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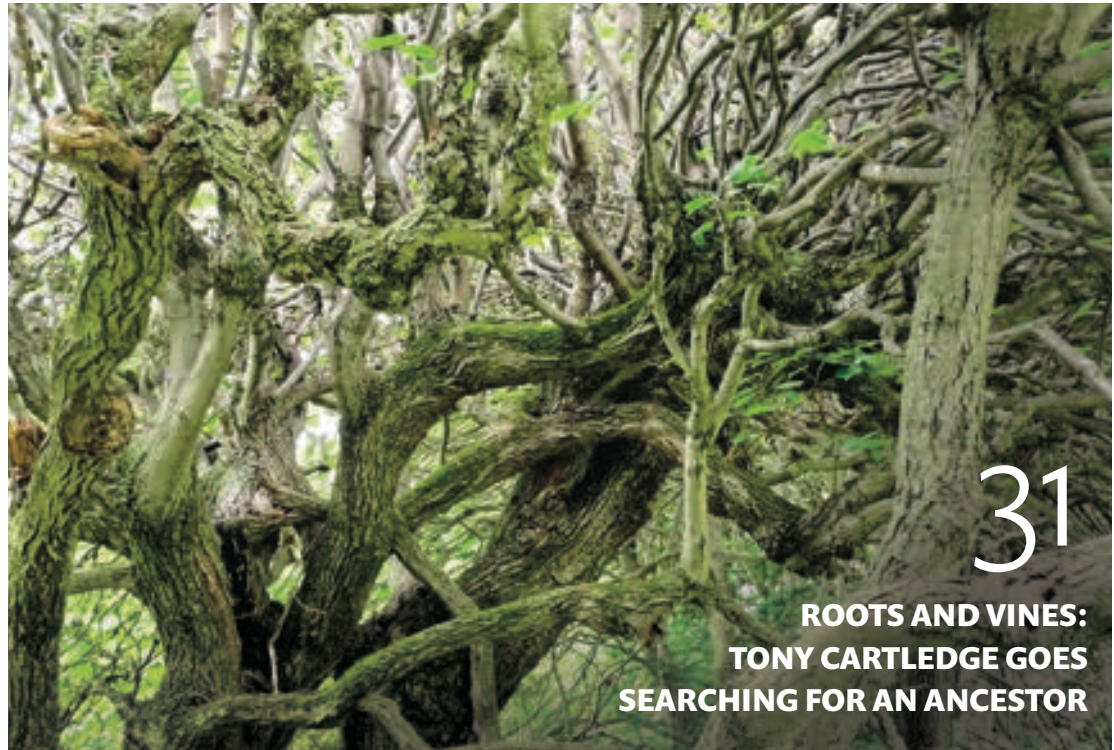
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Baptist Barriers

Fifty years after integrating Mercer University, Sam Oni reflects on the hard lessons

MACON, Ga. — “When you come to terms with being a child of God, there is no running away from it,” said a reflective Sam Oni recently. “... But it does not make you superior to others.”

With students of varied nationalities and ethnicities moving about the bustling campus now, a student coming to Mercer University from his African homeland would hardly be noticed. But that was not the case a half century ago.

Back on campus in February for the university’s 10th annual “Building the Beloved Community” Symposium, Oni reflected on his experiences as one chosen to integrate the Baptist school in 1963 — and who was met with a hostile reception one Sunday a few years later when he sought to enter Tattnell Square Baptist Church, then located on a campus corner next to his dormitory.

Following his recent presentation in that same building, warmed by the glow of stained glass and renamed as the university’s Newton Chapel, he talked to *Baptists Today* about his experiences with Baptists while growing up in Africa as well as when arriving in Georgia in the racially-charged ’60s.

Walking to his next on-campus appointment, Oni pointed to his old dorm room in Sherwood Hall — a few steps from the side entry to the church-turned-chapel. Then he ascended the steep steps to the door he once found blocked by church deacons who told him he was not welcome there.

That date was Sept. 25, 1966.

EXPECTATIONS

“Fifty years ago wasn’t exactly like the day before yesterday,” said Oni, when asked to recall his first impressions of Mercer and Macon upon arrival a half century ago.

“I didn’t have high expectations or low expectations. I did come with an open mind,”

he said. “Macon struck me as a rather low-keyed, small town as far as American cities are concerned. I hadn’t come from any great city myself but had read enough about America to know that compared to great cities like New York and Chicago, this was a small town.”

The familiar narrative is that Oni was converted to Christianity by Southern Baptist missionaries. But he would now describe it as being converted into a Southern Baptist.

