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Cover photo by John Pierce. Rebecca Blake of First Baptist Church of Biscoe, N.C., looks at the pulpit Bible and charred cross removed from the sanctuary that burned last summer.

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Beyond the blaze

Biscoe Baptists' wide embrace not tempered by challenges

BISCOE, N.C. — Typical for many mill towns, Biscoe residents recall the heyday when abundant jobs, recreation and social life sprang from the large, bustling mill. Today, local jobs are fewer and keeping bright young people is harder.

The '50s-style red brick, white-steeple home of the First Baptist Church here looks typical too. Well, it did until an electrical fire in the early morning hours of July 22, 2014 turned the sanctuary into a pile of charred rubble.

Atypical, however, is the congregation. While many churches claim diversity, Biscoe Baptists just live, worship and serve with a comfortable mix of people from a variety of ethnic, economic and social backgrounds.

WARM AND WIDE

Congregants come from various Baptist backgrounds — Southern, National, Independent — as well as other church traditions including AME Zion, Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Quaker and Pentecostal.

There are educators, business professionals, political leaders, potters and painters, chicken farmers and more. You'll also find a beekeeper, a banjo picker, a member of a beach band and two taxidermists in the mix.

These assorted church members are quick to say that the wide, warm embrace of long-time pastor Larry Wilson is most responsible for the atypical First Baptist Church family. And Wilson said he's received a warm embrace in return.

"I love the people here," he said. "It's not big, but one of the most gifted churches." Neither is it typical for a young pastor to come to a small, mill-town church and stay



for 30 years. But that's what Larry did — and although he retired last year, he's still around. When asked why he didn't move on to bigger things, Larry quickly responded: "I take Jesus' admonition about money seriously; you can't serve God and mammon. And I believe in the local church."

COMMUNITY

Wilson, however, was never one to hole up within the church walls. His pastoral presence throughout the community — personally and through his writings in the local newspaper — crossed familiar economic and racial divides.

That approach to ministry is now reflected in the congregation.

"The diversity of our people is our greatest strength," said lay leader Dwight Saunders, who grew up, left and then returned to the area.

Rebecca Blake, also a local who grew up in a more rural Baptist church, directs the music ministries that members and visitors rave about from the choir to the youth handbell ringers. Her husband, Jimmy, is the town's mayor and advocate for economic development.

"We're held together by love," she said of the church's unusually diverse mix, "and Larry has modeled that."

He's also been a prophetic voice from the pulpit, in print and in person.

"Most Baptist preachers preach like Jesus lived six hours from his birth to crucifixion," he said. "But what Jesus said mattered."

With pastoral sensitivities, he has urged the Biscoe community toward Jesus' calls for justice, grace and unconditional love.

"If you show them what the Bible says,



Top, left to right: Nancy Ruppert, Dwight Saunders, Rebecca Blake and Larry Wilson discuss rebuilding plans as well as the closeness the congregation has felt since worshipping in the smaller fellowship hall. **Above:** Rubble, but not ruins — An electrical fire brought down the sanctuary but not the inclusive, generous spirit of First Baptist Church in the mill town of Biscoe, N.C.

they'll come around," he said. "And there are some really good people here."

While the church has its problems like all others, said Larry, there is a positive, caring approach that prevails. He pointed to longtime member Betsy Crisco as one of the "church moms" who "gets things done without complaining" and shows deep concern for persons in need.

"My dog was sick and she called me," Larry said with an appreciative smile.

OPENNESS

Nancy Ruppert was recruited from Florida to a health care job in Biscoe in 1991. She didn't expect to be there long — and she sure didn't think she'd ever be a Baptist.

But that was before she met Larry, whose pastoral style she called “more open.”

“The community grew on me,” said Nancy, now a leading beekeeper and key volunteer in carving up firewood that the church makes available to people in need. And she found First Baptist to be “warm and welcoming even to someone like me who was an outsider.”

The church's openness, she said, is intentional — not the lack of conviction.

“It's not that we're intentionally ambiguous; we're open to a lot of people,” she explained. “We don't try to squeeze people into a mold.”

After moving to Biscoe, Nancy said she heard that the pastor at First Baptist was “different.” But that wasn't enough for her to visit a Baptist church.

“I'd been there and done that,” she said of previous experiences with Baptists. “I'd been told constantly that I was a sinner. I already knew that.”

When she finally relented and visited First Baptist, she liked Larry's sermon and the “really good music.” She was also impressed by the church's concern for and responses to people in need.

The church has gained that good reputation.

“In this area we're the go-to church if people need help,” said Dwight Saunders. For example, the church's youth started a food distribution ministry that is now supported by 14 area congregations.

Nancy added that the church's generosity sometimes gives the false appearance of a larger, wealthier congregation — but that much is done through partnerships throughout the community, thanks to “Larry's ability to get along with so many different people.”



Florence Cagle (center), with ministers Larry Wilson and Rebecca Blake, says she was attracted to the First Baptist Church because of the congregation's impact on Biscoe and the larger community.

SPIRITUAL HOME

Florence Cagle is one of several African-American members who've found a spiritual home and a place of service in First Baptist Church. She is a deacon and serves on the committee charged with finding a new pastor.

“Larry has touched lives all over this community,” she said of her friend and pastor.

“Larry is everybody's Larry.”

She and her family visited the church for a while before becoming members 13 years ago.

“I liked what I saw,” said Florence. “The church cares about so many people, not just the membership. I was satisfied that this was where God was leading me... I'm proud to be a member of First Baptist Church.”

The local newspaper, *Montgomery Herald*, recently carried a full-page feature on Florence in which she talked about growing up in a family of hardworking sharecroppers. She attended a school with “no heat, no running water, no cafeteria, no bathrooms and no gym” through the eighth grade.

She recalled her mother cutting pencils in half so each child in the family would have one. But conditions improved when she moved to high school. She excelled in all areas, including being honored as homecoming queen.

As a young adult she broke ground by moving into positions in the mill never held by a black person. She put in 30 years there.

When the First Baptist sanctuary burned last summer, Florence said it “tore my heart out.” It brought back a childhood experience of watching the small wooden Olive Grove Baptist Church, next to her home, burn to the ground after being struck by lightning.

The more recent fire brought members together — embracing one another amid tears, she said. The tragedy also brought a new perspective, she added.

“Maybe it's a good thing that this fire happened,” she said reflectively. “We're closer now; it's more meaningful to be a part of this church.”

FIRE ALARM

“Ruins” is a common word for the charred remains after a roaring fire has run its destructive course. However, the inclusive spirit, generosity and warmth of Biscoe Baptists were not ruined by last summer's fire.

They are better, not bitter after the blaze, church members said.

The pulpit Bible and the brass cross with a flame-marked base were rescued and placed in the fellowship hall where Sunday worship now occurs. The close proximity required by

the smaller room has its benefits.

“We're closer now,” said Rebecca Blake. “And we wanted to go about the business of being church.”

Any temptation toward self-pity was thwarted. Church members took meals to the fire department in appreciation for the quick response — and the firewood cutting crew got back to work quickly.

The retirement of a longtime pastor followed by a devastating fire were a lot for the church to handle at one time, lay leaders admit.

“Those kinds of things either make or break a church,” said Nancy, adding that the unsettling situation helped the congregation refocus on its true mission.

Dwight agreed: “Little things we bickered about — like which faucets to put in the women's restroom — weren't important anymore. The fire gave us insight into what's really important.”

THE FUTURE

Church member and mayor Jimmy Blake said new industries, including a foundry and a yogurt plant, have brought jobs to Biscoe with hopes of drawing or keeping residents in the “small and friendly” town. He runs a popular local restaurant and cooks up a big monthly church breakfast that draws members out of their beds.

The church is looking to rebuild from the fire and find new pastoral leadership. Jack Causey of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina is guiding them through a process of conversations and worship to focus on the congregation's core values, vision and pastoral needs.

He has discovered unique qualities in the Biscoe church, he said: ethnic diversity, great music and deep care for the community.

These marks of the congregation weren't the result of a strategic plan, but the natural outcome of consistent prophetic, pastoral leadership and a community willing to embrace the changes and challenges of faithful living.

Larry said he focused his ministry on three areas: fellowship, service and worship — with a strong conviction that all persons deserve to be loved and served.

“Jesus never let people be reduced,” he said. “And I can't do that.”

It is a message that has resonated with church members and is now reflected in the ways they worship, fellowship and serve, said Rebecca.

“We've heard the message of love, grace, forgiveness and inclusion — and to live as Jesus truly showed us how to live.” **BT**

quotation remarks

“Preachers studied classic Craddock sermons . . . much like aspiring jazz musicians listened to saxophonist John Coltrane and amateur boxers studied tapes of Sugar Ray Robinson — for clues to greatness and inspiration. Craddock elevated preaching to an art. . . . His sermons unfolded like a short story: there was foreshadowing, plot twists, dialogue; language of startling beauty and surprise endings.”

—*CNN religion writer John Blake, reporting on the March 6 death of Fred Craddock, 86, in Blue Ridge, Ga.*

“For Jesus, what matters above all is reaching out to save those far off, healing the wounds of the sick, restoring everyone to God’s family. And this is scandalous to some people!”

—*Pope Francis in a February Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica (RNS)*

“Maybe the people who like to ski are praying a little harder than the rest of us.”

—*Andrew Cryans of St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Durham, N.H., when record weekend snowfalls in February caused low attendance at church (RNS)*

“Most people who profess a deep love of the Bible have never actually read the book. They have memorized parts of texts that they can string together to prove the biblical basis for whatever it is they believe in, but they ignore the vast majority of the text.”

—*Rabbi Rami Shapiro, noting that a student in his Bible class at Middle Tennessee State University believed the saying “This dog won’t hunt” is a biblical proverb (CNN)*

“For me to worship at an Anglo church, I must accept white theology, pray in a white manner, sing white German songs and eat meatloaf at the potluck.”

—*Miguel De La Torre of Iliff School of Theology, urging Anglo Christians who seek racial understanding to visit African-American and Hispanic churches (RNS)*

“In evangelical and even in some progressive parts of Christianity, women are getting very mixed signals. There is a view that a woman should be subordinate on Sunday, equal to men the five workdays of the week, and Saturday is up for grabs. She’s told at home and at church the man is to be the ‘servant leader,’ but then she goes to work where she has to be as tough as the guys to succeed.”

—*Protestant scholar and author Phyllis Tickle on the “religiously imposed schizophrenia” of many women today (RNS)*

“The Bible must not become something we only look at and admire, even though plenty of American homes have unread family Bibles laid out on coffee tables or displayed on shelves. This sacred book is a living document that speaks to us across the ages and yet requires interpretive work that can’t be cast in stone.”

—*Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, on how some might view the Museum of the Bible, being erected in Washington, D.C., as a monument to the Bible (BNG)*

“Sometimes a tragedy happens and people move on after a couple of weeks. This particular tragedy has caused many people to not only look at the issue of alcoholism and other drug addictions but also how we select and elect our leaders, our bishops.”

—*Episcopal Church leader Gay Clark Jennings after Bishop Heather Cook was cited for drunk driving that caused the death of a bicyclist (RNS)*

“The IRA claimed to be Catholic. They were baptized. They had a Catholic identity . . . [but] what they were doing was a perversion of everything the church stood for.”

—*Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York telling CNN that Islamic State militants terrorizing the Middle East are a distortion of Islam much as the Irish Republican Army was a perversion of Catholicism (RNS)*

“Sweden has awoken from its fairy tale dream [of being a racism-free society].

—*Willy Silberstein, president of the Swedish Committee Against Antisemitism, SKMA, on Muslim hostilities toward Jews that were recently captured on TV (RNS)*

“Contrary to the many who speak about the church dying, I think it is actually a time of rebirth. We are actually in the process of tossing out some old stuff that wasn’t necessary and finding creative ways to express our identity in the present.”

—*Molly Marshall, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan. (BNG)*

“Where I grew up, the way to grow spiritually was: Go to church, read your Bible, witness, pray. It was a checklist, and it was clear a lot of people had done those things for years and hadn’t become less mean. Recently, more and more people, Protestants and Catholics, are asking how to become more Christ-like, and realizing that a checklist is not what brings change.”

—*Brian McLaren, author of We Make the Road by Walking (Reform Magazine)*

By John Pierce

Politicized pronouncements of faith present problems

Political ideology masked as Christianity (or another religious faith) is costly. The high price is being paid again and again.

According to survey results reported by Religion News Service, current college freshmen are distancing themselves from identifiable religious traditions. Nearly 28 percent, the study found, chose to not identify with any particular religion.

Ajay Nair, dean of campus life at Atlanta's Emory University, has a good idea why this number has risen by 12 percent since 1971.

"Religion has become increasingly politicized in recent years and, as a result," he said, "I think students may be reluctant to identify with religious institutions."

Dean Nair is probably right. But I'd be quick to add that college freshmen — or students in general — are not the only ones shying away from a religious identity that is clouded by associated politics.

It is tiring, as well, for those of all ages to keep going through life trying to untangle the confusing mess created by the conflicting merger of political ideology and religious identity. Many of us are weary of being associated with those who bear our faith names but not our understandings or convictions.

Conservative Christian preachers, for example, recently were found to hold much more strongly than the broader population the notion that Islamic State terrorists reflect the true nature of the Islamic faith. That ignorance

gets passed along as part of our Christian identity — as well as the gospel that we seek to proclaim.

During a spirited political debate on social media recently, one poster lamented: "We are losing our Christian values in this country like the right to own guns!"

Political ideology has become so entwined with religious faith that, apparently, constitutional and religious debates are one in the same.

Of course, faith and politics are not completely separable — but their influence on one another should be well noted.

Faith should shape one's politics. Too often, however, politics shapes one's faith.

There is a real probability that falling identification with organized religion is not so much the lack of faith in God as it is the lack of faith in those who claim to speak for God, yet whose priorities and politics seem so far removed from the daring disciples of old who dropped their nets and money bags to follow Jesus.

Whether on the left or right, or somewhere in between, we must take great care in how our preferred, passionate political persuasions become public pronouncements of the Christian faith. Such statements become our

"witness" — which can cause the rejection of faith (or at least of our churches and related institutions) that is actually a rejection of blurred, divisive political perceptions.

It is always easier, however, to point out the obvious failures of others who misrepresent the gospel than to acknowledge our very own contributions. Confession is much harder than expressing our frustration of being identified with a fear-based political ideology masked as religious faith that conflicts with our own understandings.

Yet we all have a responsibility to be more humble in our conclusions, more generous in our grace and more willing to hear a calling to faithfulness that conflicts with what we often portray as religious truth.

Our faith affirmations and resulting proclamations are important to us, as they should be. However, they also have a larger impact on others who may not be able to hear the gospel over the high-volume political noise. **BT**




*May the hope of Easter be lasting,
even amid the darkness of life, and
inspire us to live with deep faith,
abundant goodness and great joy.*

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- Great hotel room rates at \$121/night
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- Spend a week laughing with and learning from 1500 other Cooperative Baptists

Understanding Islam's Sunni-Shiite divide

Sunni and Shiite Muslims, two main sects of Islam, have been in conflict for more than a millennium. Why does such an ancient division continue to influence politics, foreign policy and even wars today?

Recently, militants from the Sunni-led Islamic State group have waged a bloody war of conquest across parts of Iraq and Syria and have spread to parts of Jordan, Egypt and Libya. Boko Haram, an al-Qaida affiliate waging war across parts of Africa, is also Sunni. Here's what you need to know:

Q: Who are the Sunnis and who are the Shiites?

A: Both are sects of Islam and the adherents of both are Muslims, all bound by the same Quran, the same Five Pillars of Islam — belief in one God, daily prayer, fasting, charity and hajj, or pilgrimage. Both revere the Prophet Muhammad, who founded Islam in 620.

A very rough — and admittedly imperfect — analogy is the Protestant / Catholic / Orthodox divide within Christianity. All three groups are Christian, but they have diverging views on leadership, theology, worship rites and even sacred shrines.

Some Catholics and Protestants view the other as apostates, but the bloody conflicts between the two camps are mostly consigned to history.

Q: What is at the root of their conflict?

A: Basically, Sunnis and Shiites differ on who should have succeeded Muhammad after his death in 632. Sunnis supported Abu Bakr, the prophet's friend; Shiite Muslims felt the rightful successor was the prophet's son-in-law and cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib.

Ali became the fourth caliph, or spiritual leader of Muslims, but he was murdered and his son was killed in battle, effectively ending the direct line from Muhammad. Today's Shiites consider all caliphs after Ali to be false.

Sunnis, meanwhile, believe Muslim leaders can be elected, or picked, from qualified teachers. So Sunni and Shiite Muslims do not recognize the same line of authority.

That's why the declaration by the Islamic State group, also known as ISIS or ISIL, last summer that it was establishing a "new caliphate" through its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi caused such a global stir. The Islamic State is a Sunni group and its stated goals are to create a territory run by a caliph and Shariah, or Islamic law.

In a video announcing the caliphate last June, the group described al-Baghdadi as "descendant from the family of the Prophet, the slave of God" — perhaps an attempt to legitimate him in the eyes of Shiites. If they — or any other Muslims — fail to recognize the new caliphate, they will be considered apostates and can be killed under Shariah.

Q: Where do Sunnis and Shiites live?

A: In lots of hotbed places. Syria is a majority-Sunni country, but the regime of President Bashar Assad is a close ally of Shiite-dominated Iran (Assad's Alawite sect is a whole other story).

