken. The situation was so extraordinary, the only explanation that those who hadn't been filled with the Holy Spirit could come up with were that these people were drunk.

Those who had received the Holy Spirit knew they were not drunk, so Peter stood up to defend them. His defense was practical: how could someone be drunk at 9 o'clock in the morning? His defense was also theological: the prophet Joel spoke of this day.

The Holy Spirit is with us, too, and may still lead us to live in ways that seem hard to explain to others.

MAY 27

Think About It:

What Christian words or phrases do you use that your friends might not understand? With the help of the Holy Spirit, how can you help others understand what you say and do?

Make a Choice:

The Holy Spirit resides in each of us, but we have to choose to let the Holy Spirit in so that our lives may catch on fire as well. Will you choose to let the Holy Spirit move you?

Pray:

Offer a prayer of thankfulness for the Holy Spirit that still resides with you and in you today.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Acts 1:1-11

May 20, 2012

Life Is Different Now

Some years ago, I was privileged to serve a mission church as pastor. We began with a handful of members and a heart full of desire to grow a church that would bring glory to God, bring new persons to Jesus, and bring to our community a quality center for worship, education, and fellowship. It was an intimidating task, but God was faithful, our members worked with passion, and the church became (and remains) healthy and vibrant.

Beginning something new can be frightening, even when we have other models to emulate. Imagine how the apostles felt as they heard Jesus describe the awesome task that lay before them: nothing less than the preaching the gospel throughout the entire world.

Life would be different now.

Who's in charge? (vv. 1-3)

Though today's lesson is our sixth in a series of studies from the Book of Acts, it drops back to the beginning of the book in celebration of Ascension Sunday (May 20) and in preparation for next week's celebration of Pentecost. 📖

The opening verses remind us that the Book of Acts is the second part of a two-volume work that Luke composed and dedicated to his friend (or patron) Theophilus. 📖

Luke's purpose is to explain the life and work of Jesus, both before and after his ascension. In volume one (the gospel), Luke said he had written "about all that Jesus did and taught from the



beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen" (vv. 1-2, NRSV).

Now, Luke begins the Book of Acts by overlapping with the end of the gospel and describing Jesus' post-resurrection appearances in more detail. His purpose was to make it clear that Christ remained the guiding force of the church, even after his resurrection and ascension.

Thomas was not the only follower who needed convincing that Jesus was still alive, and in charge. Perhaps this was why he "presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (v. 3). How many "convincing proofs" would it take for us to truly believe Christ had risen from the dead and now fully expected us to go out on mission? 📖

During this time, Luke tells us, Jesus' teaching focused on the kingdom of God, the eternal reign of God over

all things, a kingdom in which we are called to be willing subjects. Jesus' followers, however, like many modern dispensational premillennialists, still expected the kingdom of God to be expressed through the Jewish nation.

The promise of power (vv. 4-8a)

Jesus knew his followers would need more than knowledge to carry out his purpose: they would need spiritual power. So, "he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father" (v. 4).

The "promise of the Father" would be fulfilled by the power of the Spirit, for Jesus declared that his followers would "be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (v. 5). In his gospel, Luke had recorded the words of John the baptizer: "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16-17).

The scriptures are painfully honest

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in showing how hard it was for the disciples to grasp the true meaning of the master's teaching. Despite their newly strengthened faith in the risen Christ, this is no exception. When Jesus spoke of an outpouring of the Spirit, his followers immediately assumed that Christ was about to fulfill Old Testament hopes of the last days, when a messiah would lead Israel to receive divine forgiveness and renewed national power. "Lord," they asked, "is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6).

Again, Jesus had to correct their misconceptions. The kingdom of God was not about an eschatological future (v. 7) but about the challenging present, not about a restored nation but a global mission. In the gospels, Jesus had said even he did not know the "times and seasons" of the last days (Mark 13:32). Now he reminds the disciples that their business is not to worry about the "then," but the now.

The disciples' kingdom task was an immediate assignment, but they would need God's help to perform it. And so Jesus promised: "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ..." (v. 8a). ↓

We understand this to be a prediction of what would be fulfilled in Acts 2:4, our text for next week, when the Spirit came like a mighty rushing wind and filled the gathered followers with a new and incredible sense of God's presence and power. Through his periodic post-resurrection appearances, Jesus was teaching his disciples that he was still with them, even when they could not see him. Through the post-ascension outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would demonstrate clearly that he was still present. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of Christ, living on in the hearts and lives of believers.

A worldwide witness (v. 8b)

The Spirit would not only comfort Christ's followers, but also energize their work and witness in the world. "But you will receive power," Jesus

said, "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (v. 8).

This statement is so familiar to us that it's easy to overlook how radical it is. Remember that Jesus was speaking to a rag-tag band of disciples who were still hiding behind locked doors for weeks after Jesus' crucifixion. Now Jesus expected the same fearful followers to go out into the streets of Jerusalem and publicly proclaim their relationship with him, though it would be dangerous business — so perilous that the Greek word for "witness" furnishes the root for our English word "martyr."

Jesus expected his followers to not only witness in Jerusalem, but also throughout Judea, the homeland of Jewish power and influence. There would be opposition, antagonism and danger every step of the way. Yet, Christ expected them to be faithful in their testimony.

Jesus' challenge extended even further, as he instructed his followers to witness in Samaria. That region was geographically close, but culturally distant and ethnically inimical. Jesus' early followers were predominantly Jewish, and they had grown up with an intense hatred for Samaritans, former Jews who had become excluded during the post-exilic period. Nothing less than the clear mandate of Christ and the power of the Spirit would impel the Jewish believers to carry the gospel into such a place.

Jesus concluded his missions mandate with a phrase that has rung in the ears of Baptists throughout our history: "... and to the ends of the earth." God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son that whosoever believes in him will not perish. Christ died for all people. This good news has global significance, but the peoples of the world cannot know this unless the followers of Jesus spread the word.

The disciples faced many barriers

as they contemplated the mission Jesus set before them. They would face the external barriers of open conflict and physical danger as they challenged the Jewish people to accept Jesus. They would have to deal with the internal barriers of their own prejudice and small-mindedness as they travelled on to Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Nothing less than the power of God would lead these followers out of their hiding places and into the light. Nothing less than the present Spirit of Christ would set them free from their narrow provincialism and send them forth to proclaim grace to people they had been trained to despise.

Ascendant, yet present (vv. 9-11)

This is why it was so important that Jesus impress upon his followers the indelible truth that, though he was leaving them physically, he would always be present through the Spirit. The disciples had seen Jesus crucified, had seen him buried, and had seen him resurrected. Now, they saw him ascend into heaven (v. 9). They could no longer see Jesus in the flesh, but had no doubt that he was alive and active. Soon they would taste his power.

There is both humor and instruction in the angel's question: "Why are you looking up toward heaven?" (vv. 10-11).

Where else would they be looking? But what the angel's question implies is this: "If you want to see Jesus now, go to Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth. To stay in touch with Jesus, don't look up to the heavens; look inward to the Spirit and outward to the mission field he has given you."

It is only through the power of Christ's Spirit that we can overcome the timidity, apathy and prejudice that stifle our witness. Jesus' challenge is just as real today as it was before the first church building ever took shape. As long as there are people in the world who don't know Christ, his followers will never be out of a job. ↓ BT

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Acts 2:1-21

May 27, 2012

Well, Blow Me Down!

Today we celebrate Pentecost Sunday. Liturgical churches that display symbolic colors for the church year may drape the pulpit or communion table with red. The pastor may wear a red stole or necktie. Women ministers may wear red shoes (most men can't pull that off).

The red color reminds worshippers of the tongues of fire that marked the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in the lives of those who experienced the first Christian Pentecost. Worship planners often seek to recall the excitement of that day through stirring hymns or dramatic readings, and fiery (if not "brimstony") sermons. It is a day for celebrating the amazing gift of God's Spirit.

A mighty wind (vv. 1-4)

The familiar story is worth a closer look. Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan city with residents from all over the world. The streets may also have been packed with Jewish pilgrims who had flocked to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Weeks. ↓

The NRSV begins with "When the day of Pentecost had come," but the word translated as "had come" might be rendered better as "was fulfilled," an expression that suggests more than a date on the calendar arriving. Jesus began his ministry by saying "the time is fulfilled" (Mark 1:15, using a related word), and he had spoken earlier of prophecies concerning the coming of the Spirit being fulfilled (Acts 1:4-5, 8).



Who were the people "gathered in one place" (v. 1), and where were they? In the previous chapter, 120 persons had been gathered in the upper room of a large house as they contemplated the meaning of Christ's ascension, heard Peter speak, and chose Matthias to replace Judas as the 12th apostle (1:12-26). Perhaps we are to imagine a similar number of followers, possibly in the same place.