“I actually was born into a Christian family,” he said. “We were Anglicans, which is to say Episcopalians. And that is easy to understand because we were British colonies.”

The British, he noted, had colonized Nigeria (from which his family hailed) and the Gold Coast (where he was born and raised) that became Ghana upon independence. Anglican missionaries from England had made an impact.

“So I was an Anglican and took an early interest in matters of religion,” he said. “I found it fascinating: the stories that I heard about this God that in my fantasy sat on a throne and had a flowing beard — a father figure.”

Sam attended an Anglican missionary primary school with very strict discipline. Skipping church had an additional cost “quite apart from the price that Christ paid for my salvation,” he recalled.

“The teacher would summon four classmates to hold us suspended in mid-air — one pupil holding one limb — while the teacher would lash us. Depending on how recalcitrant you become, you would either get five lashes or 10 lashes or 15 ... I used to be in a panic.”

“That was long before I ever came to know a Southern Baptist missionary.”

BECOMING BAPTIST

Sam met a Southern Baptist missionary known as Rev. McGinnis who impressed on him the need “to be born again and that the baptism I had received in the Anglican Church wasn’t quite good enough.”

“I, in my naïveté, acquiesced and I was baptized by immersion and became a Southern

Baptist — and began going out with Rev. McGinnis and serving as his interpreter.”

Southern Baptist missionaries were new to Ghana at that time, said Oni. However, they had been in Nigeria since 1850 — with the first Southern Baptist missionary, Thomas Bowen, coming from Georgia.

“But I didn’t know the Nigerian history of the Southern Baptists at that time,” he said. “I met these Southern Baptists in the Gold Coast.”

McGinnis began talking with young Sam about his future with the charge, “You were saved to serve.”

“I said, ‘How do I serve?’ He said: ‘By becoming a preacher.’”

One of six children born to parents who had migrated from Nigeria to the Gold Coast, Oni’s life was taking a new course.

“I agreed to become a preacher and [the missionaries] enrolled me in a new Bible school, they called it. But it was kind of a mini-theological seminary where you learned about homiletics and whatever.”

GOOD CONSCIENCE

Oni gained familiarity with the Bible and impressed his teachers with his academic prowess. He was given a scholarship to go attend a secondary school.

“Unfortunately, that gift was short-lived because the student body went on strike against the missionaries because of their intransigence,” he said. “They were Americans and didn’t have a clue about what the British education system was.”

Students pleaded with the missionaries to employ some Ghanaian teachers who had gone through the British system and could best prepare them for the West African school certificate exam.

“You didn’t just graduate from high school based on your accumulative GPA,” he explained. “There is a final exam, almost equivalent to the American SAT, that you would take to determine if you graduated.”

“There was too much at stake,” he added.



Standing at the side entry to the former Tattnall Square Baptist Church, which was blocked by deacons when he attempted to attend worship in 1966, Sam Oni points to the street where he was then placed in a police car.

“But the missionaries kept insisting they wouldn’t employ a Ghanaian unless he was Baptist.”

Baptists had not been in Ghana long enough to have that kind of influence, Oni noted.

“So we thought the only way we could impress upon them the seriousness of the predicament was to go on strike. The student body came to me, knowing I was the darling of the missionaries, to ask if I was going to be part of the strike.”

It was a moment of decision.

“I could not, in good conscience, sit by and watch my fellow students fight for what was just and right — and then for me to benefit from it,” said Oni. “I signed up and essentially became the leader of the demonstration — and the missionaries didn’t take too kindly to that.”

The missionaries made all students pack their bags and vacate the campus, said Oni. But about a week later, they wrote to each student asking them to return — except for seven who were considered as ringleaders.

“I remember, during the demonstrations, one of the missionaries with tears streaming down her face saying, ‘Sam Oni, you are an ingrate. You have bitten the fingers that fed you.’”

NEW HORIZONS

Sam feared that his “golden opportunity” for further education was slipping away. He had been kicked out of school, and his family had no money for him to enroll elsewhere.

Returning home dejected, he discovered that Harris Mobley, a graduate of Mercer University, was the newest arrival among the Southern Baptist missionaries. Sam went to see him, and they became friends.

“To cut a long story short, Harris and his wife Vivian said: ‘Look, Sam, if you can find admission into a new secondary school, we’ll pay your way.’”

Sam entered the school at a time of great change following Ghana’s independence in 1957. His horizons were broadened like never before.

“We knew everything about British history and culture and heroes that we cared to know,” said Oni. “Now that we were liberated, we could then learn there were in fact other parts of the world.”

