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NEWS JOURNAL



MAY 2013

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John D. Pierce
Executive Editor
editor@baptiststoday.org

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

Julie Steele
Chief Operations Officer
jsteele@baptiststoday.org

Jackie B. Riley
Managing Editor
jackie@baptiststoday.org

Tony W. Cartledge
Contributing Editor
cartledge@baptiststoday.org

Bruce T. Gourley
Online Editor
gourley@baptiststoday.org

David Cassidy
Church Resources Editor
david@thefaithlab.com

Terri Byrd
Contributing Writer

Vickie Frayne
Art Director

Jannie Lister
Customer Service Manager
jannie@baptiststoday.org

Kimberly L. Hovis
Marketing Associate
kim@baptiststoday.org

Lex Horton
Nurturing Faith Resources Manager
lex@nurturingfaith.net

Walker Knight, Publisher Emeritus

Jack U. Harwell, Editor Emeritus

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Cover photo: By John Pierce.

After acquiring an adjacent apartment complex and discerning a new sense of mission, Oakmont Baptist Church in Greenville, N.C., quickly engaged in a variety of community ministries. Among those leading these ongoing efforts are (left to right) Sharron Edwards, an after-school volunteer coordinator, Stacey McKnight, a student at East Carolina University who lives in the apartments' intentional college community, Layne Rogerson, Oakmont Community Center minister, Lawrence Powers, a Campbell Divinity student and college ministry intern, and pastor Greg Rogers.

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Writing Submissions

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Contact Information

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

Neighborly love

Church on mission finds new identity, opportunities next door

GREENVILLE, N.C. — When Oakmont Baptist Church constructed its beautiful sanctuary in 2003, the permit called for erecting a fence between the church parking lot and the adjacent Oakmont Square Apartments. Representatives of the church asked if a softer, more natural barrier would be acceptable.

Today the well-trampled pine needles and simple plantings between the church buildings and apartment complex are no barrier at all. The congregation's ministry is as active now in the apartment complex that it acquired in 2007 as in the worship, educational and fellowship facilities next door.

ROOM TO GROW

With just seven acres, it was natural that church leaders would be eyeing adjacent property to purchase for the congregation's future needs. The 10-acre apartment complex was the most obvious target.

However, church leaders decided in November 2005 against taking on more debt following a major building project. Two years later, however, they acquired the neighboring apartments that required purchasing and flipping a second complex.

Having the additional acreage for future development was reassuring but left the church with a big question: What to do with the apartment complex? But it was not a question that had to be answered right away.

"We realized we were already providing safe, affordable housing for the working poor," said longtime pastor Greg Rogers. But the church wanted to do more than be good landlords.

Already, the congregation was doing meaningful local ministry as well as mission engagement in other settings. But acquisition of the apartment complex opened new opportunities.

EXPANDED MINISTRY

In order to seek spiritual guidance and to make good strategic decisions, the congregation entered into a church-wide exploration effort in 2010 guided by Eddie Hammett,



Oakmont Square resident Guenette Calvo (left), a Costa Rica native and ministry volunteer, talks with Oakmont Community Center minister Layne Rogerson (center) and Annette Peery, a nursing professor at East Carolina University and deacon chair at Oakmont Baptist Church who coordinates volunteers for the monthly medical clinic.

church and clergy coach for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina (CBFNC).

"Out of that came a forward momentum," said Rogers. "What came out of that coaching was a mission statement for the apartments."

Prayer groups and teams assigned to gather information on community needs were formed. A consensus was reached by the congregation that God was leading them to use the apartment complex as "a hub for community ministry" that addressed not only the housing needs of the working poor but also connected with college students at nearby East Carolina University, senior adults and the diverse population living in nearby apartment communities.

A comprehensive approach to ministry emerged that would address spiritual, educational, vocational and medical needs.

GOOD STEPS

In early 2011, following a congregational prayer meeting to discern the next steps, the church received a grant through CBFNC to call a collegiate ministry intern. Lawrence Powers would fill that role beginning in June.

Plans were made for the fall school term, when students would move into the apartment complex and become fully engaged in "intentional community."

A newly formed vision team called for a May workday to renovate 15 apartments. On Easter Sunday, the congregation gave \$57,000 to support that effort.

Layne Rogerson was called in the fall as Oakmont Community Center minister. She and her family moved into the apartment complex and, working with the vision team, began to develop new ministries among the residents and their neighbors.

The church also began to host homeless families on a monthly basis — and received a \$50,000 gift from physicians Scott and Dawn Kendrick to develop a medical clinic ministry and other initiatives.

As the productive year of 2011 came to a close, partnerships had been established with a neighboring United Methodist congregation and other groups such as Boys and Girls Club, and new ministries were formed. Christmas parties were held for those living in shelters and for homeless persons.

The following year led to further developments with grants from a local health care foundation and the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's "It's Time" missional initiative. And, again, the congregation gave generously through a special Easter offering to help fund the expanding community ministries.

NEXT DOOR

The church facilities and the apartment complex now share more than common ownership. There is a seamless connection in worship, educational and community life.

With a large Hispanic population living in the apartments, along with others from diverse backgrounds, the face of the congregation has changed, said Rogers.

"The beautiful part is that when you come to our church, there are at least 20 children from the apartments," he said. "Suddenly, the color scheme on Sunday morning is really changing."

The church's facilities manager Wayne Taylor, a retired state trooper, hosted a row and half of homeless men for the church's Christmas Eve service.

A literacy grant from East Carolina University led to an expanded after-school program held three afternoons each week. "Now we do more tutoring," said volunteer Sharron Edwards.

Stacey McKnight, an ECU student and church member, and another student moved in the apartment community as summer missionaries. Now she lives there full time as part of the "intentional community" experience with other students.

"I got involved with Backyard Buddies (for elementary and middle school students after school) first, making jewelry," she said. "Then I started going every week and started building relationships with the kids."

A community garden in the apartment complex was "a natural way to connect with the residents," said Layne, who lives and ministers within the apartment community.

NEXT YEAR

Oakmont Baptist Church will host a conference titled "Impacting Tomorrow" on May 16-17, 2014 for church leaders wishing to explore new ways of envisioning a congregation's mission and engaging community. Information will be available from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina online at cbfnc.org.

"You're doing life together," she said of her family moving into the complex. That includes chats at the mailbox and while doing laundry together, she said, and waving at the children getting on the school bus.

"The church has embraced and endorsed creating a presence with Layne and her family living there," said Rogers, adding that the ministry opportunities that followed the church's decision to focus on community service with the apartment complex as the hub, "all came down in a 12 to 15-month period."

HEALTH CARE

Response to the medical clinic has increased to the point that it was moved from the community building at the apartment complex to the church fellowship hall. Some 20 volunteers — physicians, P.A.s, nurses, intake workers and language translators — provide the clinic on the fourth Sunday afternoon of each month.

Last year, clinic personnel attended to more than 400 patients and wrote 388 prescriptions. A pharmacy fills the prescriptions for \$1 each.

"We could not have the medical clinic without the volunteer translators," said Annette Peery, a nursing professor who chairs the deacons and coordinates volunteers for the clinic.

Peery and other nurses also attend the dinners for homeless persons to do blood

pressure checks — with a physician on call if needed.

Guenette Calvo, a native of Costa Rica and an apartment resident who calls herself a "Spanish-speaking missionary," is much more than a language translator. She brings persons in need of care to the medical clinic.

She also helps cook for the homeless, recruits college students to move furniture for residents who can't do it themselves, and introduces Layne to many people.

"I convince people that they are loved," Guenette said. "It is true!"

VOLUNTEER FORCE

"Not a day goes by that I don't get a call from somebody wanting to help," said Rogers of the horde of volunteers who carry out the varied community ministries. His fear of worker fatigue dissipated, he added, when those heavily engaged in these efforts seemed to grow in commitment and in relationship with those they met.

Five to six-minute "faith stories" from experiences within the community are shared in worship, said Rogers. These stories allow the congregation to know more about what is taking place in the varied and ongoing ministries — and to encourage further involvement.

A larger emphasis on spiritual formation, said Rogers, has created a foundation for an ongoing effort to discern what God is leading the congregation to do. Even some people who are not engaged in church are offering support, Layne added.

Reading books such as Richard Stearns' *The Hole in Our Gospel*, Shane Claiborne's *The Irresistible Revolution*, and David Crocker's *The Samaritan Way* helped shape the congregation in thinking about the church's ministry in broader and deeper ways.

Sharron Edwards said Stearns' book caused her and others to rethink the "living out" of missions. "It opens your eyes to what's around you," she said.

Rogers said the church has expanded its missional understanding and refocused its energy and resources.

"We were sending five mission teams off around the world, but we weren't going across the ditch," he said. "Now we are doing both."

More than anything, he said, the experiences in recent years of acquiring the apartment complex and finding new ways of fulfilling the church's mission have shaped the congregation's identity. At the heart of this new understanding, he said, is "that God has something for us to do." **BT**



quotation remarks

“Baptists have always joined hands across lines with those of many faiths and those who don’t claim faith and have a commitment to the common good. The Baptist history of religious liberty is a special gift to the nation, and I look forward to working on religious liberty issues in this new role.”

—Melissa Rogers, a Baptist church-state expert and the new head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, in a media conference call (ABP)

“We’ve turned the Bible into a position paper.”

—Blogger Rachel Held Evans

“I don’t view people who disagree with me as my enemies or my opponents. I hope to speak with civility and with kindness and in dialogue with people with whom I disagree.”

—Russell Moore, elected to succeed Richard Land as president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (Christianity Today)

“Although some things — inventions, processes and programs — endure and are adapted over time to maintain their effectiveness, others need to be given a respectful funeral. We can give thanks for what has served us faithfully, but we must recognize when it is time to move on.”

—Ircel Harrison, coaching coordinator for Pinnacle Leadership Associates, who blogs at barnabasfile.blogspot.com.

“Some congregations are meeting the challenge by offering alternative service times and their own sports teams and programs. But many despair of their ability to compete in a culture increasingly consumed by athletics, with its multi-million dollar idols and its own sacred relics. Witness the Babe Ruth jersey that sold last year for \$4.4 million.”

—Blogger David Briggs on the impact of amateur and professional sports on church involvement (ARDA)

“If you’ve been to this breakfast before, you know that I always try to avoid preaching in front of people who do it for a living.”

—President Barack Obama, speaking at the Easter Prayer Breakfast (White House Communications)

“I am not interested in being a priest. What I am interested in is, can we be part of the decision making? Can we be part, really, of the discussions? When there are discussions going on, it’s all men.”

—Sister Christine Anderson, a British nun, in response to Pope Francis saying that women play a “fundamental role” in the Catholic Church and are most responsible for passing on the faith from one generation to another (RNS)

“It is ironic that temple workers are expected to be more clean-shaven than the deity figures — God and Jesus Christ — portrayed in [Latter-day Saints] films and portraits. Maybe men will have to achieve deity status before they will get their beards back.”

—Armand Mauss, a leading Mormon sociologist in Irvine, Calif. (RNS)

“When I was in medical school and residency, pediatric HIV didn’t exist in our state. I was not trained in it and ... didn’t choose it, but apparently God chose me for it.”

—Pediatrician Hannah Gay, a former Baptist worker in the Horn of Africa, whose work at the University of Mississippi Medical Center achieved a “functional cure” of a child born with HIV (BP)

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By John Pierce

Bad track record is good reason for speaking cautiously

Selective memory can cause many Christians to wonder in amazement why their understandings of and proclamations about what seems so clearly right to them are not readily accepted by others.

There is this missing awareness that credibility has been lost — for valid reasons. When it comes to issues of justice, peace and equality, the track record of conservative Christianity being on the right side of history is not very good.

One can never, and should never, escape the haunting reality that those who owned and subjected persons of African descent to work for the exclusive economic benefit of their owners were for the most part highly regarded as model citizens and Christians.

Likewise, those who forced Native Americans off their lands were Christian leaders who built some of the great churches and religious institutions of today. Just check the founding dates on the cornerstones.

Later, those who covered themselves in hooded robes to burn, of all things, crosses, and to carry out violent acts against black citizens would routinely change into coats and ties to head to church on Sunday to pray and sing praises to the Good Lord.

Those who turned fire hoses and fierce dogs on innocent and defenseless demonstrators who were seeking basic civil rights were the same respected congregational leaders who regularly filled Sunday school classes, choir lofts and deacons meetings.

Those who went on record in the 1980s and beyond, claiming that half the human population is excluded from having an equal role in ministry and relegated to the authority of men because Eve brought sin into the world, drummed up support and passed such nonsense at a big Baptist denominational meeting. It was done in the name of faithfulness to “the infallible, inerrant Word of God.”

Despite such a long history of being on the wrong side of history, there seems to be some disconnect for many who can't imagine why their clear perspectives on what is right and wrong aren't readily embraced by others.

When current questions about human rights and equality are raised, there remains a baffling look on the faces of those who can't seem to grasp why anyone would question their affirmations when they speak so clearly on behalf of God.

But here's why: the lack of credentials to do so.

It is not enough to make loud pronouncements of biblical authority as if some divine pipeline has been installed from God to selected holders of the truth who have no blinders. One cannot speak in such absolutes while holding to a tradition that has been absolutely wrong so often.



The track record for many expressions of the Body of Christ is not good enough to permit unquestioning acceptance of what is claimed again to be the authoritative word of God without a hint of humility.

The best those who claim to follow Jesus, especially white Baptists and other conservative Christians of the South, can do in such times is to confess our past failure and complicity in evil — due again and again to the tragic inability to see truth because it gets clouded by personal ambition and fear.

Perhaps the most honest prayers would include: “God, help me to get it right this time.”

Acting like members of an exclusive club of God's favorites doesn't open doors for constructive and meaningful conversations about life, liberty and faith.

Kingdom causes are better served when those seeking the way of Christ preface any conclusive statements with an acknowledgment of having been wrong in the past and having the potential to see unclearly in the present and future.


Otherwise, we misrepresent ourselves as something other than struggling seekers of truth — and misrepresent the faith we hold so dear as something less than the remarkable grace it always proves to be.

The cross that is so much a part of our faith can speak both to our ongoing failure to grasp truth — and to the truth that God's grace grasps us in our failures. **BT**



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Starting well

First-call ministers need congregational support

By Stephen Cook

Recently my seminary alma mater made headlines with the much-anticipated sale of its property. As its leadership sought a new place to call home, some of my fellow alumni expressed concern about losing the place where we shared those formative years of our training for ministry.

While I certainly cherish memories of what transpired in my life in that particular place, I have been far more concerned with losing classmates and colleagues: those who have graduated, gone to serve the local church, and have since left to go on in other non-congregationally-based ministries or who have given up on ministry altogether.

This is happening at an alarming rate across almost every denominational line across the country. The statistics are troubling: Half of seminary graduates do not go into congregationally-based ministries when they finish school; of those who do, half of them leave local church ministry within five years of graduation.

I am far more worried about who will serve the church in the future than I am about who will host the class reunion.

Educational and denominational institutions have been working to address the unique needs of ministers in their first calls for some time now. Residency programs and fellowships help to provide much-needed support and care for newly minted seminary graduates. But there are still more needs to be met; needs that must be addressed at the level of the local church and that engage laity and clergy alike.

Several years ago I attended a gathering sponsored by the Lilly Endowment that brought together leaders involved in their Transition into Ministry initiatives. Lilly has invested millions of dollars into these programs. Chris Coble observed that every new minister requires "a three-legged stool of support" in order to flourish: peer support, mentor support and congregational support.

For more than a year I researched how ministers graduating from Cooperative Baptist Fellowship partner schools have fared making the transition from the classroom to the congregation. The findings revealed what I inferred from my own experience of shifting my identity from seminary student to church pastor.

By and large we are doing well with providing peer-learning opportunities for ministers. CBF and others have done remarkable jobs facilitating networks that allow ministers to connect with one another in meaningful, sustaining relationships.

Likewise, we are seeing many of our recent graduates cultivate mentoring relationships that allow them to be guided in their growth by veteran ministers. While we lack formal structures to support this, many first-call ministers are finding solid role models to help them find their way in their new roles.

Where we languish, though, is in the area of providing adequate congregational support for new graduates. Rare is the search committee that takes heed of the fact that calling a minister to its church directly from seminary involves a unique set of circumstances. There are challenges for church and minister alike, to be sure. But the opportunities far outweigh the trials.

Many congregations are concerned for their futures. Attendance is stagnant, if not in decline. A slow economy means giving lags. The much-publicized rise of the "nones," who claim no religious affiliation, is an added sign of trouble.

Sadly, many churches either resign themselves to calling a recent seminary graduate because they cannot afford to pay a

more experienced minister, or they maintain an unrealistic (and patently unfair) expectation that a young minister will translate into young members who come flocking to the church.