As they gathered that morning, Luke says that suddenly, "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting" (v. 2).

Luke's account implies that the sound originated with God, for it came "from heaven." The "violent wind" was apparently more sound than fury. The NRSV's "rush of" (NET "blowing") actually translates a verb that normally means "bringing" or "carrying." The whistling sound did not indicate the movement of air, but the arrival of something remarkable.

That something, we will learn in

v. 4, is the Holy Spirit. In another sign of the Spirit's presence, tongues of flame appeared and hovered over the heads of all who were gathered there (v. 3). Ordinarily, one would think that a sudden wind would blow out small flames; this wind blew them in.

Both wind and flame were common symbols of a theophany, the presence of God. ↓ Luke understands the presence of God to be in the form of the Holy Spirit (v. 4), sent in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (1:8). ↓

In a further sign of the Spirit's presence, the gathered believers began to speak, but not in their normal fashion. In Greek, the same word (*glossa*) is used for the tongues of flame and the other tongues with which they spoke, clearly suggesting there is a spiritual component to the speech. Although the familiar King James Version uses the word "tongues" in v. 4, "languages" would be a better translation, since the following verses indicate that people from other lands heard them speak in their own languages.

Additional background information
online where you see the "Digging
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Bewildering speech (vv. 5-13)

With v. 5, Luke shifts the scene from events inside the room to a great crowd that had gathered outside. 🇺🇵 As modern folk hearing a crash or explosion might rush to see what had happened, people walking or living nearby apparently heard the same “sound like the rush of a violent wind” that had filled the house, and they came to see what the excitement was all about. If they could see the flames reportedly hovering over those inside, they might have been even more amazed that the building was still standing.

Luke does not locate the building, but the size of the crowd gathered outside (from whom 3,000 were baptized, according to 2:41), suggests it might have been on the edge of a large public square or some other open space, possibly near the outer courts of the temple.

Luke also says nothing about how the diverse multitude was able to hear the newly “spiritized” persons as they spoke in languages that every person present could understand. Did the empowered believers rush from the building to mingle with the crowd and testify to Christ’s mighty works? 🇺🇵 Did some of the group stand on steps or a raised platform? Peter reportedly addressed the entire crowd while standing with the other 11 disciples, apparently in view of those gathered (2:14).

The people expressed bewilderment, not so much at what the disciples said, but that they could understand what they said, since all of the speakers were from Galilee (vv. 6-7). Jesus had called his first disciples in Galilee, where most of his active ministry took place, and had many followers other than the 12.

Galileans were known for their distinctive regional accent (see Luke 22:59), yet on the Day of Pentecost, people throughout the international audience heard them speaking in their own native languages.

Scholars and others have long

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debated whether the miracle that day was one of speaking or of hearing. Were the disciples given the ability to speak (and presumably understand) a known language, or were they uttering some sort of heavenly language their audience could miraculously understand? The text could lend itself to either interpretation, but the plainer sense suggests they were speaking a known language.

Modern missionaries working in a non-English-speaking country typically spend the first two years of their assignment in language school, learning to communicate with the people they hope to reach. Because of Pentecost, the first wave of missionaries required no such preparation.

Note how Luke combines the observations of many people into what appears to be a single speech as he lists the nations represented that day. Though from different parts of the world, members of the crowd were uniformly Jewish — but not uniform in their response. Though “all were amazed and perplexed” by the events, wondering what it was all about (v. 12), “others sneered and said, ‘They are full of new wine’” (v. 13).

Some interpreters see evidence in v. 13 that the disciples were speaking in *glossolalia*, or unknown tongues, and that some could understand it, while to others it sounded like gibberish. It’s also possible that people could have been overhearing other foreign languages they did not understand, which could also have sounded like nonsense. Cynically, they accused the speakers of being drunk on new wine. 🇺🇵

An insightful sermon (vv. 14-21)

Peter was generally the most outspoken of the disciples, so it’s not surprising that he offered a quick response, forcefully addressing the crowd as “you men

of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem” and insisting they should “listen to what I say” (v. 14).

Charges of drunkenness could easily be dismissed, as Peter said it was only 9 a.m. (v. 15). Wine often accompanied an evening meal, but was not commonly consumed in the morning. Those who were speaking in new languages were not inebriated by spirits, but inspired by the Spirit.

Peter spoke as if his listeners should not be surprised at what they saw. Quoting a familiar scripture, he described the miraculous movement of the Spirit as nothing more than the fulfillment of Joel’s ancient prophecy that a time would come when God would pour out his Spirit on all people, so that people of every race and gender and age would experience God’s Spirit and express their faith through prophecy (vv. 17-18).

Peter reminded his hearers of how Joel had indicated that the day would be marked by signs in the heavens and on earth — signs much like those that had accompanied Christ’s death on the cross (vv. 19-20). Likewise, he pointed to Joel’s prediction that such an event would throw open the gates of heaven, so that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (v. 21).

Our text ends at v. 21, but Peter’s sermon continues through v. 36 as he quoted psalms attributed to David. 🇺🇵 Peter argued that David had predicted the coming of a messiah and called him Lord, which would connect back to the closing line of the quote from Joel, that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

As modern disciples celebrate Pentecost, we need not expect to see it repeated, for the Spirit of Christ has not left the earth and does not need to be “prayed down” again. Those who know the power of the Spirit are not those who happen to be in the right place at the right time, or have hands laid on them in a ceremonial fashion, but those who are humble enough to surrender themselves to the present Lord, whose power is greater than our own. **BT**

Adventures with LULER the Hound



Kelly Belcher

I

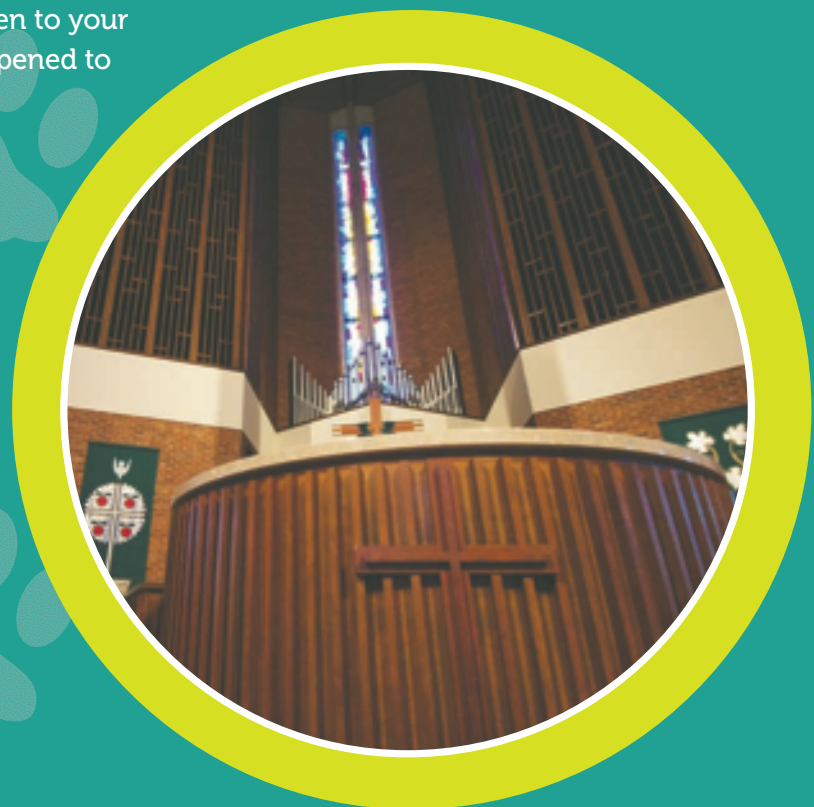
n May, a young hound dog's fancy turns to running fast toward the smell of something new. The weather is warmer, and Luler wants out of the house to roam free and follow the path of her snout's desire.

But first she runs around checking out all the regular spots in the yard where she has found something that smelled good before. She'll go each time in exactly the same order: first the flowerpot, then up the steps to the snake's hidey-hole, then to the fence and garbage can (she loves that), then to the tree where squirrels live – 1,2,3,4,5. The yard is her sanctuary.

What if we did the same thing and found all the important places in our own sanctuaries? Close your eyes and let your memory lead you the way Luler's snout leads her. In your imagination, walk down the aisle of your church's sanctuary, past the pews, to the altar or communion table, then to the pulpit, then over to the organ or piano, then to the baptistery, then to your usual worship seat. What important things have happened to you in these spots?