“I mean, we didn’t know about American Negroes, for example,” he added.

Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong was the first African American Oni discovered because the founder of Ghana had studied in America and developed a taste for jazz. Armstrong and

Martin Luther King Jr. were among those invited to Ghana’s independence celebration.

“This led me to researching and learning that some black people were captured as slaves and ended up in America and other parts of the New World,” he recalled. “By becoming independent, we learned about other worlds that we didn’t even know existed.”

NEW CHALLENGES

His experience at the earlier missionary school had already shown Oni that some Baptists can be inflexible, shortsighted and ethnocentric — while others can be gracious, forgiving and courageous. He would experience both again in a whole new setting.

Sam said he was disappointed in the Baptist missionaries who had once admired his Christian conviction and were grooming him to become a missionary to his own people. He felt his dismissal from school and rejection by them were unjustified.

But Harris and Vivian Mobley restored his hope — and, with their good help, he graduated from an excellent school in 1962.

“It was around that time that Harris [Mobley] came home and as a Mercer graduate was invited to speak to the student body,” Oni recalled. “And he met with the president of the

university, Rufus Harris.”

In the course of their conversation, President Harris told the missionary of his wish to integrate Mercer University.

“Harris Mobley told President Harris that he actually had a candidate for him,” said Oni. “These were very intelligent men who realized it would be a tough sale for the Southern Baptist churches.”

Oni said they noted that it would be even harder if a black student from a local high school entered the university first.

“So they both agreed they were going to call the bluff of Georgia Baptists by bringing a young man that Baptist missionaries had converted to Christianity,” he explained. “Let’s see them stand in opposition to that — that was kind of the unspoken challenge.”

The president believed the Baptists would be willing to accept Oni as a student rather than look hypocritical, Sam surmised.

“But he was wrong because they made it known in very nasty terms their opposition to having Mercer integrated,” said Oni. “So they kept me waiting.”

BREAKING BARRIERS

Oni had graduated at the top of his class from a respected school and was acknowledged as a well-rounded student who excelled in athletics as well as debate. But none of that mattered to those who stood in opposition.

They were concerned about only one thing, said Oni: “The fact was that their lily-white campus was going to be soiled with the presence of a black face.”

“Ultimately, and I don’t think it was Christian compassion as much as expediency,” said Oni, “they realized that to persist in denying me admission would be tantamount to undermining their own evangelistic work in my part of the world.”

After almost a year of waiting, the board of trustees voted to let him enroll at Mercer.

“And I came, I saw and I was almost conquered,” he said.

Oni was clear that it was not what happened on campus that was troubling to him: “It was my experiences with the Georgia Baptists.”

The day after settling into his dorm room, there was a knock on the door. A distinguished looking man introduced himself.

“I am the Rev. Clifton Forester,” Oni recalled him saying. “I am the pastor of Tattnall Square Baptist Church and, Sam, I’ve come to tell you that you will not be welcome to worship in our church.”

The new student was stunned by those words.

“I was almost paralyzed with shock,” he recalled. “That shock of recognition that such people existed was what prompted me to say to myself that, whatever else I did, I was going to make my position known that any opposition to integration was tantamount to going against the will of God.”

MADE-UP MINDS

Sam said he stayed away from Tattnall Square Baptist Church although it was next to his dorm. He and Don Baxter, “the brave white boy who had agreed to be my roommate,” decided to attend Vineville Baptist Church since pastor Walter Moore had chaired a committee to advise Mercer trustees on integration.

“Rev. Moore had led that committee to agree, at least by majority, that I should be accepted to Mercer University,” Oni noted. “So we thought a man of that way of thinking might have led his congregation to share his views on matters racial.”

About a dozen students, including Sam, boarded the church bus and first attended Sunday school. Then as worship came to a close, he and others were presented for membership.

“Dr. Moore then asked everybody to go back to their seats except me,” Sam recalled. “He said, ‘We’re honored to have in our midst today a young man who came to know the Lord through our own missionary effort: Sam Oni from Ghana.’”

A man in the congregation leapt to his feet, Sam recalled, and made a case against accepting Oni — telling the pastor that it was going to destroy the church. A woman offered a similar vitriolic protest, he recalled, followed by a third voice of opposition.

“Finally, Dr. Moore said, ‘Let’s put the matter to a vote,’” recalled Oni who had quietly stood before the congregation as the drama played out.

“Baptists cherish their democracy ...” said Oni with a smile — 50 years later — about a congregation that voted repeatedly on his membership.