Churches and first-call ministers have a wonderful opportunity to discover a deeper level of relationship and engagement with one another. Two vital things are happening for first-call ministers: They are integrating the knowledge they have acquired in the academy into the practices of church life, and they are developing the skills required for day-to-day ministry (time management, developing budgets, etc.) that are vital to sustaining their work.

What a wonderful opportunity for laity and clergy to come together for the common good. The first years of ministry are filled with firsts. Wise is the congregational community whose leaders recognize the chance they have to help their ministers make sense of and learn their new contexts.

Rich is the relationship between those who see their roles from a Kingdom perspective; that understands the habits and patterns put in place in the first five years after graduation are likely to go with those persons throughout their ministerial careers.

New clergy deserve safe and healthy learning environments to bring their passion for the gospel and the work of the church to bear in the lives of congregations, who need the energy and vitality these servants have to share.

Each can inform the other, of course. And together we can create environments that nourish and empower all of God's people — clergy and laity alike — to be healthier, more effective ministers unto one another. **BT**

—Stephen Cook is pastor of Second Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., and board member of the Center for Congregational Health.



Composer Buryl Red left legacy of inspiring music

By Bob Allen

Associated Baptist Press

Buryl Red, a renowned composer, conductor, producer and arranger known around the world as musical director of The CenturyMen and composer of the 1972 classic *Celebrate Life*, died April 1 after a battle with cancer.

A graduate of Baylor and Yale universities and born in Little Rock, Ark., Red, 77, wrote more than 1,600 published compositions and arrangements, many of them award-winning. He produced more than 2,500 recordings and arranged music for hundreds of shows, documentaries and musical specials for network and cable television.



Buryl Red

The *Washington Post* described his works as “uncommonly creative.”

In 1969, the Radio and Television Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention established The CenturyMen, an auditioned men’s chorus of professional musicians who are directors of music in Baptist churches across America and from around the world. With Red as conductor, the group has performed on national television, been finalists for Dove and Grammy Awards, and traveled around the world.

In 1972 he wrote music for *Celebrating Life*, a collaboration with book and lyrics author Ragan Courtney, published by Broadman Press, that became a staple in Southern Baptist youth choirs.

The song “In Remembrance,” published in the 1991 Baptist Hymnal, is from the musical. **BT**

Preaching professor Labberton to lead Fuller Seminary

By Adelle M. Banks

Religion News Service

With one foot in the church and the other in the academy, Mark Labberton says he’s ready for his new role as president of Fuller Theological Seminary, the world’s largest multid denominational seminary.

“It feels very exciting and daunting,” said Labberton in an interview shortly after he was named in March as the next leader of the flagship evangelical seminary in Pasadena, Calif. He was the unanimous choice after trustees considered 250 nominees.

Labberton, 60, served for 16 years as pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley, Calif., a Presbyterian Church (USA) congregation near the University of California campus. From there, he returned to Fuller in 2009, where he had earned his master’s degree, to serve as preaching professor and director of the Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching.

Labberton is a disciple of the late John Stott, who fostered evangelical scholarship and crafted the 1974 Lausanne Covenant, a statement of belief that unified evangelicals worldwide.

Fuller President Richard Mouw will retire June 30 after leading the seminary for 20 years. Labberton hopes Fuller’s global reach — with 4,400 students from 70 countries and 100 denominations — will expand even more under his leadership.

“Rather than being caught thinking

only, or primarily even, about North American church issues, I hope that we’re also thinking about global issues,” said Labberton, the co-founder of Scholar Leaders International, a program to train a new generation of theologians and scholars in the developing world.

“The North American church has a great deal to learn from the courage and passion of the church around the world.”



Mark Labberton

Labberton also is open to a dialogue that has been started this academic year by OneTable. The Fuller student group supports gays and lesbians, provides “safe places” to discuss faith and sexuality, and held a weeklong film festival attended by more than 300 people earlier this month.

“Often the evangelical church, I think, has not been honest and compassionate in entering into that dialogue, so I’m grateful that there’s an opportunity for that to happen at Fuller,” he said.

Labberton said he’s prepared to grapple with the financial, technological and spiritual challenges facing theological education — and expects Fuller’s online education offerings to expand. He also hopes to help Fuller students focus on both Scripture and service in hopes of overcoming the growing trend of “nones,” people who claim no religious affiliation. **BT**

BTSR plans move to new home

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (BTSR) will relocate to an office complex about four miles north of its current campus, according to seminary president Ron Crawford. The space is being refurbished in time for the fall semester.

“The new site will allow the seminary flexibility and a fresh setting in which to engage a new generation of students,” said Richmond pastor Bert Browning, chair of the relocation committee, in a press release.

Two year ago, trustees approved a plan

calling for the sale of the campus buildings near Union Theological Seminary that has housed the freestanding seminary since 1997. The seminary was formed in 1991 as an early response to the fundamentalist shift in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The move will improve BTSR’s financial stability and allow for creating facilities designed to meet current needs. The Hymn Society in the United States and Canada, which leases space from BTSR, will move to the new facilities as well. **BT**



During the Women of the Wall's prayer session in March, a dozen police stood between them and the men's section of the Western Wall, in an effort to keep the peace. Ultra-Orthodox Jews, opposed to non-traditional prayer at the Wall, tried, unsuccessfully, to drown out the WOW worshippers. RNS photo by Michele Chabin

Tensions flare over women's prayers at Western Wall

By Michele Chabin
Religion News Service

JERUSALEM — The ultra-Orthodox rabbi in charge of the sacred Western Wall assured a government emissary on April 4 that Jewish women will not be arrested if they try to recite the mourner's prayer at the holy site, despite a warning from Israeli police.

Tensions have grown between traditional Jews and reform-minded women over prayers at the Western Wall, which contains the remains of the Temple that was destroyed nearly 2,000 years ago.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tapped Natan Sharansky, chairman of the Jewish Agency, with defusing the conflict and ensuring "that every Jew in the world can pray in the manner that they are accustomed to at Judaism's most important national and religious site," according to a statement issued by the Jewish Agency.

Sharansky met with Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, the caretaker of the Western Wall, in early April, three weeks after the Israeli police told the Women of the Wall prayer group that their recitation of the Kaddish mourner's prayer at the site would be grounds for arrest.

The Kaddish mourner's prayer is the newest flashpoint in the ongoing dispute; ultra-Orthodox Jews say women should not

sing or pray aloud in public because their voices are provocative to men. Because the mourner's prayer traditionally is recited only when a quorum of 10 men is present, a group of women reciting the prayer in public is doubly offensive to traditionalists.

Sharansky went into the meeting "to express his shock" at the March 14 police letter, but "Rabbi Rabinowitz assured Sharansky that, contrary to the letter, no woman would be arrested for reciting Kaddish at the Western Wall," the agency statement said.

Members of Women of the Wall, a group of Reform, Conservative and modern-Orthodox women, have been praying at the Western Wall for more than two decades despite objections from the ultra-Orthodox religious establishment, which has attempted to put further restrictions on the women's prayer options.

In recent months the police have detained several WOW members and their supporters for wearing prayer shawls and bringing in a Torah scroll to the women's section — both banned by a 2005 High Court ruling that mandated the status quo at the holy site.

The women's group holds monthly prayer services at the site, and in March three female Israeli parliamentarians, dressed in prayer shawls, joined the group. The presence of the lawmakers deterred the police from detaining any of the 300 worshippers. **BT**

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Tutu wins Templeton Prize for work on forgiveness

By Chris Herlinger
Religion News Service

Desmond Tutu, the former Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his battle against apartheid, has won the 2013 Templeton Prize, which is billed as the most significant award in the field of spirituality and religion.

Tutu, who has not been afraid in recent years to criticize leaders in his country and across Africa for humanitarian and political shortfalls, was cited for his work in advancing the cause of peace and the spiritual principles of forgiveness.

“By embracing such universal concepts of the image of God within each person, Desmond Tutu also demonstrates how the innate humanity within each of us is intrinsically tied to the humanity between all peoples,” said John M. Templeton Jr., president and chairman of the John Templeton Foundation, in a video statement April 4 announcing the \$1.7 million award.

“Desmond Tutu calls upon all of us to recognize that each and every human being



Retired Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of Cape Town, South Africa, won the 2013 Templeton Prize. RNS photo courtesy Templeton Prize / Michael Culme Seymour

is unique in all of history and, in doing so, to embrace our own vast potential to be agents for spiritual progress and positive change. Not only does he teach this idea, he lives it.”

Tutu is the second Nobel laureate to win in as many years; the 2012 prize was given to the Dalai Lama. Previously, the prize went to little-known physicists and theologians.

Tutu, 81, said he was “totally bowled

over” by winning the prize.” I want to say a very big thank you, but I would also like to acknowledge the fact that ... when you are in a crowd and you stand out from the crowd, it’s usually because you are being carried on the shoulders of others,” he said in a video statement.

Following years of activism against apartheid and national elections in 1994 that elected a black majority government, Tutu headed South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, charged with examining the sins of apartheid and fostering reconciliation between the nation’s black and white citizens.

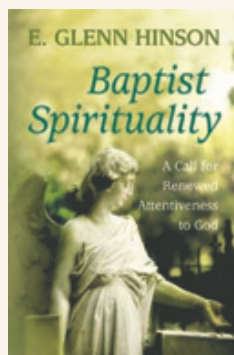
Since then, Tutu has been an outspoken advocate on a host of peace and justice issues, including support for gays and lesbians facing harsh discrimination in the church and across a number of African countries.

“We inhabit a universe ... where kindness matters, compassion matters, caring matters,” he said in his video remarks. “This is a moral universe, and right and wrong matter. And mercifully, gloriously, right will prevail.” **BT**

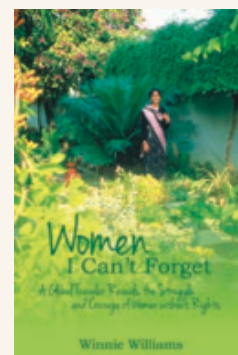
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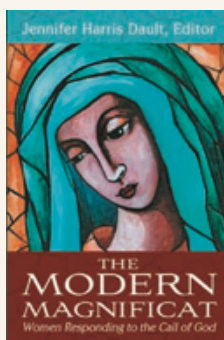
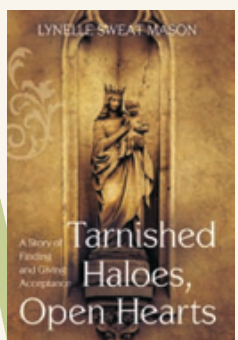
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QUESTION: Are Baptists New Testament or Old Testament People?

From their beginnings, Baptists described themselves as a New Testament people. This theme is woven throughout Baptist history and readily acknowledged by contemporary historians.

Baptist historian C. Douglas Weaver titled his 2009 survey of Baptist history, *In Search of the New Testament Church: The Baptist Story*.

William Brackney, a senior statesman among Baptist historians, in his 2004 *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought*, declared that among Baptist theologians in the denomination's history, "scripture was the starting point," with New Testament Christianity forming the basis of church "free from the corruption of ecclesiastic machinery."

Baptist historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University, in his 2003 volume *Baptist Ways: A History*, also highlighted the impulse of Baptists to strive to replicate the New Testament church.

Reflecting the observations of historians, there are hundreds — if not thousands — of Baptist churches in America bearing the name "New Testament Baptist Church." (Try a Google search at the peril of your own time.) Conversely, none could be found named "Old Testament Baptist Church."

However, thousands of Baptist churches have or will post the Old Testament Ten Commandments on their lawns or buildings. But has anyone seen a posting of Jesus' Greatest Commandments? (Please send a

photo if you know of one.)

So what gives? Are Baptists truly a New Testament people, or does rhetoric sometimes mask deeper realities in contemporary Baptist life?

Early Baptists of the 16th and 17th centuries were radical New Testament Christians in their actions. At a time when theocratic governments in Europe and the American colonies demanded conformity to a violent theology based upon Old Testament laws, Baptists in the midst of persecution courageously clung to New Testament principles of freedom of conscience, religious liberty, church-state separation, voluntary faith and priesthood of all believers.

The Old Testament contained important history and teachings, but was to be understood in the context of ancient, pre-Christian faith. The New Testament was Baptists' guide for personal living and congregational life.

In the early 19th century, church-state separation in America resulted in a widespread interest in doing church in a way consistent with the New Testament, leading to the birth of a number of new denominations.

In more recent history, the Baptist devotion to a New Testament-centric faith has been embraced by much of Christendom in America, evidenced in part by the now common recognition of the primacy of voluntary faith and the widespread practice of believer's baptism.

At the same time, the baptization of American Christianity has occurred against the backdrop of a lingering desire by many Christians to forcefully crown their country as God's chosen nation. This movement,

known as Christian nationalism and deeply embedded in America's Christian Right, is a product of pre-Christian, Old Testament theology.

Christianity in the U.S. thus lurches back and forth between loyalty to New Testament principles and determination to conform America to Old Testament legalism. Hence the emphasis on Old Testament laws by seemingly New Testament churches, including Baptist congregations.

Contemporary Baptists cannot be easily categorized in regards to this tension, but it would be fair to say that an increasing number of Baptist congregations and individuals during the past 50 years or so have in practice emphasized the New Testament in the experience of personal conversion, while holding up the Old Testament as the model for transforming society.

This dichotomy has resulted in a lessening of the historical Baptist commitment to religious liberty for all and church-state separation, while weakening the New Testament concept of voluntary faith.

Is the New Testament more important than the Old Testament in congregational Baptist life? The answer perhaps lies at the intersection of congregational discourse and action as expressed in both the experience of personal faith and the exercise of Christian responsibility in the world at large.

Checking what gets posted in your church's lawn or on the walls of its buildings might also help to answer the question. **BT**

—*This series is provided in partnership with the Baptist History & Heritage Society. Bruce Gourley serves as executive director of the society and as online editor for Baptists Today.*

Christianity in the U.S. thus lurches back and forth between loyalty to New Testament principles and determination to conform America to Old Testament legalism.

Editor's note: Gordon Cosby, founder of The Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C., died March 20.

Summer of '69 and the gift of Gordon Cosby

“**S**ummer of 69” by Bryan Adams is one of my favorite rock songs, mostly because of the opening guitar licks and the lyrics about his “first real six string,” a purchase that changed his destiny. Even more, it’s a favorite because in the summer of 1969 my life took a course that changed everything forever.

My Young Life leader, Frog Sullivan, invited me to work at the Laity Lodge youth camps deep in the Texas Hill Country. Laity Lodge is an adult retreat center for Christian laypeople, as the name implies, started by Howard E. Butt to renew the church through renewal of the laity.

Summer camps for youth are also offered, and I was a counselor for high school students. On my first day I fell in love with the canoe instructor, a beautiful blonde from San Antonio named Suzii Youngblood.

I called my mom to tell her I had met the girl I was going to marry. Suzii and my mother were both skeptical, but eventually I won them over. That was the greatest part of that summer.

The second great part came when I was invited to morning lectures at the retreat center — since I was transferring to Baylor University in the fall to major in religion with the intention of becoming a pastor. At Laity Lodge I heard Elton Trueblood, Keith Miller and Bruce Larson.

Also I read books by Paul Tournier, Robert Raines and Karl Olsson. But the words that struck me the hardest were from books by Elizabeth O’Connor and sermon tapes by Gordon Cosby.

It was the era of the church renewal movement and, while all these writers and speakers had fresh and creative ideas about where the church was going, O’Connor and Cosby were making it happen at The Church of the Saviour in Washington, D.C.

The third great part of the summer was discovering that Hull Youngblood, Suzii’s father, was an active lay member in this movement and friends with Cosby. That relationship made it possible for me to develop my own friendship with both Gordon and his wife, Mary, his equally committed partner in their far-reaching vision of church.

What first intrigued me about the



Roger and Suzii Paynter with Mary Cosby (right) in 1976.

church were the demands required to become a member. No one joins the church without entering a highly intentional process of discipleship.

More than two years are required for the prospective member to complete courses in Old and New Testament studies, church history, Christian ethics and Christian theology. And that alone does not admit one to membership. The candidate must undergo a long discernment process that includes discovery of one’s spiritual gifts and a call to a specific mission that emerges from those gifts.

While the church has many friends who participate in their numerous mission groups (now individual churches), a person must demonstrate his or her own sense of call to a particular mission and willingly enter into the discipline of a small group to become a full member. Joining a small group calls for a minimum tithe and having a spiritual director among other expectations.

Additionally, each October, each member must commit to another year of membership.

This sounded harsh to me until my first encounter with Gordon and the church. The complete opposite was true. There was focus, honesty, joy and a level of dedication I had never encountered in any church before.

Over the years I have attended numerous events with the church including retreats at Wellspring (the church’s retreat center), classes at the Servant Leadership School,

participation in the Potter’s House ministry and orientation trips to most of the other ministries. I had the opportunity to visit with Gordon on almost every occasion.