The Bow-wow

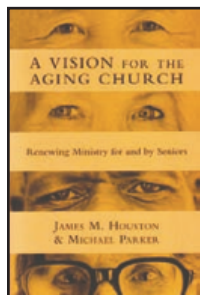
Luler says to get to know the parts of your sanctuary by name and by heart like she knows her backyard.



The Idea Box

Draw a map of your church sanctuary. Do you know the names of the furniture and worship items? What parts are you curious about?

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**Michael Parker and
James Houston**

A Vision for the Aging Church:
Renewing Ministry for and by Seniors

A review by Jackie B. Riley, Managing Editor

Aging church offers challenges, opportunities

“Youth are the church of tomorrow.” For years we have heard this statement in church circles. Based on current population trends of society in general and the church in particular, however, authors Parker and Houston would say that “elders are the church of tomorrow.”

Seniors are not the problem, they contend, but rather the solution. The aging church offers opportunities as well as challenges. Therefore, Parker and Houston call on the church to ...

- Address the moral issues related to caring for seniors.
- Provide successful care-giving programs.
- Restore broken connections across the generations.
- Promote the care and employment of seniors, healthy caregiving practices, caregiving support, late-life planning, aging-in-place initiatives, and strategies for successful aging.
- Uphold the inherent value of dependent, disabled people.
- Reconceive the place and part of the elderly in local congregations.
- Create a vision for change in which the church is a clear stakeholder.
- Work with community-based and ecumenical partnerships.

The authors develop their case well throughout five parts titled “An Ageist Zeitgeist,” “Biblical and Historical Themes of Aging,” “Solutions

for an Aging Church,” “Late Life Significant Living,” and “Finishing Well.”

The stage is set with the authors telling the Old Testament story of Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem joining together to rebuild their city walls, and then relating it to the need for churches to involve elders with persons of other ages in rebuilding modern communities — rather than simply being recipients of caregiving.

This intergenerational approach is confirmed in several ways, including an expanded meaning of caregiving that includes the spiritual and relational dimensions, a theological-scientific approach that explains the benefits of an aging church, and examples of successful intergenerational programs.

The discussion of depression and aging is enlightening — and should garner close attention. The chapter on Alzheimers disease and dementia explains the latter as not only deterioration of the brain but also of a diminishing social environment — and thereby establishes the need for greater involvement of the church with aging persons.

The epilogue relates back to the prologue about Nehemiah and rebuilding: “What a responsibility it is ... to be a

Christian elder ... sometimes giving and sometimes receiving, but always united in Christ and by the scars affixed from a lifetime of service!”

A Vision for the Aging Church needed to be written. Few seminaries offer courses on aging and ministry, so ministers are not well equipped to lead their congregations in dealing with issues regarding the elderly. This volume offers substantive instruction for congregations of varying sizes and faiths and also for secular leaders. And, who better to write it than two people who portray the role of intergenerational connections they advocate?

James Houston is an Oxford-educated theologian in his 80s and the author of 40 books. Michael Parker felt a strong spiritual calling in midlife to redirect his career toward specializing in gerontology, and now teaches at the University of Alabama medical school. These two formed a friendship and professional partnership over issues regarding aging populations in churches.

Endorsed by physicians and sociologists along with ministerial professionals, *A Vision for the Aging Church* ably combines research and scriptural application. The blend of academic and ministry aspects flows naturally and in a positive tone that makes sense and also confirms the need for the church's role in caregiving and seeing elders as positives to the church.

The book is not a quick read, but is nevertheless quite approachable and understandable because of the short chapters and thoughtfully organized text. **BT**



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BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

As the month of April dawns, the Confederacy is reeling from Union advances in the state of Tennessee. Andrew Johnson now serves as the military governor of Tennessee, appointed by U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. Meanwhile, U.S. General Ulysses S. Grant advances into the southwestern portion of the state.

Disillusioned but not entirely defeated, the Confederates regroup in western Tennessee. Stopping Grant's advance is imperative.

On April 6, two Confederate armies launch a surprise attack on Grant's army, which is leisurely encamped near Shiloh Baptist Church, a small log church inland from Pittsburg Landing on the Tennessee River. Confederate forces, some 55,000 strong under generals Albert S. Johnston and P.G.T. Beauregard, push Grant's army back toward Pittsburg Landing. Thousands of Union soldiers are captured in the bloodiest day of the Civil War to date.

As night falls, the Confederates are certain they have bested Grant. Yet Union reinforcements arrive in the evening, and the next morning Grant launches a counterattack, driving the Confederates back to the Shiloh Baptist Church, where they make a last stand before retreating in defeat.

The Union thus wins a great victory, while the Confederacy suffers a shocking defeat. In response, President Lincoln decrees a national day of Thanksgiving, while the Confederate Congress passes the South's first Conscription Act.

Beyond the momentary emotions, the carnage of the Battle of Shiloh is staggering: 10,000 Confederate casualties and 13,000 Union casualties. One year into the war, any hope of the conflict ending with one great battle is lost. North and South now realize the immensity of the challenges ahead.

In the wake of Shiloh, Rev. S. Dryden

Phelps of the First Baptist Church of New Haven, Conn., preaches a sermon titled "National Symptoms," in which he declares:

A year of civil war in our country we never expected to witness. But it is now a matter of experience and history.... we believe a New and brighter Day will spring from this National night of ours. Its symptoms already appear. Its strokes of dawn gild the horizon. The first anniversary of the war comes with events as startling as those that marked its beginning, and far more propitious.... God signals the coming Morn by His manifest Interpositions in our behalf....

The morning cometh evidently, from the present aspects of the ever-perplexing Slavery question. There is



now increasing hope of our ultimately becoming a free nation.... This war, waged by its instigators in the interest of human bondage, has done more to break down that system, and thus freed more slaves in one year, than all other agencies seemed likely to accomplish in a lifetime. Indeed, slavery can never regain its former power, but must in time pass away, as utterly at variance with the fundamental principles of our Republic and the moral sense of the civilized world, and no doubt abhorrent to God, who seems to be over-ruling the wrath of man for its overthrow.... O blessed Day of death

150 YEARS AGO

April 1862

to Treason and Slavery, come! O glorious Day of a brighter Liberty, and a freer Land, over all which the starry folds of our dear Banner shall wave in triumph and peace, come! Come, O longed-for Day of Righteousness, and thou conquering Prince of Salvation, come!

Union triumphs this month do not stop at Shiloh. Fort Pulaski on the coast of Georgia is captured by Union forces, sealing off coastal access to Savannah. Union naval forces sail up the Mississippi River and force the surrender of New Orleans. President Lincoln frees the remaining 3,500 slaves in Washington, D.C.

Yet, as the month draws to a close, white Southern Baptists are undaunted. The Georgia Baptist Convention meets and passes the following resolutions:

Resolved, That while profoundly feeling our cause is just, we nevertheless have great reason to humble ourselves before Almighty God, and to acknowledge his chastening hand in our late reverses. Resolved, That we find in the present circumstances of the country no cause for discouragement; that God, our heavenly Father, often chastens most promptly those whom he most loves; and that, trusting in Him with the whole heart, we are more and more determined, by His blessing, to oppose the invader of our soil by ever means placed in our power and to the last extremity.

The stage is thus set for three more years of an increasingly-bloody war. **BT**

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

Runaway Bunnies

The graduates sang a rousing rendition of “We’re on Our Way to Kindergarten.” Mrs. Ayres gave out the “Certificates of Completion.” (They went in alphabetical order. Youngers learn to be patient.) We had cupcakes and cookies and then stepped out into the bright light of the post-pre-kindergarten world.

I enjoyed graduation, but the real rite of passage took place earlier that morning in my office at 8:05. Almost three years earlier, Caleb began attending the Children’s Center at our church two mornings a week. On his first day Caleb was apprehensive, so we took three books from home (*Spot Counts from 1 to 10, But Not the Hippopotamus*, and *The Runaway Bunny*) to read before going downstairs. The next day we read the same three books. We kept them on my shelf, but soon decided to pick a book from the church library each day. We quickly had a full-blown ritual. We would drop Graham off at school, park in front, unlock the door, turn on the lights, go to the library, pick out a book, and read it in my office.

As a 4-year-old, Caleb came to the Children’s Center three mornings a week. The next year, it was five mornings. So, we read in my office more than 300 mornings. We learned about nature (*Our Yard Is Full of Birds*). We read books with noises (*The Very Quiet Cricket*) and blinking lights (*The Very Lonely Firefly*). We made friends with Corduroy, Babar, Chrysanthemum, and Wilfrid Gordon McDonald Partridge. We introduced discussions on the family with *Daddy Makes the Best Spaghetti* — my favorite — and dealt with social issues such as prejudice (*Frog and Toad Together*) and war and peace (*The Butter Battle Book*). We tackled theology with *God Made It All*, *Carol Beth Learns about Following Jesus* and *When I Talk to God*.