“I would contend that an extreme majority favored my membership,” he said. “But the diehards were not ready to throw in the towel — so the vote was taken the second time and it was clear that a majority favored my membership.”

Some still would not accept defeat, so Moore asked for a standing vote. It was then clear to all that a majority favored accepting the young African student for membership.

“That was how I was enthusiastically welcomed into the house of worship in a

congregation that had been supporting missionary activities in my part of the world for a century,” said Oni with justifiable sarcasm.

The ongoing tension was so great, however, that Oni soon decided it was not “conducive to my own spiritual peace of mind or a worshipful atmosphere” to continue attending the church.

TROUBLE AT TATTNALL

Thomas Holmes, a minister and Mercer administrator who worked closely with President Harris in plans to integrate the university, became pastor of the on-campus Tattnall Square Baptist Church in December 1964. As a member of Vineville, he had voiced the motion to accept Oni into the congregation.

His wife, Grace Bryan Holmes, in her autobiographical *Time to Reconcile: The Odyssey of a Southern Baptist* (2000, University of Georgia Press), reported that Tattnall’s leading deacons told her husband that the church had erred in telling Oni he could not attend and assured him such attitudes and behavior were in the past.

Many students, faculty and other members had moved to Vineville Baptist, she added, and the Tattnall Church lay leaders said they were eager to reach students and to rebuild their congregation.

Those promises were short-lived, however, when, in the summer of 1966, a few African-American high school students participating in the Upward Bound program on campus began attending worship at Tattnall. A sign in the student center had extended a warm welcome to all.

The situation escalated as Holmes and the other ministers on staff took opposing positions from some powerful lay leaders who rejected sharing their worship space with those of a different race. By late summer the opposition had formalized with a whites-only policy and the deacons voting to recommend the ouster of the three ministers who advocated for a broader welcome.

The ministers refused to back down, and news of the church’s internal battle reached from coast to coast.

HEADLINES

Oni spent the summer of 1966 studying at the University of California at Berkeley. The *Berkeley Gazette*, the city newspaper, carried a column by Atlanta’s Ralph McGill about the situation at Tattnall.

“When I saw Ralph McGill’s name and

saw the headline, I thought, ‘This is happening in my neck of the woods,’” said Oni. “It was a story about the minister of Tattnall Square Baptist Church having the gall to invite some young African-American students who were participating in the Upward Bound that summer to worship with them.”

Oni had great affection for Tom Holmes. He and Grace had invited Sam to their house on the Sunday he joined Vineville Baptist Church. It was his first meal in an American home.

“I knew right away that he was a different breed of Southern Christian and Southern minister,” Oni reflected. “His death more than 25 years ago was very painful.”

Sam felt he needed to do something — and taking a public stand for justice was not an odd idea for someone studying in Berkeley in the mid-’60s.

Reasoned attempts to explain that racial discrimination was undermining missions and violating biblical teachings were rejected by racist Baptists who simply could not accept social change.

So Sam decided that — when he returned to Mercer for the fall term — it was time to go to church at Tattnall.

DOORSTOPS

Two deacons were guarding the side entry to Tattnall’s sanctuary — mere steps from Oni’s dorm room. They told him he was not welcome there.

“I tried to reason with them but one of them kept saying, ‘Why don’t you go worship with your own kind?’”

Oni said he “tried and tried” to talk with the deacons about how their attitudes and actions were not consistent with the gospel and were hostile to missions. But there was no interest in such a discussion.

“The next thing I knew, there was a tap on my shoulder and it was a policeman,” Oni recalled. “He said, ‘Come with me.’”

Sam was led down the steep steps to a patrol car.

“He opened the door and said: ‘Get in.’ I stepped in and waited for some 20 minutes or so. Then he said, ‘I’m going to have to let you go because nobody from the church will come press charges.’”

They were afraid of negative publicity, Oni surmised. But it was too late.

The congregation voted 259-189 to fire Holmes and his two associates: Jack Jones and Doug Johnson. And all of the major news outlets around the nation began placing calls to Macon, Ga.

LIVING LESSONS

The obvious last question for the gracious, graying Sam Oni with a perspective of nearly five decades: Why do you think it’s important to come back and share your story?

“It may be a cliché to say that people who do not remember their history are doomed to repeat it,” said Oni. “But it rings true.”

It is easy for young people, especially black young people, to take for granted the opportunities they enjoy now, he said.

“They just assume things have always been this way,” he added. “You want to go to Mercer, you apply and are accepted and that’s

all there is to it. So it’s important.”

And he is not the only one sharing the story of a troubled time from which hard lessons can be learned.