In addition, Mary Cosby has led retreats at two churches I have served. Those times remain as indelible markers in the life of those congregations.

Most of my conversations with Gordon took place over coffee at the Potter’s House. He was always the essence of patience as he explained, time and again, what it meant to live by the guidance of the Spirit, how silence and biblical justice go hand-in-hand, why preaching is an opportunity not only to educate but also to plant seeds of hope and challenge, and why the structure of a church has to be grounded in common commitments and creative imagination.

Gordon’s recent death at age 95 surprised me. I had no idea he was that old. But then, he wasn’t.

He was always in the process of becoming a new creation in Christ, and no one who knew him could ever miss that. I shall remain forever grateful for the gift of Gordon Cosby in my life. **BT**

—Roger Paynter is pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, and a member of the Baptists Today Board of Directors. His wife, Suzii Paynter, is executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Editor's note: Duke McCall died April 2 at age 98. He led the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee (1946-1951) and served as president of two SBC seminaries. After retiring from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, he served for five years as president of the Baptist World Alliance.

Remembering Duke McCall

News of the death of Duke K. McCall took me back nearly 43 years. In 1970 I was thinking about a life in ministry. My father, Al Wilson, responded with enthusiasm and suggested we “call that Mr. McCall at the seminary in Louisville.”

Dr. McCall, president at Southern Seminary, had been a guest preacher/teacher at our church, Calvary Baptist in Evansville, Ind. Dad was a deacon, finance committee chair, volunteer youth advisor and Sunday school teacher.

In those days Baptist laymen like my father regarded seminary professors and administrators as part of the family. With a son thinking about a life in ministry, it was natural for him to seek the best help and advice he could.

Two things about that spring afternoon amaze me: that Dad was home and that the seminary president took his call.

For most of his adult life, Dad was a “traveling salesman” of building materials. He was in the Pacific during the final months of World War II. Returning home to a wife and two-year-old son, he took advantage of the G.I. Bill and enrolled at Indiana State University. When he finished his degree from the Teachers’ College, he and Mom had welcomed four daughters to the nest. Three years later I crowded in as the sixth and last child.

Through his college years Dad supplemented his income at a lumberyard. It turned out that building materials supported his family better than a college education.

Only in retrospect can I appreciate the sacrifice he made to be home one afternoon to “call that Mr. McCall at the seminary.” I am sure I fidgeted and waited to see what would happen.

Vividly, I recall Dad telling Dr. McCall, “My son is thinking about the ministry. Could you talk to him?”

There were some introductions, but they were succinct. Soon I was on the phone with Dr. McCall. He asked about my “call” and my educational plans. I did not know that I needed to go to college before entering seminary. I shared my father’s naivetés.



Rick Wilson celebrates his seminary graduation in December 1982 with his parents.

Dr. McCall was remarkable, gently nudging me toward colleges: “Mississippi College, Samford University, and Oklahoma Baptist University.” He did not tell me that Mississippi College was his alma mater.

I applied to only the schools he recommended, and chose MC because it was the first to offer me a scholarship. I’d never been to Mississippi.

Five years later I was a student at the seminary in Louisville, and saw Dr. McCall in a Norton Hall hallway. With the same naïve impudence, I engaged him and he was gracious. He said he recalled our conversation, and welcomed me to Southern.

In one conversation he had a lasting influence on my life. In a second, my future was sealed.

At Mississippi College I found myself and a tradition. There, too, I met Lucy, my life partner for 38 years and counting. Some of my best friends today were college friends then.



Duke McCall

I stayed at Southern Seminary for seven years (1975-82). They were hard years, especially beginning in 1979. My understanding of and identification with Baptists in the South deepened.

President McCall and most of my professors set high standards for personal and academic integrity. The eruption of Baptist Wars exposed strengths and weaknesses of character that have guided me since. For the past 31 years I have strived to live up to those high standards as a university professor.

My story may be unique, but it is not isolated. As impressive as the high-profile legacy of Duke McCall is, I am certain that his low-profile legacy — providing a model for laypeople and encouragement to high school students too naïve to know what questions to ask — will reverberate through the lives of Baptists in the South and the world for many years to come.

Thanks, Duke K. McCall, for your life and legacy. **BT**

—Richard F. Wilson is chair of the Roberts Department of Christianity at Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

Barna and the Bible

By Tony W. Cartledge

Good grief, George. Your latest survey on American attitudes toward the Bible can't tell us much when you ask square questions of a multi-shaped people.

Barna's latest survey on what Americans think of the Bible was released March 27, in an apparent attempt to take advantage of the buzz created by Mark Burnett's surprisingly popular "The Bible" miniseries. The survey, like the miniseries, includes both interesting and misleading information.

The spurious parts result from misguided presuppositions built into the survey. I have critiqued Barna's surveys before, usually because his definition of "evangelical" eliminates everyone but inerrantists and fundamentalists, while the evangelical movement is much broader.

The recent Bible survey takes a similar approach, as illustrated by one group of results in particular. Attempting to measure Americans' level of engagement with the Bible, Barna has four categories ranging from "Engaged" to "Antagonistic."

To be "Engaged" with the Bible, in survey terms, people believe "The Bible is the actual Word of God with no errors" and "Read the Bible at least four times weekly." Twenty-one percent of Americans fit that category, according to the survey, up from 20 percent in 2011.

To have a "Friendly-moderate/light" engagement with the Bible, according to the survey, respondents must still believe "The Bible is the actual Word of God or inspired with no errors," but don't read it as often. Barna puts 39 percent in that camp, down from 45 percent two years ago.

People who are "Neutral" toward the Bible, in the survey's view, are those who believe "The Bible is the inspired Word with errors or not inspired but tells how writers understood (the) ways of God." In addition, they "Rarely or never read the Bible." Barna says 23 percent of Americans fit here, compared to 25 percent in 2011.

Finally, the survey designates as "Antagonistic" those who believe "The Bible is just another book written by men with teachings and advice," and "They rarely or

Selections from recent blogs
at baptiststoday.org

never read the Bible." This group has grown from 10 to 17 percent in the past two years, which Barna finds troubling.

The problem with this line of questioning is obvious: The survey assumes that to be "engaged" with the Bible, one must believe it is inerrant, and that anyone who doesn't take a fundamentalist or inerrantist position can't be anything more than "neutral" toward the Bible.

Whoever formulated the survey apparently can't imagine that someone who considers the Bible to be sacred and central to one's faith — but not necessarily inerrant — can't also read the Bible every day and be deeply engaged in serious Bible study.

When survey questions are based on false premises, survey results are meaningless. Americans are quite capable of being actively engaged in Bible reading and Bible study without simultaneously holding an inerrantist approach to the scriptures, and millions of them are — but you won't find them in Barna's survey. **BT**

Hope and a glove

There is a proverb that says, "Raise up a child to appreciate baseball and when she is on her college break she'll go to spring training games with you."

Perhaps I paraphrased that just a little. But my daughter Meredith and I enjoyed two baseball games at the Braves spring training complex at Disney during her spring break from the University of Georgia.

It was a perfectly good time — as we settled into our seats to watch a game not rushed or limited by a clock. Baseball fans look forward to this time of year.

One of my favorite recent baseball-related readings was shared by my fellow Braves fan and a longtime baseball coach, Don Brewer, who serves on the *Baptists Today* Board of Directors. It was a column by *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* sportswriter Carroll Rogers, who told the compelling story of Braves announcer

Don Sutton who was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1998. He won 324 games pitching for five teams, mostly with the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Sutton, a native Alabamian, tells of playing high school baseball in Pensacola, Fla., where he shared with a close friend and teammate that Cooperstown was in his future. He traced the dream back to an earlier experience.

When he was born, his parents were tenant farmers living in a one-room house and surviving on \$25 a month. When they moved to another house, Sutton said, he found a baseball glove on the roof.

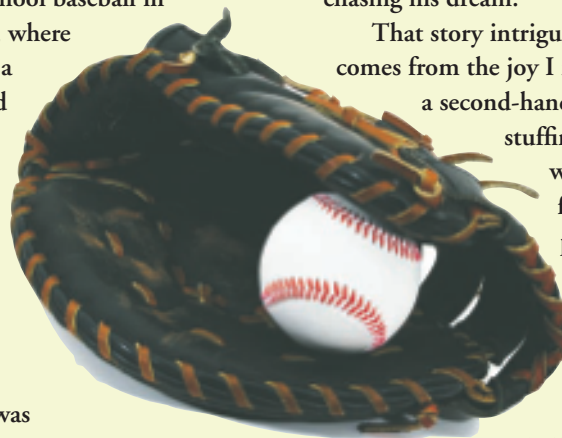
I imagined some kid tossing his — or more likely a friend's or brother's — glove

high into the air and it landing on the roof. I couldn't imagine not finding a way to get it down.

But that gift on high, if not from on high, set the course for Sutton's life in baseball. From that moment on he was chasing his dream.

That story intrigues me. Perhaps it comes from the joy I recall in obtaining a second-hand glove, with the stuffing coming out, that would become my favorite childhood possession — along with a cracked bat with the handle wrapped in electrical tape and a waterlogged baseball with some of its 108 stitches dangling.

Or maybe it is in wondering if we should all check our roofs a little more often. There could be something hopeful up there. And hope is always a good thing. It sets us on a better course. **BT**





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June lessons in this issue

Prophetic Exasperation

1 Kings 18:17-39 — Baal, Bulls, and Blazes
JUNE 2, 2013

1 Kings 17:1-24 — Giving and Getting
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1 Kings 21:1-29 — How Low Can You Go?
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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Kings 18:17-39

June 2, 2013

Baal, Bulls, and Blazes

I can remember an unforgettable sermon on today's text – that is, one I would like to forget. As a college student, I'd been invited to preach in a church that shall remain unnamed, and felt inspired to liven up the sermon with a visual aid from my science education studies.

I turned a large cake tin upside down on the pulpit, and as I read the text about Elijah constructing an altar, I built a small pile of potassium permanganate crystals. As Elijah poured water over the sacrifice, I poured glycerol (a clear liquid) over my "altar."

I then timed Elijah's plea for God to answer with fire from heaven with the time required for the chemicals to spontaneously combust – which they did with much smoke and a bright flare – and blazing bits of brimstone whizzing through the air to leave scorch marks on the pulpit and the carpet.

Can you understand why I was never invited back?

Elijah's flaming victory in the "duel of the gods" was even more memorable – except to the 450 prophets of Baal who reportedly fell victim to Elijah's knife and didn't remember anything at all.

A fierce conversation (vv. 20-24)

Today's text falls within a cycle of stories about Elijah found in 1 Kings 17-19, 21, and 2 Kings 2. Specifically, it is bracketed by Elijah's proclamation to Ahab that God would withhold rain from the land until he gave the word (17:1) and a later



1 Kings 18:39 –
"When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.'"

announcement that the rain would return (18:41-46).

Ahab does not appear to be a strong king but one who was easily manipulated by others, especially Jezebel, his wife (21:1-16). The drought Elijah had proclaimed left the countryside in such a state that Ahab and his steward Obadiah had to go roaming through the wadis (dry river beds) in search of fodder for the animals – a decidedly menial activity that one would expect to be assigned to a servant (18:3-6).

Ahab had looked for Elijah without success for a long time and was surprised when the prophet showed up during his search for forage. Though he offered a snide greeting when they met, Ahab meekly obeyed when Elijah instructed him to call "all Israel" to assemble on Mount Carmel, along with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah supported by his Canaanite wife Jezebel (18:17-20).

Mount Carmel is a rather flat-topped mountain in northern Israel, near the Mediterranean Sea. On a clear day its 1,650-foot summit offers stunning

views of the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Jezreel Valley to the east.

Once all were gathered, Elijah began by unleashing his rage on Israelites who were present. "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" (v. 21) draws on the metaphor of someone using crutches made from tree branches. The people had long been famous for their syncretistic worship of the Canaanite gods alongside Yahweh, and Jezebel's campaign had only exacerbated the problem.

Elijah insisted that the people needed to choose between Yahweh and Baal. The people had no defense and "did not answer him a word" – the first of several occasions in which the word "answer" has special significance in the story.

Reminding the people that he stood alone against 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah proposed a contest in which both he and the prophets of Baal would be given a bull to slaughter and sacrifice – but no fire. The prophets would pray for heaven-sent flames to consume the offering, and the god who answered with fire would be declared the winner.

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



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The thought of such a spectacular event brought cheers from the crowd and this time they had an answer, literally, “the word (is) good” – meaning “That’s fair!”

Wouldn’t we like for it to be that easy? On days when we wonder if God really cares or even if God really exists, wouldn’t we like to see God prove it by sending lightning on cue? We know, however, that God doesn’t make a habit of working that way, and even if we did see such a display, how long would it take for us to forget it?

The all-time greatest demonstration of God’s presence and power occurred with Christ’s resurrection, and while we weren’t there to see it, we have the testimony of many witnesses who don’t want us to ever forget.

A fruitless frenzy (vv. 25-29)

The prophets of Baal appear powerless from the beginning. As Ahab did, they follow Elijah’s instructions without objection, slaughtering the bull they were given upon an altar and praying for Baal to answer. But the narrator is emphatic: “There was no voice and no answer” (v. 26).

A closer look at the underlying Hebrew portrays an even direr situation: The word translated as “answer” is not the noun form but a verbal participle. Instead of there simply being “no answer,” there was “no answerer,” a subtle reminder that the prophets were praying to a god that didn’t exist.

The behavior of the prophets suggests something of their ecstatic style of worship, which included leaping or jumping about in a ritualized dance. “They limped about the altar” is the narrator’s way of recalling Elijah’s charge that Israel could not go on “limping” between two mismatched crutches but would need to choose one over the other.

After a full morning of prayer and dancing about the altar produced no results, Elijah mocked his opponents in enigmatic but clearly derisive language. He challenged them to cry even louder. “Surely he is a god!” is used

sarcastically. Elijah did not believe Baal was real, but if he did exist, Elijah suggested, perhaps he was distracted or using the bathroom or away on a journey or even asleep (v. 27).

Elijah’s mocking led to a redoubling of the prophets’ efforts through the afternoon as they added self-mutilation to their frenzied efforts at attracting the attention of their god – but again, to no avail. The narrator grows even more emphatic: “There was no voice, no answer, and no response” (v. 29).


Again the word for “answer” is a participle: “There was no answerer.” Baal was far away or dead or non-existent. A similar phrase is used in 2 Kgs. 4:31, where the expression “there was no sound and no response” was used as evidence that a boy was dead.

It is possible that Elijah’s pointed digs hit especially close to home, because an ancient myth about “Baal and Mot” held that Baal had once been defeated by Mot (death) and held captive in the underworld before being rescued. Some scholars think the Canaanites thought of this as an annual cycle in which Baal was kidnapped by Mot during the dry season. Rituals such as those described here may have been used to call Baal to emerge from the underworld and renew the rains. [For more, see “The Hardest Question” online.]

A fiery God (vv. 30-39)

As the day wore on and the prophets of Baal grew bloody and exhausted, the stage was set for Elijah to call everyone to attention and beckon them to watch his own performance. Elijah first “repaired” the “altar of Yahweh” (v. 30; the word translated “repair” normally means “heal”) suggesting that a Yahwist altar had previously occupied the spot, though we have no other biblical

record of it.

The narrator is careful to emphasize God’s covenant with Israel by noting that Elijah used 12 stones to represent the tribes of Israel as he rebuilt the altar and dug a trench about it (v. 32). 

The purpose of the trench became apparent when Elijah placed the wood and the slaughtered bull on the altar, then had attendants pour 12 jars of water over the sacrifice, enough to soak the meat and the wood and still fill the surrounding trench (vv. 33-35).

As if calling down fire from heaven were not challenging enough, Elijah appeared to be doing everything possible to make his task even more difficult.

Elijah’s prayer made it evident that his purpose throughout was to prove to Israel that Yahweh alone was God, boldly praying “Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (v. 37).

If Israel was to repent, it would be because God’s own action caused them to turn their hearts back in the right direction.

We know the rest of the story: God answered with fire that fell from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, even licking up the water in the trench. Perhaps we are to imagine a well-aimed and powerful lightning bolt that immolated the offering in an instant.

The end result is that the fire of Yahweh had to fall from heaven before the people would fall on their faces to acknowledge “The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God” (v. 39).

Again, a more careful reading is instructive. The word “God” is preceded by the definite article in both instances. In essence, the people were saying: “Yahweh – he is the God! Yahweh – he is the (real) God!”

Do we believe the God we read about in scripture really exists? Can we hear God’s voice above the cacophony of competing voices in our world? What would it take for us to declare with conviction that the God we worship is alive and well and more present than we know? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Kings 17:1-24

June 9, 2013

Giving and Getting

Have you ever seen a real, sure-fire miracle? We sometimes use the word with reference to occasions such as the birth of a child or the emergence of flowers, but children are born and flowers bloom every day. We know how such things happen, and though we might wax eloquent about such events, we also know how they happen, and there's nothing particularly miraculous about them.