Iraq is majority Shiite, but northern Iraq has a lot of Sunnis and the Islamic State group has made increasing inroads into the country. Neighboring Iran is majority Shiite, while next-door Saudi Arabia is majority Sunni. Yemen, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Lebanon have significant Shiite minorities.

Sunnis make up about 85 percent of the world's Muslims (including the vast majority of U.S. Muslims). See the problem?

Q: So, if all this happened 1,400 years ago, what are they fighting about now?

Poll: 1 in 4 Americans say Islamic State represents true Islam

By Aamer Madhani
USA Today

(RNS) More than a quarter of Americans and nearly half of senior Protestant pastors say the Islamic State terrorist group offers a true representation of Islamic society, according to a pair of new surveys by LifeWay Research.

Forty-five percent of 1,000 senior Protestant pastors surveyed say the Islamic State, also known as ISIL or ISIS, "gives a true indication of what an Islamic society looks like." Forty-seven percent disagreed with the statement.

The pastors had a much darker view of Islam than Americans at large. In contrast, in the second survey, 27 percent of Americans say the Islamic State reflects the true nature of Islamic society.

Of the 1,000 senior Protestant pastors surveyed, 724 identified themselves as evangelical; 474 consider themselves mainline. Pastors were permitted to consider themselves under both labels. **BT**

A: It's a complicated question that can't be reduced to a few sentences, but here goes:

Where once the conflict between Sunni and Shiite was religious, now it is more political.

In Iraq, the Shiite-dominated army has been seen as a strong-arm of former Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and an oppressive force by majority Sunnis in the north.

That's why many were happy to have the Sunni-dominated Islamic State group make gains across the north. And as the Islamic State group grows in strength and numbers, the Sunni-Shiite conflict will intensify and spread.

Q: OK, but all this is taking place on the other side of the world. Why should I care?

A: Because Islam is a global religion, and America has significant strategic and military interests in the region. The number of Muslims is expected to rise by 35 percent in the next 20 years, according to the Pew Research Center, to reach 2.2 billion people. **BT**

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By Tony W. Cartledge, CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

But are they really Muslim?

The savage inhumanity of ISIS's brutal ideologies continued as the organization kidnapped hundreds of Christians to be used and abused in a sneering show of radical imbecility that grows from a perverted interpretation of Islam. The terrorist group also released videos of manic members raiding a museum in Mosul, smashing priceless artifacts of the Assyrian civilization.

But what if Christians interpreted the Bible in the same way the strategists of ISIS interpret the Quran?

We'd also be breaking into museums and smashing every ancient representation of a god, rather than preserving them as invaluable objects for the understanding of human development and cultural diversity. The prophets often called for the Israelites to destroy their idols and tear down sites where other gods were worshipped.

We'd also be stoning children who cursed their parents, cutting off body parts for various crimes, selling slaves, and committing other acts that were embedded in Old Testament law — relics of a bygone age that we now consider to be barbaric. Horrific practices are there

in scripture, but we don't interpret them as appropriate for civilized society.

The problem, then, is not with Islam itself, as some outspoken critics would have us believe, but with sometimes twisted and sometimes too literalistic interpretations of Islamic scriptures. We must acknowledge that Christians have also been guilty of misappropriating scripture.

Catholic popes endorsed the Crusades and offered advance pardon for all present and future sins to those who happened to die while fighting the "infidels" — not unlike brain-washed terrorists who think martyrdom will get them immediately transported to heaven. That was supported by the church, but was it Christian?

The Ku Klux Klan claimed to be a Christian organization trying to do right by God and to preserve civil society. Does anyone believe such bigotry and terroristic actions were inspired by Jesus?

Jim Jones of the People's Temple led a mass suicide of 909 cult members in 1978. Jones claimed to be a Christian. "That wasn't really Christianity," we would say, but he drew

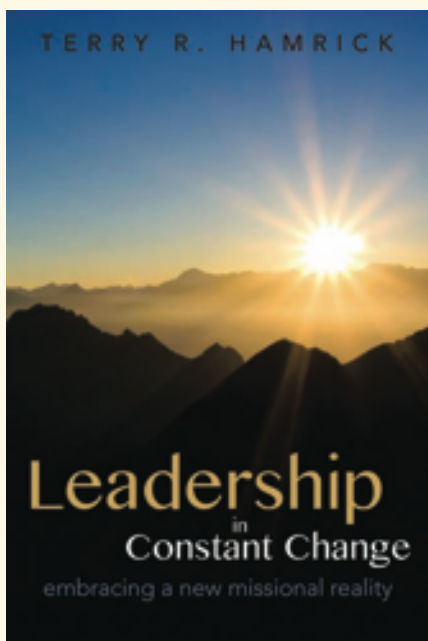
many of his teachings from an aberrant interpretation of the Bible.

Branch Davidians, led by David Koresh, a schismatic group that broke from the Davidian Seventh Day Adventists, became increasingly ingrown, retreated from society, and burned their compound — killing 79 children, women and men — rather than allow federal agents to investigate charges of child abuse.

"That wasn't Christianity," we would say — but cult members claimed it to be. We should keep that in mind the next time we hear someone blame the atrocities of ISIS on Islam.

There are more than 1.5 billion Muslims in the world. The vast majority of those who are actually religious look to the Quran for teachings of peace, justice and moral behavior. Meantime, a few thousand have been brain-washed into believing the exclusive hate-based ideology of extremists who harbor visions of grandeur and are mainly interested in gaining power for themselves — but they get all the headlines.

They're not teaching true Islam any more than the KKK was teaching Christianity. **BT**



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Todd Still appointed dean of Baylor's Truett Seminary

WACO, Texas — Baylor University has announced that President Ken Starr appointed New Testament scholar Todd D. Still as the fifth dean of the university's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

Still currently serves as the William M. Hinson Professor of Christian Scriptures at Truett, where he has been a faculty member since 2003. He will succeed David Garland, who will return to full-time teaching after eight years as dean of the seminary.



Todd D. Still

"In Dr. Todd Still, Baylor University, and our dear friends in the Texas Baptist family, found a visionary leader to guide into a bright future

our beloved Truett Seminary," said Starr in a university press release. "As a brilliant scholar of the New Testament, Dr. Still is widely recognized in the academy for the quality of his research and writing. At the same time, Dr. Still has maintained a strong commitment to educating ministers to lead the church in Texas and beyond while he has personally served Baptist churches in transition as a preaching pastor. He is a forward-thinking leader who cares deeply about Texas Baptists and Texas Baptist life."

Still said he was "humbled and honored" by the opportunity to serve in this role.

"As dean, I look forward to joining hands with colleagues and churches in preparing students for ministry in Christ's name both within and beyond Texas," he said according to the release. "I am deeply committed to the vital work of theological education and ministerial formation that takes place at Truett and am convinced that there are great things in store."

Earlier Still taught at Dallas Baptist University (1995-2000), and at Gardner-Webb University's School of Divinity (2000-2003) where he held the Bob D. Shepherd Chair of New Testament Interpretation. He holds degrees from Baylor, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the University of Glasgow, Scotland, where he completed a Ph.D. in 1996. He and his family are members of First Baptist Church of Waco. **BT**



Report finds anti-Semitism a problem at U.S. colleges

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — A comprehensive survey of anti-Semitism at American colleges released in late February shows that significant hostility is directed at Jews on U.S. campuses.

The National Demographic Survey of American Jewish College Students, produced by a Trinity College team well known for its research on religious groups, found that 54 percent of Jewish students experienced anti-Semitism on campus in the first six months of the 2013-2014 academic year.

Professors Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar asked 1,157 students in an online questionnaire about the types, context and location of anti-Semitism they had encountered, and found that anti-Jewish bias is a problem for Jews of all levels of religious observance.

"And this is a national problem; it's not just happening in pockets of areas," Keysar said. "Hopefully people will read this survey as a wake-up call. Clearly, the students want us to do something."

The survey, she also noted, was given to students months before last summer's war between Israel and Gaza, which ignited much anti-Israel sentiment on college campuses, sentiment that at times crossed the line into anti-Semitism.

The question sent to Jewish students on 55 campuses asked whether they had personally experienced or witnessed anti-Semitism on campus. Most of the 54 percent who

responded "yes" reported one incident.

That suggests "Jewish students are not just being paranoid, because if they were, then we would expect each of them to identify more than one incident of anti-Semitism per year," the researchers wrote.

Similar percentages of religious (58 percent) and secular Jewish students (51 percent) said they had experienced hostility toward Jews or Judaism. And while 58 percent of those who say they are "always" open about being Jewish on campus said they had experienced anti-Semitism, 59 percent who said they "never" were reported the same.

As for the most common context of the anti-Semitism, 29 percent of students surveyed said the source was a single student, and 10 percent said it happened in a college club or society. Only 3 percent said the anti-Semitism stemmed from the college administration.

Kosmin and Keysar's survey follows the 2013 Pew Research Center's "Portrait of Jewish Americans," which found that 22 percent of young Jews reported being called an offensive name in the previous year because they are Jewish, a far higher percentage than older Jews. It also comes 10 years after the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights declared that campus anti-Semitism had become a "serious problem" and called for more research on the issue.

Kosmin and Keysar end their report with recommendations to address anti-Semitism on campus, including the suggestion that administrators let it be known that "the university considers anti-Semitism a serious issue equivalent to other forms of hate and bias." **BT**

'Bishop Bling' makes a soft landing in new Vatican post

By David Gibson
Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY — The German churchman christened the “Bishop of Bling” for lavish expenditures he made on his residence and church offices has been given a low-level post at the Vatican, nearly a year after Pope Francis ousted him from the Limburg diocese.

Bishop Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst is now a “delegate” at the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, an office in the Roman Curia.

Tebartz-van Elst will reportedly help prepare catechism, or religious instruction, materials — his area of expertise — for various national bishops’ conferences. But he won’t have his name attached to any documents,

according to Archbishop Rino Fisichella, head of the council.

The post was created for Tebartz-van Elst and has the hallmarks of a “make-work” job because the Vatican couldn’t figure out what else to do with the prelate.

Controversy over Tebartz-van Elst’s residence in Limburg erupted in October 2013 when it was revealed that costs to renovate the diocesan center and the bishop’s home ran several times over the initial estimate, to some \$40 million. Tebartz-van Elst blamed the expense on a deputy who failed to keep track of cost overruns.



Tebartz-van Elst

But it also emerged that the expenses from the refurbishment of the residence included \$300,000 for an ornamental fish tank, \$2.4 million for bronze window frames, and \$240,000 for a spiral staircase. The bishop also had a freestanding bathtub, created by French designer Philippe Starck and featuring headrests at both ends, installed at a reported cost of about \$20,000.

In addition, a month after the expenditures were first reported, Tebartz-van Elst paid a court-ordered fine of nearly \$30,000 to avoid a perjury charge over his false claims that he did not fly first-class to India on a charity trip.

That all came just a few months after Francis was elected pope and began inveighing against churchmen who live like princes instead of leading humble lives marked by simplicity and service. **BT**

Myanmar’s religious noise pollution annoys locals

By Mann Kyaw and Brian Pellot
Religion News Service

MANDALAY, Myanmar — While Myanmar’s strict curbs on religious freedom continue to draw international scrutiny, its lax enforcement of noise limits is attracting the ire of locals.

Residents of the densely populated cities of Mandalay and Yangon are demanding stronger rules and regulations to control the use of loudspeakers in the country’s many religious festivals.

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) is a predominantly Buddhist country in Southeast Asia with significant Christian, Muslim, Hindu and animist minority communities.

Local Buddhist holidays, including Vesak and the Tazaungdaing festival, along with Christmas, Diwali and Eid al-Fitr are often celebrated with music, dance, stage performances and carnivals. Monks and revelers in some communities use the Buddhist holidays as an excuse to collect donations and play rock and pop music over loudspeakers.

While complaints about loud church bells or the Muslim call to prayer from minarets are common in other cities, annoyed locals say the noisy atmosphere detracts from the festivals’ religious origins — and the country’s quiet Buddhist getaway image.

U Ngwe Khee, a Mandalay taxi driver, lives near a Buddhist Dharma center where

monks use loudspeakers to play music and announce how much money each person has donated from the area.

“We have already contributed cash and they have collected money door-to-door in our area,” Ngwe Khee said. “They should not ask for more donations by making noise. The noise is very disruptive and disappointing.”

U Hla Sein, a retired teacher in Mandalay, agrees.

“They should have more understanding, since this is a religious activity,” he said. “They play music before religious ceremonies but the music is not related to faith at all. But because they refer to religion, we cannot complain.”

Myanmar’s temperate winters attract foreign tourists at the same time many of the loudest and most popular Buddhist religious festivals are being celebrated.

“People visit our country looking for a peaceful place, but when modern music is played in these ceremonies it can be quite disturbing for surrounding residents, and also tourists may get the wrong perception of Buddhism,” Mandalay tour guide Naing Tun Lin said.

Some hotels have started preemptively apologizing for the noise.

Last November, the 79 Living Hotel in Mandalay greeted guests with a note in English explaining that monks would be collecting donations over loudspeakers during the

Tazaungdaing festival.

“We apologize for any disturbance that this religious practice, over which we have no control, may cause,” the note stated.

Naing Tun Lin, the tour guide, said authorities should consult locals to set guidelines for when music can be played and at what volume to minimize disturbances.

National law states that authorities must grant permission to use sound systems or loudspeakers and that existing rules and regulations must be followed.

People who violate this rule can be fined up to 5,000 kyat (about \$5) or imprisoned for up to seven days.

U Hla, an attorney from Mandalay, said legal action is possible and would reinforce the point that noise pollution is disturbing and contrary to the ceremonies’ religious purposes.

Buddhist religious sites and houses of worship are not the only ones keeping neighbors awake. Some Buddhist families play recordings of monks’ teachings over loudspeakers early in the morning to bring good luck.

Other faiths are also causing complaints. Maung Maung Swe, a journalist in the capital city of Yangon, said the noise from a Hindu temple near his house sometimes continues until 2 a.m.

“It is quite annoying,” he said. “We don’t want to blame it on religious activity, but no one can sleep through the night.” **BT**

Mormon critic excommunicated for ‘apostasy’

By Peggy Fletcher Stack
Salt Lake Tribune

SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — Mormon critic and podcaster John Dehlin has been excommunicated from the LDS Church. The official charge against the founder of the “Mormon Stories” podcast was “conduct contrary to the laws and order of the church,” but a letter from Dehlin’s North Logan LDS stake president, Bryan King, called it “apostasy” and cited evidence for the unanimous decision:

- Dehlin’s teachings disputing the nature of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ.
- His statements that the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham are fraudulent and works of fiction.
- His statements and teachings that reject The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as being “the true church with power and authority from God.”

King further noted that the Cache Valley-based podcaster has “spread these teachings widely via the Internet to hundreds of people in the past,” and that Dehlin has said he plans to “continue to do so.”

The action was not taken because Dehlin had doubts about the church or its history, the LDS leader wrote, but “because of your categorical statements opposing the doctrines of the church, and their wide dissemination via your Internet presence, which has led others away from the church.”

Dehlin is free to criticize the church and to share his opinions, King wrote, but not “as a member in good standing.”

Dehlin, who expected to be ousted from the Utah-based faith, maintains the apostasy charges stem from his “unwill- ingness” to censor his podcast, his public expression of his doubts about the religion and his visible advocacy for civil same-sex marriage and the ordination of women to the all-male LDS priesthood.

Despite the decision, Dehlin and his wife, Margi, expressed “appreciation” for their local lay leaders. **BT**

Young Brits reject religion, approve of atheist politicians

By Trevor Grunday
Religion News Service

CANTERBURY, England —In marked contrast to the U.S., public figures who disavow belief in God tend to win approval from a growing number of British people.

A survey of 1,500 adults released in February by YouGov, a British market research firm, shows that as many as a third of all Britons do not believe in God or any kind of higher power.

The poll found that Nick Clegg, deputy prime minister, and Ed Miliband, leader of the opposition Labor Party, were viewed positively because they state openly that they don’t believe in God.

That’s a stark contrast to the U.S., where the number of openly atheist politicians in Congress hovers around zero.

The survey shows that while atheists in England are ready to stand up and talk about their nonbelief in God, most Christians are



reluctant to proclaim their faith.

And it shows a marked divide between young people — who increasingly embrace atheism — and older people, who identify with their religious upbringing.

Almost one in three under the age of 24 declare themselves to be atheists, compared with only one in 10 people over the age of 60.

Thirty-three percent of those surveyed said they did not believe in “any sort of God or spiritual power.”

The proportion of people who denied belief in God rose to 46 percent among 18- to 24-year-olds. **BT**

Court finds Applebee’s not liable for man burned while praying over fajita skillet

By Christopher Baxter
The Star-Ledger

TRENTON, N.J. (RNS) — A New Jersey man cannot collect damages for burns he suffered while bowing his head in prayer over a sizzling steak fajita skillet at Applebee’s, a state appeals panel ruled in March.

In 2010, Hiram Jimenez visited the restaurant with his brother, Rafael, and ordered a steak fajita, which was brought to him in a sizzling skillet, according to court records. The waitress allegedly did not warn him the dish was hot.

After receiving the food, Jimenez and his brother decided to pray, and Jimenez bowed his head close to the table. As he was praying, he claimed he heard a loud sizzling noise followed by a grease pop, and felt a burning sensation in his left eye and on his face.