“Thank God for Will Campbell for doing *The Stem of Jesse* because he did a masterful job of encapsulating all the things — because I had no knowledge of all the things going on in the background,” said Oni, who now lives in Atlanta, of the 1995 book (republished in 2002) detailing integration at Mercer.

“It’s not that students knowing about this will necessarily be better people for it,” said Oni. “But that knowledge is important.” **BT**

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quotation remarks

“Whatever I do, I’m all in. Whether it’s at church worshipping, if it’s on the floor coaching, if it’s eating fried chicken, getting my iced tea, I’m all in.”

—Bob Hoffman, head coach of the Mercer University men’s basketball team (*NewsOK*)

“We simply don’t talk about it. I really would say that the great failing of the church in the context of mental illness is just simply silence.”

—Matthew Stanford, a Baylor University professor who has researched how churches treat the mentally ill (*Southern California Public Radio*)

“They will have all the responsibilities that I do, including pastoral care, planning, teaching and preaching.”

—Pastor Amy Butler on a new pastoral residency program emerging at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. (*ABP*)

“I intend to take good care of it for future generations.”

—Roy Evans of Denville, N.J., after Goodwill workers in Denver discovered an 1812 Bible from England tied to his ancestors (*9news.com*)

“There was a major uptick in the use of the actual phrase ‘ask Jesus into your heart’ in the 1970s. This was, perhaps, the result of children’s ministry becoming more established and leaders looking for very simple ways to explain to children what a decision for Christ would entail.”

—Thomas Kidd, professor of history at Baylor University, who blogs at *The Anxious Bench* (*ethicsdaily.com*)

“Every leader goes through different phases of maturity, growth and development and it helps by [recognizing] the mistakes that you make. And you learn from those mistakes. If not, you’re just a fool. I’m thankful that I lived through it and I learned a lot from it.”

—Chick-fil-A President Dan Cathy telling how he regrets pulling the company into culture wars with comments on gay marriage (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*)

“The vast collection of unique writings that we know as the Bible was born in the real world of hard life and great journeys, of stomach-churning conflicts and surprising victories. And in the end, this large, unruly collection came together into something clearly recognizable as a big story. It meanders, yes, but in the end it is a narrative that goes someplace.”

—Glenn Paauw, executive director of the *Biblica Institute for Bible Reading* (*faithstreet.com*)

“Institutional loyalty hasn’t been popular since Nixon was president. Meaning that if your church is the Cathedral of Cool or the First Church of Perpetual Hipness, then you’re in good shape. Until, that is, the Community Church of the Latest Happenin’ moves down the street from you. Then those who found it easy to switch to your church will find it equally easy to switch from your church.”

—Travis Collins of *Fresh Expressions US* (*Center for Healthy Churches*)

“Entire denominations have reduced their public message to regulations on sex. It’s as if the four Gospels weren’t enough.”

—*Religion News Service* columnist Tom Ebrich

“Nahum 1:7”

—Subtly printed on wrappers of *In-N-Out’s Double-Double burgers* as a faith testimony of the company’s founders (*Forbes*)

Objects to characterization of Catholic Church

EDITOR: As a Baptist with Catholic friends and Catholic heroes, I object to [R. Kirby] Godsey’s characterization of the Roman Catholic Church as a “multi-national corporation” run by “merchants of the Church” (“The people’s pope vs. the corporate pope,” p.30, February 2014, *Baptists Today*).

The none-too-subtle message of the article on Pope Francis is that somehow, against all odds, an authentic Christian has emerged from a corrupt, hypocritical institution that will not rest until the Roman Church tames him to its oppressive purposes.

Reader’s Response

Does Mr. Godsey honestly believe that the Church Francis now leads had nothing to do with the pope’s spiritual formation? Or that Francis would agree to lead a Church that had so egregiously betrayed its Lord? Did Francis narrowly escape the clutches of the Jesuits as well?

Every church needs periodic reform. The Lord has placed his treasure in earthen vessels, as veterans of the SBC wars should know. Can’t we Baptists praise a good man without vilifying the Church that has mothered him in the faith? **BT**

—John Sykes
Wingate, N.C.

By John Pierce

It seems fatalism just won't die

Cousin Pearl would call my mother to express her high anxiety over “the way things are going.”

Her alarm was not surprising; she was getting old and spending too much time watching daytime television.

My mother would listen to her long laments, sometimes more patiently than others, and then offer this remedy: “Then stop watching Geraldo!”

That was in the '80s. Pearl and Mom are gone now — and Geraldo Riviera still lingers in the shadows of television. But such fears take root elsewhere.