Brett and Caleb Younger enjoying great literature

As we opened the front door on our last day of pre-kindergarten, I said: “Caleb, this is the last morning we’ll read a book before going downstairs, so pick a good one.” He thought about it for a long time. I thought he would choose a recent favorite — *The Little Baby SnoogleFleejer*, *The Cowboy and the Black-eyed Pea*, or *The Giant Jam Sandwich*. Instead my suddenly very grown-up soon-to-be-kindergartner said, “Let’s read the old ones.”

It may have been the last time that I heard *Spot Counts from 1 to 10*. We counted one cow chewing, two horses trotting and three ducks swimming. We squealed with four piglets squealing, clucked at five chickens clucking, and when 10 bees buzzed we shut the book fast before any could escape.

We read *But Not the Hippopotamus* in unison. We reminisced with the hog and the frog cavorting in the bog, the cat and two rats trying on hats, the moose and the goose who together have juice, and the bear and the hare who went to the fair. When the animal pack came running on back saying “Hey come join the lot of us” and “She just didn’t know. Should she stay? Should

she go?” ... we shouted joyfully “But yes the hippopotamus!” and feigned tears on “But not the armadillo.”

The Runaway Bunny, not normally a tearjerker, got to me. The little bunny (just like, I imagine, every pre-kindergarten graduate) feels a need to put some distance between him and his parents. His mother keeps saying, “If you run away, I will run after you. You are my little bunny.” If he becomes a fish, she will be a fisherman. If he becomes a rock on the mountain, she will be a mountain climber. If he becomes a bird, she will be a tree to which he comes home. By the time we read that if he became a little boy, she would be his mother and catch him in her arms and hug him, I was telling Caleb that my allergies were acting up.

My little bunny is now waiting on college admission letters. Caleb will graduate from high school next month. This graduation may feel even more momentous than pre-kindergarten. In our mushiest moments we know that the love we know overwhelms all the sorrow we feel. **BT**

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

Atheists likely to outnumber Christians in England in 20 years

By Al Webb
Religion News Service

LONDON — Christianity is waning in England and could be outnumbered by non-believers within 20 years, according to a new study.

The study conducted by the British Parliament showed there were 41 million Christians in Britain, down nearly 8 percent since 2004. Meanwhile, the number of non-believers stood at 13.4 million, up 49 percent

over the same period.

Researchers at the House of Commons Library concluded that Christianity had declined to 69 percent of the population while those with no religion increased to 22 percent.

“If these populations continue to shrink and grow by the same number of people each year,” the study said, “the number of people with no religion will overtake the number of Christians in Great Britain in 20 years.”

The research was based on the government Office for National Statistics’ annual

labor force survey, considered authoritative because it examines a sample size of 50,000 people.

The “Religion in Great Britain” survey also found that from 2004-2010, the number of Muslims in Britain grew by 37 percent, to 2.6 million.

England’s Hindu population rose by 43 percent, to 790,000, and Buddhists by 74 percent, to 340,000. The numbers of Jews and Sikhs were reported down slightly, at 270,000 and 340,000, respectively. **BT**



Israeli postmen refuse to deliver Hebrew-language Bibles

By Michele Chabin
Religion News Service

JERUSALEM — Israeli postal workers outside Tel Aviv are refusing to deliver thousands of copies of the New Testament and other Hebrew-language Christian materials.

Israel media reported that dozens of religious and secular Jewish mail deliverers jointly informed their supervisors that disseminating the materials goes against their religious beliefs.

The workers, who deliver mail in Ramat Gan, assert that delivering the items would be tantamount to proselytizing and therefore a violation of Jewish law.

Proselytizing is a sensitive issue among Jewish Israelis, who feel the Jewish people have already lost too many adherents to the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust and other times of Jewish persecution.

Israel’s anti-missionary law prohibits offering people monetary incentives in order to

convince them to adopt another faith. It also bans proselytizing to minors. It does not prevent the dissemination of written material.

The Israel Postal Company told Ynet News that it is “a governmental company operating in accordance to the postal law, which obligates us to distribute any mail it receives. The Israel Postal Company has no right or ability to choose what it can or cannot distribute. Therefore, the mail will be distributed according to the law.” **BT**



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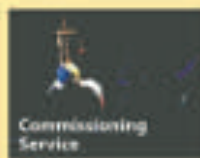


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Experienced relief worker to head BWAid

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — Rothangliani Rema Chhangte has been tapped as the new director of Baptist World Aid (BWAid), which provides global disaster relief and economic development services. She succeeds Paul Montecute who retires in July.



Chhangte (pronounced “shan-tay”) is a native of India, where her father worked as an administrator of a hospital and was actively involved in Baptist life, including the Baptist World Alliance. She was educated at Bethel University, Eastern University, and Palmer Theological Seminary, earning degrees in economic development and theology.

Chhangte currently serves as pastor of Woodland Baptist Church in Philadelphia and has held leadership positions with the American Baptist Churches USA, Church World Service and the World Council of Churches.

She has helped coordinate disaster relief efforts through the ABCUSA and BWAid, and was founder and director of the Asian American Youth Association. She previously served on the BWA General Council, has wide experience working with refugee populations, and currently serves as liaison to Burmese refugees for the American Baptist Home Mission Societies.

Search committee chair Jerry Carlisle said Chhangte is skilled at budgeting, fundraising and working cross-culturally — and that “BWA has been in her DNA from birth.” He described her as having superior diplomatic skills and wide experience with non-governmental organizations.

Chhangte, he said, has a vision for BWAid “to be the premier relief and development agency for Baptist churches worldwide.”

The executive committee voted unanimously to approve her appointment. The BWA’s general council will be asked to affirm the appointment at the annual gathering in Santiago, Chile, July 2-7. **BT**

Baptists Today joins North American Baptist Fellowship

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — The independent news journal *Baptists Today* was accepted for membership in the North American Baptist Fellowship (NABF), a regional body of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA).

During a March 9 meeting, the membership application was approved and Tony Cartledge was elected as one of 12 at-large members of the NABF executive committee. He is the contributing editor for *Baptists Today*, whose assignments include coverage of global Baptists. He also serves as chair of the BWA Communications Committee.

“*Baptists Today* enjoys mutually beneficial partnerships where there are both shared values and respect for one another’s autonomy,” said Executive Editor John Pierce. “We are glad to build communication bridges across the global Baptist family.” **BT**

Pastor and human rights advocate Palacios honored

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — Edgar Palacios, associate pastor of Christian education at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., is the winner of the 2012 Baptist World Alliance’s Denton and Janice Lotz Human Rights Award. Palacios was featured in the January issue of *Baptists Today*.

Palacios worked as a Baptist pastor and advocate of social justice prior to and during the civil war that wracked his native El Salvador from 1980-1992. He helped to organize the Permanent Committee for the National Debate

for Peace, a group of religious and social organizations seeking change, and was chosen to be its leader. He sought dialogue between the U.S.-supported government and the FMLN, an armed rebel group seeking social reform.

Palacios was targeted for assassination by government agents. In November 1989, after six Jesuit priests were murdered by a government-sponsored “death squad” and FMLN forces advanced on San Salvador, Palacios made his way to Washington, D.C., where he and his wife, Amparo, lobbied the

U.S. Congress to end military aid to the El Salvadoran government.

Palacios later returned to El Salvador, where he urged the United Nations and the Organization of American States to press for a just and peaceful solution, and assisted in the negotiations. In recognition of his important role, Palacios was invited to be present when peace accords were signed in 1992.

Palacios continues to advocate for social justice for the poor and for immigrants in Washington, D.C., and also travels often to El Salvador where he is a trusted consultant to church and governmental officials. **BT**

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“American individualism, consumerism, affluence, and activities that involve kids’ sports and adult hobbies are church competitors like never before.”

Pastoral *perspectives*

DALLAS — Pastor George Mason and Wilshire Baptist Church are known for training successful young pastors through a groundbreaking two-year pastoral residency program that receives support from the Lilly Endowment.

Mason grew up on Staten Island, N.Y. He attended the University of Miami where he played quarterback for the Hurricanes. He earned M.Div. and Ph.D. degrees from Southwestern Baptist Seminary.

He has served Wilshire since 1989, coming from the pastorate of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala. He currently chairs the committee charged with recommending a new executive coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

BT: How would you briefly describe your leadership style as a pastor?

Mason: One image that I keep coming back to is the leader of a band. In a jazz combo, the bandleader passes the spotlight around while others support that one by playing along.