Jimenez said he panicked and knocked the plate of food on his lap, causing more burns.

None of the burns left any scarring, records show.

He sued in state Superior Court, claiming he suffered serious injury after the restaurant negligently gave him hot food.

The lower court dismissed the case, finding that the danger posed by the sizzling fajita plate was “open and obvious” and that Jimenez chose to put his face close to it. Jimenez appealed, and an appeals panel agreed with the lower court’s findings.

“Here, the danger posed by a plate of sizzling hot food was self-evident,” the two-judge panel ruled. **BT**



A high price

Evangelicals find that affirmation of gay members can be costly

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Pastor Stan Mitchell's announcement that his evangelical GracePointe Church would fully affirm gay members was met with a standing ovation from some, stunned silence from others, but everybody prayed together quietly at the end of it.

Then Mitchell began routinely receiving emails inviting him to kill himself, often including the assurance they were sent in love from other Christians. Half of his 12-member board has left, along with half the average offering and about a third of the weekly attendance — once at 800 to 1,000 people.

He's met with dozens of disenchanted members and plans to see dozens more, apologizing almost compulsively for his handling of the issue. But there's no going back, he says. He doesn't even want to.

One of his biggest fears is that talking publicly about what happened at GracePointe could discourage countless other evangelical pastors who he says are ready to make the same move.

"I'm watching LGBT people finally make peace with themselves because they couldn't get away from the authority of Scripture and what they thought it said about them," said Mitchell, 46. "The upsides, ... they're everywhere in this."

The shifts and conversations within this Bible Belt congregation mirror a larger debate among American evangelicals as they engage tricky and sensitive matters of human sexuality, the authority of Scripture and a rapidly changing culture.

That dialogue is being pushed by Christians who, like Mitchell, no longer believe that the terms "evangelical" and "LGBT-affirming" are mutually exclusive.

Last year, evangelical ethicist David Gushee at Mercer University wrote the book *Changing Our Mind*, about his own theological shift — on questions of gay marriage and welcoming gays and lesbians into church leadership. Author Matthew Vines' Reformation Project and his book, *God and the Gay Christian*, drew attention from top evangelical leaders.

A handful of large evangelical churches are publicizing their supportive stances. The



The GracePointe Church choir performs during Easter service in 2014. Photo courtesy of GracePointe Church/RNS

Highlands Church in Denver was among the first, suffering deep drops in attendance and donations but now recovering. EastLake Community Church in Seattle announced its LGBT inclusion and affirmation; Mitchell spent a February weekend there, huddling with church leaders.

But there remains a high price: Last year, the Southern Baptist Convention expelled New Heart Community Church in La Mirada, Calif., after its pastor changed views on homosexuality. More recently, the Chicago-based Evangelical Covenant Church cut off funding for a church plant in Portland, Ore., when its pastor announced his support for LGBT equality.

Several factors are coming into play in the pastors' decisions, observers say. Marriage equality has reached all but 13 states, forcing churches to confront an issue many have long demonized or simply hoped to avoid. Polling by the Public Religion Research Institute survey shows 43 percent of white evangelical millennials support same-sex marriage, double the percentage of the oldest generation of that demographic.

At the same time, gay Christians raised in and rejected by evangelical churches haven't lost their love for those roots, said Scott Thumma, a sociologist at Hartford Seminary

who has studied both homosexuality and megachurches.

"To be an evangelical Christian is more than the theology. It's the tradition you were raised in, the songs and hymns you sang as a kid," he said. "There's a pull to the expression of Christianity they grew up with, where they feel at home and where they feel the deepest connection to God even if the theology said they didn't belong there."

In some ways, the change is happening from the inside out. Gay-friendly mainline Protestant churches such as the Episcopal Church just don't hold the same appeal for that group, said Brandan Robertson, 22, spokesman for Evangelicals for Marriage Equality.

"It's not that we're ashamed or not grateful to be welcomed," he said. "But rather, we just want to be seen as normal Christians, not part of some 'special group.'"

Robertson, too, says there are dozens of evangelical churches on the precipice of making announcements of their affirmation. Most, however, are not.

"There's going to be polarity on this issue either way you go," said Dave Travis, CEO of Dallas-based Leadership Network, a church consulting firm. "The vitality of American religion is that people vote with their feet. ... If (Mitchell) retains half, that's about right." **BT**

By Robert F. Browning

A tribute to Eldred Taylor

Editor's note: Eldred M. Taylor died Jan. 15 in Louisville, Ky., at age 93. Among his ministry settings, he served as pastor of First Baptist Church of Somerset, Ky., 1958-1981. He was succeeded by Robert Browning, who now serves as pastor of First Baptist Church of Frankfort, Ky.

In 1982, I was called to be the pastor of the First Baptist Church in Somerset, Ky. I followed Eldred Taylor, who had served the church for 23 years. I knew I was inheriting a strong, vibrant, healthy church, and for this gift and opportunity I was grateful.

What I did not see at that time was another gift I was going to receive: Eldred Taylor's friendship. I cannot begin to tell you how much this relationship has meant to me the last 33 years.

No former pastor ever treated the person who followed him or her better than Eldred treated me. He was gracious and kind in every way. He offered wise advice when I asked for it and encouragement when I needed it.

What made our close relationship unusual yet mutually beneficial was that Eldred and I were different in many ways. We were born 30 miles from each other, but were actually

worlds apart.

He came of age during the Great Depression and when the world was at war, as my parents did. I came of age when our country was at war with itself and our streets were filled with blood.

His generation valued order and loyalty. My generation measured faithfulness more by the questions we asked than the answers we memorized.

My generation became captivated by the prophets' call for justice and peace and fell in love with the Jesus who walked the dusty Palestinian roads listening to people's stories and pleas for help that others ignored or tried to silence.

I once told Eldred the challenge my generation faced was figuring out a way to get people who experience and see life so differently to respect, listen to and love one another.

"How can we get people to suspend their understanding of truth long enough to discover what they don't know?" I asked him. "How do



Robert F. Browning

we mobilize church members to make hope visible to all people, especially those who have no seat or voice at the table where decisions are made? How can we help our members to see that the church reflects the kingdom of God when it resembles a quilt rather than a blanket?"

How I enjoyed our many conversations, which continued after I moved to Atlanta and upon my return to Kentucky. I found Eldred to be a good listener, a trusted friend and a lifelong learner.

I deeply appreciated the opportunity to bounce ideas off of this brilliant scholar, theologian, historian, statesman, preacher and teacher. I am especially pleased that his legacy will be known by the students at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky through the Eldred Taylor Chair of Biblical Studies.

In recent years, every conversation Eldred and I had ended the same way. "I love you and appreciate your friendship," we both would say.

At his memorial service at St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, I had the privilege of repeating these words for the final time. I assured his family, though, that Eldred's influence upon me would always be a part of my testimony. **BT**

Classifieds

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church of Lenoir, N.C., is prayerfully seeking a full-time senior pastor. FBC affirms the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. The church is now in its 126th year and has 782 members. It is important to our members to have opportunities for personal spiritual growth, continue in our local and national missions, and have appealing programs for youth and children. The senior pastor candidate should be a strong spiritual leader, an inspirational worship leader, and mission-minded. Qualifications include an advanced theological degree from a seminary or divinity school. Please send résumé and references to pastorsearch.fbclenoir@gmail.com or to Pastor Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 304 Main St. NW, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Spiritual Matters, Old Testament Style

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You Want Me To Do What?
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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 John 4:7-21

May 3, 2015

Deep Love

Perhaps you have known someone, newly in love, who couldn't stop talking about his or her new flame. Or, perhaps you've known what it is like to be so deeply engrossed in a project or cause that you rarely spoke of anything else.

The author of 1 John couldn't stop talking about love – the love of God for humankind and the love we are called to share with each other. He spoke of other things in his meandering epistle, including a final warning against the false teachers who denied Christ's incarnation and were soft on sin (4:1-6), but kept circling back to his favorite subject. With the possible exception of 1 Corinthians 13, there is no profounder discussion of love in all of scripture than in 1 John 4:7-21.

Knowing God's love ... (vv. 7-12)

John has previously reminded his readers that they are called to accept God's love and share it with others (2:7-11, 3:11-18). In vv. 7-12, he delves more deeply into what that kind of unselfish, self-sacrificing love is like.

An important thing to understand about Christian love – or any love worth the name – is that love is a choice, not just a feeling. We don't get to choose our feelings, but we choose whether to love. Jesus taught us to love our enemies, something we would never do on the basis of our feelings about them.

Marriages sometimes fail because idealistic couples have based their relationship too heavily on the way



1 John 4:11
"Beloved, since God loved us so much,
we also ought to love one another."

they feel around each other, feelings largely induced by brain chemicals such as dopamine and oxytocin. When their mates don't arouse the same neurochemical buzz as in their courtship, they may look elsewhere for someone with whom they have more literal "chemistry." Love that lasts is not based on feelings alone; it is a choice that keeps its commitments.

The writer addresses his readers as people who are "beloved," and then urges them to be people who practice active love.

Why? "Because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (v. 7). Love does not consist of sentimental attachments, self-gratifying romanticism, or straightforward sensuality. The central, distinguishing mark of God's children is the kind of self-sacrificing love that God revealed in Jesus. ↓

Those who do not demonstrate such love cannot claim to know God, John says, because "God is love" (v. 8). That

is a bold statement, but not intended as a definition of God. The statement "God is love" cannot be turned around to say "love is God" – neither the Greek syntax nor logic allow it. ↓

The phrase "God is love" is descriptive, not definitive. We know God through acts of divine love, but God's essence is not limited to love. Earlier, John had said "God is light" (1:5), but we wouldn't think of saying "light is God." Both statements describe important aspects of God's character, but neither defines God completely.

Christians are known because they love as God loves. They have come to know such love, John tells us, because God sent Jesus, God's "unique Son," into the world (v. 9a). The word *monogenē*, "only begotten" in the KJV, is less concerned with birth than with uniqueness. It conveys the meaning "only one of his kind." There is no one else like Jesus. There is no love greater than the choice-making, self-giving agape love we see in Jesus. We celebrate that love in

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old hymns such as “No One Ever Cared for Me Like Jesus” and newer praise songs like “My Jesus.” Perhaps you can think of other songs that celebrate God’s amazing love.

God sent Jesus into the world “so that we might live through Him” (v. 9b). This statement is not just about living forever – the concept of getting baptized as a fire insurance policy to avoid going to hell would have been completely alien to the author. The life we have through the love of Christ is not just “pie in the sky bye and by,” but life to the full, life in abundance, life that is lived as God intended for it to be lived.

In v. 10, John repeats the thought, but with the added reminder that we did not earn or even seek God’s love. God loved us first (a thought made explicit in v. 19) and sent Jesus to make that love manifest, to cover our sins and lead us into the loving fellowship that is found only in God.

Again John uses the word “beloved” to introduce a challenge. The gift of God’s love brings with it the imperative of loving others (v. 11). Those who have truly experienced God’s love cannot help but to pass that love along: it has become a part of their nature. Those who do not love testify in their actions and attitudes that they don’t truly know God after all. 📌

No one has seen God, John said (v. 12). We can’t show people God’s picture or send them a link to a Yahweh channel on youtube.com. We can’t get anyone a tangible audience with God as if meeting the president or the pope. We show people God by showing them love: God’s generous, selfless, abiding, freely given love. 📌

Showing God’s love ... (vv. 13-21)

Those who love as God loves show by their lives that they abide in God, and God abides in them. 📌 As in 3:24, John offers further assurance of our relationship with God by pointing to the Holy Spirit (v. 13). The coming of the Spirit was not a momentary miracle designed as a sign for the Day of Pentecost, but

a permanent promise to those who believe. 📌

Yet more assurance is found in the life of Jesus: “We have seen and do testify,” John said, “that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world” (v. 14). That divine initiative calls for faith and promises assurance: “God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God” (v. 15).

John’s insistence on confessing Jesus as the Son constitutes another verbal dart aimed at those who denied that the human Jesus could also be the Son of God. The context, though, reminds us that confession implies much more than right belief. To confess Jesus as the Son of God is to experience God’s love and pass it on to others. Love and belief go hand in hand: “So we have known and believe the love that God has for us” (v. 16a). Those who know God live in love, which strengthens their confidence in God (v. 16b).

As we abide or remain in fellowship with God, “love has been perfected in us” (v. 17a), John says. This does not mean we become perfect or love perfectly: A better translation would be “complete.” Knowing and sharing the love of God gives us confidence to face the day of judgment (v. 17b).

How could we be afraid when standing before someone whose love we have known in an abiding and ongoing relationship? “There is no fear in love,” John said, but “perfect love drives out fear” (v. 18a). We would only fear if we expect to be punished. If we truly believe God has sent the Son to cover our sins, if we consistently receive and share God’s love, why should we be afraid?

“We love,” John says, “because he first loved us” (v. 19). Imagine a child who loves her parents dearly. Would she love them as deeply if they had

neglected or mistreated her? Of course not. She loves her parents because they first loved her. They changed her diapers and rocked her to sleep. They fed and clothed her, held her and played with her. They sent her off to school with tears in their eyes and supported her as she grew.

She loves them – and learned how to love others – because they first loved her.

Just so we love, John insists, because God first loved us. And when love rules, fear departs.

In the 1990s, a line of T-shirts containing the tagline “No Fear” became popular. When we stand before God, would we dare to wear our “No Fear” T-shirt? If not, John would suggest, something is awry. If we base our relationship on becoming sufficiently pure or righteous, we will fail, and have reason to fear. If our relationship with God is in word only and not in deed, we have reason to fear. If we realize that our faith is a lie because it has no feet and no hands that reach out to others, we have reason to fear.

John typically draws sharp dichotomies, and here he sees no middle ground between love and hate: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (v. 20). We’re not allowed to not care, John says. To ignore another’s need is to display an absence of love, and as far as John is concerned, that’s equivalent to hate.

In other words, whether we aggressively wish someone ill or passively allow them to suffer, the end result is the same. Their needs are not met. We have not shown love or given evidence that God abides in us. “The commandment we have from him is this,” John says: “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (v. 21).

But, we do not have to live in fear. We don’t have to be hypocrites or liars. We can love because God first loved us and because he has commanded us to love others. Where love abounds, fear can’t be found. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 John 5:1-5

May 10, 2015

Love Conquers All

Victory: we love the word. We long to conquer our opponents and come out on top. When our team wins the Super Bowl or the NCAA's Final Four, we want to raise our hands and shout "We're Number One!" When we achieve a goal at work or in physical fitness, we celebrate. When we survive a rough patch in life, we smile with relief: we have overcome.

Today's text assures believers that we can experience victory in life, not by vanquishing opponents or at others' expense, but by letting God live through us in a way that overcomes whatever obstacles may come. 📖

Victory through belief (vv. 1, 4-5)

The word "victory" naturally leads us to think of team sports. Coaches are prone to exhort their teams with statements such as "If you don't believe you can win, you'll always be losers: you gotta believe!"

Winning teams are typically made of players who have confidence in themselves, in their teammates, and in their coach. The author of John was far removed from the concept of sports as we know it, but he understood that the most important victory in life comes through confidently recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

Opposing voices had split from the church because they had been led to believe that Jesus was not the Son of God, but a human messenger on whom the spiritual Christ had dwelt for a short period of time. John would have



1 John 5:5
"Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?"

nothing of it. He insisted that all who believe that Jesus is the Christ have been "born of God," and that "everyone who loves the parent also loves his child" (v. 1).

As he has done before, John circles back to the theme of love as the proof of our relationship with God, for love and faith go hand in hand in Christian teaching. 📖 We demonstrate our love for God by obeying God's command to love others (vv. 2-3a). Those commands are not a burden we cannot bear, not something too hard for us, because "whatever has been born of God conquers the world" (v. 3b).

Showing how they are interrelated, John turns back to the importance of belief: "This is the victory that has conquered the world: our faith" (v. 4). The one who overcomes is the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 5), not just a man who was briefly visited by a spiritual Christ sent from an unknowable spirit-god, as some claimed. In typical fashion, the author uses the present tense, indicating an

ongoing and active belief.

As 1 John continually warned against teachings that failed to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, we should also be aware of variant views about who Jesus is. Many people, Jewish and otherwise, believe Jesus was a good rabbi who got carried away with himself. Muslims believe that Jesus (called "Issa" in the Quran) was a prophet. Humanists recognize Jesus as a good man and an important teacher. John insists, though, that the one who gains victory over the world must believe that Jesus is more than a preacher or prophet: he is the Son of God.

If you believe that Jesus was a good man and an inspiring teacher, he may influence your life, but if you truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God, he will change your life.

In English, when we think of "belief," we often think of "intellectual assent," and when we say "faith," we think of trust in someone to the point of commitment. Greek uses a single verb (*pisteuo*) that incorporates the concepts

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of both “belief” and “faith.”

John is not just saying that anyone who gives intellectual assent to the notion that Jesus is God’s son will gain this victory. He is talking about something much deeper. He is talking about a belief that leads to faith, a conviction that leads to commitment. That kind of belief puts Christ in the center of our lives, at the top of our priority list. 📌

If we truly believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, then he will become the central concern around which all other things fit, the organizing principle of our lives. When we center our lives on Christ, we have victory.