An even older relative, whose letters I once found, would write to my aunt about how bad things were getting in the '60s. The problem had to do with African Americans gaining the same rights as everyone else.

One can go to any point in human history and find those who romanticized some segment of the past and worried over “the way things are going.” Doom gets predicted, again and again.

To some, all sociological change, it seems, is worrisome.

Alarmist preachers and others have been telling us for longer than we have lived that “America is descending into hell” over whatever is happening at that moment that they don't like.

Often, it is nothing more than the personal disappointment in seeing that one's own politics of fear and discrimination are not winning the day. So, judgment is called down on those that are feared.

These alarmists declare how wonderful

things were “back then” (even though “back then” was once considered a worrisome time) and how awful things are going now.

Uttering some forthcoming of God's judgment as part of their fatalistic cries seeks to give legitimacy to the hallow warnings that are indistinguishable from those that deserve deep concern. Also, it helps to mask personal fears as well as the realities of the issues they



overstate and find so threatening.

Each era brings its own concerns and challenges as technology grows and society changes.

But I don't buy the notion that America is descending into hell in

some wholesale fashion today and needs to return to whichever time an alarmist chooses — knowing that other alarmists back then were warning that America was descending into hell.

Such warnings are often ploys to rally other fearful people to a particular cause — whether it's opposing equal rights for whichever group is perceived as threatening at the time or another hot-button issue in the news. And this repeated generational alarmism appears to be timeless.

There is a more honest approach. It involves calming down and admitting that many fearful warnings over social unrest in the past — and young people resisting authority — didn't actually destroy our nation, and that extending constitutionally-assured equality to

those who were formerly excluded from such rights didn't bring the promised demise. (Pick any group and era.)

So I quickly scroll past the many fatalistic online postings from modern-day alarmists and delete emails such as a recent one from an alarmist preacher who claimed that “the USA is descending fast” due to the familiar litany of fuller equality, “turning our backs on Israel,” and so on.

However, honest and reasoned assessments are needed — and are found somewhere between Pollyanna and religious/political alarmists.

Taking a thoughtful, constructive approach to ongoing change helps us identify and address the real challenges of the day — while admitting that many sociological and technological changes that were once feared have actually made this a pretty darn good time to live in America.

However, it is easy to see why some are so worried and riled. Handling defeat in the public arena is hard for alarmists who have tied their opinions to “God's truth” — shifting the loss from a personal one to a loss that calls out the wrath of the Almighty.

Perhaps there will always be those who wring their hands and lament “the way things are going” — although there is nothing constructive in that defeatist perspective that sees the past as better than it was, the present as worse than it is, and the future as something to always fear.

Continually hearing that the sky is falling will cause the wise person to stop looking up. And there are better options to fatalistic alarmism, such as these:

Face one's own fears with faith.

Confess that every change once condemned and feared didn't turn out so bad.

Separate one's own opinions and disappointments from God's will and wrath.

Honestly acknowledge the challenges to be faced by every generation — and seek to be part of a constructive solution.

And turn off Geraldo — or whatever gets you too riled up to be as hopeful and loving as possible. **BT**



MAKING A GIFT to support the ministry of *Baptists Today* is just one click away. Make a gift online at baptiststoday.org/donate. Your generous giving is most helpful and deeply appreciated.



5 baptiststoday.org great reasons to visit the enhanced website

The *Baptists Today* website has a fresh look with added features — along with all of the popular offerings that have long been enjoyed. Here are five good reasons to check out baptiststoday.org.

1. More content, easier to access

All the content usually found at baptiststoday.org is still there, including Daily News Headlines and *Baptists Today* blogs.

However, the upgraded site also offers more *Baptists Today* news, full-length features, and additional religion news stories. There's also additional information about the growing resources from Nurturing Faith, the book and church resources publishing imprint of *Baptists Today*.

Subscribers to the digital version of the monthly news journal have access to all the content from current and recent issues of *Baptists Today* — now offered in easy-to-read web format (more on this below).

The site design offers a quick look at the latest content — all from the homepage. And a prominent slider allows for a look at featured stories, events and opportunities.

Just below the slider, a quick link offers the day's news headlines (and past ones too). Scrolling on down gives a look at the latest blog posts from John Pierce and Tony Cartledge, as well as "Baptists Yesterday" and "Jackie's Bookshelf." Click any of these to read the full post.

Below the blogs are highlights from the latest *Baptists Today* news story, followed by other religion news. Finally, see the theme for the upcoming Nurturing Faith Bible Study, check out the "Weekly Photo" and learn

about great new books from Nurturing Faith publishing.