Everyone gets a chance to solo, but it’s never really a solo because everyone else is cooperating and encouraging the one who is leading in that moment. At times it’s the bandleader in that lead role, but otherwise it’s the work of the leader to make sure the music goes on, the song is being well played, etc.

As a pastor, I know there are times when I am front and center. Other staff and laypersons also have their turns to lead, in which case I will play a supportive role and not get in their way.

But I still have to keep my eye on how we are doing in achieving our mission, which sometimes requires me to step in or to ask others to step up. For the most part, I try to lead with a light hand but with clear vision and a confident presence.

From George Mason

Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas

BT: Can you identify a couple of the biggest challenges in pastoral ministry today and share how you and your congregation are facing them?

Mason: Participation and stewardship are two significant challenges. The self-definition of an active member has shifted from attending about three times per month to about once per month. It’s difficult to have continuity, to preach sermon series, to staff Sunday school, and to count on common knowledge when people are AWOL so often.

The subtle shift from a sense of being part of a covenant community to being an attender when convenient is a huge challenge. American individualism, consumerism, affluence, and activities that involve kids’ sports and adult hobbies are church competitors like never before.

One additional challenge is finding a way to lead a church by the guiding principle of what Kavin Rowe has called “traditioned innovation.” Failure is found both in being shackled to tradition or unshackled in innovation. Somehow we need a faithful tethering to tradition, along with a spirit that allows us to adapt to the challenges of our time.

One such example is the recovery of the notion of the believer’s church that believer’s baptism by immersion is a symbol of but not necessarily the definition of. Our commitment to a believer’s church should allow us to respect the conscience of believers who have been baptized as infants (thus getting the order wrong, by our reckoning, but nonetheless believing and being baptized) or of believers who have been

baptized by sprinkling or pouring.

To exclude them from membership today, after the battle of church-state separation has been won and soul liberty is otherwise practiced, is to judge all other churches as false and every other baptism invalid. Most of our members no longer believe this, but our baptismal practice has not caught up with our belief.

BT: What do you know now that you wish you had known earlier as a pastor?

Mason: I wish I had figured out earlier that I didn’t have to be the key figure all the time. I have learned that I don’t have to write the pastor’s column every week, or teach every Wednesday Bible study, or attend every staff or committee meeting.

Sharing ministry leadership strengthens the whole body, keeps me fresher, and prevents the church from being too identified with the pastor’s style and personality.

BT: Is denominational identity and engagement important to you — and to your congregation? How do you engage with other churches, and what value does that bring?

Mason: Church autonomy can too easily lead to independence and away from cooperation. Denominational identity and engagement keep the church moored to a tradition and prevent it from becoming isolated or deluded into thinking it is self-sufficient.

The bigness of the body of Christ requires our intentional interaction and partnership with other Baptist and Christian churches. We can do that through traditional means of associations, conventions and fellowships, and also through direct and select partnerships with other churches.

EDITOR’S NOTE:

In this new series, experienced pastors are asked the same seven questions about the important and sometimes misunderstood work they provide in congregational leadership and care. The monthly feature is designed to help pastors learn from one another and to give others greater insight into the multi-faceted work of pastors in changing times.



BT: How do you keep a balanced life that allows for personal time and study while being accessible to your congregation?

Mason: It's not easy to keep a balanced life in ministry, but I try to remind myself that that challenge is not unique to ministry. Everyone has that challenge.

We tend to address it too much these days on the side of balance, I think. And that means we start setting up ministry against our life away from the church as if we are divided selves.

There's a lot of attention given in seminaries and divinity schools to setting boundaries and making sure that you work when you work and are home when you are home. But I think this has gone a bit too far. We are better off focusing on the life of being a minister more than the balance part of it.

There needs to be a healthy flow between my being a distinct person and my being an ordained minister. It should be difficult to separate those two, even if we distinguish them. *I am called, and I am called.*

When I try to set my boundaries too strictly, I tend to get resentful of the demands of the work and forget the enormous privileges of the life of being a pastor. I believe I am a better human being because I am a pastor, and I hope I am also a better pastor because I am a healthy human being.

BT: Every church member knows exactly the right time for scheduling worship and the proper format of the service. The problem, of course, is that these are as different as the people. How do you, as a pastoral leader, plan worship with such varied expectations?

Mason: We do not try to be all things to all people. There are many other churches that worship differently from us. God is at work in all of them.

We have a distinct culture of worship that reflects the need for reverence and transcendence as well as immediate experience. Our worship is Baptist in its call for response and conversion, but it is also ecumenical in its liturgical format.

We have a flavor of Baptist experientialism, but our unity with the body of Christ is also expressed in our commitment to the church year and common texts. Another way we keep that fresh is by using many lay worship leaders in each service, so that over time the congregation is educated about how and why we worship as we do.

Worship should never be the performance of the clergy for the laity; it is always the people's work (liturgy). And this is especially true for Baptists, who believe that clergy are a subset of the laity and not a separate category of Christians.

BT: What keeps you coming back for more?

Mason: These days I am inspired and encouraged by young ministers and their formation more than by my own work.

I still love being a pastor, with all its attendant duties of preaching and teaching and leading and being a healing presence of Christ at the most crucial moments of people's lives. But I truly love helping and seeing young people discern their call and find their way in ministry.

I like very much being for them "a guide on the side" more than "a sage on the stage." Our church has worked to become a teaching congregation, and it takes that role quite seriously. This is one of the more important ways we believe we can contribute to the wider church. **BT**

This is more or less important to churches depending upon how important it is to the pastor. Although there are exceptions to this, it seems to me that churches tend to take on the vision of the pastor about denominational identity and engagement.

My former pastor and mentor, Charles Wade, once said that it's a fallacy that back in the heyday of the Southern Baptist Convention everyone was on board with growing their gifts to the Cooperative Program. Even then, the pastor had to keep advocating for missions and cooperation. The same is true today.

There is little blind loyalty today. We are all more loyal critics now, knowing more about our mission partners than ever before and wanting more from them as well. This can sometimes lead to unfair carping, but it can also reflexively demand more from those of us who call on our mission partners to be good stewards of church dollars.

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A case for ministry

Attorney's new calling affirmed in Mobile

MOBILE, Ala. — When attorney Bart McNiel shared his calling to ministry with the deacons and congregation of First Baptist Church of Mobile, the universal response was, “It’s about time!”

According to pastor Chris George: “When Bart expressed his desire to respond to God’s calling, I externally maintained my composure and provided a ministerial affirmation, but internally experienced a celebration.”

McNiel’s move toward his call to ministry seemed to be a long time in coming to fruition. At the age of 14, he walked to the front center stage of a youth conference with scores of other emotional teenagers responding to an evangelist’s plea to come forward if they could sense God calling them to full-time Christian service.

Over the next few years — and multiple youth conferences and zealous evangelists later — McNiel continued to follow that sense of call throughout his teen years, and then completed undergraduate and graduate studies in religion at Florida State University.

However, McNiel came to resent ministers who he felt specialized in manipulating children and teens at their most vulnerable stages of physical and emotional maturity. He wondered if he was headed toward ministry simply because, as the son of Baptist missionaries, it was what he knew best.

So, he changed vocational direction. Three years later, he graduated with a law degree and spent the next 12 years building a career as a civil defense litigator.

But as a student and a young lawyer, McNiel remained active in church life. In the congregations he joined, however, he found that his missionary background, love of Bible stories, and studies in religion often landed

him behind a pulpit.

“Over many years,” said McNiel, “more than one fellow church member remarked that I had missed my calling.”

Giving up a successful career as a defense attorney was hard to imagine, however. Yet he would accept opportunities to teach and preach in his church — even though he often worked 60 to 70-hour weeks.

“What was apparent to so many around me started to become clear to me,” said McNiel. “Christian ministry had become my passion.”

But he felt that his daily grind had become essential if for no other reason than to pay for a large custom home and the promise of the ever-elusive American dream.

“What I was teaching and sometimes preaching on Sunday was an indictment of everything I had become — Christ asked me not to worry about tomorrow, but I could not stop chasing tomorrow long enough to see today.”

Before the church was aware of this decision, Bart and his wife, Stacey, put their home up for sale as a visible sign of their commitment. When the calling was finally shared with the Mobile congregation, there was much rejoicing.

“It has been evident to many people for many years that God has been working through Bart to minister in our church community,” said George. “In both the deacon council and the church in conference, Bart received unanimous support.”

First Baptist Mobile wasn’t the only partnership that his pastor wanted for McNiel. George worked with Ronnie Brewer, coordinator of Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, to bring together several ministers throughout the state to share advice and wisdom from their ministry experiences.