Have you ever seen a tiny bit of food multiplied so that it lasted for months or fed a great crowd of people? Have you ever seen someone literally raised from the dead when no "medical miracle" was involved?

We may still believe in miracles, but they are not part of our normal experience. If they were, they wouldn't be so special.

The Bible contains a number of miracle stories, but they weren't any more common then than now. The stories were remembered, retold, and ultimately recorded precisely because they were rare, and the people who effected them were regarded as particularly close to God. One of those people was Elijah. 🇺

Drought for a king (vv. 1-7)

Today we turn to the second of five stories about Elijah that we'll study this month. In truth, today's lesson contains several related stories. 🇺

You will notice that we have backtracked from last week's lesson, which was from chapter 18, and we learn where

1 Kings 17:14 —

"For thus says the LORD the God of Israel: The jar of meal will not be emptied and the jug of oil will not fail until the day that the LORD sends rain on the earth."



Elijah had been during the extended period of drought and how he had managed to remain hidden from King Ahab.

This chapter records Elijah's first appearance in scripture, as he came out of the blue and confronted King Ahab with a strongly worded oath, declaring that the rains and even morning dew would cease "for these years" (literally), until he gave the word (v. 1).

Interestingly, the narrator does not call Elijah a prophet or a "man of God," as we might expect. Elijah has to claim for himself that he lives out his name, which means "My God is Yahweh." Confirmation of his identity as Yahweh's prophet will be revealed by his actions.

At this point in the story we know little more about Ahab, who was introduced at the end of the previous chapter. The narrator's summary judgment insists that he was a wicked king who had married Jezebel, the daughter of the king of Sidon, and followed her in the worship of Baal. Ahab had even built a temple to Baal and erected a sacred pole to Asherah, acts that should

be anathema to a worshiper of Yahweh (16:29-34).

If Ahab recognized Elijah or offered any response, we don't know what it was, because the next verse declares that "the word of the LORD" sent Elijah to hide out by a brook called "Cherith," a tributary of the Jordan. We no longer know the location, but the word *kerith* means "cutting," and it probably refers to a deep ravine cut by seasonal rains. Several such ravines are found along the Jordan valley, and they would have provided an isolated place for Elijah to hide from the angry king. 🇺

Searchers would not have expected that anyone could survive in such rugged surroundings, but Elijah did not have to emerge from hiding until the water eventually ran out, as Yahweh appointed ravens to bring him food (17:2-7).

Food for a prophet (vv. 8-16)

Again acting on "the word of the LORD," Elijah traveled north and west to a city called Zarephath, located near the coastal city of Sidon, north of Israel

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



proper and within the kingdom of Jezebel's father (vv. 8-9).

We learn later that Ahab and Jezebel had sought diligently for Elijah during the period of the drought, even into foreign lands (18:10), but had been unable to find him. Jezebel would have been particularly aggravated to know that her nemesis was hiding out near her own hometown.

No one would expect to find Elijah staying in the home of a poor Phoenician widow – including the widow herself, who was taken aback by Elijah's sudden appearance and request for food and water (vv. 10-11). The NRSV translation implies that Elijah was brusque and demanding, but the Hebrew construction is more polite, on the order of "Would you please give me a little water in a cup?" and "Would you please bring me a handful of bread?"

Elijah asked for very little. Unfortunately, that's all the woman had: Elijah met the poor widow as she was gathering a bit of firewood to prepare a final meager hoecake for herself and her son before the last of her flour and oil was gone.

It seemed that Elijah had left a place with food but no water only to find a place with water but no food. Once again, a miracle would be required if he was to find sustenance.

The widow did not hesitate to go for the water, but was slower to comply with Elijah's request for bread. She explained her pitiful state (v. 12),^U but he challenged her to feed him first nevertheless, promising that her paltry supply of grain and oil would last for as long as the drought, not failing until the rains returned and she could replenish her supplies (vv. 13-14).

How would you have responded to such a request, however polite? Elijah would no doubt have appeared unkempt and eccentric after his long trek. A widow living near Sidon would not be expected to worship Yahweh (the LORD) or look after Yahweh's prophet, though God told Elijah that the woman had been told to provide for him. Why should she trust this strange man?

But why should she not? The story

implies that the poor widow and her son were down to their last piece of bread, with no prospect other than starvation beyond. As wild and crazy as Elijah's request may have seemed, it did offer a breath of hope, and that was more than the woman had before. So, we read, "she went and did as Elijah said," and Elijah's prediction proved true, so that he lived with the widow and her son "for many days" and all of them had bread to eat for the entire time (vv. 15-17).^U

Life for a son (vv. 17-24)

Like v. 7, v. 17 jumps forward in time. Elijah had dwelt with the widow and her son for an unknown period when tragedy struck: The boy grew ill and died. Yahweh's provision of grain and oil through Elijah's presence had extended the boy's life and filled the woman with hope that the child would not starve, but he died anyway.

In her grief the woman turned to Elijah with a sharp accusation. She called him a "man of God" but implicitly accused him of being complicit in her son's death. "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" (v. 18).

The primary theology running through the Old Testament (and still common in many minds today) is that God gives people what they deserve, especially when they sin. The woman spoke as if Elijah's presence had drawn God's attention to her shortcomings, causing God to kill her son as punishment for her sins.

Notice how Elijah responded: Instead of defending himself, he took the boy from her and carried him upstairs, perhaps symbolizing movement from the mundane realm of the house to a higher sphere of power, where the prophet could commune more directly with God (v. 19).

Once there, Elijah laid the boy on

the bed and cried out to God in strong language, with words very similar to those of the woman. With this action we see the dual roles of the prophet: He speaks God's word to the people, but he also speaks the people's words to God. Like the widow, Elijah believed God was responsible for the boy's death, and he didn't understand why God would respond to the poor woman's hospitality so cruelly (v. 20).

Elijah's action of prostrating himself upon the boy appears to be a symbolic effort to transfer some of his own living vitality to the lifeless body of the widow's son. Again he prayed, but more respectfully and indirectly: "Yahweh, my God, please let the life of this boy return within him" (a literal translation of v. 21).

God's response is likewise reported in indirect fashion. The text doesn't say something like "So God brought the child back to life," but "The LORD listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived" (v. 22).

As Elijah carried the child back downstairs to his mother, we're reminded that the boy had returned to the land of the living, to ordinary life, much to the delight of his mother (v. 23).

If we expect the mother to be overflowing with gratitude, however, we will be disappointed. The narrator has a different focus in mind, so he fashions her words to affirm the role of Elijah as a man of God who can be trusted to speak the truth. This has been his purpose all along.^U

This story holds a challenge for us. Though it's not inconceivable that we could save someone's life through performing CPR or some other means, we are unlikely to perform miracles. That doesn't mean we should not aspire to be more like Elijah, however.

Do our words and actions lead others to think of us as a man or woman of God, as one through whom God may speak, as one who can be trusted to speak truth? Who are the poor widows to whom God has called us to minister, and what do they have to say about us? **BT**

Youth

June 2 — June 30, 2013

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



of the Bible Lessons by Tony Cartledge.

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

Prove It!

1 Kings 18:17–39

Have you ever watched two people trying to prove they are able to do something? The argument grows louder and more intense until one person challenges the other to “Prove it!” In 1 Kings 18:17–39, Elijah and King Ahab are having a similar conflict.

Elijah begins by asking Ahab and his people how long they will limp between two opinions about who is really God. With no answer, Elijah provides the “prove it” moment when he puts forth this challenge: Two bulls are to be brought for sacrifice—one for the prophets of Baal and the other for Elijah, a prophet of the LORD. Both will have the opportunity to prepare their sacrifice, but they are not to burn it themselves.

Instead they must call upon their god to set the sacrifice ablaze.

The challenge is accepted, and the prophets of Baal go first. The sacrifice is prepared, the prayers are offered and ritual cuttings done, but there is no response.

Elijah reconstructs an old Israelite altar with 12 stones and places the sacrifice on the altar. He asks that jars be filled with water and doused over the sacrifice three times so the people will see it is God, and not Elijah, responsible for the fire. Elijah then calls out to God, and God responds by setting the sacrifice on fire!

We usually get into verbal sparring matches to prove our own excellence and ability, but this was not the case for Elijah. He did all of this so the people might know that God is the one true God.

JUNE 2

Think About It:

Elijah was the only prophet of the LORD God who dared to stand up to King Ahab. What does it reveal about Elijah that he acted so that others might see God revealed through him?

Make a Choice:

We make choices every day that have both short- and long-term significance. How often do you intentionally choose to do the thing that will reveal God through your actions?

Pray:

God, we pray that our actions may reveal to others that you are real and present today.

Of God

1 Kings 17:1–24

Across hangs around his neck. The hoodie he wears is from the latest youth group event. An Ichthus is tattooed on his foot. His phone has a Bible app on the home screen. By looking at this person, you might assume he’s a follower of Jesus. But what do his actions say? In 1 Kings 17:1–24, we read of a man who didn’t have to wear anything to show he was a man of God; his actions revealed who he was. This man was Elijah.

Event 1: Elijah stands before King Ahab and tells him there will be no rain, or even dew, upon the land again unless it is by Elijah’s word. After this pronouncement, God tells Elijah to leave and hide.

Event 2: Elijah approaches a widow and asks her for some water and a morsel of bread. The widow reveals that she has only a handful of meal and a little oil. Elijah promises that if she will bring bread for him, neither the meal nor oil will run out before the rains come again.

Event 3: The widow comes to Elijah because she thinks he has something against her because her child has died. Elijah asks her to show him her son so that Elijah may go to him. Elijah asks three times of God to bring life back to the boy. Elijah and the boy return downstairs to the widow.

What is the meaning of Elijah’s actions in these three events? The woman reveals the answer when she says, “Now I know you are a man of God.”

JUNE 9

Think About It:

These three stories of Elijah are miraculous. Elijah did not speak these things to bring attention or glory to himself but to reveal the truth of God. What reasoning do you have for the things you do and say?

Make a Choice:

We either can choose to serve our own interests or those of God. When people look at the things you do, do they see actions that serve your interests or the interests of God?

Pray:

God, we pray that the words we say and the actions of our life will reveal your glory and truth.

I Want It

1 Kings 21:1-29

In 1 Kings 21:1-29 we read the story of Jezebel, a woman who has gotten what she wants for far too long.

King Ahab wants a piece of land next to his palace in Jezreel, so he offers more than what it is worth to the land's owner, Naboth.

Naboth refuses the offer because God has told him he is not allowed to give up his ancestral inheritance. Ahab is so distraught over the rejection of his offer, he cannot even eat.

Enter King Ahab's wife Jezebel. She forges a letter on behalf of her husband to arrange for Naboth to be accused of cursing God and Ahab and thus killed for his betrayal. The plan works and Naboth is falsely murdered.

Elijah hears about what has happened and confronts Ahab. When Elijah reveals to Ahab how he has been tricked, Ahab is deeply remorseful. He rips off his clothes and walks around in sackcloth. God acknowledges King Ahab's remorse and decides to delay the punishment for another generation.

JUNE 16

Think About It:

How does our desire to get what we want tempt us to treat others?

Make a Choice:

Which of your wants could you do without in order to help someone truly in need?

Pray:

God, help us place others ahead of our wants and desires.

Listen to the Silence

1 Kings 19:1-15

After his success revealing that the God of Israel is the true God, Elijah receives a death threat from Jezebel. Elijah seems worried enough about the threat that he flees to Beersheba with his servant. Elijah leaves his servant in Beersheba and then travels another day into the wilderness where he reclines under a broom tree and gives up.

While Elijah is asleep, an angel comes to him twice to tell him to get up and eat

and drink. After eating a couple of meals he travels another 40 days and nights to Horeb, the mount of God.

At Horeb the word of the LORD comes to Elijah and tells him to go stand on the mountain because God will be passing by. Elijah endures a wind that breaks rocks, an earthquake, a fire and then sheer silence. After enduring these things, Elijah hears the voice of the LORD in the silence. The voice tells him to return to Damascus and anoint Hazael as king.

JUNE 23

Think About It:

Elijah heard the voice of God in the silence. How do you escape the noise in your life so you can listen for God?

Make a Choice:

When you have a choice to make, what voices do you seek out?

Pray:

God, I sit in silence awaiting your voice so that you might give me purpose and direction.

Wear It

1 Kings 19:15-21

Elijah goes into hiding after receiving a death threat from Jezebel. During his literal and metaphorical trek through the wilderness, he receives numerous directions from God. The last of these directions begins the reading from 1 Kings 19:15-21.

God has instructed Elijah to return to Damascus. Along the way he is to anoint Hazael as king over Aram, Jehu over Israel, and Elisha as a prophet. Along with the list of people Elijah is to anoint, he also learns

of some who will be killed as the people flee from these cities.

The first person Elijah anoints is Elisha. There isn't a lot of pomp and pageantry in this ceremony: Elijah just tosses his mantle over Elisha.

Elisha then asks to leave to tell his parents before he begins his service with Elijah. When Elisha returns he slaughters his oxen and gives the meat away to the people. Now he is ready to begin following Elijah.

JUNE 30

Think About It:

Elisha had an incredible opportunity to follow Elijah. Who are some of the people you would want to follow?

Make a Choice:

We choose the things that show our identity. What would someone say about the kind of person you are trying to become?

Pray:

God, thank you for the way you have created me. Help me to grow into the kind of person you hope for me to become.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Kings 21:1-29

June 16, 2013

How Low Can You Go?

In 1969 the Rolling Stones recorded one of their most iconic songs: “You Can’t Always Get What You Want.” Do you find that to be a true statement? On the surface, today’s text seems to focus on a wicked royal pair who thought they could prove it false, but there are also deeper issues involved. What we want and what we need do not always coincide, and God has a voice in the matter.

Getting what you want (vv. 1-16)

First Kings 21 consists of two connected stories: the royal but murderous appropriation of Naboth’s vineyard (vv. 1-16) and God’s judgment on such callous behavior (vv. 17-29).^U

The first story unfolds in several scenes, beginning with King Ahab’s attempt to purchase a vineyard belonging to a man named Naboth, who lived in Jezreel. Israel’s capital was in the hill-country city of Samaria, but Ahab apparently had a winter residence in Jezreel, about 20 miles northeast and at a lower elevation, in the heart of the fertile Jezreel valley.

We know nothing of Naboth except that he owned a vineyard located adjacent to Ahab’s palace, and Ahab wanted to obtain it and convert it to a vegetable garden. Ahab’s approach to Naboth was both polite and generous: He offered to exchange a better property for the vineyard or to pay an appropriate sum in cash (vv. 1-2).

Naboth declined to sell or trade his land on principle, however, swearing



1 Kings 21:3 –
“But Naboth said to Ahab, ‘The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance.’”

(“the LORD forbid!”) that he could not surrender his “ancestral inheritance” (v. 3). Naboth held to the traditional belief that God had entrusted the land to Israel. It had been divided among the tribes following their entry into Canaan (Joshua 13-22) and further subdivided among families to be theirs in perpetuity.

According to Lev. 25:23-28, the land could not be bought or sold as any other commodity. If people reached a state of such poverty that they had nothing left to sell but the land or themselves, they could do so, but only temporarily. Ideally, a kinsman would “redeem” the land to keep it in the family, but in any case it was to revert to the ancestral house in the next Jubilee year.^U Naboth’s response suggests that he could not sell the land without violating the religious understanding of the land and the laws of inheritance.

Ahab did not press Naboth any further, but was “resentful and sullen” over his refusal to sell. The same phrase was used to describe Ahab just a few verses before, after a prophet had upbraided

him for failing to kill King Ben-Hadad of Syria (20:43). Both are strong words: Either could include an element of willfulness and mean something like “vexed.” The NET translates the phrase “bitter and angry.”

Stymied by religious tradition and a landowner’s faithfulness to it, Ahab became petulant and went to bed in a sulk, pouting and refusing to eat (v. 4).

While Ahab resented Israel’s traditions, his wife Jezebel simply ignored them. As a native of Sidon and fervent worshiper of Baal, she had no respect for Israel’s God or its understanding of the land. In her mind, kings had complete power to take what they wanted.

Thus, when Jezebel found Ahab in his pitiful state and persuaded him to tell her what had made him so depressed, she had little sympathy for him.^U Impatiently, scolding Ahab as if he were a child, Jezebel told him to act like a king, and then proceeded to show him her version of how a king takes what he wants (vv. 5-7).^U

Writing letters in Ahab’s name and sealing them with the king’s seal, she

Additional background information
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instructed the leading citizens of Jezreel to proclaim a fast, call everyone to an assembly, and seat Naboth in a prominent position so all could see when two appointed “scoundrels” falsely accused him of cursing both God and the king. ^U Either offense was punishable by death, so Jezebel instructed them to take Naboth out immediately and stone him (vv. 8-10).