That is not to say that life will be easy and we never have to struggle. Rather, as we contend with the world from day to day, we can be sure that in Christ we will overcome.

In his classic book *Christ and Time*, New Testament scholar Oscar Cullman compared the Christian life and struggle to the time between D-Day and V-Day in World War II. With the success of the Normandy invasion on D-Day, victory for the allies was assured in the European theater. That does not mean the war was over: V-Day had not yet arrived. But, those who fought between D-Day and V-Day were certain that victory was around the corner.

In his gospel, John remembered Jesus saying “In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (16:33). Victory is around the corner.

Victory through love (vv. 2-3)

As we seek a victorious life, it helps to know that we are not in this struggle alone. As football, basketball, baseball or soccer players rely on their teammates to win a victory together, members of the faith community can offer help to one another, knowing that we all are “children of God” called to obey God’s commandments by loving one another.

The most successful coaches, especially in sports such as basketball,

are those who are best at building team chemistry, teaching their players to love each other and play unselfishly so that team success is more important than personal success. Victory over the world is most often evident in relationships.

Recall the name of Booker T. Washington, who was born as a slave in Franklin County, Va. but went on to become a leading educator and advocate for the betterment of black Americans. After he and other slaves gained their freedom, Washington worked hard to obtain an education and eventually became the first president of Tuskegee Institute, one of the first black colleges in America.

In his autobiography, titled *Up From Slavery*, Washington wrote that one of the most onerous aspects of life as a slave was being forced to wear rough flax shirts, which were common in the part of Virginia where he lived. Slaves’ clothing was made from the roughest and cheapest parts of the flax. Washington said that putting on such a scratchy shirt for the first time was like pulling teeth: “It is almost equal to the feeling that one would experience if he had a dozen or more chestnut burrs, or a hundred small pin-points, in contact with his flesh,” he wrote.

But Washington did not suffer alone. On several occasions, he wrote, his older brother John would take Booker’s new flax shirt and wear it until the rough edges and sharp points were worn smooth, absorbing the pain in his younger brother’s behalf. Even in slavery, there was victory, and it was won through love. 📌

It may be hard for us to grasp this concept because our own love is so limited, but the love of God cannot be fenced in. If God’s love pours into our lives, it will also find its way back out. Those who love God will also love God’s children (v. 2).

Let’s think about that for a moment, remembering that we don’t get to pick who God’s other children are. I have two younger brothers. I did not ask for them. My parents did not consult with me. They did not say “Would you like a brother?” Or, “Would you like this one?” They just showed up. I love them, but it wasn’t up to me to choose them.

It is the same way in God’s family. We don’t get to pick who gets in. If we did, we would tend to choose people who are like us, who are socially acceptable and easy to get along with. We’d be unlikely to choose adults who don’t bathe or youth who don’t behave or children who can’t sit still. But that’s not the way it is. Love compels us to stretch beyond our comfort zone and reach out to people who don’t look like us, smell like us, sing like us, or even speak the same language as us. 📌

Every act of love is a victory, and every bit of ourselves that we give away is one more step toward the light, one more blow against the darkness of the world in which we live. “For the love of God is this,” John wrote, “that we obey his commandments” (v. 3a). And what is his command? That we love one another.

If we try to fulfill that command on our own, we are likely to be defeated. There’s just not that much love in us. But if we truly believe in Jesus as the Son of God, if Christ’s love flows through us, then his commands are “not burdensome” (v. 3b) but become a natural outgrowth of who we are as God’s children – children who are not only loving, but also victorious.

Are there people in your church that you find hard to love? Try looking at them through Jesus’ eyes. Seek to be understanding, even if you have to imagine compassion. Does that make a difference?

If we could find through faith in Christ the ability to love all people as Jesus loved, we’d find our own lives exponentially enriched even as we become the presence of Christ to others – and we wouldn’t need cheerleaders to remind us that this is a victory worth celebrating. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 John 5:6-13

May 17, 2015

Testimony

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “testimony”? Perhaps you think of a criminal trial, in which witnesses to a crime or acquaintances of the accused are called to give testimony to what they have seen or heard.

Or maybe you’ve recently read about scientists called to testify before a congressional committee about global warming, national health concerns, or environmentally sensitive bills.

If you grew up in the South during the mid-20th century, you may have attended “testimony meetings,” services in which volunteers were encouraged to stand before the church and “give a testimony” about how they became a Christian, or how they went through a wild phase but reconnected with their faith.

If you’ve participated in various evangelism programs, you might have been trained to develop a short testimony to use in witnessing to others of your faith in Christ.

Testimonies are important. We learn from the expertise or experience of other people, and often make decisions based on what we have learned.

We have to be careful, though: Not all testimonies are true. Advertisements for any number of “miracle” products include testimonials from “satisfied customers” that are patently false. Innocent people have been sent to jail, or even to their deaths, on the testimony of people who were lying.

Faithful viewers of a popular newscast were disappointed to learn recently that a trusted anchorman had

1 John 5:11

“And this is the testimony:
God gave us eternal life,
and this life is in his Son.”



been suspended after admitting that he had stretched the truth about his time as a war correspondent in Iraq well past the breaking point.

Sadly, false testimony can be found in the Christian family, too. A young man named Alex Malarkey found fame after emerging from a coma and claiming he had died and visited heaven. His account became a popular book, *The Boy Who Came Back From Heaven*, but he later admitted that he had made the stories up in order to get attention. More than one pastor has gotten into trouble after parishioners Googled a few lines from Sunday sermons and discovered they were hearing sermons the preacher found online, including personal illustrations repeated verbatim.

We need and rely on the testimony of others, but who can we trust?

Three witnesses (vv. 6-8)

Throughout the letter we call 1 John, the author has insisted that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the one through

whom believers can find life abundant and eternal. In the first chapter, he relied on his own testimony, speaking of how he and others were eyewitnesses to the person and work of Jesus.

In intervening chapters, he argued for love as the preeminent witness of Christ’s presence in the lives of believers. Here in the final chapter, John turns to three other witnesses to the identity and power of Christ: the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

What does he mean by this odd trio? Jesus came, John says, “by water and blood.” We may associate both water and blood with the act of childbirth, and John would not have denied Jesus’ humanity, but that is almost certainly not his intent here.

“The water” is a more natural reference to Jesus’ baptism, when his public ministry began. Competing teachers, possibly including some who had left the church, taught that “the Christ” had come upon Jesus at his baptism, but departed before the bloody crucifixion.

That is why John insists that Jesus

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came by “the water and the blood” (v. 6) – the human Jesus and the divine Christ were one and the same from beginning to end. The water of baptism and the blood of the cross were both witness to the life and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 📖

Further testimony is given by the Spirit, which was made manifest at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:10) and throughout his earthly ministry as Jesus taught with authority, wrought works of power, died with purpose and rose in glory. Jesus promised his followers that he would send the Spirit to testify of him, guide believers into the truth, and empower them for ministry (John 15:26, 16:13; Acts 1:8). The inrushing presence of the Spirit revealed to Jewish believers at Pentecost (Acts 2) and to Gentile followers in Caesarea (Acts 10) was both a historical memory and a lived experience.

Thus, John wrote, “There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree” (vv. 7-8). 📖 The word for “testify” is in the present tense, indicating ongoing action. The memory of water and blood, along with the continuing witness of the Spirit, agreed together that the Jesus who lived and died and rose again was also the Christ, the Son of God.

**True and false testimony
(vv. 9-10)**

As noted above, we often rely on the testimony of other people, even though we know that humans are fallible and sometimes their testimony is false – including that of those who denied that Jesus was the Christ. If we can believe the testimony of humans, John wrote, then certainly we can believe the testimony of God, who can always be trusted (v. 9).

While the Spirit, the water, and the blood all testify to Jesus, behind all three stands the sovereign authority of God, whose testimony is like a keystone in the arch of witnesses to the heart of the gospel, the identity of Jesus’ self-sacrificial work with God in fullness.

Earlier, John spoke of how believers abide in God, and how the testimony,

Spirit and love of God abide in them (2:24-28; 3:9). Now he insists that “Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts” (v. 10a). In other words, believers don’t need any further testimony than that of God’s Spirit, which witnesses to their spirit of Christ’s saving work.

In contrast, those who do not believe make God out to be a liar by denying the divine testimony (v. 10b). With this comment, John seems to have set those who denied Jesus’ divinity fully in his sights. Their teachings were not just misleading: Their refusal to believe the divine testimony was tantamount to calling God a liar.

**Testimony of life
(vv. 11-13)**

Choosing to follow the false teaching of those who denied Christ’s divinity was not a minor doctrinal quibble, but serious business. Denying God’s own witness would have eternal consequences, John insisted. Lest anyone forget the content of that testimony, he summed up the gospel message: “God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (vv. 11-12).

This testimony reminds us, first, that eternal life is a gift of God. It did not originate with us or result from our own efforts. While humans may strive to live as long as possible on the earth, and some may go so far as to have their bodies or brains cryogenically frozen in hopes of being revived at a later date, any hope of eternal life is far beyond our grasp. If we are to have the hope of life that extends beyond this world, that hope must rest in God.

Secondly, John reminds us, “this life is in his Son.” Our eternal hope is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is God’s

Son and therefore divine. Those who believe God’s testimony and put their trust in Christ “have the Son,” and thus have (eternal) life. Those who reject Jesus as God’s Son do not have life, because they don’t have Christ. For the author, it was as simple as that.

With v. 13, John wraps up his argument and begins drawing his letter to a close. With language reminiscent of 2:12-14, John reminds his readers of his purpose in writing: He wants them to believe the truth and thus have a hope that others cannot know. “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” 📖

The classic story of “the fall” (Genesis 3) is based on the premise that the serpent led Eve to doubt the goodness and promises – i.e., the testimony – of God. The seed of doubt grew into the fruit of rebellion. John does not want his readers to be led astray by the tempting words of false teachers who raised doubts about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God or the life made possible through the work of Jesus. He does not want them to doubt either Jesus’ deity or their own salvation. Thus, he writes “so that you may know that you have eternal life.” 📖

The word translated as “know” could also be rendered as “be sure.” In the face of deceptive and confusing teaching by former church members who would lead them astray, John writes to assure believers that their salvation is secure.

A second verb is also significant: “so that you may know that you have eternal life.” John did not think of eternal life as a future hope, but as a present possession. The life that true believers have in Christ is qualitatively different: The promise of eternal life puts our present life in a different perspective, enabling us to love, to risk, and to sacrifice for others in a way that those who are focused on self-survival cannot do.

We can know that we have eternal life, John says. Can you imagine any promise more amazing than that? **BT**

Bible Study

Ezekiel 37:1-14

with Tony W. Cartledge

May 24, 2015

Can These Bones Live?

Public speaking is fraught with both opportunity and peril. Not only does the speaker need to have something to say and the ability to say it in an engaging fashion, but he or she also needs an audience with some modicum of interest in listening.

In some churches, preaching is easy. Congregations that are attentive, involved, or vocally responsive amplify the preacher's own enthusiasm, enabling him or her to hold forth with confidence and passion.

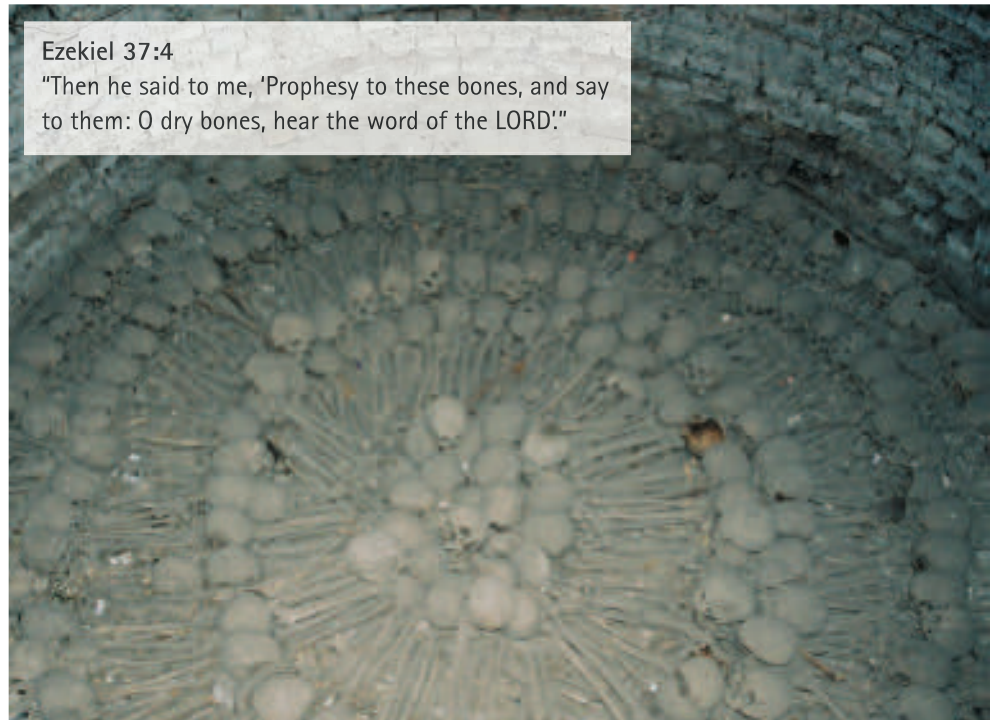
Other settings are more difficult. When standing before a small crowd of habitually reserved worshipers scattered through a large sanctuary, the preacher can feel the coolness and find it difficult to work up much fervor for the sermon.

One of the toughest places to speak is for a required program on a university campus. Students are compelled to attend, but can't be forced to listen. Trying to engage a sleepy audience engrossed in naps, homework, or smartphones is like pulling teeth.

Preachers may trade stories about the deadest crowds they've ever faced, but none can match the congregation of dry bones that the prophet Ezekiel was called to awaken. 🕒

A dead crowd (vv. 1-3)

Ezekiel, one of the first Israelites to be deported by the Babylonians, had begun his career as an active priest. A few years after arriving in Babylon, however, a mind-boggling vision from God led him into a prophetic ministry



Ezekiel 37:4

"Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!'"

that lasted more than 20 years. 🕒

Some of his fellow exiles, no doubt, would have considered Ezekiel to be crazy, and not just because he incorporated the roles of both priest and prophet – two groups that didn't usually get along. Ezekiel's inaugural vision of God was filled with fiery wheels, strange creatures, and a rainbow aura surrounding a flying sapphire throne – so strange that some modern authors cite him as witness to a visit by an alien spaceship.

🕒 Would you have believed Ezekiel?

Ezekiel believed firmly that God had not given up on Israel. In the previous chapter, he assured the exiles that God had not forgotten them, relaying a divine promise of new life in a renewed relationship with God: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (36:26-27).

Many people, however, remained morose. Although they had been quickly

integrated into the Babylonian culture and economy, the Hebrews still longed for their homeland, especially during the first 20 years, before the generation of adults who had been captured had begun to die out. If v. 11 is an accurate reflection, they were saying things such as "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

It's no surprise, then, that God would show Ezekiel a vision of hope that began with a valley of dry bones. While Ezekiel tells the story as an actual event, phrases like "the hand of the LORD was upon me" could indicate visionary experiences taking place in a trance-like state (see also 1:3; 3:22; 8:1; 40:1). The next several verses describe a symbolic vision, not a mass resurrection of literal bones.

Ezekiel speaks of being brought to a valley filled with disarticulated skeletons. There were "very many" bones, and they were "very dry" (v. 2), indicating that their owners were also very dead. Inhabitants of the ancient Near East sought to be buried or placed in secure tombs where their bones could

Catacombs of Convento de San Francisco in Lima, Peru

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remain together. The thought of having one's skeleton scattered across the land would have been innately disturbing. 📖

The image suggests the aftermath of a battlefield where thousands had been slain (vv. 9-10), perhaps suggesting both Judah's defeat by the Babylonians and the Northern Kingdom's earlier destruction by the Assyrians.

In the midst of a lifeless and apparently hopeless scene, Ezekiel was asked: "Mortal, can these bones live?" A modern scientist might envision a way to extract DNA from the bones and at least replicate the genome, but Ezekiel saw only bones that were deader than dead. He had no answer beyond the obvious response: "O Lord GOD, you know" (v. 3). 📖

A lively sermon (vv. 4-10)

The succeeding verses are familiar to us. God told Ezekiel to preach to that congregation of dead bones, promising that he would re-articulate the skeletons, then return to them muscle and sinew and skin before breathing once again the breath of life into their bodies (vv. 4-6).

When Ezekiel did as commanded, he felt a quaking and heard a rattling of bones as the skeletons reformed, then watched as flesh and skin reappeared like a time-lapse video of decomposition run in reverse (vv. 7-8).

At last, Ezekiel stood among a collection of cadavers that could do any medical school proud, but they were still dead. God then instructed him to "prophesy to the breath" that it might come from the four winds, re-enter the corpses, and return the "vast multitude" (or "vast army," NIV11, HCSB) to life (vv. 9-10). 📖

In Hebrew, the same term (*ruach*) can be used to mean "wind," "breath," or even "spirit." The image calls to mind the creation story of Gen. 2:7, though on a less anthropomorphic but far grander scale. Instead of personally breathing life into one man, God whistled up the four winds to inspire a host of bodies, returning them to life. 📖

But what was the meaning of this resurrected multitude? Was Ezekiel now standing before a zombie army of the living dead, or did the scene suggest something more? We can only imagine the questions running through the stunned prophet's mind before a word from God connected the dots for him.