As a result, those involved are putting together a program that can be shared with



other congregations who affirm and ordain one of their own members. The plan is also designed to strengthen bonds among the ministers in the region who have much collective experience and wisdom to share with prospective pastors.

Since McNiel was not a typical candidate for ordination, the church sought a way for him to serve at First Baptist Church of Mobile and to learn more about the practice of ministry, worship planning and pastoral care. So a pastoral resident internship was born.

On a quarterly basis, the internship incorporates various aspects of ministry — as well as a reading list ranging from pastoral care and counseling to fictional writings that are relevant to contemporary challenges of the church.

The church provides a setting for spiritual growth and practical experience for McNiel while he enhances the church’s pastoral ministry.

“Thus far, the internship has exceeded expectations and been a wonderful blessing to both Bart and our congregation,” said George.

He described the experience in terms of two callings: “God’s calling for Bart to commit to Christian service, embarking upon a difficult journey toward full-time Christian ministry — and God’s calling for First Baptist Church Mobile to provide a place for Bart to learn, live, love and experience God’s work in our church community.” **BT**

By Tommy McDearis

Remembering Melissa

A tribute to a well-lived life

It was one of the hardest emails I have ever written to my church:

Today we mourn the loss of our good friend and fellow minister, Melissa Cheliras. Only 33 years old, her life seems so unfinished. However, few ministers I have known touched more lives as positively as did hers. She was a dear friend who joined our church as a freshman in college. I had known her for almost 15 years. Cancer claimed her days on earth. God claimed her life, soul and spirit — and what a spirit it was!

Few people have made such an impact for Christ in so few years. This young woman embodied the spiritual gifts of humility and commitment as well as anyone I have known.

The qualities found in Gal. 5:22-23 — “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” — formed the key to her life as a minister.

When Melissa moved to Boston as a Baptist home missionary, she lamented “the sad fact” that so few people her age attended church. After pondering how to reach a largely unreached population, and after reading several books on evangelism that she found interesting but less helpful than she had hoped, Melissa made a risky decision.

Recognizing the signs of spiritual hunger, Melissa launched into a relational outreach that was radical, yet very Christ-like. If the people would not come to church, she would go to the people.

Realizing those her age congregated in bars instead of churches, Melissa went there to create relationships. After spending months of meeting people and gaining trust, she started a discussion group called “Theology on Tap.”

Melissa then began inviting these young people to come to the new church with which she was working. To the surprise of no one who knew Melissa, many of those “Theology on Tappers” began attending the church.

Her college ministry in Boston took a similar approach. Melissa went to the students and formed friendships. Then she began some



small discussion groups that became Bible studies. She then invited these curious students to her church — and they came!

Then she led those students to team with other Christian students on campus to do what she had done — start their own groups. The result was new disciples who professed faith because Melissa had the courage to think outside the comfort zones of most ministers and churches.

One of her signature questions was, “OK, where is Jesus in that?” Melissa always sought the goal of doing something great for Christ.

When Melissa returned to Blacksburg, she asked about the vision of our church. When she realized our vision remained that of mission outreach, she joined and became involved.

She worked with college students and taught a youth Bible study. She became a volunteer staff member to help form new outreach endeavors. She served on ministry teams and in mission projects. Most of all, she became an encourager to those around her, including her ministers.

Early in my ministry in Blacksburg I lamented that we were not reaching many students. It was then-20-year-old Melissa who suggested that I go to students. She

accompanied me to those places and introduced me to students she had already met.

Sure enough, those students began talking to me — and some came to church. Some were baptized, and they in turn invited others. Those years were our most successful at reaching students. It was Melissa who led the way.

My daughter, Kathryn, met me at Melissa’s funeral. She told me that only a month earlier Melissa had called her at James Madison University — just to see how college was going and to assure Kathryn of her prayers.

“I’m fine,” Kathryn told Melissa, who was quite ill. “There’s nothing wrong in my life that study and work doesn’t solve.”

Kathryn added: “You don’t need to pray for me; let’s pray for you.” To which Melissa’s replied: “We can do both.” She ministered to the end.

On Monday, Feb. 12, a day appropriately filled with sunshine, we celebrated the life of Melissa Cheliras at her home church in Chesapeake, Va. The sanctuary designed for 480 was packed with nearly 550 people from several states. Others joined the service by video feed in the chapel.

For 90 minutes we sang, told stories, read Melissa’s favorite scriptures, and shared memories of one of the best Christians I have ever known. I wish I understood why this exceptional witness for the Lord was lost at such an early age. It seems she had so much more to offer.

Yet, while I do not have an answer, I do know one thing for certain: Melissa’s 33 years were well invested; her life counted on earth as it did in heaven.

Goodbye, dear Missy. We do so love and miss you! Well done, good and faithful servant. Today you dance in your healing place where no pain will ever harm you. Thank God! **BT**

—Tommy McDearis is pastor of Blacksburg Baptist Church in Blacksburg, Va.

Pastor-Judge

Little Rock's Wendell Griffen proclaims justice in two roles

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Pastor Wendell Griffen fills the pulpit of New Millennium Church with his physical presence and the power of his words. He is strong, but not boisterous; he is insightful, not but aloof.

The sermon for this Sunday morning is a call to be prophetic people — modeled after Jesus.

“Jesus is no less savior for his prophetic work and no less prophet for his saving work,” said Pastor Griffen.

He contrasted the life and teachings of Jesus to some religious leaders of his day who overemphasized following religious law at the expense of dispensing love and grace. He called Jesus the “un-scribe.”

“Jesus didn’t call us to be scribes but to be prophetic agents of change in his world,” he added.

Getting practical, Griffen spoke to his year-old congregation that meets in the Lakeshore Drive Baptist Church sanctuary about ways of being prophetic today — including ministry to returning military veterans and persons who have been incarcerated.

“You only do baby food so long, then you get chores,” he said, calling the congregation to an active faith.

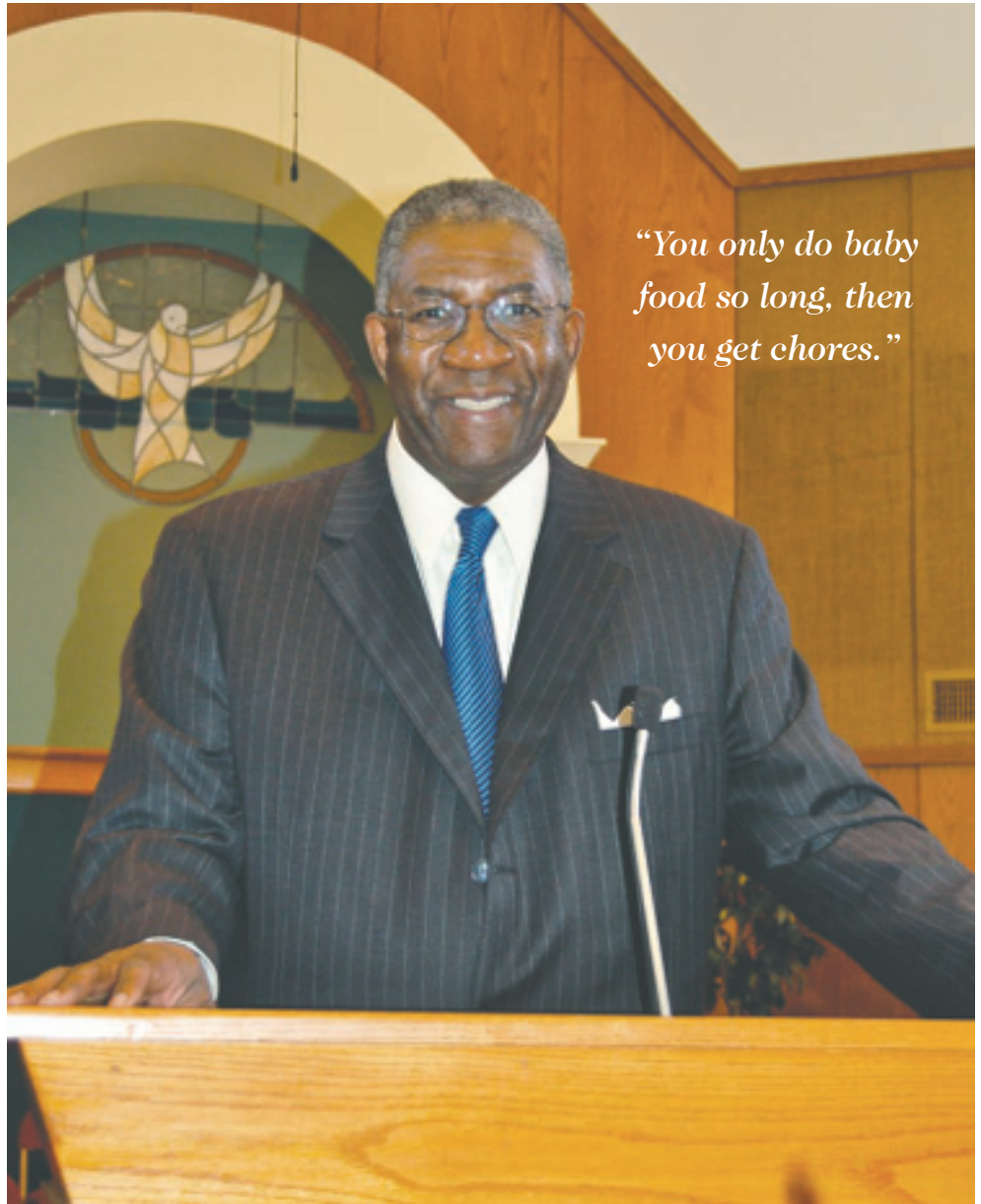
He told of a retired pastor who mentioned having never gone behind prison walls. Griffen — who is also an appeals court judge — shook his head in disbelief.