In contriving her vile plot, Jezebel showed an apparent familiarity with Israel’s religious customs, but cynically twisted them to serve her own purposes. Public fasts were typically called in times of distress such as war or drought, with the intention of showing community contrition and seeking God’s favor: Jezebel would have them fast falsely as a pretext for something God clearly does not favor.

Israel’s law required two witnesses if someone was accused of a crime, especially in capital cases (Deut. 17:6). Jezebel’s deceptive plot twisted this rule in order to have Naboth condemned – by having two ne’er-do-wells break the commandment against bearing false witness. ^U

Why Jezreel’s citizens were so willingly compliant in turning against Naboth, we do not know, but Jezebel’s plot succeeded so well that the narrator described the result with virtually the same words as the plan (vv. 11-13). The false accusation against Naboth engendered a mob scene, and the faithful landowner was stoned to death – even though the “elders and nobles” knew their neighbor was innocent.

The letters detailing the plan had been written in Ahab’s name, but the parties involved apparently knew whose idea it had been. When the deed was done, “they sent to Jezebel, saying ‘Naboth has been stoned; he is dead’” (v 14).

Jezebel then told Ahab that the coast was clear and demanded that he get up and take possession of the land. According to the narrative, Ahab asked no questions – it’s as if he didn’t want to know (or admit that he knew) what Jezebel had done – but he immediately obeyed his wife and set out to claim the

dead man’s property for the crown (vv. 15-16).

Getting what you need (vv. 17-29)

As Ahab went to take a murdered man’s land, we can imagine that the last person he’d want to meet would be an angry prophet with a divine directive – but that was just what Ahab needed and precisely what he found when Elijah showed up.

Elijah’s job was to bring to Ahab a word he needed to hear – that he would soon get more than the land: he would get what he deserved (vv. 17-19).

Knowing they were on opposite sides of a theological war, Ahab addressed Elijah in combative terms: “Have you found me, O my enemy?” ^U

Ahab’s reply was immediate and devastating. Because Ahab had sold out to doing “what is evil in the sight of the LORD,” God would bring disaster on him and his house. The matched response is clearer in the Hebrew, where the word translated as “disaster” is the same word for “evil” that describes Ahab’s behavior. Because Ahab had done what was evil in God’s sight, God would bring evil on him (vv. 20-21).

The narrator does not want readers to miss this point. The “Deuteronomistic History,” a narrative unit that begins with Joshua and extends through 2 Kings (with the exception of Ruth), consistently illustrates the belief that obedience to God resulted in blessing, while rebellion led to cursing: Good would be repaid with good, and evil for evil (see, for example, Deuteronomy 28). Thus, we are reminded that Ahab’s legacy will face the same ugly demise as the earlier dynasties of Jeroboam and Baasha. Prophets warned all three kings that their dynasties would fall and their bodies would become food for dogs or birds. And, all had sons who ruled for

only two years before dying. ^U

Ahab’s sin was not just that he had (knowingly or unknowingly) caused the death of an innocent man. The plot to kill Naboth had entangled Naboth’s neighbors and made them party to the crime. Speaking for Yahweh, Elijah insisted that judgment would fall “because you have provoked me to anger and have caused Israel to sin” (v. 22). In the background, perhaps, we are also to remember that Ahab had reportedly built a temple to Baal for his wife and allowed her to oppress the prophets of Yahweh while promoting Baal worship among the Israelites.

The narrator seems so exasperated by Ahab’s many sins that he inserts a pejorative parenthesis in vv. 25-26, insisting “there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD, urged on by his wife Jezebel.” Ahab acted “most abominably,” the narrator said, in “going after idols.”

Those excoriating words of judgment have a strong note of finality; there seems to be no hope for Ahab. It comes as a surprise, then, to find a more sympathetic account in vv. 27-29. The narrator declares that Ahab was so convicted by Elijah’s words that he fell into abject repentance, tearing his clothes, wearing sackcloth, fasting, and publicly grieving over his sins.

In response, we read, God told Elijah to declare that God would postpone the predicted disasters until the reign of Ahab’s son. ^U

Today’s lengthy text suggests a few obvious lessons: Greed leads to grief, evil begets evil, but repentance brings forgiveness.

Other lessons are less obvious. As individuals, as communities, as corporations, and as a country, we can’t (or shouldn’t) always get what we want. Better, we can learn to forgo unnecessary “wants” and focus on our needs. We may struggle in learning to tell the difference, but when we consider others’ needs beside our personal wants, the picture often becomes clear. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Kings 19:1-15

June 23, 2013

The Sound of Silence

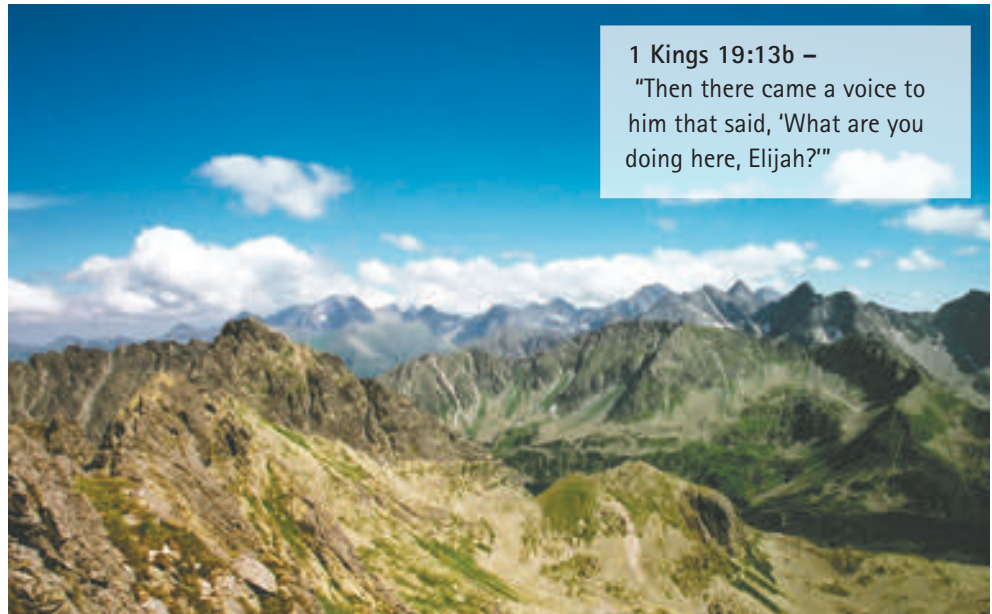
What makes you feel depressed? We all face disappointments or struggles in life, whether major tragedies or creeping despondency. Some mornings we just don't want to get out of bed.

We, of course, are not the first to pull up the covers, run away, or crawl deep down inside ourselves to hide. One of the first people we can read about who experienced this kind of depression was Elijah, whom we've been studying the past few weeks. What we can learn from Elijah's experience may offer some small clues for our own days of struggle when life seems too overwhelming. 📖

A downhearted prophet (vv. 1-9a)

The story we find in 1 Kings 19 occurs immediately after the high point in Elijah's career. On Mt. Carmel he had challenged 400 prophets of Baal to a game of dueling prophets, and he had won an amazing victory that proved to all that Yahweh was truly God and Elijah was a prophet (see the lesson for June 2). The prophets of Baal were dead, the Israelites who were present had repented, and Elijah was on top of the heap.

What Elijah had not counted on was the political implication of his victory. King Ahab's wife Jezebel, a Phoenician princess and avid devotee of Baal, was furious. The angry queen, seeking to get Elijah out of the country, sent him a warning: "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them (the dead priests



1 Kings 19:13b –
"Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

of Baal) by this time tomorrow." 📖

The same Elijah who was not afraid of 400 priests of Baal decided he had good reason to be afraid of one furious queen, and he fled for his life, running all the way from the northern kingdom of Israel to the town of Beersheba, near the southern border of Judah. 📖

Even that was not far enough: Elijah left his servant in Beersheba and traveled yet another day's journey south into the desert, losing himself in the lonely wilderness of the Negeb. 📖

Lost and alone, Elijah collapsed under a lonely little tree and prayed to die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors" (4b). 📖

Did Elijah really want to die? Of course not – or else he would have remained in Israel, where Jezebel would have been glad to assist him. But, for a while, he may have felt like it.

Elijah had not been taking care of himself. He had not been eating or drinking properly and had not gotten any rest for several days. He was absolutely run down, and of course, that made him feel even worse. When Elijah finally fell asleep under that solitary shrub, it was because he had no other

choice. He was totally worn out.

God knew what Elijah needed, and the text then tells us that when the prophet woke up, it was to the totally unexpected touch of an angel. 📖 "Get up and eat," the visitor said, "or else the journey will be too great for you." 📖 Elijah saw a steaming cake of bread and a jug of water nearby. He ate and drank, lay down again, then ate and drank some more.

Elijah did not eat again for 40 days, but journeyed on to the most sacred mountain in Israel's memory. Some called it Mt. Horeb, while others called it Sinai.

Using the last of his strength, Elijah climbed the hallowed hill until he came to a cave, perhaps the same cleft that had once sheltered Moses (the Hebrew has "the cave," as if the reader should know the cave of which he speaks). There Elijah spent the night, not knowing what would be next (vv. 5-9a).

An uplifting God (vv. 9b-18)

What came next was a question: "Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'" (v. 9b).

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



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Elijah responded with a litany of complaints, insisting that despite his faithfulness, the people of Israel had deserted Yahweh, that he was the only prophet left, and now Jezebel was after him (v. 10). In these words, Elijah portrayed his self-interest and self-pitying distortion of the situation. He ignored the faithful Obadiah and the 100 prophets he had kept safe (18:13), as well as the widespread repentance following the miracle on Mt. Carmel (18:39-40), focusing only on his own troubles.

God gave Elijah a chance to vent, then offered him a picture of something bigger than his frustrated self, calling Elijah to come out of his cave and stand on the mountain before God.

Elijah remained in the cave, though, when a howling wind blew past, “so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD,” but surprisingly, “the LORD was not in the wind.”

After the wind came the frightful wrenching of an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. On the heels of the temblor, Elijah felt the heat and heard the roar of a wildfire racing across the mountainside, but “the LORD was not in the fire,” either (vv. 11-12).

When all the commotion ceased, an eerie silence settled over the land, so tangible that Elijah could hear it. Translators struggle to describe what Elijah experienced. The KJV says there was a “still, small voice,” while the NIV has “a gentle whisper.” Literally, the text says that Elijah heard a *qôl demâmâ daqqâ*: “a sound of a thin silence.”

And that’s where Elijah found the voice of God: in the silence. The rejection Elijah had felt and the uncertainty of his future and the fierceness of his opposition may have seemed as fearsome as a storm wind, as tumultuous as an earthquake, as ravaging as a forest fire. But God was not behind that. God was not the author of Elijah’s discontent.

Perhaps God wanted Elijah to learn that, in the midst of the storms of life that make it hard to get ahead, of the upheavals that turn our lives upside

down, of the burning heat of anger and disappointment and loss, God is still there with us. In times like that, we may wish for God to speak up and make everything clear, but that is not the way God works. More often, God is present in the eerie quiet.

When Elijah recognized the presence of God in the sound of silence, he covered his face with his mantle – proving that he didn’t really want to die, for he was certain that God was present and the Hebrews believed that one who saw God would die. 🕒

Carefully, then, Elijah ventured to the mouth of the cave – still short of standing “on the mountain” as God had commanded – and again God asked: “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (v. 13).

It was the same question as before, because Elijah hadn’t dug deep enough to really answer it yet. And despite all he had learned, Elijah remained stuck in his despondency. He gave the same answer as before, complaining that Jezebel had been killing the prophets, that he was the only one left in Israel, and that he was next in line (v. 14).

It’s easy to be hard on Elijah, but if we’d been in his worn-out sandals, chased into the desert by a wicked queen’s death squad, we’d probably be rather self-absorbed, too.

Elijah’s depressing response suggests that, if nothing else, he needed assurance that his lonesome life and his dangerous work had some meaning.

So it was that God did not offer Elijah a theological self-defense of divine actions or a neat analysis of Elijah’s psyche. God answered by giving the prophet several specific assignments.

We will study Elijah’s new commission next week. For now, the important thing is to observe that Elijah rediscovered his purpose, and was reminded that it wasn’t all about him.

Let’s give another thought to God’s insistence that Elijah listen to (or through) the silence. In our culture

we seem addicted to noise. As the daily clamor of life assaults our ears, our minds also crackle with inner static as we try to remember to pick up the dry cleaning and take the chicken out of the freezer and figure out the best approach for a presentation we need to do at work.

This is a problem, if we wish to have a spiritual life. Years ago, writing in *The Christian Century*, Margaret Guenther observed: “We wrap noise around us like a blanket, insulating ourselves from one another, and from God ... true silence is frightening because it leaves us receptive, open and vulnerable. It strips away our excuses and defenses” (“Embracing the Silence,” *The Christian Century* 112 [June 7-14, 1995], 603).

We may say that we want to live in close relationship with God, but we cannot expect to hear God speak unless we are willing shed those insulating layers of noise and let our hearts and minds lie bare before God. 🕒

It doesn’t matter how low we may feel, how battered and bruised, how fierce are the storms that surround us: God is there, speaking in the silence, if we are willing to become quiet enough, open enough, vulnerable enough to hear. There is meaning in this life, and hope. There is work for us, worthwhile work that will make a difference for Christ and for our world. Will we listen for it this week? 🕒

Broom tree? – The “broom tree” Elijah slept beneath (v. 4) is a variety of juniper, more of a large shrub than an actual tree. It can tolerate dry conditions and continues to grow in many parts of Palestine.

Note that the shrub is described as “one tree.” Elijah’s own loneliness is emphasized by his attempt to find shade beneath a solitary shrub that probably offered little comfort.



Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Kings 19:15-21

June 30, 2013

If the Mantle Fits ...

Have you ever had the unsettling discovery that some hero of yours was not as perfect as you had thought? Perhaps you saw a teacher you had idolized lose her temper in an unattractive way, or learned that an admired politician had spent campaign money for personal luxuries.

Seeing favorites fall from their pedestals is not a happy event. In some cases, however, there may be some comfort in learning that our heroes are human. We are not the only ones who have our weak spots or even dark spots, who come up short of perfection.

Today's disappointing hero is Elijah.

God commissions Elijah (vv. 15-18)

This is the fifth of five lessons about Elijah that we've studied this month, and in most cases we've seen him zealously defending the worship of Yahweh against the intrusions of Baal worship promoted by Jezebel, the Phoenician princess who had married Ahab, Israel's king.

Elijah appeared confident and courageous as he confronted King Ahab to predict a lengthy drought, then faithfully followed God's instruction to retreat to a ravine near the Jordan and later to a widow's home near Sidon. He showed no doubt that God would provide food for the widow and her son, and when the boy died, Elijah intervened with Yahweh to restore the boy's life. Later, he ordered King Ahab to assemble the Israelites for a duel of



1 Kings 19:20a –

"He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, 'Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you!'"

the gods on Mt. Carmel, where Elijah's faith in Yahweh was vindicated in a great triumph over the prophets of Baal.

There were hints all along, however, that Elijah was not the most cooperative of prophets. When the widow's son died, Elijah charged God with being unjust. When Obadiah explained that he had managed to keep 100 prophets of Yahweh safe and fed, Elijah acted as if he never heard and showed no gratitude, later complaining that he was the only prophet God had left. Despite his sweeping triumph on Mt. Carmel, Jezebel's continued opposition sent Elijah crashing into despair, fleeing the country, and asking Yahweh to take his life in a failed attempt to resign his post.

On Mt. Sinai, Yahweh twice asked Elijah what he was doing there, when he should have been at work in Israel. Both times, Elijah showed himself to be fully self-absorbed and fearful of his opponents.

When Yahweh told Elijah to come out of his cave and stand before God, the prophet remained inside as wind

and earthquake and fire swept by. He ventured to the entrance only after all became quiet, and then with his face covered, as if unwilling to stand vulnerable before God or to see what God would show him.

In last week's lesson we noted that God refused to accept Elijah's resignation and sent him back to the prophetic task, assuring Elijah that God still had meaningful work for him to do. That could have bolstered Elijah's outlook, but it didn't.

Elijah was instructed to anoint three people. First, he was to go to Damascus – the capital of Aram, Israel's enemy – and anoint an official named Hazael to replace Ben-hadad as king. Secondly, he was to return to Israel and anoint Jehu the son of Nimshi, a top military commander, to take Israel's throne. Such actions would have perilous political implications. By openly endorsing regime changes, Elijah could become a hero for some, but a target for others.