A hopeful prophecy (vv. 11-14)

The dried bones represented the "whole house of Israel," God said – a phrase probably intended to include the northern kingdom of Israel (conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE) as well as the southern kingdom of Judah, which fell to the Babylonians in 597 BCE and suffered several subsequent deportations.

The people had given up, thinking themselves as good as dead, "cut off completely" from home and from hope (v. 11). God, however, had not given up on Israel. In language reminiscent of the Exodus, God promised to raise the Hebrews from their metaphorical graves, returning them to life and to the land of promise (vv. 13-14).

The new life God promised would come about through the active power of God's Spirit: "'I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,' says the LORD" (v. 14).

As the Holy Spirit would later bring new life to the dispirited disciples on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the presence and power of God's Spirit promised new life to the exiles, and the hope that they might yet return to their homes in the land of promise.

Ezekiel's prophecy echoes a theological understanding of the exile as God's punishment for Israel's collective sin and rejection of the covenant. God had the power to "kill and make alive" (Deut. 32:39, 1 Sam. 2:6), to punish and forgive. The vision of 37:1-14 seems to

elaborate on the promise of 36:26-27. Although Israel had proven incapable of keeping the covenant, God's grace would renew life and the promised Spirit would motivate obedience: "I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (36:27).

What the Hebrews could not do for themselves, God would do for them.

And how might this strange vision of Ezekiel speak to us?

We may not live as captives in Babylon, but that does not mean we cannot feel separated from God and cut off from hope. We may know very well what it is like to feel dry of bone, numb of heart, and dead of spirit. We may be exiled by grief or despair or loneliness. We may have lost hope that our family will ever be whole or that our life will ever make sense.

Like Israel, we may sometimes feel as if our emotional ribs have been picked clean by vultures and left to dry in the sun.

One might argue, however, that the people in deepest exile are those who have no worries, who think everything is fine, whose indifference to God has left them too blind to see that they are dying inside, that their spiritual bones are turning to dust.

In Ezekiel's vision, things did not begin to change until there was a great shaking and a rattling. It could be that our pathway to renewed life must begin with a shaking of priorities that rattles the framework of a fruitless faith.

We are no different from Israel in that God does not want us to be exiled forever. More than anything, God desires to live and work in our lives through the presence of the Spirit, as Jesus made clear (John 14:15-16).

When we recognize that our own spiritual efforts are no more alive than a skeleton that has dried in the sun, when we open our hearts to the presence of God, we may be sure that God's eternal Spirit will bring new life beyond anything we have known before. What's so crazy about that? **BT**

Bible Study


with Tony W. Cartledge

Isaiah 6:1-13

May 31, 2015


You Want Me To Do What?

Do you believe God has called you to any particular sort of ministry to others? We don't have to be professional ministers to feel called to a ministry of volunteering in soup kitchens or food pantries, of visiting lonely folk in retirement homes, or tutoring children in after-school programs.

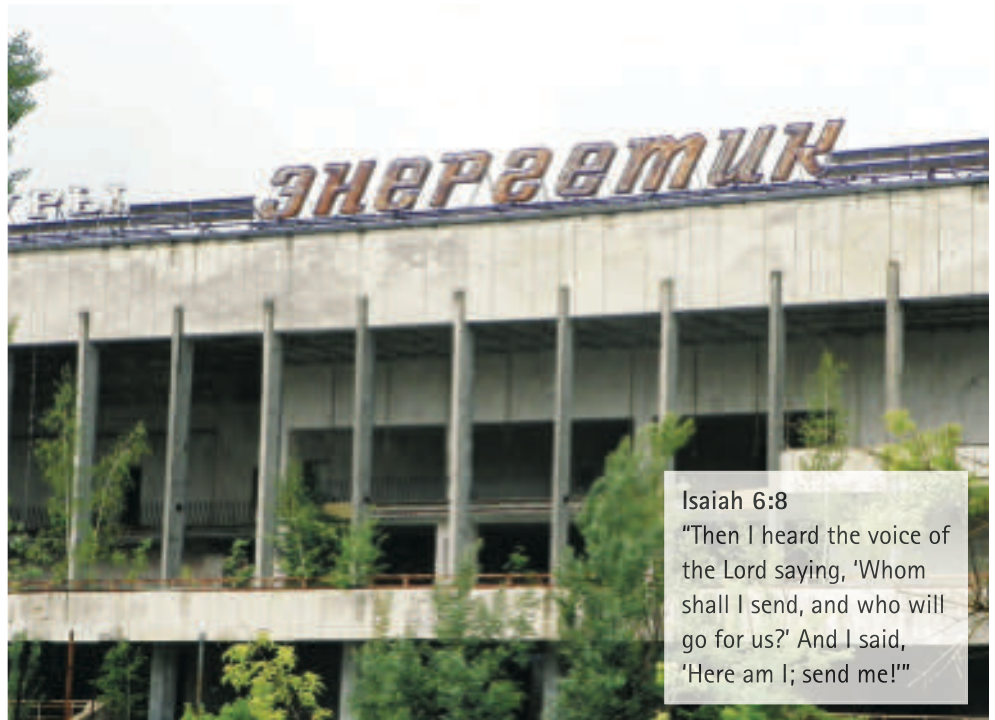
Sometimes our sense of calling is a gradual thing. At other times, God intrudes into our lives in such a way that it knocks our socks off. If young Isaiah had been the type to wear socks with his sandals, he would surely have been bare-footed after the experience we find in today's text. 

A death and a vision (vv. 1-4)

Isaiah dated his call to "the year that King Uzziah died," somewhere around 740 BCE. Uzziah, also known as Azariah, had led the kingdom of Judah for 40 years. He suffered from a serious skin disease the last few years of his life, allowing his son Jotham to reign in his stead (2 Kgs. 15:5). Uzziah's tenure had been marked by a long period of peace and prosperity for the inhabitants of Judah, and many would have mourned his death.

In that memorable year, a devout young man with the imposing name "Isaiah" (meaning "Yahweh is salvation") had a life-changing encounter with God, a vision in which Isaiah felt himself ushered into the very throne room of God. 


Isaiah saw himself in the main sanctuary room before the smaller



Isaiah 6:8

"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"


The abandoned city of Prip'yat, site of the Chernobyl disaster


Holy of Holies, where God's glory was thought to dwell. The Holy of Holies contained the great talisman of power and memory known as the Ark of the Covenant, a gold-plated rectangular box where the tablets containing the Ten Commandments were kept.  Two magnificent golden cherubim crowned the Ark, with their wings stretched toward each other. The Hebrews imagined that God's presence was somehow manifest above the Ark.

Isaiah's powerful vision would surely have sent him into a sensory overload of awe-inspiring sight, sound, smell, and touch. The experience would likewise have been frightening, for many ancients believed that seeing God would lead to death (Gen. 32:30; Exod. 33:20; Deut. 4:33, 5:24, 26; Judg. 6:22, 13:22).

Isaiah described Yahweh as sitting on a "high and lofty" throne, clothed in such majesty that "the hem of his robe" filled the temple (v. 1). We get the impression that the prophet averted his eyes, for he says nothing about God's appearance other than the lowest part of the divine apparel, then quickly shifts to

the heavenly attendants.

Impressive seraphs (or seraphim, the Hebrew plural) hovered about the throne, he said. The word "seraph" means "burning one," and may derive from their shining appearance or from the fiery imagery associated with the presence of God (Ezek. 1:27). 

The living *seraphim* of Isaiah's vision seem to be analogues of the golden cherubim mounted on the ark. Cherubim typically were animal in form, though sometimes with human faces, and were usually represented in ancient iconography with two wings. 

The seraphim in Isaiah's vision, however, had six wings: two for humility (covering the head), two for modesty (covering the "feet," often used in Hebrew as a euphemism for genitals), and two for mobility (with two they flew).

The seraphs were apparently somewhat human in form or at least spoke in voices understandable to humans, for Isaiah declares that they joined in an antiphonal chorus declaring the magnitude of divine holiness and

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



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the extent of God's pervasive glory (v. 3). While the thrice-repeated "Holy!" emphasized God's apartness, the divine glory was perceived throughout the earth (see also Num. 14:21, Ps. 72:19, Hab. 2:14). **U**

The seraphs' singing was not the sweet, harp-playing music we tend to associate with heaven, but a vocal blast louder than an unfettered rock band. Their voices caused the temple doors to shake in their pivots, Isaiah said, even as an impressive outpouring of smoke filled the sanctuary (v. 4).

Isaiah's vision was a rare gift of God, but the text suggests that the prophet had put himself in the right position and prepared himself for an encounter with God. He may have been praying in the temple when the vision occurred. Can you think of initiatives we might take to help us appreciate the majesty and holiness of God?

A call and response (vv. 5-7)

The spectacular vision of Yahweh enthroned and the ear-blasting, door-shaking declaration of God's glorious holiness washed over Isaiah like a sonic tsunami, leaving him supremely aware of his smallness and unworthiness to witness such an impressive scene.

Even the great Isaiah could be frightened, for he cried "Woe is me! I am lost!" Isaiah's response may reflect the fear of imminent death as a result of seeing God, but he seems as concerned with what he has done as with what he has seen. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips," he said, "yet my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!" (v. 5).

Here was holiness, and Isaiah knew it when he saw it. He could not imagine that a sinful human could exist for long in the presence of such flaming purity. The locus of uncleanness on Isaiah's lips represents the entire person, rather than verbal transgressions alone. Isaiah's statement reflects his commonality with a people who had persistently rebelled against God.

Isaiah may have thought his life was

over, but the vision did not kill him. He was correct in assuming that his sinfulness could not stand in the presence of divine purity, but incinerating the sinner was not God's only option.

A seraph flew toward Isaiah, bearing a live coal from the altar in a set of tongs, touching it to Isaiah's lips as the focal point of his confessed sin. The fiery ritual was not torture, however, but the touch of salvation. As if the blazing ember had burned away Isaiah's past offenses, the seraph declared "your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out" (v. 7).

The thought of having a burning coal aimed at our mouths sounds horrifying, but we should not let the symbolism be lost on us. Can there be true confession without some measure of pain, or forgiveness without cost?

A commission and a question (vv. 8-13)

Only after the ritual of cleansing did Isaiah hear the voice of God, who spoke as if expecting one of the heavenly attendants to respond: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (v. 8a).

Like Abraham (Gen. 22:1, 11), Jacob (Gen. 46:2), Moses (Exod. 3:4) and Samuel (1 Sam. 3:4, 6) before him, Isaiah responded "Here I am," even though God had not called him by name, like the others. Isaiah volunteered, adding: "Send me" (v. 9b). **U**

Isaiah's assignment would turn out to be more difficult than he could have imagined, for God's instructions seemed confusing, even paradoxical. Isaiah was to go and tell the people to listen without comprehending and to look without understanding (v. 9). He was to proclaim God's prophetic word of judgment to the Hebrews in a way that would cause them to harden their hearts and stop up their ears, lest they repent and be forgiven (v. 10).

What? Such a command appears to make no sense. Didn't God want Israel

to be saved? Then why should Isaiah preach in such a way as to turn them away? Isaiah likewise recognized the inconsistency of the message. His plaintive query "How long, O Lord?" (v. 11a) was not about timetables, but a cry of protest.

God's response offered only a glimmer of hope. Isaiah was to preach until the land was laid waste by Israel's enemies, a divine punishment for centuries of rebellion. Such destruction would come during Isaiah's lifetime, as the Assyrian king Sennacherib defeated the northern kingdom of Israel and scattered its inhabitants, then pushed into Judah, destroying nearly all of its fortified cities and forcing the people of Judah to pay tribute.

Proclaiming such a message may still seem strange to us, but the impression is that the verdict had already been given: The Hebrews' collective transgressions had earned them a prison sentence to be fulfilled in the coming exile. Isaiah's preaching was to make abundantly clear what was about to happen and why it would happen, with no plea-bargaining allowed and the only hope being a remnant reminder: a stump or memorial containing a "holy seed" (v. 13). **U**

While such preaching would seem totally counterproductive, it could also be understood as an intentional rhetorical strategy. If Isaiah's audience was stubbornly refusing to hear his call for change, the prophet's insistence that God didn't want them to hear and understand might goad the people into listening more closely and responding with repentance.

Our land, no less than Isaiah's, is occupied by "a people of unclean lips," and not just because of trashy language. Even when it seems hopeless, God calls us to live as lights that shine into the darkness of this world, and call other persons out of the gloom. The echoes of God's call to Isaiah will reverberate for as long as there are people who need to hear that there is a better way: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"

And will it be me? **BT**

Editor's note: This is the second article in a series that highlights the Baptist principle of liberty of conscience. The series is supported by an endowment gift from the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society, whose mission is carried on through the pages of Baptists Today.

BAPTIST PROFILES IN CONSCIENCE

Nannie Helen Burroughs

On this 50th anniversary of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the late Baptist preacher and civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr. towers above the landscape in the ongoing narrative of the struggle for human equality in the 21st century.

His contributions and untimely death are memorialized in a national holiday as well as numerous monuments and city street names throughout America. Without King's tireless championing of racial equality, alongside the equally important efforts of many of his contemporaries in the civil rights movement, the progress of human rights in modern America would be far less than it is today.

Many decades before King, however, another Baptist leader and advocate of racial equality helped prepare the way for the coming of the civil rights movement. An advocate of justice in an era of black disenfranchisement and lynching, Nannie Helen Burroughs made such an impact in the nation's capital so as to be honored with annual celebrations in Washington, D.C., to the present day.

EARLY YEARS

Nannie Helen Burroughs was born in 1878 in Virginia. Her mother, Jennie, was a former slave, while her father, John, was born as a free person of color. Educated at the Richmond Institute, John Burroughs was a Baptist preacher.

Providing the best education for their daughter was a priority of the proud parents. In 1883 the couple enrolled their then five-year-old daughter in the highly regarded city schools of Washington, D.C.

As a child, Nannie Helen Burroughs grew up during an exciting and challenging time



for African Americans. The emancipation of slaves resulting from the United States' victory over the Confederate States in the American Civil War had ushered in an era of hope and promise, known as Reconstruction, for African Americans in the South.

Government programs and northern missionaries helped many black families acquire land, housing and rudimentary education. With voting regulated by federal officials, a number of black southerners were elected to serve in state legislatures and as lawmakers in Washington.

Black Baptists in the South prospered during these heady years. Exercising newfound religious autonomy, they left the white churches of their slave years and quickly formed hundreds of their own congregations. State and national Baptist associations of black churches soon followed, with the National Baptist Convention eventually emerging as the largest of the national organizations.

Most southern whites, however, resisted equality with blacks. White efforts to oppress freedmen were somewhat held in check by the oversight of federal officials until the late

1870s, at which time Reconstruction ran out of steam in the face of growing white intransigence and northern ambivalence.

Freed from the restraining presence of federal authorities, white southerners in the 1880s began reversing many of the gains made by African Americans. Black legislators and congressmen were soon voted out of office in the South. The financial prospects of black families dimmed. African Americans were increasingly isolated, openly treated with disdain and provided with few opportunities to achieve successes of any kind.

Nannie Helen Burroughs' childhood was lived out in these hard years. One of the fortunate, the education she acquired in Washington was better than that which most southern black children received. But rather than distancing her from the trials of many of her peers, Burroughs' education heightened her conscience and instilled within her a desire to help the less fortunate succeed.

As the 1880s gave way to the 1890s, southern white oppression of blacks escalated, leading to the systematic implementation of a system of racial apartheid. Disallowed from forcing blacks back into slavery, whites resorted to other means to keep African Americans in a subservient state.

Between 1890 and 1905 every southern state passed laws designed to prevent African Americans from voting. During this same time, state legislatures implemented additional laws segregating blacks from whites. And in the 1890s and for many decades afterward, black men were lynched by the thousands in a reign of terror that effectively intimidated African Americans into submission and preserved the apartheid status quo.

Nannie Helen Burroughs thus confronted both promise and peril as a young black Baptist woman in the South. Demonstrating her leadership abilities and exhibiting courage and conscience, an 18-year-old Burroughs helped establish the National Association of

Colored Women (NACW) in 1896, an organization formed to help counter the growing and widespread oppression of African Americans, as well as to counter vicious attacks on the character of black women in the pages of southern newspapers.

Burroughs stood alongside Harriet Tubman and others in forming the organization that adopted the motto “Lifting We Climb.” The NACW devoted itself to helping black women and children obtain health care, education, better clothing and housing, along with supporting the woman’s suffrage movement.

Black churches and denominations, sharing the common goal of uplift for African Americans, supported the NACW. Burroughs’ involvement with the NACW helped launch a career of advocacy for black rights in partnership with the National Baptist Convention.

WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Following her father’s footsteps in ministry, Nannie Helen Burrough’s first job was that of associate editor of the *Christian Banner* in Philadelphia in 1897. The South beckoned, however, and she soon returned to her home region to take a position as a bookkeeper and editorial secretary for the Foreign Mission Board of the National Baptist Convention in Louisville, Ky., a title she held until 1909. During this time she took business classes and received an honorary degree from Louisville’s Eckstein-North University, a historically black college.

Burroughs quickly made an impression among National Baptists, advocating for the right of women to equally participate in the missionary activity of the denomination. Her “How the Sisters are Hindered from Helping” address at a denominational gathering led to the formation of the Woman’s Convention as an auxiliary to the National Baptist Convention.