“We don’t need more scribes,” he continued his sermon. “You and I are called to follow Jesus, the un-scribe. Let us not do less.”

The music at New Millennium is traditional yet upbeat. LaVante Pettigrew added soft saxophone sounds to the organ and piano accompaniment while the congregation sang “Oh, How I Love Jesus” and “Just a Closer Walk With Thee.”

Then the young man, who was scheduled for baptism the following Sunday, sang a soulful rendition of “Fix Me, Jesus” for the offertory reflection.

There is a sense of welcome at New



“You only do baby food so long, then you get chores.”

Millennium where quick smiles and warm embraces are commonplace before and after worship. During the formal welcome, Griffen acknowledged guests, shared prayer concerns and promoted upcoming activities.

He told congregants that his wife Patricia, a clinical psychologist, was recovering well from eye surgery. He relayed her request for continued prayers and her report that “her husband is doing a decent job” in providing care.

He announced upcoming occasions in which women will fill the pulpit. But he quickly added that their doing so was not a special emphasis: “We believe women preach year ‘round.”

But on this day it was Pastor-Judge Wendell Griffen who gave the charge.

“Somebody said, ‘Be ye doers of the Word,’” he reminded his listeners. “That’s what prophets do!” **BT**

LITTLE ROCK — An appeals court judge and Baptist minister, Wendell Griffen brings many gifts to both callings. He is an Arkansas native, Army veteran and graduate of the University of Arkansas School of Law.

Griffen was the first African American to join a major law firm in Little Rock. He took to the bench in 1996 after then-Gov. Jim Guy Tucker appointed him to the Court of Appeals.

Baptists Today editor John Pierce posed questions to Griffen, who currently serves on a search committee to find the next executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

BT: How would you describe your dual calling as a judge and minister? In what ways does one role inform the other?

Griffen: I consider my work as judge and as minister to be part of who God has created me to be. Both functions are based on commitment to social justice.

Justice is always a moral issue first, and becomes social because of our relationship actions and misconduct. So ministry and judging go hand in hand.

BT: How did you get connected to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship? How does that relationship enable your ministry?

Griffen: I was engaged in seminary extension studies when the fundamentalist faction gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention. Although I belonged to a National Baptist congregation, I knew white Baptists who were followers of an inclusive, intellectually humble, and socially engaging gospel and I wanted to be in fellowship with them.

Tom Logue, Robert Ferguson and other “goodwill Baptists” in Central Arkansas encouraged my early ministry in



Pastor Wendell Griffen greets church member Bettye Brown before worship.

the late 1980s. [Current CBF of Arkansas Coordinator] Ray Higgins reached out to our new church start in a very genuine way in 2009.

Tom Logue, with his typical gentleness and kindness, asked that I use what had been his former CBF of Arkansas office as my church study. [Pastor] Matt Cook and Chris Ellis of Second Baptist Church in Little Rock reached out to partner with New Millennium almost from the time we became a congregation.

The CBF relationship New Millennium enjoys is based on that kind of support.

BT: You are a strong advocate for reforming the justice system that you know so well. From your insider perspective, what are the major areas that need attention?

Griffen: We must rethink what justice means in a systemic way. Justice involves more than the outcomes of legal controversies. The causes for social conflict must also be understood and addressed.

We are seeing support for public education for every child attacked. Social service agencies (governmental and non-governmental) are under attack. Meanwhile, our society steadily invests more in private prisons and tactical weapons for police agencies.

We must also turn away from the mass incarceration mindset developed over the past 40 years. A society is more just when people who are poor, vulnerable, immigrant, and socially marginalized are protected and free, not when they are targeted for incarceration.

That mindset and social ethic isn't politically popular, but justice is rarely popular (politically or otherwise). That's why

prophets are the key proponents of social justice in the Bible rather than princes and priests.

BT: The Bible speaks a great deal about justice. What are some ways churches can be more engaged in justice issues today?

Griffen: Start with your understanding of the gospel of Jesus and why you are a congregation. You need a justice sense about the gospel of Jesus that guides your sense of ministry.

The whole Bible should be preached, taught and understood as dealing with love, truth and justice, not about privilege and maintaining the status quo.

I wish every pastor and church leadership team would study Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, along with Dr. King's “A Time to Break Silence” sermon (preached April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church in New York).

Churches will never become more involved with social justice if pastors and other leaders (lay and ordained) cling to the un-biblical notion that following Jesus is simply a matter of private piety and social privilege.

So I would focus on changing how people think about the gospel of Jesus. Ministry efforts are based on what we believe we're called to be and do for God as followers of Jesus.

BT: What are your hopes for New Millennium Baptist Church?

Griffen: My hopes are reflected in the “Affirmation of Oneness and Purpose” we share during each Sunday worship service when we say: “We praise and worship God together. We petition God together. We proclaim God together. We welcome all persons in God's love together. We live for God in every breath and heartbeat by the power of the Holy Spirit as followers of Jesus Christ, together.”

That is what I pray we will do “in every breath and heartbeat” to the glory of God. **BT**

To tithe or not to tithe?

Reblog

By Tony W. Cartledge

The reported historic low in tithing among Americans should come as no surprise to anyone who plays a role in trying to balance church budgets. Often programs are being cut, mission offerings sliced, and staff positions pared away because the money just isn't there anymore.

The recession plays a role, but not the only one. The practice of tithing is fading away, and sometimes with the encouragement of church leaders who fear an emphasis on giving will chase away current or prospective members.

A survey of "evangelical leaders" by the National Association of Evangelicals found that 58 percent of the respondents don't believe the Bible requires tithing, though 95 percent of them claimed to do so, and virtually all of them believe that God calls Christians to be generous.

It is often reported that Mormons tithe at a much higher rate than either conservative or mainline Christian groups. But Mormons are required to tithe in order to participate in temple

rituals and remain in the good graces of the institution.

For the most part, neither Protestants nor Catholics believe tithing is a requirement of faith. Protestants in particular put a lot of trust in the New Testament teaching that salvation comes through the grace of God, not by human works — though it's also believed that those who are saved by grace should show evidence of their faith through good works, including generosity.

The notion of tithing comes from the Hebrew Bible, which describes a fairly complex system of tithes and offerings given in support of the temple and the poor. The Hebrew word translated as "tithe" literally means "tenth," which gave rise to the idea that believers should contribute one-tenth of their income to God's work.

I don't believe tithing is essential for salvation, nor that Christians should tithe as a down payment on greater blessings in return (as some teach, based on Malachi 3:10). But tithing plays a very important role in the living out of



Selections from recent blogs at baptiststoday.org

our faith.

Tithing shouldn't be thought of as a legalistic requirement for church participation; otherwise, we might as well be selling indulgences or charging fees to remain in good standing with the church. Nor should it be taught as a ticket to greater riches, which is all about selfishness and greed, the antithesis of the gospel.

Still, it seems obvious that those who participate in and benefit from a church ought to support it. As for the amount, I always thought 10 percent is a good place to start.

Jesus' teaching, and examples we find in the early church, suggest we should be willing to give everything for the sake of the kingdom — which makes 10 percent seem a bit chintzy.

Pastors and other church leaders should never be embarrassed about preaching or teaching on the subject of stewardship. One doesn't have to appeal to a legalistic tithe in order to demonstrate the importance of generosity and the common-sense reality that churches and their ministries cannot survive if their members don't support them.