Site menus have been reworked to make it easier to find whatever content you seek.

2. Tablet and smartphone friendly

Because more readers are using tablets and smartphones to access websites, the new *Baptists Today* site is optimized for use by mobile devices.

When visiting the site from a smartphone, the same content is provided — but automatically resized to fit the screen, removing any need for pinching or zooming. On smaller screens, the menus change to a format that is easier to "tap" from touchscreens.

Combined with the enhanced online edition, online subscribers to the news journal can comfortably read articles using tablets and smartphones. We hope you will add *Baptists Today* to your device's home screen for ready access.

3. Enhanced online edition

For online subscribers, the new subscriber area is a big leap forward. In the past, issues of *Baptists Today* were offered in a format that sought to replicate the layout of the printed news journal. This offered a faithful replica of the paper, but was not as easy to read — especially from tablets and smartphones.

Now the content appears as a series of web articles. Clicking on any article opens the full text and images of the article in the browser for easy reading. Because it is a web article, the browser can be used to enlarge text size, if needed.

So when you're relaxing in your favorite

chair with your tablet, you can comfortably read the latest from *Baptists Today*. Or if waiting for an appointment, you can read an article or two on your smartphone.

Existing subscribers will use a personalized code to access to the subscriber-only area. If interested in checking it out, you may use this coupon code to get free one-month access: `freebt2014`. Just click on "Subscriber Login" in the top menu on the far right to get started.

4. Photo sharing

Both words and images tell the stories of faith and express spiritual meaning. Our travels, places of worship, and the world all around us have beauty that photography can reveal.

Baptists Today would like to share your photos. You can submit them online, and each week one photo will be specially featured. Just visit the "Blogs" menu and choose "Photo of the Week." You will see submitted photos and find a form for submitting yours.

5. Help us help you

Baptists Today is excited to provide additional content and greater ease of use through its enhanced website. More features and new resources are envisioned, too.

As a supportive partner, you can help us provide trusted, innovative and needed resources with a generous gift to *Baptists Today*. The "Donate" tab is a fast, safe and easy way for you to make a real difference.

Please visit baptiststoday.org and let us know what you think. **BT**

—David Cassady is president of Faithlab and church resources editor for *Baptists Today*.



NURTURING FAITH EACH SUNDAY

Drayton Talley, Jim Reeder and Cary Rutland (left to right) share teaching duties in one of the Sunday school classes at First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., using the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies found inside *Baptists Today*. An abundance of teaching resources is available to them — as well as to other participants wanting to “dig deeper” into the Bible lessons — at nurturingfaith.net. They expressed appreciation for the depth of the material by writer Tony Cartledge as well as the easy access to online teaching resources — including video overviews of the lessons.

—Photo by Ben McDade

NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE: ISRAEL FILLS AS WAITING LIST FORMED

Excellent response to the Nurturing Faith Experience to Israel, set for Nov. 6-17, has reached the extended capacity of 58. A waiting list has been created for those who would like to be contacted should space become available. Call (478) 301-5655 or email info@baptiststoday.org to be added to the list.

Space is still available for Nurturing Faith: Montana, Aug. 18-23. Details may be found on page 40 of this issue.



Thoughtful Christians need relevant, reliable information that connects them to good ideas, **quality resources and one another.**

And *Baptists Today* needs you! To fulfill its unique and important mission, *Baptists Today* relies on generous giving.

For more than 30 years, this news journal has been on the cutting edge of addressing the issues individuals and congregations face with courage and faith. As times and technology have changed, so have the news journal and its related resources.

What haven't changed are the journalistic commitments and the vital role of those who support this ministry of communication with faithful giving.

Nurturing the Future of *Baptists Today* is a three-year campaign to provide the funding needed to move forward in publishing a trusted, high-quality news journal, maintaining a daily-updated web presence and producing innovative new resources.

To do so with confidence and vitality, we ask you to make a generous three-year pledge. We need you!

Please make your pledge today. Together, we can do this.

HERE'S HOW:

- Send notification of your pledge to Baptists Today, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 or to Ben McDade (ben@baptiststoday.org).
- First-year gifts may be included with your pledge, paid by check later in the year or made online anytime at baptiststoday.org/donate.

QUESTIONS OR IDEAS?

Contact Ben McDade:
ben@baptiststoday.org / (678) 231-5600.



Baptists Today, Inc. is a 501(c)3 charitable organization with a strong commitment to stewardship. Your gifts are both needed and appreciated.