For more than 60 years Burroughs led the organization in its efforts to raise money to provide food, clothing, housing and education for the poor.

Moving back to Washington, D.C., in 1909, Burroughs brought her influence, experience and passion to bear in the formation of the National Training School for Women and Girls. Focused on preparing black women for employment, the school offered courses in subjects ranging from domestic science to secretarial skills to shoe repair to gardening, of which Burroughs taught many.

The school was distinctively Christian.

Endorsed by National Baptists, it emphasized self-sufficiency through a clean life, a clean body and a clean house. Bible, bath and broom represented these three emphases.

Tireless in her efforts to help educate black women, Burroughs secured the support of prominent black Baptist leaders who helped raise funds to build and expand facilities.

While the training school represented a monumental achievement and her leadership of the National Baptists’ Woman’s Convention took much of her additional time, Burroughs did not limit herself to African-American uplift through Christian channels only. Concerned that black women were typically left out of the woman’s suffrage movement, Burroughs became active in the National League of Republican Colored Women. Seeking to help black women earn more than poverty wages, she became involved in the National Association of Wage Earners.

Woman’s suffrage was achieved in 1920. Increasing the earning power of black women proved to be an even greater challenge, of which Burroughs nonetheless achieved notable successes through her school.

Burroughs’ collective achievements led many of her contemporaries to compare her to the venerable Booker T. Washington. Meanwhile, Burrough’s broad advocacy of the rights of black women did not go unnoticed in the halls of the nation’s capitol.

‘NEGRO HOUSING’

In the year following the stock market crash of October 1929 that signaled the beginning of the Great Depression, U.S. President Herbert Hoover sought measures to shore up a plunging economy and reassure a worried public. Hoover, after all, was up for re-election in 1932.

With homelessness skyrocketing, one concern uppermost on the minds of many Americans was that of home ownership. Thus on Aug. 30, 1930, President Hoover announced a Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership to be held Dec. 2-5, 1931.

In preparation for the conference, 25 committees were created, of which a chairman was chosen for each. Prominent businessmen, scholars and government officials occupied most of the committee chairmanships, with few women represented. One committee, that of “Negro Housing,” was led by Nannie Helen Burroughs, by now a renowned black leader in the District of Columbia.

The envisioning of the conference, in

Hoover’s words, was to help “meet the situation presented by the present emergency, to alleviate the hardships that exist among home owners today, and to revitalize the building of homes as a factor of economic recovery, ... in its long distance view it was put forward in the confidence that through the creation of an institution of this character we could gradually work out the problem of systematically promoted home ownership on such terms of sound finance as people who have the home-owning aspiration deserve in our country.”

The conference ultimately helped bring about the passage of the 1932 Home Loan Bank Act, legislation that established means for the federal government to work with banks in providing affordable mortgage loans to families.

While African Americans in the years following remained financially disadvantaged compared to whites, the legislation nonetheless assisted many black families in acquiring their own homes, thanks in part to Nannie Helen Burroughs.

ENDURING LEGACY

Burroughs lived a long life of service and advocacy, dying in 1961 in the early years of the civil rights movement, a movement made possible in part due to her earlier, remarkable accomplishments on behalf of African Americans.

While Martin Luther King Jr. and other courageous black men and women captivated the attention of the nation during the civil rights movement, Burroughs was not forgotten. In 1975 the nation’s capital set aside May 10 in her honor. “Nannie Helen Burroughs Day” has been celebrated annually in Washington, D.C. ever since.

In 2009, 100 years after the founding of Burroughs’ National Training School for Women and Girls, the District of Columbia inaugurated an annual parade in her memory. Each year the parade proceeds down Helen Burroughs Avenue.

Marchers proceed past the school, which still stands and is a National Historic Landmark. A local historian is on hand to discuss Burroughs’ many contributions to the city and beyond.

The celebrations that continue to this day are a fitting tribute to a remarkable Baptist leader who, through courage, conscience and bold action, enriched the lives of millions of disadvantaged persons and helped prepare a nation to embrace racial equality. **BT**

How 'ill' are you?

By Bill Wilson

My grandmother often used a word to describe herself or other people. It was the word "ill."

She did not use it to describe someone who was sick with a cold or the flu. She used it to describe an attitude, a demeanor or a spirit.

For example, if someone were rude or stern with her, she would describe them as being "ill." If someone were sour or negative and brought a wet blanket to every gathering, she described them as "always being ill."

While not meaning that they were physically sick, she was accurately describing another kind of sickness. This sickness is spiritual and emotional.

It is the dreaded disease characterized by grouchiness, sullenness and negativity. Unfortunately, it is a disease that is present in pandemic proportions in local congregations today.

The "ill spirit" that pervades many churches is born of personal frustration, anxiety, unmet expectations and general unhappiness.

It is often brought into the life of the church from the workplace, the media, the economic realities we live in, our dysfunctional families or our own personal emotional struggles.

We show up at church "ill," and at the first opportunity, we share our "illness" with all those within reach.

I recently was in a congregational meeting that was punctuated with mean-spirited comments and actions. The entire evening had an unpleasant feel to it. The trust level among those present was so low that nothing was taken at face value.

Everything was subject to skepticism. In the end, the gathering was embarrassing. I walked away saddened and embarrassed that a people who call themselves Christian could treat one another in such brutal and unhealthy ways.

As I left, I wondered how is it that some people are able to attend church for a lifetime, call themselves Christians, and yet so easily revert to being un-Christ-like in the way they treat others.

How are we able to produce so many righteously mean Christians? How have we managed to create a theology that allows such disconnect between the one we claim to follow

and the way we live?

Dallas Willard, theologian par excellence, suggests that we have made secondary the inner transformation that Jesus made primary. When we neglect the spiritual disciplines, our surface spirituality melts away quickly when emotions get heated or issues become intense.

Far too often, our inner self has been shaped and formed by the culture we live in rather than the Christ we follow. Willard suggests: "The greatest need you and I have is the renovation of our heart. That spiritual place within us from which outlook, choices and actions come has often been formed by a world away from God. Now it must be transformed."



I recently spent a very pleasant weekend with a group of Baptist deacons who wanted to talk about transformation. We began by admitting that most of us are a bit frightened by the idea of transformation.

We are more interested in slight modifications or subtle adjustments than genuine transformation.

After all, we are bright, intelligent, self-made men and women who tend to become self-absorbed and somewhat proud of our lives. The last thing most of us want to be accused of is being a zealot or a religious fanatic. Transformation sounds like more than we signed on for.

I am convinced that the tidal wave of

"ill" people surging through our churches is a direct result of our failure to take seriously spiritual transformation into Christlikeness as the exclusive primary goal of a healthy local church. Such a priority would permeate our efforts at worship, evangelism, education, age-group ministries, small groups, etc. Such a focus would fundamentally change many of us.

Transformation is not optional for a Christ-follower. It is why we are here and what we are to be about. Re-forming our lives from the inside out will surely change us and reshape us in profound ways.

It might even make a difference in the way we conduct ourselves in a church business meeting when emotions are high and tensions are up. If not, then we may need to admit that we have managed to hear dozens, even hundreds, of sermons, Bible studies, Sunday school lessons and the like and have managed to not take internally those teachings.

Rather, what if we sought diligently to personally cultivate a loving spirit that became a defining characteristic of our congregation? (John 13:35)

What if we took seriously the idea that our transformation is why Jesus came and lived among us? (John 10:10)

What if the fruit of the Spirit, rather than being called "ill," became the defining trait of each of us? (Gal. 5:22)

Such would be a church that would honor and not embarrass our Savior. **BT**

—Bill Wilson is president of the Center for Healthy Churches.

An advertisement for a festschrift. On the left is a book cover for "Baptist History Heritage: A Festschrift in Honor of Walter B. Shurden, Sr." with a price tag of \$15 including shipping. On the right is promotional text: "NEW! A Festschrift in Honor of Walter B. Shurden, Sr." listing articles by John Finley, Kirby Godsey, Bruce Gourley, Glenn Hinson, Fisher Humphreys, John Pierce, and Doug Weaver; speeches by Walter B. Shurden, Sr.; and a bibliography of Shurden's published works. Orders are listed as 151 Broadleaf Dr., Macon, GA 31210, with contact email bbhs@baptisthistory.org.

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How to give your testimony

The well-dressed man standing at the pulpit is sharing his testimony. The pastor, Brother Will B. Done, sits behind him.

The testifier shouts, “Brothers and sisters, I’m not the man I used to be! Yes, friends, I used to be a drunkard.” Will B. Done calls out, “Tell it brother.” “And I used to be a gambler!” “Tell it brother!” “And I used to carry on with women!” “Tell it brother!” “And I used to dress my Doberman in ladies’ clothing.”

“Ooooh ... I wouldn’t tell that!”

Testimonies used to be a favorite part of worship, because someone might say something juicy. When missionaries gave their testimonies, they included oddities such as eating scorpions and learning languages you have to spit. Evangelists had the best testimonies. They dropped out of high school, went into show business, were miraculously converted, and stopped sleeping around — “Hallelujah!”

Testimonies have a long, checkered history. Some people tell their story as though it is an achievement. They consider themselves self-made. We are tempted to tell our stories as if we pulled ourselves up by our own bootstraps.

For instance, I grew up in the turmoil of the Deep South in the 1960s and the hardships of the Rust Belt North in the 1970s. I chose Baylor, the world’s largest Baptist university, a demanding school with a terrible football team. My parents wondered if I would have enough money to pay tuition — it was \$45 a semester hour — but I took a grueling job in the bookstore, worked as many as eight hours a week, and I made it. I moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where I finished a master’s and a Ph.D. in only eight short years. I set my sights on a beautiful woman whose parents considered her way out of my league, but I persisted. I served as a pastor for 22 years in four churches that my mother would describe

as prominent. In each place of service I was respected by several people in the community. The fourth largest seminary in Atlanta thought I should be shaping young minds, so now I’m one of the 14 finest professors at the McAfee School of Theology.

Telling our story that way is fun, but there are a variety of ways to tell your story. You can tell your story without it meaning anything. One thing happens, then another, random occurrences without meaning. Sometimes we tell our story that way.

I was born in South Dakota. I went to elementary and junior high in Mississippi and high school in Ohio. I graduated from college. Carol and I met in Louisville and got married. I took a job in Indiana. Graham was born. We moved to Kansas. Caleb was born. We moved to Waco, then Fort Worth, and now Atlanta. That’s the story.

All the facts are right, but it does not mean anything. To see our lives as meaningless happenstance or as the product of our own labors means we have missed the point.

This is my testimony: Way back in the beginning, God’s goodness erupted and created the heavens and the earth. God made people to hear their stories.

Two thousand years ago, my story took a dramatic turn in the story of Jesus. We see the heart of God broken and opened in front of us in Jesus’ life and death. The people who loved Jesus’ story discovered that the Spirit was

with them to help them remember and live the story. The best of our ancestors were not only faithful to the story, but also added to its glory.

Not many years ago, some people in Mississippi told the story to my grandparents who told it to my mother who claimed it as her story, too. A college student in San Antonio told the story to my father, who decided that he wanted it to be his story. My parents and those with whom they shared the story helped me slowly but surely understand that my life has meaning in the light of God’s story.

Several churches encouraged me to explore God’s gracious invitation to ministry. At seminary I met a most genuine Christian who worked at an inner city church. Carol’s mother and father had taught her Christ’s way of compassion. I was way behind and still am.

A church in Indiana welcomed us and cared for us through a painful miscarriage. When Graham and Caleb were born, we recognized that they were gifts of grace. We have served delightful churches and a wonderful seminary. Through those caring sisters and brothers God has taught me. My story is all about God’s grace. My testimony and yours is the story of God loving us, through good and bad, helping us find hope in a story bigger than our own. **BT**

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

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A conversation with
Scott Willis about
worship, music & more

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. — Scott Willis has been playing guitar, writing songs and engaging in worship leadership for a long time. In college he traveled nationally with a musical group of Baptist students called Intermission, sponsored by National Student Ministries.

After seminary graduation, he served as a campus minister in Georgia and Arkansas. Now Scott is a worship leader at First Baptist Church of Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Recently, he launched worship150.com, an online resource that offers songs to “enhance the corporate and personal worship experience.”

Editor John Pierce talked with Scott about his decades of musical experience and what he sees happening today in corporate and personal worship.



BT: Often worship music is discussed in divisive ways, particularly in terms of age and style. Yet not every person of the same age prefers the same kinds of music. And many people find a variety of musical styles to enhance worship. Have you found that to be true?

SW: What concerns me is that people can become territorial about different styles of worship music. It’s not helpful, and it can be hurtful to those who welcome variety.

I find that young people can readily embrace the style and liturgy of classic hymns

just as an older generation steeped in hymnology can be interested in the intimate personal nature of modern worship music.

Worship is a transformative experience, and people are discovering a variety of creative ways to express their love for and devotion to God.

BT: You clearly care about “multi-generational corporate worship.” Why? And how do you make that happen in an intentional way?

SW: I believe that experiencing worship with people older and younger in the faith adds richness and perspective and opens things up to more variety. We have a good cross section of ages in our “contemporary” service, and I want to be inclusive with our music choices — from a familiar timeless hymn (sometimes re-imagined), to classic worship choruses, to current worship songs.

Planning also involves creating good flow with the music and smooth transitions into other elements in the service. I am intentional in involving all ages — from children to youth to adults — singing, ushering, reading scripture and leading in prayer.

BT: Will you share a bit about how you connect music to the sermon and the larger worship objective? That seems to be a mark of your worship planning experiences.

SW: I like to settle in with the scripture text and a summary of key points in the sermon. I’ll read commentary as well that helps stimulate ideas for songs that tie into certain themes.

It helps to be familiar with a large catalogue of songs, and online music worship resources are readily available. Sometimes I’m inspired to write a song to fit the theme. That adds a personal touch that hopefully will connect with others.

BT: As a songwriter, when you pick up your guitar, what’s usually on your mind?

SW: I am thinking about a song that will enhance a theme, topic or scripture text. I want the music to complement the lyric.

A pleasing hook in the melody or rhyming pattern in the lyric always makes the song more accessible. If I am writing a song to be sung by the congregation, then I hope to keep it simple and “singable.”



BT: Tom Long, who teaches at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, has said that worship leaders tend to draw a vertical line that only allows for a particular style of music. He suggested drawing a horizontal line with "good" above the line and "bad" below, and that all styles deemed "good" are appropriate for worship. Do you agree?

SW: I agree that it's easy to become one-dimensional when it comes to music style and content. Getting feedback from the worship band, ministers and the congregation can be a great help.

Recognizing sound theology is certainly a criterion. Just because a song is currently popular doesn't mean it's appropriate or usable. I look for songs that say something familiar in a fresh new way.

BT: We all have our personal preferences about worship. Yet sometimes those preferences are equated with a sense of superiority. Doesn't that contrast with the very attitude needed for worship?

SW: Whenever we approach God in worship, it requires genuine humility. Preferences are fine; we all have them. But we should not try to dictate what defines authentic worship.

If those preferences lead to the belief that "my way is right and your way is wrong," then it's time to take a serious step back and allow "surrender" rather than "control" to become the operative last word in worship.

BT: How can personal devotional experiences, beyond corporate worship

experiences on Sunday, be enhanced with music?

SW: Each of us should create some sacred space for listening for God. Music can and should draw us to that sacred place. Anyone can do this by playing recorded music or just singing quietly.

Look for a "heart song" — a classic hymn, chorus or modern worship song that brings you into an experience with the Holy; centers you; defines and describes where you have been and where you are on your faith journey.

BT: Why did you launch worship150.com? What have been the results, even surprises so far? And what are your hopes for this web site?

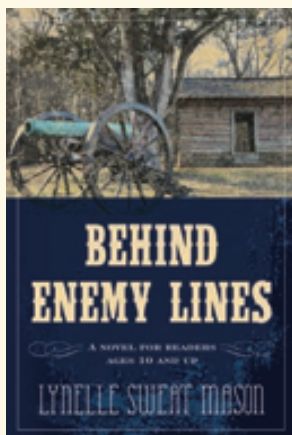
SW: Creating original music for worship has been a passion of mine for several years. I am offering this site as a resource for churches to supplement the songs they access from major worship writers and artists.

My songs are grouped according to theme or event. I also want individuals to discover songs that inspire and encourage them.

The site was launched Feb. 26. I am pleased that this dream of mine has finally taken off. It's too early to determine specific results, yet I am hopeful that worship leaders will find useful song content and benefit from insightful blog posts.

I want folks to let me know how their church has been blessed or how they have been touched. My prayer is that all the work has been for a purpose even beyond what I had imagined. **BT**

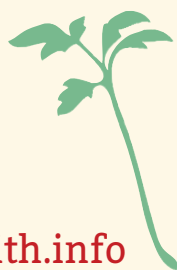
'Recognizing sound theology is certainly a criterion. Just because a song is currently popular doesn't mean it's appropriate or usable.'



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BWA host: ‘Come over to Africa!’

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — When thousands of Baptists gather in Durban, South Africa for the 21st Baptist World Congress, July 22-26, it will mark the first such meeting ever held on the African continent.

Organizers hope more than 4,000 Baptists from around the world will gather for inspirational worship, music, workshops and fellowship. Advance registrations are lower than anticipated, however, according to a report given to the BWA Executive Committee, which met March 2-4 in Falls Church.