Finally, he was to go to Abel-meholah, find a man named Elisha, the

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son of Shaphat, and anoint him to be a prophet (vv. 16-17). The Hebrew could be read “as a prophet instead of you” or “as a prophet under you.” The first option suggests that God would allow Elijah to retire after completing the three tasks, with Elisha taking his place. The second option would have Elijah remaining as a prophet, with Elisha serving under his tutelage. Elijah acted more in accordance with the second option.

In addition to giving the dejected prophet work to do, God also reminded Elijah that he was not alone, as he had claimed. Not only would Elisha be willing to follow him, but there were at least 7,000 others in Israel who remained faithful to Yahweh (v. 18). ↓

Elijah commissions Elisha (vv. 19-21)

The most surprising thing is that Elijah, despite Yahweh’s threefold command, did not anoint anyone. He gave the capital cities a wide berth and made no pretense of following through on God’s orders to anoint either Hazael of Syria or Jehu of Israel. ↓

Instead, Elijah started at the end of the list and journeyed first to Abel-meholah, where he expected to find Elisha, the son of Shaphat, a person Elijah is likely to have known already. ↓

Elijah’s cranky demeanor had not improved by the time he located Elisha, who was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen ahead of him, “and he was with the twelfth” (v. 19). This suggests 12 men plowing in staggered fashion, each guiding a pair of oxen, so that each pass of the field would turn over a dozen rows.

As Elisha plowed, “Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him” (v. 20). That’s the extent of Elijah’s “anointing” of Elisha, so far as we know, and it was done as if every bone in Elijah’s body resented the thought of sharing his role with another. He couldn’t bring himself to speak, to invite, or to explain, but simply walked up to Elisha, flung his mark of office across the farmer’s shoulders, and

passed on by so quickly that Elisha had to run to catch up to him.

Despite Elijah’s failure to say a word, the text suggests that Elisha knew exactly who he was and what he intended. Elijah, in his distinctive garb, was a well-known figure (see 2 Kgs. 1:7-8), and the hair mantle appears to have been a characteristic symbol of the prophetic office (for more on the significance of the mantle, see “The Hardest Question” online). ↓

Once Elisha caught up with the speeding prophet, he asked only for permission to go and tell his family goodbye before leaving to follow Elijah.

Elijah’s response appears both gruff and cryptic: “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” (v. 20, NRSV). This rendering has a sarcastic ring, suggesting that Elijah took no ownership of the call, as if saying “Go on, when did I ever ask you to do anything?” ↓

Perhaps Elijah hoped Elisha would go home and not return, preferring to remain alone. Elisha fully intended to follow, but his goodbyes involved far more than a parting kiss. After leaving Elijah, Elisha slaughtered the pair of oxen with which he’d been plowing, adding his plow-stock to the firewood needed to boil the meat and give it to “the people,” who ate (v. 21).

The implication is that Elisha threw himself a farewell feast, as it were. By burning his farming gear and slaughtering his oxen, Elisha indicated that he did not intend to return. By hosting a meal, he portrayed the event as something to be celebrated, perhaps as a sacred occasion. ↓

If Elijah had any part in the going-away ceremonies or the meal, we are not told about it, but once the festal occasion was finished, Elisha “set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant” (v. 21b).

The word “servant” is not the best translation. “Servant” was appropriate in v. 3, where Elijah left his “lad/servant” in Beersheba before proceeding deeper into the desert. The word used in v. 21 usually carries the sense of “minister to.” Elsewhere, it was used to describe Joshua’s role as Moses’ chief assistant, for the priests who “ministered” in the temple, and for young Samuel’s role in ministering to Yahweh as he assisted Eli (1 Sam. 2:11).

Elisha, then, was not to be Elijah’s drudge, but his assistant or aide, a prophet-in-training. In modern terms we could think of Elisha as serving an internship with Elijah as his mentor.

Elijah does not appear to have been a very patient tutor, however, and there’s no record that he ever anointed Elisha with anything other than the scent of his well-worn mantle and the oil from his skin that clung to it. On more than one occasion Elijah did his best to part company with Elisha, but his assistant was determined to follow and would not be put off.

For practical purposes, of course, Elijah would have quickly reclaimed his mantle. He needed it for protection from the elements and for warmth at night. Though he was on his way, Elisha had not yet earned the hairy mantle of the prophet. A later story will describe how Elijah’s mantle fell to the ground when he was taken to heaven by a whirlwind, at which point Elisha claimed it for good (2 Kgs. 2:1-14).

Whether we receive from them a literal “mantle” or not, we all learn from mentors: the parents who raise us as children, our teachers in school or church, our on-the-job trainers. We also serve as mentors to others, passing to them the mantle of our experience, our beliefs, and our commitments, whatever they are.

It might be good for us to think about the various mantles we wear and to ask whether they would look good on our children or on others we might pass them to. Would wearing our mantles enhance their lives or detract from them – and what should that tell us? **BT**

The trouble with labels

Labels can be helpful when applied to cans of soup or barrels of toxic waste. But they are less so when affixed to human beings — particularly when meant to summarize, indelibly, one's spiritual identity.

In a recent *Rolling Stone* interview, Marcus Mumford, the 26-year-old lead singer of the wildly successful British band Mumford & Sons, raised the hackles of some religious folks when he declined to claim the “Christian” label as his own.

Marcus is the son of John and Eleanor Mumford, who are the national leaders of the Vineyard Church in the U.K. and Ireland, an arm of the international evangelical Christian Vineyard Movement. Last year, he married actress Carey Mulligan, whom he'd met years earlier at a Christian youth camp.

And the music of Mumford & Sons, for which Mumford is the main lyricist, is laden with the themes and imagery of faith — often drawing specifically upon the Christian tradition. They explore relationships with God and others; fears and doubts; sin, redemption, and most of all, grace.

During the *Rolling Stone* interview, reporter Brian Hiatt asked Mumford whether he “still consider(s) himself a Christian.” Mumford gave the following answer:

“I don't really like that word. It comes with so much baggage. So, no, I wouldn't call myself a Christian. I think the word just conjures up all these religious images that I don't really like. I have my personal views about the person of Jesus and who he was. ... I've kind of separated myself from the culture of Christianity.”

His spiritual journey is a “work in progress,” Mumford said, adding that he's never doubted the existence of God and that his parents are unbothered by his ambivalence toward the Christian label.

When I was Mumford's age, I might have given a similar answer. He's young and faith is a journey, not a destination. Cut Mumford some slack and thank him for his honesty.

That was not the reaction of many of my co-religionists, some of whom deemed his answer a cop-out, chastising him for being



Photo courtesy Big Hassle Media

ashamed of the gospel of Christ and tossing his lot in with the booming spiritual-but-not-religious crowd that is so popular among his age demographic.

Not so fast, good Christian soldiers. Before we march off to war against young Mr. Mumford, perhaps we should consider why he chose to answer the way he did.

I didn't hear Mumford's remarks as a wishy-washy equivocation about the precepts of Christianity or a capitalist concern about alienating non-Christian fans. Rather what I took away from his answer was a keen wariness about other Christians and our too-often brutal judgmentalism.

Growing up as a pastor's kid, undoubtedly Mumford knows this all too well. And as someone who is newly accustomed to standing in the unforgiving glare of celebrity's spotlight, he surely also understands our cultural obsession with putting people on pedestals and knocking them off with great glee and heaping doses of schadenfreude.

What I heard in his reticence to label himself a Christian was not a denial of faith, but instead something that falls between Dorothy Day's famous “Don't call me a saint — I don't want to be dismissed so easily,” and Soren Kierkegaard's, “Once you label me you negate me.”

I also heard echoes of another rock star whose own Christian faith has been a topic of controversy and debate for years: Bono of U2.

Some critics have called Bono “holier-than-thou” and mocked him as “St. Bono.” The most vicious attacks, however, came from

other Christians who called Bono's faith into question because of his day job.

For many years, beginning when Bono was the same age Mumford is now, he shied away from the Christian label and largely stopped talking about his faith publicly.

When asked about the role of religion in his life in a 1987 *Rolling Stone* interview, Bono said in part: “I am a Christian, but at times I feel very removed from Christianity. The Jesus Christ that I believe in was the man who turned over the tables in the temple and threw the money-changers out.”

Fifteen years later, in 2002 Bono and I spoke about his discomfort with “the church” and his reluctance to self-apply the “Christian” label.

“By the way, I don't set myself up to be any kind of Christian. I can't live up to that. It's something I aspire to, but I don't feel comfortable with that badge,” he told me. “It's a badge I want to wear. But I'm not a very good advertisement for God.”

It wasn't a disavowal of faith or beliefs (although some thought it was). It was a statement from a humble believer who wants people to look to God — not him — for perfection and answers.

I don't care what Mumford or Bono call themselves or don't. Their actions and (other) words tell a story of faith that is much more nuanced, and therefore truer, than any label. **BT**

—Cathleen Falsani is a columnist for the *Orange County Register*. Her column is distributed by *Religion News Service*.



Satan in America

The Devil We Know
By Scott Poole

By Adelle Banks, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

Dark-skinned Satan has long history

When some people started questioning whether the Satan character on “The Bible” miniseries resembled President Obama, others posed a broader question: Why does Satan need to be dark skinned at all?

Religious experts and historians say the controversy points to a centuries-old tradition where dark is bad, light is good.

“It’s just part and parcel of the stereotyping and the encoding of dark and black, particularly of African descent, as negative in American popular culture,” said Paula Matabane, an African Methodist Episcopal minister and associate professor of television and film at Howard University.

Scott Poole, author of *Satan in America: The Devil We Know*, says the linking of Satan and race predates American history.

European folklore described Satan as a black man, and the Puritans imported these notions, and raised them during the Salem witch trials of the 1690s.

“That’s an idea that the Puritans brought with them from England to New England,” said Poole. “They actually had a tendency to identify all racial others with satanic powers, satanic control.”

Roma Downey and Mark Burnett, the husband-and-wife executive producers of the History channel miniseries that concluded on Easter Sunday, swiftly rejected the Obama comparison, calling it “a foolish distraction” and noting their “highest respect” for the president.

“The series was produced with an international and diverse cast of respected actors,” the History Channel added in a statement. “It’s unfortunate that anyone made this false connection.”

Entertainment writers noted that makeup artists made Moroccan actor Mohamen Mehdi Ouazanni look darker than he usually is, with one comparing his usual visage to Omar Sharif or David Niven.

Stephen Thorngate, an associate editor for *Christian Century*, was one commentator who said the hubbub about Obama “isn’t the point.”

“Just don’t give the ultimate good guy fair skin and the ultimate bad guy darker skin,” he

said. “We’ve been down that road too many times before.”

Time columnist James Poniewozik noted that the Bible lacks descriptions of Satan — just as it doesn’t dwell on the color of Jesus’ skin.

“Whether or not they intended to make Satan look like Obama, they did intend to make him a dark-shrouded bogeyman,” he wrote. “And that’s the real sin here.”

Long before Obama became the nation’s first black president, white supremacist theologians in the late 1800s claimed the devil was black.

“In that kind of high-water mark of American white supremacy, even the tempter in the Garden of Eden is referenced as an African man or woman who is soulless,” said Edward Blum, co-author of *The Color of Christ*.

Jumping ahead a century, there’s another Hollywood example of a negative biblical character: African-American actor Carl Anderson portrayed the role of Judas in the 1973 movie *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

“That caused a great deal of controversy,” said Blum, whose book noted protests from black Baptists who were upset that Jesus’ betrayer was depicted as a black man.

Robert Thompson, professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University, said Anderson’s role was an “exception” for Hollywood depictions of Judas. But white actors tend to be cast as what would be

considered the good guys of the Bible.

“There’s been a tradition that an awful lot of the heroes of the Bible have been played by light-skinned European Americans, including oftentimes, Jesus, who looks much like he may have come from northern Europe than down Israel way,” he said.

In Mel Gibson’s 2004 *The Passion of the Christ*, Satan was depicted as an androgynous albino figure. “I believe the Devil is real, but I don’t believe he shows up too often with horns and smoke and a forked tail,” Gibson told *Christianity Today*.

Cain Hope Felder, professor of New Testament language and literature at Howard University, said the Satan depiction in the recent miniseries was disappointing given the more multicultural depictions of biblical figures seen in recent decades.

He was the general editor of the *Original African Heritage Bible*, which in 1993 included images of Jesus and his disciples as people of color. That was followed in 1999 by the *African American Jubilee Edition of the Holy Bible*, which includes depictions of a black Jesus on the cross and in the arms of Mary.

“It’s unfortunate that the producers of this show made this terrible error,” Felder said. “They either should have taken Satan off the screen entirely and just had a voice or something. Or if you’re going to use him, he should certainly not have been black.” **BT**

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Pastor: Godwin Heights Baptist Church of Lumberton, N.C., is seeking a full-time pastor with five or more years of ministry experience and who holds a seminary degree, preferably a Master of Divinity. The ideal candidate would be an effective communicator and preacher who works well with the church family and community, a strong leader who promotes the spiritual interest of the church, and a caring individual who is gifted in pastoral care. Interested candidates should submit résumés to Pastor Search Committee, Godwin Heights Baptist Church, 704 Godwin Ave., Lumberton, NC 28358.

Associate Minister: University Baptist Church of Hattiesburg, Miss. (UBC), is seeking a full-time associate minister. UBC is a CBF-affiliated congregation located in a city that is home to two universities. Along with general associate minister duties, the ideal candidate will serve as the primary staff minister for children's ministries, including leadership of Godly Play, and will be responsible for enhancing existing programs and developing new ministries that promote the faith formation of church members of all ages. The candidate must hold an undergraduate degree from an accredited college or university and the Master of Divinity degree or Master of Divinity degree with concentration in Christian education from an accredited seminary or divinity school. This individual should be ordained or seeking ordination. Interested candidates may submit a résumé to ubcsearch@ubchm.org or to Associate Minister Search Committee, 3200 Arlington Loop, Hattiesburg, MS 39401. Applications will be received through May 31 or until a suitable applicant is chosen. Additional information, including a complete job description, can be found at ubchm.org.

In the Know

Chris Aho is pastor of Oxford Baptist Church in Oxford, N.C., coming from Hillcrest Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala.

Sulen Bosumatari died March 28 in the Assam state of India at age 82. He served as general secretary of the Boro Baptist Church Association, formerly known as the Goalpara Boro Baptist Union, for more than 20 years.

Chris George is pastor of Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., coming from First Baptist Church of Mobile, Ala.

Billy Lemons has retired after serving for 48 years as organist for Boiling Springs Baptist Church in Boiling Springs, N.C. Earlier he was organist at Poplar Springs Baptist Church in Shelby, N.C., for a total of 51 years of continuous ministry.

Florence Lavelle Henton Leonard died March 23 in Winston-Salem, N.C., at age 95. She was retired from the Texas Highway Department and lived most of her life in Ft. Worth, where she was a member of Gambrell Street Baptist Church. She moved to North Carolina in recent years to be near her son, Bill Leonard of Wake Forest University.

Quenton Lockwood died March 20 in Chillicothe, Ohio, at age 90. After service in World War II, he completed his education and served as pastor of several

churches before becoming the first missions director for Southern Baptists in Nebraska. He and his wife, Mary Alene, started the inner-city Omaha Baptist Center. He served on the staff of the SBC Home Mission Board in Atlanta from 1968 until retiring in 1988. He then served churches in and around Ashland, Ky., as an interim pastor, gaining the nickname, "Pope of the Big Sandy."

Russell Moore is president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. He comes from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary where he served as dean of the school of theology and senior vice president. He follows Richard Land who is retiring from the ERLC.

Charity Roberson has joined the Baptist General Association of Virginia as learning communities/equipping coach with a special interest in fostering peer learning among emerging and collegiate leaders. Previously, Roberson served as Raleigh area campus minister for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, and most recently as pastor of Sharon Baptist Church in Smithfield, N.C.

Kay Wilson Shurden received the distinguished church woman of the year award from Baptist Women in Ministry of Georgia. **BT**

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Ethical decisions about death convey faith

Editor's note: This commentary was written as a follow-up to "Three ethicists respond to hard questions about tough end-life decisions" (March 2013, p. 32).

Woody Allen's quip, "I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens," expresses how many of us feel. We know that we will die, but we don't like to think about it. And we certainly don't want to plan for it.

John Hardwig, a retired philosophy professor and medical ethicist, often talks to community groups about the common fear that death will come too soon. But he also asks, "How many of you are afraid that death will come too late for you?" Hardwig said about half his audience will raise their hands.

Today we have treatments, procedures, and medications unimaginable just a few decades ago. In the past, dying was most often a brief process due to no effective treatment for infection or other illness. We now have the capacity to extend life in amazing ways.

As a result, many face difficult medical ethical questions for themselves or their loved ones. Are there times to forgo some of the technology — and accept that we are dying and choose carefully how to spend our remaining time?