If our faith really matters to us, we won't tithe because we have to, but because we want to. **BT**

Taking ourselves too seriously is serious mistake

By John Pierce

Over the years I've not always lived up to my philosophy that the right balance in life is to take the Gospel seriously while not taking oneself too seriously. But I sure try.

That perspective resurfaced after reading a *New York Times* column by Eric Weiner about "the sad state of our national conversation about God." He wished there were another way. So do I.

"For a nation of talkers and self-confessors, we are terrible when it comes to talking about God," said Weiner.

Honest seekers and humble followers get drowned out by the more boisterous and certain "true believers" and "angry atheists," as he calls them. Indeed, that is no way to

have a conversation.

Humility is often evidenced by humor. No, not the derisive attempts at ridiculing another faith tradition or getting a laugh at someone else's expense, but those places where genuine smiles abound and self-deprecating laughter is celebrated as a confession that we are all faulty in our thinking and feeble in our attempts to grasp the fullness of God.

Weiner quotes G.K. Chesterton who said: "It is the test of a good religion whether you can joke about it." He noted that perhaps Americans are enamored of the Dalai Lama because "he laughs, often and well."

Many would rightly argue that religious faith is a serious matter. But the trouble comes when we take our own take

on religion way too seriously — and overestimate our abilities, not God's.

Then we end up with many people, like Weiner, who say they can only find an angry God — or perhaps an absent God — being argued about in the national conversation.

And I like his metaphor of God as not an exclamation point — but rather a semicolon that connects people to experiences of grace.

It is in those unpredictable, unexplainable experiences of grace that we most often find God. And since such experiences are not of our own making, we have no reason to brag or get defensive.

But we have very good reasons to be grateful, to smile and to perhaps even laugh a bit — and to join the conversation with faith, humility and joy. **BT**

Truth seekers

Bearing false witness often the result of forwarding political emails

DALLAS (ABP) — When a politically volatile email arrives warning Christians about some elected official's action or some candidate's position that sounds so horrible it's hard to believe — don't believe it, some pastors suggest.

And for heaven's sake, don't forward it.

"When an email is forwarded to me, I am skeptical from the start," said David Morgan, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Harker Heights, Texas. "Assume it isn't true until you check it out. Personally verify it. Be hesitant to forward anything."

Christians have a responsibility not only to avoid bearing false witness, but also to stand up for truth, said Van Christian, pastor of First Baptist Church in Comanche, Texas.

"We are horrendously guilty of the

urban-legend syndrome. If it sounds good to us and seems plausible, we want to warn everybody about it," Christian said. "To tell something you do not know to be true is a terrible Christian witness."

Failure to check out the veracity of a rumor not only violates the commandment about truth-telling but also demonstrates sloth, he added.

"We need to make a commitment to not be lazy. We need to be good stewards of the truth. We should take the time and make the effort to find out what the truth is and stand for that," Christian said.

Civility should characterize a Christian's conversation, whether that involves political debate during a campaign or commentary on an official after an election, Morgan said.

Christian suggested that Christians

who like to quote Scripture to back up their already-determined political views should listen to the whole counsel of the Bible.

"We are pretty selective about which Scriptures we listen to. When we look at the commands of Scripture, we find we are not to bear false witness. We are to control ourselves and tame the tongue. We are to bear one another's burdens. These things receive more emphasis than what we generally tend to quote."

In regard to truthfulness and civility, Christian offered a question believers should ask: "If we were discussing politics with Jesus, would we do it the same way we do with others?" **BT**

—Ken Camp is managing editor of the Texas Baptist newspaper Baptist Standard.

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‘Two buildings, one heart’

Together Raleigh’s First Baptist churches celebrate 200 years



Cast members framed by North Carolina’s state capitol building describe a time of transition for the two churches.

RALEIGH, N.C. — They sit diagonally on opposite corners of Capitol Square, with North Carolina’s state capitol building between them. One might think they are worlds apart, but Raleigh’s two First Baptist churches are determined to remember their common birth and work together toward common missions, whether serving the poor or promoting civil rights.

To avoid confusion, locals refer to the predominantly Anglo congregation as First Baptist Salisbury Street, and to the largely African-American church as First Baptist Wilmington Street.

The two congregations celebrated their 200th anniversary March 8, capping a year of festivities with a theatrical production March 2-4 and a joint birthday party at the State Capitol on March 8.

Celebrating through theater came naturally for the two churches: both have innovative pastors who incorporate the arts into worship, Chris Chapman at Salisbury Street and Dumas Harshaw at Wilmington Street.

As committees planned the anniversary festivities, Salisbury Street member Anne Bullard suggested that the local Burning Coal Theater Company, which Bullard serves as a board member, be commissioned to produce a play commemorating the event as part of the non-profit company’s “Our History” productions.

Ian Fleming, the company’s resident playwright, took on the project, researching and writing the script with artistic director Jerome Davis and intern Rebecca Wyrick, who also served as stage manager for the production.

Director Robby Lufty was faced with the challenge of staging the portable play, which began in one of the churches and moved to Capitol Square for three scenes, taking the audience with it, before concluding in the other church.

“It was really important that we use both buildings,” Lufty said. “The name of the play is ‘Two Buildings/One Heart.’” Not wanting to show preference for one church over the other, the company began at First Baptist Salisbury Street for the first two performances, moving across the square to First Baptist Wilmington Street. For the last two performances, the order was reversed.

While Burning Coal actors performed the primary roles, a choir composed of members

from both churches accompanied the performers at each venue. Coordinating schedules and finding adequate rehearsal time was a challenge, Lufty and Wyrick agreed — as was working with representatives from two churches who aren't accustomed to the way theater runs.

The effort was worth it, as far as Katrellia Montague-Moorman was concerned. A Raleigh native who spent most of her life in New York City and is now a member of the Wilmington Street church, Montague-Moorman said:

“I really enjoyed the creative use of staging. I had never seen a play that started in one place and moved to another.”

Noting that she sees Raleigh as part of the New South that is less racist and more diverse, Montague-Moorman said she was pleased that the play “encompassed not only church history but also the social history of Raleigh.”

Much of that social history was played out in churches. As Baptist work spread across the South in the late 1700s and early 1800s, it was common for both white landowners and their slaves to be members of the same church, though whites were clearly in control and slaves were often relegated to the balcony. In some cases, slaves were allowed to hold separate services under the leadership of black preachers.

Such was the case in Raleigh. When 23 members gathered in the old state meeting house to organize what was then called “Raleigh Baptist Church,” 14 of the members were black, and nine were white. By 1826, when the church had 224 members, 67 were white and 137 were black.

The church grew fairly quickly, and in 1816 constructed a building on South Person Street, spending \$600. The building was later moved to a wooded area that came to be known as “Baptist Grove” (now Moore Square).

Internal strife during the 1830s led to a split and the church struggled for some years, but persevered, and in 1840 constructed a new building on the corner of Wilmington and Morgan Streets — the site now occupied by the predominantly black church.

Pastor Thomas E. Skinner led a time of rapid growth during the 1850s and the church constructed a larger building on the opposite corner in 1859, which First Baptist Salisbury Street now calls home.

As with most southern churches, emancipation and the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War led to a separation of white and black members. In Raleigh, the division occurred in 1868, when Henry Jett led a delegation of about 200 black members who asked for letters of dismissal to form what was



Members of a local “Red Hat Club” enjoyed each other as much as the performance of “Two Buildings/One Heart.”

then called First Colored Baptist Church. The separation, by all accounts, was amiable.

Through the years, the churches have cooperated in a variety of ways, and during the tumultuous 1960s, both were led by strong proponents of civil rights who spoke openly of the need for an end to segregation. Charles W. Ward of the Wilmington Street church served as executive director of the Raleigh NAACP, and John M. Lewis urged members on Salisbury Street to embrace a more integrated society.

Vignettes in the play captured many of the strategic moments in the churches’ shared history, but also incorporated moments of humor. Tom McCleister, playing the role of a man known as Major Vass, spoke of how “strict decorumists” controlled the church in the 1820s and 1830s, when he was called to account and in danger of being drummed out of the church for

having attended a circus.

Vass confessed to having seen the circus, but insisted that his purpose was to learn more about God’s creation by observing the elephants, tigers, monkeys and other animals in the show. His answer was sufficiently convincing, and he was not dismissed.

Near the end of the play, Carly Jones and Tierra McMickle portrayed two unnamed African-American women bantering with each other as they awaited the arrival of Martin Luther King, trading humorous comments while wondering if the civil rights leader would really show.

King did not disappoint, and neither did “Two Buildings/One Heart,” an apt reminder that Raleigh’s two First Baptist churches are committed to continued cooperation as they enter their third century. **BT**

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