Emmett Dunn, who leads youth work and conference organization for the BWA, said slow registrations were due in part to ongoing fears of the Ebola virus — even though Durban, in the southeastern corner of the continent, is thousands of miles from where the now-abating outbreak occurred in West Africa.

Duro Ayanrinola, general secretary of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship, told the BWA Executive Committee March 4 that potential visitors should have no fear. Ayanrinola, who lives in Nigeria, outlined ways in which Baptist groups have worked to educate church



Duro Ayanrinola

members and help prevent the spread of the virus. The Ebola crisis has passed, he said.

African Baptists are looking forward to hosting the meeting, Ayanrinola said with a smile: “They are already cooking for you, and the aromas are delightful.” He urged members of the Executive Committee to allay fears in their home countries and encourage persons to attend the historic Congress.

“You are not guests in Africa, but family,” he said. “Come over to Africa,” he urged, to have fellowship with brothers and sisters. “Come over to Africa,” he concluded, “and praise the living God!”

Paul Msiza, a pastor from the South African capital Pretoria and former president of the All Africa Baptist Fellowship, will become president of the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) at the end of the Congress. He will be the second BWA president from Africa: William Tolbert of Liberia served from 1965-1970 and went on to become president of his country in 1971, holding that office until he was assassinated in 1980.

Cultural interchange and colorful worship highlight the BWA World Congress, which is held every five years in a different part of the globe. The last three meetings were held in Australia (2000), the United Kingdom (2005) and the United States (2010). Smaller annual gatherings are held in the intervening years.

Speakers, choral groups, soloists and workshop leaders for the upcoming Congress will represent each of the six geographical regions of the BWA. Keynote speakers will include Joel Gregory of North America, Anthony Carroll of the Caribbean, Donald Ndichafah of Africa, Dimitrina Oprenova of Europe, Peter Chen from the Asia Pacific region, and Luiz Roberto Silvado from Latin America.

Information about the Congress, including a link for registration, can be found at bwanet.org/congress. **BT**

Rwandan Baptist to receive Human Rights Award

Corneille Gato Munyamasoko, general secretary of the Association of Baptist Churches in Rwanda, will receive the BWA Congress Human Rights Award in July, following action by the BWA Executive Committee meeting in Falls Church on March 4.

Munyamasoko was lauded by the award committee for having dedicated his life to Christian ministries, to promoting peace and reconciliation, and to combating the stigma associated with HIV and AIDS.

Munyamasoko was born in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where his parents fled following an outbreak of ethnic violence in Rwanda in 1959. As a teacher in the DRC, Munyamasoko worked to help Rwandans and Congolese overcome ethnic differences.

When the Rwandan genocide of 1994 spilled over into the DRC, with Hutu invaders killing Tutsi residents, Munyamasoko moved his family to Rwanda in hopes of helping to rebuild his native country.

Working as a principal in a Baptist high school near the Rwanda-DRC border, Munyamasoko witnessed many atrocities, including the murders of the entire student body of a nearby boarding school. He and his wife, Anne-Marie, took in children orphaned by the genocide to be raised as their own.

Later elected as deputy general secretary of the Association of Evangelical Baptists of Rwanda, Munyamasoko oversaw 51 schools and regional churches in addition to serving as pastor of a local church.

Believing that the country’s future depended on changing attitudes among the

young, he promoted peace and reconciliation clubs in secondary schools, and later launched a movement of “peace camps” that help young adults from different ethnic backgrounds come to terms with the violence they had witnessed and to gain a greater appreciation for one another.

Munyamasoko has also worked with church leaders in the DRC and Kenya to promote peace and reconciliation, the committee said, and has tackled other social concerns, as well.

Aware of a strong stigma in the churches against persons suffering from HIV and AIDS, he began training pastors to become role models in caring for people with HIV and AIDS. The result, Munyamasoko told the committee, is that the stigmatization “is no longer an issue in our congregations.” **BT**

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



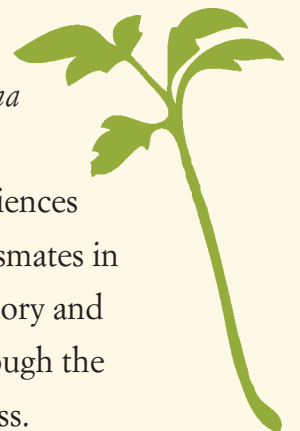
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THE FINAL ARTICLE; NEXT, THE BOOK

EDITOR'S NOTE: For more than four years we have followed the month-by-month summaries of Baptist engagement in and interpretations of the American Civil War 150 years ago. This is the final article in the series. However, Bruce Gourley has graciously agreed to let us publish this well-researched and insightful material in book form. Sponsors will have their names in the book and receive a signed copy. The \$100 sponsorship, minus the cost of the book, is a charitable gift. Make your contribution online at baptiststoday.org/donate or mail to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31201-6318. Please indicate the gift is for the "Gourley book." Thank you.

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Like a towering, thundering wave crashing upon the shore, the army of U.S. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant finally breaks through the Confederate lines at Petersburg on the morning of the second day of the month, a Sunday.

It is the moment the North has long awaited, and the moment long dreaded by Confederate officials. Having rolled up Rebel defenses, the road to Richmond is open.

Within hours a telegram is delivered to Confederate president Jefferson Davis, who is attending a Sunday morning church service. The message is from the commander of the South's armies, Gen. Robert E. Lee: "I advise that all preparation be made for leaving Richmond tonight."

Jumping up, Davis rushes to his office and instructs officials to destroy government documents and then leave town. Stacks of papers are hauled outside and set ablaze.

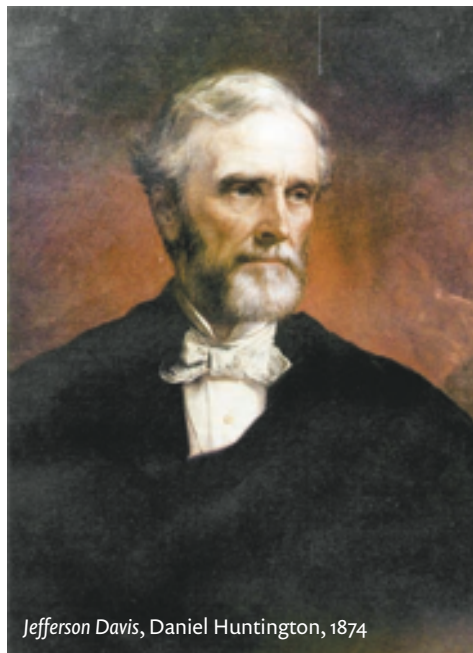
Startled observers see the flames. As the smoke drifts skyward, rumors begin swirling around town. Something is wrong. Has the fighting at Petersburg been renewed?

At four o'clock in the afternoon the departure of the Confederate government is formally announced. Mayhem immediately ensues.

From late afternoon through the night, Richmond's white elites stream out of town. On horseback, in train cars and carriages and skiffs and boats, or pulling carts, they take what they can.

During the night, Confederate soldiers work quickly to destroy the stocks of tobacco, cotton and food stored in warehouses. When local poor whites see the massive quantities of food being brought out of secret storage, they react with disbelief, having for many months lived on the edge of starvation because of

150 YEARS AGO

April 1865

Jefferson Davis, Daniel Huntington, 1874

Confederate officials' insistence that there was a shortage of food.

An enraged crowd quickly forms and begins looting at will. Amid the looting, soldiers set fire to tobacco and cotton bales. The flames mingle with those from piles of government documents yet burning.

The wind picks up, spreading the flames to the business district. Loaded shells at the ironworks go off, then the arsenals aboard docked warships explode with such force that windows are shattered for a radius of two miles.

The morning of April 3 dawns on a city devastated, and devoid of most of its leading white citizens. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is notified.

"Thank God," the president responds. "I have lived to see this! It seems to me that I

have been dreaming a horrid dream for four years, and now the nightmare is gone. I want to see Richmond."

Union troops march into the city to the cheers of blacks who were slaves just hours earlier. The sight of black troops brings joyous tears to the eyes of many.

The arrival of Lincoln on April 4, however, elicits the greatest response of all. Instantly recognizing the president, former slaves greet the man who is widely viewed as their Moses.

Adm. David D. Porter, accompanying Lincoln, describes the scene: "As far as the eye could see, the streets were alive with negroes and poor whites rushing in our direction.... They all wanted to shake hands with Mr. Lincoln or [touch] his coat tail or even to kneel down and kiss his boots!"

With Richmond fallen, Lee surrenders to Grant on April 9 at Appomattox, Va. Although some Confederate forces remain afield and Jefferson Davis is not captured until weeks later, the war is effectively over.

The rebellious states have been defeated, the Union preserved. Four long, agonizing years and more than 600,000 deaths have been required to fulfill the promises of 1776 that bound the original colonies together.

"All men are created equal," the "unanimous Declaration of the 13 united States of America" had boldly decreed back then. "Liberty" is an inherent "right." And "whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it," the Declaration had trumpeted.

The southern states had denied these very words of the nation's founders, insisting that liberty belonged to whites only. For almost a century southern white elites had enriched themselves off of slave labor, preaching white solidarity while leaving crumbs to common white folk and censoring dissenting voices.



Architect of the Capitol, by Allyn Cox. A Confederate soldier and a Union soldier shake hands, marking the reunion of the country after the devastation of the Civil War in 1865. A cotton plant and a northern pine tree symbolize the South and the North, respectively.

Many Baptist elites in the South had joined the chorus, sanctifying black slavery with a literal interpretation of the Bible while condemning evil northerners, including Baptists, who insisted that God willed freedom for all people.

The South had gone to war with the North for the stated purpose of preserving black slavery. But God's hand ultimately found expression in northern military might, bestowing freedom to all and thus completing the American Revolution — or so many northerners believe as celebrations erupt throughout the North.

As joyful as are the northerners, the bitterness and despair of many white southerners is every bit as visceral. An actor and Confederate sympathizer named John Wilkes Booth, hateful of Lincoln as have been many southerners during the war, seeks revenge.

On April 14, five days after Lee's surrender, Booth assassinates the president, shocking the world. Seemingly no one is left untouched by the murder.

Northerners are outraged and deeply saddened. In the days and weeks following the killing, from many Baptist pulpits in the North, black and white alike, flow tributes to Lincoln for his sacrificial commitment to freedom. On the other hand, many white southerners believe Lincoln got what he deserved. Others, especially the poor, mourn.

Blacks everywhere are shocked, while many are fearful. God's agent, their deliverer, is

dead. Might their newfound freedom somehow be snatched away?

Nonetheless, celebrations of freedom are held in many black Baptist churches. Former slaves praise God and Lincoln's Republican Party. At an April 23 gathering at the State Street Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala., the packed crowd of former slaves sings:

*Free workmen in the cotton-field,
And in the sugar cane;
Free children in the common school,
With nevermore a chain.
Then rally, Black Republicans —
Aye, rally! We are free!
We've waited long
To sing the song —
The song of liberty*

The immediate post-war years are full of promise and hope for black citizens in the South and North. The 13th Amendment formally ends slavery in December 1865, while the 14th and 15th amendments in the years following extend legal protections to blacks and decree that suffrage cannot be predicated on the basis of race.

En masse in the South, black Baptists leave white churches and form hundreds, then thousands, of autonomous congregations. Some individuals, such as South Carolinian and war hero Robert Smalls, become political leaders in state houses and in Washington, D.C.

Others, having served in the Union

military, trade their soldier uniforms for clerical garments. Collectively, black Baptists begin establishing denominational structures to help in the tasks of missions, education and uplift of the black race. Many northern Baptists, black and white alike, provide assistance.

White southerners confront a land destroyed and a society, culture and economy devoid of slave labor. Southern Baptists face the daunting prospects of rebuilding their churches and denomination, eventually emerging organizationally stronger than ever.

Southern ideologues, meanwhile, set about turning defeat into victory. Unwilling to concede that the South was in the wrong in going to war with the North, they create a narrative of righteousness.

Southern Baptist leaders such as John William Jones, well-known Confederate chaplain and denominational administrator, play prominent roles in this task. Ignoring the historical records of the Confederacy that clearly portrayed the South as going to war to preserve black slavery, Jones and other southern apologists create a "Lost Cause" mythology, recasting the war as a noble and moral fight for states rights and southern traditions.

While the godless North won the war due to military dominance, the superior southern way of life had not been conquered. Quietly set aside in public discourse is the fact that "states rights" and the "traditional" southern "way of life" were shorthand for black slavery. The new narrative thus preserves white supremacy while downplaying slavery.

Nonetheless, many remain convinced that God yet wills that the black race be subservient to the white. Some openly voice such sentiments. In the 1890s Southern Baptists support efforts to take freedoms away from blacks, including the implementation of apartheid laws and the suppression of black votes.

The end of the war, it turns out, is anything but. Not only are blacks in the post-war South gradually stripped of many of the freedoms to which they are legally entitled as American citizens, but racism remains all too real in the post-war North.

The Civil War was thus a second revolution, but an incomplete one. Legislatively, full freedom and equality for black citizens will not come until the passing of another 100 years. **BT**

—Bruce Gourley is executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and online editor / contributing writer for Baptists Today.

Beliefs *into* Action

The night Dean Smith broke the rules on race in Chapel Hill

James Forbes was at a conference of pastors on Sunday, Feb. 8, in Virginia when he got a call from his brother. “Have you heard the news?” his brother asked.

Dean Smith, the revered former basketball coach at the University of North Carolina, had died.

In the days since, Forbes has heard all the tributes. He’s seen the remembrances of Smith’s on-court success and off-court courage.

“Listening to all the words people have been saying about what a special human being he was, I’ve just been saying ‘Amen!’” Forbes said. “Yes, that’s just the kind of man he was.”

While Forbes, the senior minister emeritus at New York’s Riverside Church, didn’t have the same close, decades-long relationship with Smith as many of the people who remembered the coach recently, he did play a role in a central piece of Smith’s legacy.

As a young black pastor, spending the summer of 1962 on the staff of Chapel Hill’s Olin T. Binkley Baptist Church, Forbes was part of the most famous meal in the town’s history. The dinner he shared with Smith and the pastor at Binkley Baptist, Robert Seymour, at The Pines restaurant helped kickstart the town’s path to integration.

It’s a story that has been retold recently as evidence that Smith turned his beliefs into action in a way that almost overshadows what he did as a coach.

When Forbes first met a then 33-year-old Smith, who had just finished his first season as the Tar Heels’ head coach and was on the church’s deacon board, he quickly grasped the innate decency that has been referenced often in the wake of his death.

“You see, black people sort of understand when people are trying to bend over backwards to be accepting versus the times when we encounter people for whom it is natural,” Forbes said. “... You can sense it. You can smell it. You can feel it. In his case, there was no straining to have to be open and accepting... The comfort level, the genuineness, what I’d call the unfeigned sense of friendship, that’s what you found in Dean Smith.”

Ask Forbes about the night when he, Seymour and Smith went to The Pines, an upscale Chapel Hill restaurant that was staunchly segregated, and he’ll tell you about Binkley Baptist.

In 1962, Forbes, who was born in Burgaw in eastern North Carolina, had just graduated from New York’s Union Theological Seminary but didn’t have a job lined up. So he took part in a program run by the National Council

of Churches called the Student Interracial Ministries.

“They would place black pastors in white congregations and white pastors in black congregations to at least begin to overcome separation and to make it possible to recognize that our faith makes us one,” Forbes said.

Seymour invited Forbes to Binkley and Chapel Hill.

The Chapel Hill that Forbes found was far



Coach Dean Smith, a Baptist layman, made a huge impact on college basketball and beyond the court. This photo and the one on the cover are courtesy of UNC Athletic Communications.

from the tolerant place it has become. Forbes remembers leaving a church service and walking uptown to restaurants with parishioners only to get turned away. He recalls afternoons when he would umpire youth baseball games and hear racial epithets shouted after unpopular calls.

Once, when he visited the hospital after one of Binkley Baptist's white parishioners had given birth, he was greeted by a nurse at the door to the maternity ward. She was certain he was on the wrong floor. Black babies, she told him, were somewhere else.

While Chapel Hill still had its racial barriers, Binkley did not.

"The extraordinary openness of the people at Olin T. Binkley Baptist Church made all the difference and indicated what I learned for many years, and that is you cannot put all the people from any ethnic group in the same basket," Forbes said.

"That is true for black people. That is true for white people. I was glad to have an experience that confirmed that philosophy of life."

Ask Forbes again about the night he dined at The Pines and he'll tell you about Seymour.

In his three decades as Binkley's pastor, Seymour was an unwavering progressive voice. He spoke out against the Vietnam War and the death penalty and advocated for tolerance and helping the poor. In the early 1960s, he took aim at Chapel Hill's oppressive racial climate.

He had an ally in Smith, who had been taking similar stands since helping to integrate his high school basketball team in Kansas.

This led to a belief among the Binkley congregation that the racial status quo must be challenged.

"We must attempt to do what we pray about," Forbes said. "We prayed 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' They were fully aware of the racial difficulties and continued prejudices. But the pattern was, let us model what we believe the way society ought to be, fully aware that not everybody was up to it and there would be an emotional and psychological lag. So what we were going to do, while I was there, was let us act as naturally as we would wish to be. And if we encounter negativity, then we will deal with that."