We might think about what medical professionals refer to as "goals of care." Is my goal to live as long as possible, no matter the side effects of the treatment? Is my goal to spend time with loved ones, feeling as well as possible? Where would I prefer to be during my last weeks or days?

Dying used to be accompanied by

prescribed customs. There were guides to the art of dying that included an opportunity to reaffirm one's faith, repent of sins and let go of worldly possessions. There were prayers for the families, along with questions for the dying. The idea was to help the person and the family to prepare for death.

Our stunning medical advances have contributed to our loss of how to die well and how to think about our own death. For instance, studies have shown repeatedly that most Americans would like to die at home. Yet a recent article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that during the past decade, while slightly more people died at home or in hospice care, the percentage of patients who spent part of their last month in an intensive care unit grew, and the percentage of patients on a respirator (breathing machine) during the last month also grew.

But we can choose to think ahead, plan ahead and make decisions about the medical care at the end of our lives. These are ethical decisions, and we have the right to choose for ourselves.

A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that nearly half of patients needed a decision made at the end of life. It might be whether to continue aggressive medical intervention or to consider using a feeding tube for artificial nutrition and hydration. It might be whether to have more costly treatment even if it offers only a small chance of extending life briefly.

Decisions may involve whether to put a patient on a breathing machine or to provide comfort care, guided by physicians who specialize in end-of-life care. Nearly

three-fourths of those needing such decisions were unable to decide at the required time.

That means a family member or a designated health care agent became the decision maker. The study found that if patients had filled out living wills, documents that express their wishes, they were more likely to have those wishes honored.

If suddenly faced with such ethical decisions, would you or your family know what you would want? These decisions often require hard conversations, but it is critical to find ways to talk through these kinds of questions:

- Would you want to be resuscitated if you are near the end of life and your heart stops?
- Would you want aggressive interventions such as a breathing machine?
- Would you want to receive artificial nutrition and hydration through a feeding tube?
- Would you prefer to be kept comfortable and have family nearby?
- When your time becomes short, what is most important to you?

The church offers an ideal place for these discussions. These kinds of life-and-death issues are central to who we are as people of faith, and our responses can reflect our confidence that, ultimately, there is no separation from the love of God.

There are abundant resources for leading these kinds of conversations. Local hospital or hospice chaplains can offer guidance.

All of us will die. Our ethical decisions about how we deal with death can be a rich expression of our faith in Jesus. **BT**

—Mary Caldwell is a clinical ethicist at Mission Health in Asheville, N.C. She is member of the American Society of Bioethics and Humanities and the First Baptist Church of Asheville.



Mary Caldwell

If suddenly faced with such ethical decisions, would you or your family know what you would want?

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

150 YEARS AGO

May 1863

This month opens with Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee achieving the high point of his war-time battlefield successes by overcoming long odds and soundly defeating Union forces in the seven-day Battle of Chancellorsville, Va. In the middle of the fighting of May 3 stands the Salem Baptist Church. Damaged, the small brick building nonetheless survives.

Confederate victory, however, comes at a terrible cost. Thirty-nine-year-old Confederate Gen. Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, widely recognized among Southern Baptists as an exemplary Christian leader, dies on March 10 from complications after having been accidentally shot by friendly fire at Chancellorsville.

While Jackson is lying on his death bed, the Southern Baptist Convention assembles in Augusta, Ga. The assembled delegates are a who’s who of prominent Southern Baptist pastors and denominational leaders, most of whom are slaveholders.

The Home Missions report focuses heavily on the need for more army missionaries. Delegates also form a committee “to report suitable resolutions to be adopted by the Convention in regard to the war now raging in this country.” One of the seven resolutions declares:

The war which has been forced upon us is, on our part, just and necessary, and have only strengthened our opposition to a reunion with the United States on any terms whatever ... we have no thought of ever yielding, but will render a hearty support to the Confederate Government.

Another resolution acknowledges “the hand of God” upon the Confederacy, noting “we

confidently anticipate ultimate success.” One resolution acknowledges sins for which repentance is needed, but excludes African slavery, the very issue over which the war is being fought. Other resolutions call for evangelization of soldiers, sympathies and help for families displaced by war, and diligence to the moral and religious training of children in the face of the war. The final resolution addresses the death of Jackson.

That we have just heard with unutterable grief, of the death of that noble Christian warrior, Lieut. Gen. T. J. Jackson; that we thank God for the good he has achieved, and the glorious example he has left us, and pray that we may all learn to trust, as he trusted, in the Lord alone.

Meanwhile, the American (Northern) Baptist Missionary Union convenes at Cleveland, Ohio, presided over by U.S. Senator Ira Harris (N.Y.), a leading Baptist layman of the North. Like their southern counterparts, delegates pass resolutions concerning the war. One resolution condemns “the authors, aiders, and abettors of this slaveholders’ rebellion, in their desperate efforts to nationalize the institution of slavery and to extend its despotic sway throughout the land.” Another resolution states:

That in the recent acts of Congress, abolishing slavery forever in the District

of Columbia and the Territories, and in the noble proclamation of the President of the United States, declaring freedom to the slave in States in rebellion, we see cause for congratulation and joy, and we think we behold the dawn of that glorious day when, as in Israel’s ancient jubilee, “liberty shall be proclaimed throughout all the land, until all the inhabitants thereof.—Leviticus xxv.10.”

Thus heroes both are the recently-deceased Gen. Jackson and President Lincoln, respective to Baptists south and north. While having little in common ideologically in regards to the war, both men trace their spiritual roots to the respective Baptist congregations of their boyhoods.

The other significant battlefield action this month takes place in the western theater of war: on the Mississippi River. U.S. General Ulysses S. Grant, following months of preparation, wins several significant victories in the area of Vicksburg, Miss., a fortified Confederate city that the United States considers essential to gaining control of the Mississippi River and dividing the Confederacy east and west. Following the battlefield victories, Grant sets siege to the city on May 22.

As the month thus draws to a close, sadness and apprehension pervade the Confederacy. Jackson is dead and Vicksburg under siege.

Conversely, United States politicians and the general public, following the unfolding saga on the Mississippi River, desperately hope that Grant will be able to turn the tide of the war in favor of the North. **BT**



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Paying it forward

Response to storm damage leads to long-term ministry

JACKSONVILLE, Ala. — Two years ago Wendell McGinnis was caught up in a tornado that left him bruised and broken, but alive, in a field behind what was once his home. Days later he and his wife, Carol, would stand on the concrete deck of their pool, filled with debris, and look at the pieces of their house strewn across acres of land.

The good people who make up their church, First Baptist Church of Williams, near Jacksonville, Ala., joined hands to minister to the McGinnis family and countless others over the following year.

Unlike many others, the McGinnis home was insured. So the church with its many volunteers focused on building and repairing the houses of those who had no other means.

“We eventually formed a separate organization from the church and called it the Community Resource Group (CRG),” said Wallace Almaroad who helped coordinate the building ministry. “It provided the avenue we needed to partner with other churches, organizations, and corporations to raise money and help more people.”

For more than a year, groups of volunteers from Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-affiliated churches within Alabama and beyond, along with a variety of other organizations, have come to the Williams community to rebuild homes lost in the storm.

CRG formed a committee of seven persons to evaluate the applications being submitted by those seeking help. During the first year, every applicant had lost a home to the tornadoes.

Those families, mostly with children, that were underinsured or had no insurance received priority attention, said Almaroad.

After responding to these crucial needs in the first year, CRG leaders decided to help others in need within the Williams and Webster Chapel communities. They focused on the poor and underinsured with home repairs and meeting other needs.

Two years later they are expanding their reach to other communities. Recently a team from First Baptist Williams, including



After a busy day of repairing homes, these long-term volunteers enjoy dinner together and prepare for the next project. The ongoing effort resulted from quick responses to tornadoes that hit northern Alabama last year.

Almaroad and McGinnis, traveled from the northern part of the state to Saraland, Ala., a suburb of Mobile. There they teamed with Volunteers of America Southeast, a partnering organization with Alabama CBF, to pay the kindness forward.

“A group of 13 of us went to Mobile to help some senior adults who needed home repairs,” said Almaroad. “We were surprised; ... the conditions were almost unlivable.”

Paul McLendon of VOA Southeast said the Williams team helped two senior adults with their homes — one of which was close to being condemned.

The team removed rotten flooring and constructed new floors for both homes as well as other repairs. Because of the team members’ building skills, they were able to complete the projects in just a few days.

“First Baptist Church of Williams has been a faithful partner with VOA since Katrina,” said McLendon, referring back to 2005. “They have made many trips down to repair and rebuild homes damaged by the hurricane. They continue to share their talents with us to help people whose lives have been endangered by either natural disaster or other catastrophic events.”

Ironically, while the team from Williams was away recently, a storm system made its way across Alabama causing more destruction

in the Jacksonville area. The primary workers from the CRG at Williams would have been first responders, but they were away on mission. So other church members helped with immediate needs while the team returned home.

“We’re currently working on replacing the roofs on two homes that lost them during the storm that hit while we were away,” said Almaroad. “Like most non-profit agencies, we were blessed to receive a lot of help after the tornadoes, but those funds are now depleted.”

So, the Community Resource team from First Baptist Church Williams is back to fundraising — in an ongoing effort to help families in need of a roof over their heads or a sturdy floor under their feet.

These dedicated volunteers said they have learned much about the love of God through the outpouring of support and help after the disaster that came their way a couple of years ago. Now they remain committed to partnering with others in need — whether from a natural disaster or the struggles of poverty.

“They’re amazing,” said McLendon of the many volunteers and partners who have made lasting commitments to working together for good. “We look forward to continued partnerships with First Baptist Williams and CBF to touch many lives and bring positive change to families.” **BT**

Passing the Peace

Baptist, Episcopal congregations share worship, gain appreciation of each other



Baptist and Episcopal members greet one another during a shared worship service held at Dayton's First Baptist Church this winter while the chapel of Christ Church was under reconstruction.

DAYTON, Ohio — Christ Church was left with no place to worship while demolition work was being done on the Episcopal congregation's chapel in downtown Dayton this winter. Rector John Paddock asked the neighboring First Baptist Church if his congregation might hold a noon service in its facilities.

But First Baptist pastor Rodney Kennedy suggested another idea: join together for Sunday worship for those five weeks. When the shared 10:30 a.m. services were first announced, some questions poured in.

"Will we serve wine in the Baptist church?" "Do the Baptists always preach on hell?"

In the end, the idea of mixing congregational polity with sacramental theology for a few weeks offered just enough discomfort to produce worship that participants will long remember and savor, said Kennedy.

First Baptist Church was founded May 29, 1824 by a small band of Calvinist Baptists, just 19 years after the city was incorporated. The church survived the loss of all



Rector John Paddock (left) of Christ Episcopal Church and pastor Rodney Kennedy of First Baptist Church serve communion during one of the five Sunday services in which the neighboring congregations in downtown Dayton shared worship.

but eight members to the Campbellite movement in its early years.

The current sanctuary was under construction when the flood of 1913 filled the basement of the incomplete structure. After the waters subsided, the building resumed.

The magnificent Gothic structure opened its doors on June 26, 1915, where the congregation continues to worship on the banks of the Miami River. The grand entrance faces Dayton's downtown as a reminder of the church's mission.

Unlike the founders, the current pastor is a self-described "full-orbed Arminian" and a "professed Anabaptist-catholic" — as well as "a refugee from the fundamentalist-captured Southern Baptist Convention."

Neighboring Christ Episcopal Church was established in 1830, with the first services held in the courthouse. On May 28, 1831, 103 persons signed the Articles of Association. By 1833, services were held in the congregation's own building on South Jefferson Street, before moving to the current site on First Street in 1879.

Paddock, rector since 1999, has led Christ Church in a ministry of reconciliation and outreach to the poor and the homeless. Both congregations are leading voices in Dayton for social justice. Together they have fed the hungry, served the homeless, and worked together in various forms of mission.

"We have worked together in many different ways, particularly on community-wide issues in a mission to the Dayton community," Paddock said.

On Ash Wednesday last year, Paddock said he and Kennedy, along with clergy from other denominations, imposed ashes on passersby on Main Street as part of the "Ashes to Go" campaign.

In addition, there have been special

times of shared worship on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, as well as joint Sunday school classes led by Larry Welborn, professor of New Testament and early Christian history at Fordham University, and luncheon discussions attended by members of Christ Episcopal, First Baptist, and Temple Israel.

Yet the two congregations, only a block apart, had never before worshiped together on Sunday. With stereotypes running deep, the idea of worshiping together created an undercurrent of excitement and a bit of anxiety.

Some Episcopalians looked with suspicion at the baptistery behind the choir. One expressed mild surprise that the sermon by the Baptist pastor didn't meander.

One Baptist communicant took the wafer from the priest, but rather than dipping it into the cup of wine, she put it in her pocket.

When planning the joint services, leaders decided to use the basic order of worship that forms the weekly experience of Christ Episcopal Church — much of which was already standard in the worship at First Baptist.

The processional and recessional included acolytes, crucifer, Bible-bearer, the combined choirs and the ministers. Lay readers from both congregations shared lectionary readings. Paddock and Kennedy rotated the preaching responsibilities.

As the enlarged choir processed on Jan. 27, the first of five Sundays together, the worship of Episcopalians and Baptists created a greater sense of one faith, one Lord, one baptism, said Kennedy. Greeting one another in the name of "Jesus Christ our Savior," the congregation offered a testament to Christian unity.

"This worship has been more than symbolic," said Kennedy. "It has been the

embodiment of what it means to be a faithful church.”

Communion was served on four of the Sundays by intinction at four stations with both wine and grape juice provided. On one Sunday, communion was done Baptist style — with deacons passing the bread plates and the grape juice trays.

Each person received the bread, passed it to the next person and said, “The body of Christ, given for you.” Then each person passed the tray of grape juice and said, “The blood of Christ, shed for you.”

These words embodied the Baptist belief in the priesthood of believers, not as a private right, but as a communal gift, said Kennedy. And the services went much more smoothly than many had imagined — aided by the fact that the two churches use the same lectionary and a liturgical style of worship.

And Kennedy noted that his grandmother’s Primitive Baptist church always served wine for communion.

After the shared services, participants enjoyed coffee and fellowship. It was a chance to get to know one another better and to discuss their common and different experiences.

“I learned how unity is more than absence of difference,” said Brad Kallenberg, a member of First Baptist. “True unity involves synergy.”

Kennedy said that something deeply spiritual happened during the five Sundays that drew Christ Episcopal and First Baptist congregations closer to one another — and it wasn’t just coffee and donut holes.

“It was the sharing of the sacrament of Holy Communion, the sense of unity, the recognition of common practices, and the sheer joy of praising God with joyful voices,” he explained.

First Baptist member Bill Trollinger called the joint worship services “powerful” and “the best sort of ecumenism, in that it is centered on worship that takes into account both traditions.”

“I doubt I am the only member of First Baptist who was sad to see the members of Christ Episcopal return to their own church,” he added.

Barbara Cerny of Christ Episcopal, called the shared worship “a brilliant effort to prove that we have much more in common than we might have otherwise thought.”

Lifelong Baptist Emily Taylor said she was delighted to extend Christian hospitality to the members of Christ Episcopal Church. “This experience reinforced my belief that we Christians have much more in common than we sometimes realize.”

Kennedy said there was some sadness when March 3 rolled around and the two congregations were no longer sharing in weekly Sunday worship. For longtime members, he said, the sight of First Baptist Church being full of worshipers recalled powerful memories of the congregation’s glory years.

However, the experience was much more than nostalgic, he added. It gave both congregations a sense of brighter hope for the future.

“We are doing far more than sharing worship,” said Carole Ganim of Christ Church. “We are saying that the hope of the early Christians can be achieved with good will and hard work so that people will see how these Christians love one another.” **BT**

—This story was based on information provided by Rodney Kennedy, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dayton, Ohio.

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By R. Kirby Godsey

Election of people's pope has significance for all Christians

The world no longer trusts Christians to be Christian. Frankly, the world has watched us confuse our Christian rhetoric with the preservation of religious systems even when they harbor evil.

We have sanctified political and economic systems even when they become instruments of injustice. Following the ways of Jesus is hardly a prominent preoccupation in either our religious or secular world.

Into this milieu comes a newly minted pope. The election of a pope is a major event deserving worldwide media attention for several reasons.

First, the pope of the Roman Catholic Church is not only head of the earliest and largest congregations of Christians in the world and the Bishop of Rome, but he also is, in the eyes of the great majority of humankind, the leader of the Christian religion. We should remember that most people on the planet are not interested in the internecine battles and feuds among our plethora of denominations, all of whom call themselves Christian.

While the pope will have his critics from within and without the Church, the pope remains the one person most identified as leader of all Christians. But that fact is simply a formal reason for the significance of his election.

Another reason is more compelling and relevant to the moment. Pope Francis has been elected to represent, to speak, and to act on behalf of Christians at a time when there is increasingly less confidence and even a loss of respect for the Church. The abuses perpetuated by those who, though surely a minority, represent the mantle of holiness in our society are spread daily and hourly across the blogosphere and the Twitter world.

Rarely has it been as important to elect a pope who is more a person of and among the people than a bureaucrat of the Church or a professional bred by the Vatican. The

election of Pope Francis should remind us that the Church itself often becomes the greatest hindrance to its being the Church. The wounds the Church suffers are mostly self-inflicted.

Reformations within and without the Church, including the 16th century, have been ardent cries for the Church to become the embodiment of the ways of Jesus in the world. And those who revolt and consequently establish new religious orders and



R. Kirby Godsey

entire religious denominations seem inevitably to become engaged in theatrical doctrinal debates and new versions of misbehavior.

We should be honest to acknowledge that, like other human institutions, the Christian Church cannot shed its humanness. In all of its manifestations, whether Roman or Baptist or Episcopal or Pentecostal, churches fall prey to doctrinal and ecclesiastical correctness that diverts its attention from living out the will and purpose and character of Jesus in the world.

Enter Pope Francis, who is not a child of the Vatican. He comes to this high and holy post from the context of caring for real people who exist on the margins in meager circumstances and often in virtual human desperation.

His frame of reference is not the vast wealth of the Church or the political intrigue of the Vatican hierarchy. He is not the handmaiden of the Curia that is too often perceived to be steeped in the corruptions of power, while appearing remote from the pain and suffering and abuses that bleed through people's lives.

Pope Francis is a pope of the people, a pope who is acquainted more with scars than stars, more attune to the heart than the hierarchy. Pope Francis holds within his election the capacity for a spiritual reverence towards all persons, weak and strong, poor and rich, those who count and those who don't seem

to count at all.

Pope Francis can become a transformative pope, in part because he is more accustomed to listening with the heart, like the one whose name he chose, more inclined toward living out the presence of the holy among us and helping all who see and touch him to regain a sense of their own holiness within.

As the people's pope, he is likely to remind us that following Jesus changes our ways, changes our behavior toward one another, and changes our priorities both within and outside the Church.

The trajectory of the papacy, of course, is weighted toward becoming preoccupied with the difficult and sometimes obtuse issues of administering and governing such a vast religious enterprise. It is indeed even a legitimate preoccupation, because overseeing the machinations of such a complex empire is fraught with a web of political and religious challenges. Even so, these heavy responsibilities can divert one who is perceived to be the Holy Father from being able to serve first and foremost as the bearer of Christ's presence in the world.

In the final analysis, the Church will stand or fall, be vibrant or a shadow of irrelevance, gain confidence or lose allegiances by how effectively and persuasively and authentically the people who are the Church are challenged to embody the ways of Jesus in the world, to become bearers of grace and instruments of peace, to find the courage for unbridled compassion, becoming hope in flesh and blood for someone with a face and a name.

We are often, and I think justifiably, frustrated by the pace and the reluctance of the Church, especially the Roman Catholic Church, to face up to outmoded and destructive religious practices. The Church is surely weaker and smaller in stature because the power and presence and insight of women are not embraced more fully.

The "princes" of the Church desperately need "princesses" alongside them. The Church is diminished by continuing to require that priests not marry.

Because of the focus of Pope Francis on the priority of the ways of Jesus, some of these outworn and counterproductive practices may be successfully challenged. They will change. The issue is when and will it be in time to help restore the credibility and relevance of the Church.

The relevance of the Church, after all, does not come from its accumulations of power and wealth. It arises from the confidence that the Church continues as the voice that connects with the holiness that lies within the human spirit. Perhaps some of these practices will be eroded by the people's pope who is inclined to listen with the heart before and more often than he speaks *ex cathedra*.

Neither should the Church or the pope become obsessed with protecting the sanctity of its doctrines. Doctrines are simply the residue of the religious experience and thought of those before us.

Faith is rarely about believing the right things; it is about changing the center of gravity of people's lives, not revising human language. The doctrines of all our Christian churches are likely a little bit wrong, reflecting both human frailty and clouded understanding.

Pope Francis will probably not change substantial Church doctrines as soon as I and others might like. But that may not be his more compelling call. Ultimately, Church doctrine will take care of itself. His more compelling agenda is to be the priest of the people. His parish is expanding to the world.

Beginning with silence as his first act was both encouraging and promising. Silence calls upon us to listen to the inner light. And the silence enables the pope to sense the holiness that arises not chiefly from his office but from the inner holiness of the people gathered in the cold and the rain of St. Peter's Square.

Perhaps the people's pope can enable us to see that our hope for peace and a more compassionate world lies not in the catacombs of the Vatican or the inner sanctums of our churches or synagogues or cathedrals or mosques but in the hearts of people who long to see and experience a better way. **BT**

—R. Kirby Godsey is chancellor of Mercer University and the author of *When We Talk About God ... Let's Be Honest and Is God A Christian?*

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Papal insights

Protecting abusive priests ‘stupid idea,’ said Francis in earlier interview

During a conversation last year while he was still Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, the new pope advocated a zero-tolerance approach to clergy abusers, saying the way abusers were shuffled around to different parishes to protect the institutional church was “a stupid idea.”

The book-length dialogue with a rabbi, which will be published in English in May, showed how Francis’ personal experiences might inform his policies on hot-button topics such as celibacy and sex abuse. The passage was translated by Aleteia, a website promoting Catholic evangelization.

“You cannot be in a position of power and destroy the life of another person,” Bergoglio told Rabbi Abraham Skorka, rector of the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary. Their conversation was held in 2012 while Bergoglio was archbishop of Buenos Aires.

He told Skorka that when a bishop once asked him what he should do with priests suspected of molesting children: “I told him to take away the priests’ licenses, not to allow them to exercise the priesthood any more, and to begin a canonical trial in that diocese’s court.”

“I think that’s the attitude to have,” said Bergoglio, who is now Pope Francis. “I do not believe in taking positions that uphold a certain corporative spirit in order to avoid damaging the image of the institution.”

Bergoglio also reflected on his own



Pope Francis waves to the crowd in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican. RNS photo by Andrea Sabbadini

romantic experiences, noting that when he was a seminarian he was “dazzled” by a woman he met at an uncle’s wedding.

“I was surprised by her beauty, her intellectual brilliance ... and, well, I was bowled over for quite a while. I kept thinking and thinking about her. When I returned to the seminary after the wedding, I could not pray for over a week because when I tried to do so, the girl appeared in my head. I had to rethink what I was doing.”

He decided to continue the path to the priesthood, but said “it would be abnormal for this kind of thing not to happen.”

The future pope said that if a seminarian — or a priest — falls in love or has a child with a woman, he counsels the man to

leave and support his family, to “go in peace to be a good Christian and not a bad priest.”

Bergoglio also said that if a priest got a woman pregnant, he advises the man to leave the priesthood so he can take care of the mother and child, even if the couple does not marry. “For just as that child has the right to have a mother, he has a right to the face of a father,” he said. He added that if it is a one-time affair with no children, then he tries to help the priest do penance and “get on track again.”

Bergoglio also spoke highly of Eastern-rite Catholic churches with married priests. Still, the future pope said, “For now, the discipline of celibacy stands firm.” He added, however, that while he favors maintaining celibacy for priests, “with all its pros and cons,” celibacy is “a matter of discipline, not of faith. It can change.”

Thomas Reese, a Jesuit — like Pope Francis — and an analyst for the National Catholic Reporter, wrote that Bergoglio’s conditional language on priestly celibacy is “remarkable.” Reese said phrases such as “for the moment” and “for now” are “not the kind of qualifications one normally hears when bishops and cardinals discuss celibacy.”

The conversation between Bergoglio and Skorka will be published by Image Books and titled *On Heaven and Earth*. In it the two men discuss topics such as fundamentalism, atheism, the Holocaust, abortion and homosexuality. **BT**

An advertisement for the Canterbury retreat center. The background is a photograph of a cross standing in a lake at dusk or dawn, with the cross and surrounding trees reflected in the water. The text is overlaid on the image.

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Poll: Americans love the Bible but don't read it much

More than half of Americans think the Bible has too little influence on a culture they see in moral decline, yet only one in five Americans read the Bible on a regular basis, according to a new survey.

More than three-quarters of Americans (77 percent) think the nation's morality is headed downhill, according to a new survey from American Bible Society.

The survey showed the Bible is still firmly rooted in American soil: 88 percent of respondents said they own a Bible, 80 percent think the Bible is sacred, 61 percent wish they read the Bible more, and the average household has 4.4 Bibles.

If the Bible is so commonplace in America, wouldn't its moral teachings counteract the downward trend? Almost a third of respondents said moral decline was a result of people

not reading the Bible, while 29 percent cited the "negative influence of America" and one in four cited corporate corruption.

Doug Birdsall, president of American Bible Society, said he sees a reason for why the Bible isn't connecting with people.

"I see the problem as analogous to obesity in America. We have an awful lot of people who realize they're overweight, but they don't follow a diet," Birdsall said. "People realize the Bible has values that would help us in our spiritual health, but they just don't read it."

If they do read it, the majority (57 percent) only read their Bibles four times a year or less. Only 26 percent of Americans said they read their Bible on a regular basis (four or more times a week).

Jesuit priest James Martin, author of *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*, said the Bible can come across as intimidating to the uninitiated.

"There's a tendency to think that if you read the Bible, you have to read it from start to finish," he said. "But when people do read the Bible, they don't know where to begin."

Younger people also seem to be moving away from the Bible. A majority (57 percent) of those ages 18-28 read their Bibles less than three times a year, if at all.

The Barna Group conducted "The State of the Bible 2013" study for American Bible Society, using 1,005 telephone interviews and 1,078 online surveys with a margin of error for the combined data of plus or minus 2 percentage points. **BT**



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The Lighter Side

By Brett Younger

Hats off to Jesus

The church in which I grew up taught me that hats are vaguely sinister. I never heard “Take off your hat in church!” because none of us wanted to commit an unpardonable sin. Boys took off their hats because we were in the presence of God (and never thought to ask, “Since we believe God is everywhere, why would we ever wear hats?”).

The rule in my old hat Baptist church was “No hats” with one exception. Each year women celebrated Jesus’ resurrection with hats covered with enough ribbons, flowers and feathers to make Lady Gaga jealous. These special occasion hats were acceptable in the same way chocolate Easter bunnies were an acceptable breakfast once a year.

This inconsistent prohibition on hats in worship makes sense until you worship with a Jewish congregation. Jewish men wear yarmulkes as a reminder that God is always above us. In many African-American churches women wear hats like the Queen of England wears her crown. Bishops have pointy hats. Cardinals have red hats. The pope has a white hat. Catholic nuns and



Muslim women wear headscarves. Hindus and Sikhs wear turbans. Some religious groups insist you take off your hat, and others insist you put on a hat. I’ll eat my hat if that makes sense.

Paul, as is often the case, is not helpful. The fezless saint writes: “Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head. But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven” (1 Cor. 11:4-5 KJV). Paul says that men can’t wear hats in church, not even a dignified derby, if they are preaching. Women who preach have to wear hats (especially if the woman is bald).

We should tip our caps to the Anabaptist women who were so concerned with violating Paul’s command that they wore head coverings in the shower so they could pray there. Some Amish and Mennonite women cover their heads all of the time, because who knows when you will need to prophesy.

Maybe Paul was talking through his hat, but like Paul, I like women’s hats. I owe my existence to a hat. Forty-five years before I was born, my mother’s father ran through the rain to catch a train. He was a beginning student on his way to Mississippi A&M. When he got on the train he saw a beautiful girl in

a dark blue hat. She had been out in the rain, too, and her brand new blue hat was losing its blue. She didn’t know it, but blue streaks were running down both sides of her face. My grandfather had never seen such lovely blue stripes on any woman. He thought, “She must be rich to afford such an unusual hat. I am going to marry that woman.” He sat beside her and tried not to stare at the beautiful hat streaming down her cheeks.

I wonder what Paul would say about Bob’s hat. When I was pastor of a rural church in Indiana, Bob wore a cap during basketball season that proclaimed, “The Lord is my shepherd. Bobby Knight is my coach.” We had no problem letting Bob pass the hat when it was time for the offering.

Perhaps I should keep this under my hat, but I find myself questioning the embargo on sombreros. When I wear a fedora, I assume students see me as whimsical rather than as an old guy going bald.

Is it possible Abraham Lincoln stopped going to church because they wouldn’t let him wear his stovepipe? Would Sherlock Holmes have been a churchgoer if his deerstalker had been welcome? Did Daniel Boone choose between his coonskin cap and a seat in the pew? Would we hear more barbershop quartets in worship if we let them wear their boaters?

How could an usher justify asking Captain Crunch to take off his bicorn or Mr. Monopoly his top hat? Wouldn’t the church be more fun with Laurel and Hardy in their bowlers? Shouldn’t congregations have welcomed Winston Churchill with his homburg, Bear Bryant with his hounds tooth, and Elmer Fudd with his Elmer Fudd hat? Cowboy churches began so that fake cowboys could wear real Stetsons.

Imagine your sanctuary filled with beanies, bonnets, hard hats, trilbies, wimples, pith helmets, party hats and Panama hats (which are made ironically in Ecuador). In the kingdom to come the chapeaued and the hatless will sit side by side. **BT**

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

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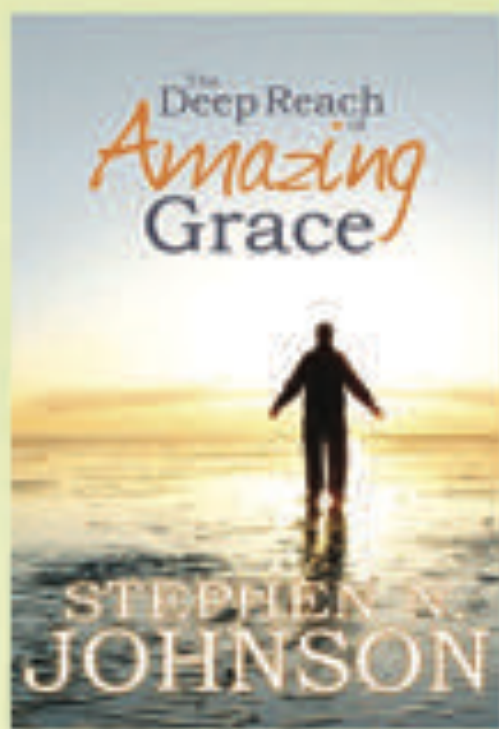
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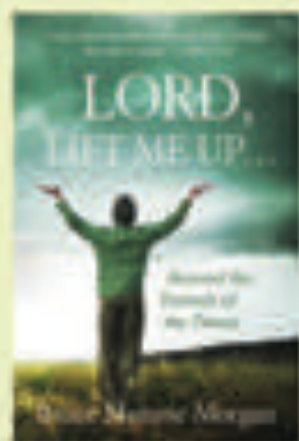


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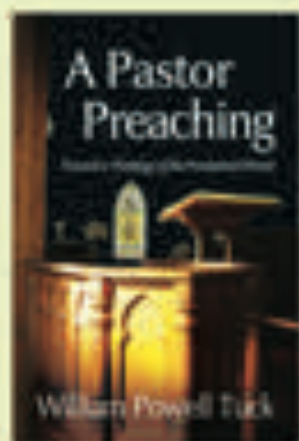
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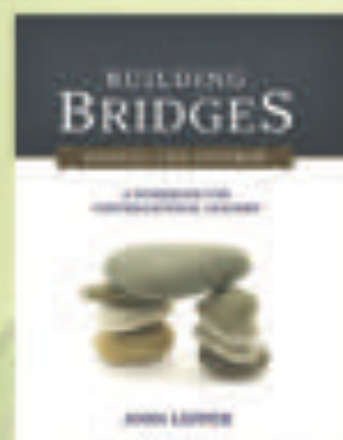
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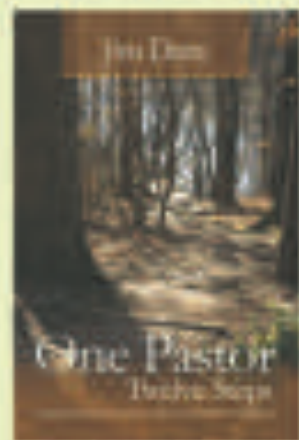
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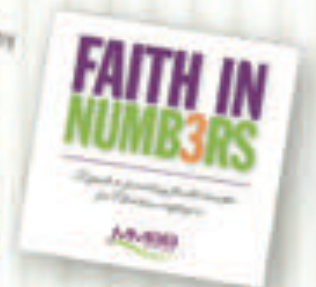
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