The dinner at The Pines was part of this push. The restaurant was one of the fanciest in Chapel Hill.

Smith's teams dined there often. All of the patrons were white.

The story is that Seymour first approached Smith with the idea of the three trying to get a table there. With Smith's stature in the town, the owners wouldn't dare turn him away.

In his 1999 autobiography, Smith described the meal as uneventful, saying the only hiccup was a slight delay in finding the trio a table.

When asked once more for his memories of that night, Forbes paused. You see, he explained, he has none. "In those days, part of the way you survived was to anesthetize yourself to the indignities that would come quite frequently," Forbes said. "Should you have lived with exposed nerves to all the slights and slings and arrows, you might have become a kind of basket case. But black people learned how to live as if the pattern was a temporary arrangement based on faulty understanding, that in the course of time, it would be better.

"You don't always sit around nursing these things. So I suspect if I were in hypnosis, somebody could help me to remember a whole lot of things that I chose not to be as fully aware of or not to remember."

For those who learned well after the fact about the nation's struggle to move past Jim Crow, it can be too easy to confine it to the pages of books or discussions in history class. One can lose sight of the fact that the fight was waged by real people who had to endure it in living color.

What in hindsight reads like a triumphant march toward progress was in fact earned one awful, degrading, fearful moment at a time.

"You could either choose, as some people do, to dwell on [your] scars, or you can celebrate the healing that comes amidst the assaults and bruises and unjust arrangements," Forbes said. "I guess we could actually enjoy having many black people who have managed to survive."

For Forbes, the details of that night at The Pines aren't important. More than a half century later, the only thing that matters is that he was there.

So was Seymour.

And so was Smith.

Forbes' time in Chapel Hill was brief. After the summer ended, he went on to serve at the Holy Trinity Church in Wilmington. N.C.

Later, he preached at a church in Richmond, Va., and went back to Union Theological Seminary to teach. In 1989, he became the first black minister at Riverside

Church, a diverse and influential parish on Manhattan's upper west side.

Along the way, he never stopped advocating for change.

He also never lost touch with Seymour. The now-retired pastor officiated Forbes' wedding in Wilmington and, just last summer, traveled to New York to speak to his congregation.

Forbes didn't stay in as close contact with Smith. As the coach built the Tar Heels program into a powerhouse, Forbes was content to watch from afar.

"My contact with him was, every time I saw him on the floor, to say 'I know that man,'" Forbes said.

Very quickly after Forbes arrived in Chapel Hill in the summer of 1962, Seymour decided to take a vacation. So for a few weeks, Forbes was left in charge.

He said it was an important time for him as he was still learning how to run a parish.

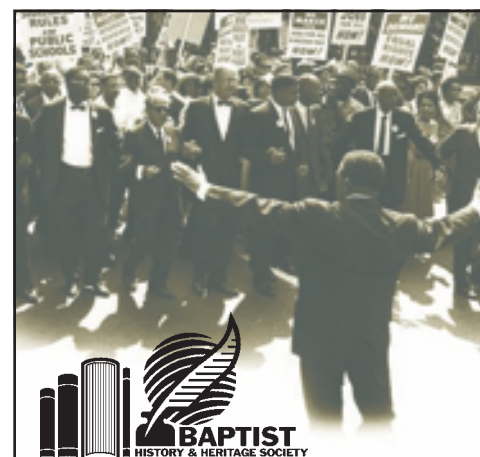
In the decades since, his brief period at the helm of Binkley Baptist has taken on an additional meaning, one that he said continues to be a source of pride.

"I could really say 'I was Dean Smith's pastor,'" Forbes said. "That's a real distinction." **BT**

—Stephen Schramm is a staff writer for The Fayetteville Observer in Fayetteville, N.C., where this story first appeared. It is reprinted with permission.



James Forbes



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‘Caving into culture’ often needed

By John Pierce

Whenever a hot-button issue arises within the larger society, as well as within church life, there are those who charge proponents of social change with abandoning the Bible and caving into culture.

One does not have to be an indefatigable historian to find ready examples about all kinds of shifts that faced such criticism and opposition — from Sunday recreation to racial and gender equality — voiced by leading Christian figures at the time.

Southern Baptist Convention president Ronnie Floyd recently took up that charge regarding the fast-moving political embrace of marriage equality, according to Baptist Press. “Even religious leaders are caving in to the shifting sands of cultural change ...,” the Arkansas pastor is quoted as saying.

While it is possible to make a biblical case for most sides of any debate, this familiar way of standing in opposition to social change is riddled with problems.

Chiefly, it has been the common refrain used by defenders of the status quo through

most every societal shift including women’s rights, dancing, interracial relationships, blue laws, slavery and many others.

The charge in each situation is: You caved into modern culture while I remain true to the unchanging Bible.

Within that charge is the arrogant assumption that one’s long-held social position could not have been influenced by earlier cultural norms that shaped what one claims to be biblical.

To strengthen that position, the charge of apostasy (as well as failed patriotism) is first employed. The 19th-century Presbyterian minister and writer James H. Thornwell of South Carolina took such an approach in defense of African slavery.

He labeled supporters of abolition as “atheists, socialists, communists [and] red republicans,” according to *Christianity Today*. Then his argument of holding the one true biblical position followed.

Because of such historical evidence, much caution about labeling others as failed disciples who caved into culture should rest with conservative evangelical Christians. The track record is simply not good.

One doesn’t have to dig too deeply to know that more-conservative Christianity has consistently come down on the wrong side of one social issue after another related to equality and human rights. And, in each case, the go-to argument was one of staying true to the Bible while the less faithful were “caving into culture.”

That reality does not mean that every new issue that arises should be embraced without questioning or even appropriate opposition where one’s conviction lies. But it should cause a sense of humility and caution that doesn’t quickly dismiss those with a different perspective as unbelievers.

Indeed, following Jesus is counter-cultural. However, what many assume to be a “biblical worldview” or “Christian culture” often misses the very essence of Jesus’ words and deeds.

And, as a result, history and the Bible have often been found on the side of those who at the time were deemed heretics who caved in.

On any side of any debate, however, caution is always needed before claiming that one’s own perspective is assuredly shared by God. **BT**

Are they really working?

By Tony W. Cartledge

My students are allowed to use laptop computers in class because I want them to take good notes, and most people can type faster and more legibly than they can write by hand. But I often ramble around the room to make sure they have a word processor open, rather than Facebook.

Workplace managers might want to look over a few shoulders, too. Apparently, many folks who sit behind a computer are checking out more than the price of pork bellies or the status of the latest contract. I suppose that should not come as a surprise.

Of course, students and others who have smart phones can do the same thing beneath the desk without the need of a computer.

A friend who’s interested in doing a social media campaign recently pointed me to an “infographic” (we used to call them charts) about peak times for social media use — and they mostly come during business or school hours.

If the chart is correct, the highest number of click-throughs on Facebook occurs between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. on weekdays, with the peak time being at 3 p.m. on Wednesdays. Hump day is actually marked by a hump on the graph.

If you want people to read your tweets, the most popular Twitter time is between 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. Monday to Thursday.

The business-related site LinkedIn is most popular Tuesday through Thursday, with peak times being at noon and between 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. My understanding is that LinkedIn

is mainly for networking, but I’m aware that one popular use is for job hunting or prospecting for possibilities.

Perhaps managers should worry that so many employees are checking out the site during lunch break and at the end of the workday — but, then, maybe the managers are doing the same thing.

Fewer people than you might expect are cruising social media at night: the worst time for Facebook is after 8 p.m. on weekends. Twitter calms down after 8 p.m. every night, and LinkedIn hits the skids after 10 p.m.

The take-home, apparently, is that if you want more people to see the latest cute picture or charming insight you have to share, post it during a workday afternoon.

Here’s to productivity! **BT**

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Online mapping: Atlas ‘heat-maps’ views on abortion, gay marriage, immigration

WASHINGTON — Anyone from politicians to scholars to the simply curious can now see just how deeply the nation is divided on abortion or same-sex marriage — and discover there’s significant consensus on immigration — with a new online mapping tool.

The latest edition of the *American Values Atlas*, released in late February, allows users to “heat-map” views on those issues across all 50 states and 30 metropolitan areas to see where attitudes blow hot or cold.

The Public Religion Research Institute launched the atlas last year featuring political and religious affiliation and demographic data such as age, race and ethnicity.

With the new data on abortion, gay marriage and immigration, users can see that “Americans are all over the map” on the hot social questions of the day, said Robert P. Jones, CEO of PRRI.

To give a sense of the partisanship on issues, Jones looked at the degrees of difference.

Across the U.S., there’s a 43-point spread between the state where the most residents “favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to be able to marry legally” (New Hampshire, at 75 percent) and states where the fewest percentage of people agree (Alabama and Mississippi, each at 32 percent). In Massachusetts support is at 73 percent.

On whether abortion should be legal in all or most cases, the gap stretches 36 percentage points; it’s highest in New Hampshire (73 percent) and lowest in Wyoming (37 percent).

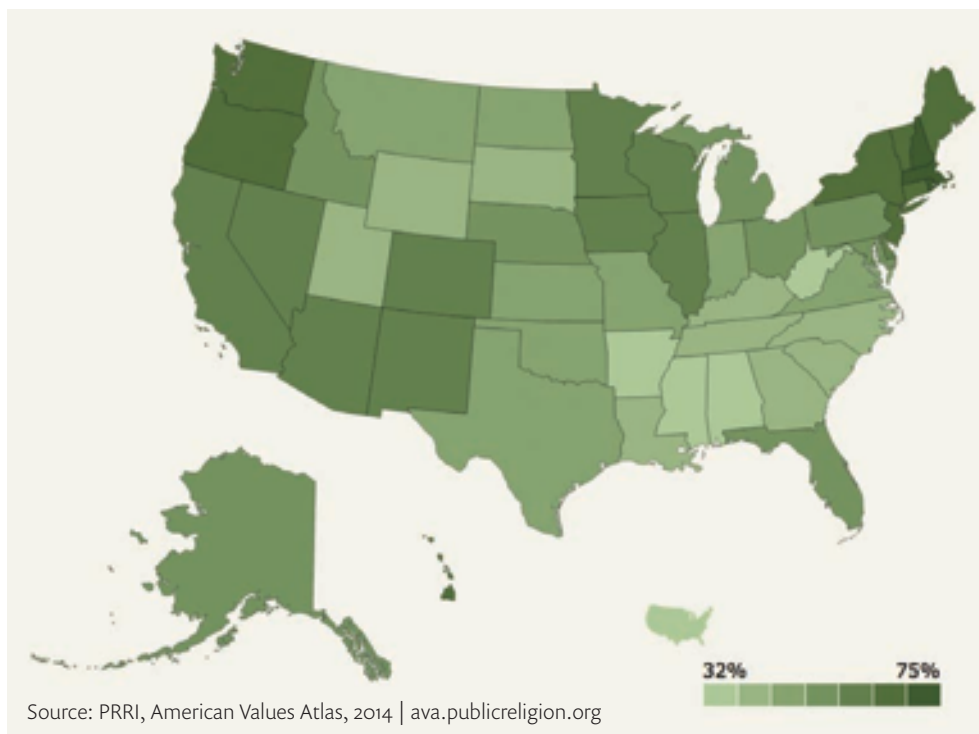
The atlas also maps a second question on abortion: whether “at least some health care professionals in your community should provide legal abortions.”

According to the atlas, in all three cities that Pope Francis is scheduled to visit in September — Philadelphia, New York and Washington — more than 60 percent say that abortion should be legal in all or most cases and that at least some health care professionals in their cities should offer it. More than 60 percent also favor legalizing same-sex marriage.

However, Jones said, there is also “surprising consensus” on immigration. The issue is timely, given President Obama’s push for reform

SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Percent who favor allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry legally



amid an acrimonious legal and financing debate in Congress and Pope Francis’ frequent calls for people to welcome the stranger.

The atlas shows that more than 62 percent of people in the cities on the pontiff’s itinerary favor offering immigrants who are in this country illegally a path to citizenship (with requirements). More than 17 percent would offer permanent residency but not citizenship. Nineteen percent want to see these immigrants identified and deported.

“All the states are in majority territory” on offering a path to citizenship, Jones said. The nationwide gap on immigration is also smaller — just a 14-point spread between Delaware (66 percent) and Wyoming (52 percent).

PRRI also asked a second question, measuring people’s view of immigrants. Again, attitudes were chiefly positive.

Politicians headed for the Iowa caucuses and the 2016 presidential race might want to take heed: In Iowa, 57 percent agree that “immigrants strengthen our nation.”

Atlas users can find out everything Iowans think by using the atlas state profile feature, which offers demographic, religious and

political and social viewpoints state by state, but the profile feature is not yet available by cities.

However, on the views toward immigrants, one city on the pope’s tour revealed some negative views. One in three Philadelphians surveyed (35 percent) said illegal immigrants are “a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care.”

Because the data were drawn from a large sample — 50,000 interviews, conducted in 2014 by landlines and cellphones — users can search demographic data both by large religious traditions (and those with no religious brand) and by subgroups.

That means it’s possible to see locations and demographic distinctions among Hispanic Catholics, white non-Hispanic Catholic and other Catholics, including other ethnic groups.

It also means religious minorities such as Jews, Muslims, Mormons, Hindus and Buddhists are represented. Even Unitarian Universalists — fewer than 1 percent of all Americans — can be searched if you want to know, for example, that New Hampshire is the only state where they reach 2 percent of the population. **BT**

Who's watching all that Christian media?

All the preaching, teaching, music and entertainment beamed by Christian TV and radio is primarily consumed by evangelicals and weekly churchgoers — the folks most often found in the pews. Meanwhile, 2 in 3 Americans are tuned out, a new survey finds.

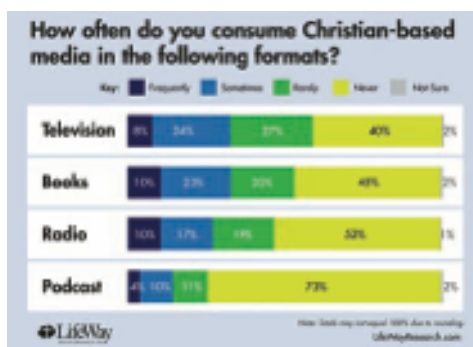
But Ed Stetzer, executive director of LifeWay Research, which released the data Feb. 25, sees good news in the numbers

“Most people would be surprised that 1 in 3 of their neighbors is watching Christian TV. Do 1 in 3 watch the nightly news? I don't think so. It's an overlooked segment of society that is larger than most people think,” he said.

A look at online use found that 1 in 4 Americans say they watch or listen to Christian programming every week on their computer, phone or tablet.

Fewer than 3 in 10 unchurched people — people who don't attend worship services — are in the Christian media audience, yet Stetzer still strikes a positive note.

“Even if they rarely or never attend a



Courtesy of LifeWay Research

worship service, they may still be people of faith. For some people, Christian media is their church,” he said.

Among those few who said they turn to Christian media sometimes, many said they only tuned in on religious holidays. That may be good news for NBC, which has timed the release of its *A.D.* miniseries — sequel to Mark Burnett and Roma Downey's series *The Bible* — for Easter.

The National Religious Broadcasters sponsored the research based on an online survey of 2,252 U.S. adults and a phone survey

of 1,009. The margin of error on the Internet portion of the results is plus or minus 2.9 percentage points; on the phone portion, plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

Among the phone survey highlights:

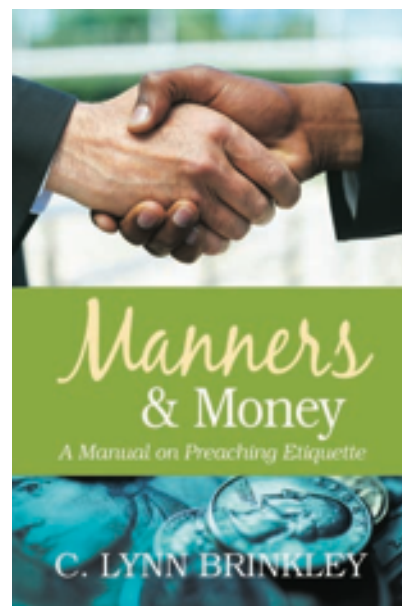
- 67 percent of Americans never or rarely watch Christian-based programming on television. Those who do watch at least sometimes are overwhelmingly self-identified evangelicals (69 percent) and weekly churchgoers (62 percent).
- 71 percent never or rarely listen to Christian radio. Those who do are similar to the Christian TV crowd — 67 percent are evangelicals and 57 percent are weekly churchgoers.
- 84 percent of Americans never or rarely listen to Christian-themed podcasts. Books and movies fared slightly better: 33 percent said they at least sometimes read Christian-based books. And 40 percent report seeing a Christian movie in the last year.

Stetzer found it “fascinating” that 14 percent of people are using podcasts, “a medium that didn't exist 10 years ago.” **BT**

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Lynn Brinkley, who serves as a guest preacher herself and also works with student services and alumni relations at Campbell University Divinity School, addresses the issues of preaching and hosting etiquette in a manual written for current and future ministers — and those who instruct them — and also for churches. Based on scriptural guidelines, it addresses proper pulpit decorum and principles of hospitality and honoraria. A seminar on preaching etiquette is also included.



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Nurturing
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NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE:
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With theologian John Franke, author of *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth*
Registration details to follow.