Pope Francis: Marriage an icon of God's love

ROME (RNS) — Pope Francis stressed the importance of marriage between a man and a woman at his general audience at the Vatican in early April, saying the two were united in “one flesh” as “icons of God’s love.”

“When a man and a woman celebrate the sacrament of marriage, God is reflected in them,” the pontiff told an estimated 45,000 pilgrims who gathered in St. Peter’s Square.

The emphasis on traditional marriage comes after Francis’ much-discussed comments on gays soon after his election.

Last year, he surprised many conservatives with his “Who am I to judge” comment about gays. Then, in an interview published in the Italian daily *Corriere Della Sera* in March, he said the church might explore the possibility of recognizing civil unions for gays and lesbians.

At his general audience, he reinforced the role of marriage and urged men and women to work harder to resolve their marital differences.

“We know the many trials and difficulties that the lives of a married couple encounter,” Francis told the crowd. “You don’t need to call the United Nations to your home to make peace: A small gesture is enough, a caress, and tomorrow is a new day.”

The pope’s attitude toward homosexuality earned him the “Person of the Year” accolade in *The Advocate*, a U.S. gay magazine last year. **BT**



Photo courtesy of American Bible Society

American Bible Society to sell off 12-story NYC building

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey
Religion News Service

NEW YORK — The American Bible Society will sell its 12-story building on Broadway, vacating prime real estate in the heart of Manhattan that serves other evangelical ministries.

The society provides space to several New York-based evangelical organizations, such as Q Ideas, Redeemer Presbyterian Church’s Center for Faith & Work, the Museum of Biblical Art and Young Life. Through the years, the building had become a destination for Christians in the city.

The 200-year-old ABS first occupied the 1865 Broadway address in 1966 with a

ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by Billy Graham. The organization has not made any decisions about a new location, but a spokesperson said it remained committed to New York City.

“The decision to sell the property was made to unlock the value of the site to further the mission of American Bible Society,” board Chairman Pieter Dearolf said in a statement. “I believe we will always maintain a presence in New York City, the epicenter of American culture and commerce.”

ABS was last in the spotlight in January, when it named Roy Peterson to succeed Doug Birdsall as president. Birdsall was fired by the ABS board in October after only months on the job. **BT**

Mark Driscoll apologizes, says he’s quitting social media

By Sarah Pulliam Bailey
Religion News Service

Seattle megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll wrote a letter to his congregation to explain recent controversies, including the marketing campaign intended to place the book, *Real Marriage*, on *The New York Times* best-seller list.

Driscoll has been an influential pastor within Reformed evangelical circles for several years, helping to found a church-planting network called Acts 29. His Mars Hill Church attracts some 14,000 people at 15 locations in

five states each Sunday.

In recent months, however, reports have emerged that Driscoll plagiarized some of the material in his book. And in March, *World* magazine reported that Driscoll hired a firm to buy copies of the book he penned with his wife, Grace, so that it would top the best-seller lists.

In a letter posted on Reddit, Driscoll apologized for using the marketing strategy.

“I am sorry that I used this strategy, and will never use it again,” he wrote. “I have also asked my publisher to not use the ‘#1 *New York Times* bestseller’ status in future publications, and am working to remove this from past

publications as well.”

Church spokesman Justin Dean confirmed that a letter from Driscoll to Mars Hill Church was posted to the church’s internal network as “a private family communication.”

“At this time we have chosen not to publicly release the letter,” Dean said, adding that the pastor was not available for interviews.

Driscoll also apologized to his church in 2007 for lacking humility. In the new letter, Driscoll said he would quit social media for the rest of 2014 to “reset” his life. He also wrote that “my angry-young-prophet days are over.” **BT**

Richard Land says gay marriage 'truth serum' for evangelicals

By Bob Allen
Associated Baptist Press

A former Southern Baptist Convention official says gay marriage functions as a "truth serum," distinguishing real evangelicals from those who don't affirm the Bible's authority.

Richard Land, president of Southern Evangelical Seminary, wrote in the *Christian Post* about World Vision's rapid turnabout after announcing it had changed its employment policy to allow the hiring of professing Christians who are legally married to a member of the same sex.

Land, who retired last year after 25 years as head of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said the episode demonstrates that gay marriage is different from matters of doctrine such as baptism, the role of

women, reproductive issues, and divorce and remarriage where Christians adopt "a range of views."

"Same-sex marriage cannot be squared with the traditional, historic, evangelical view of biblical authority," Land said.

"As World Vision has learned, evangelicals cannot declare 'neutrality' on this issue, and it cannot be fudged or finessed," Land said. "If you tolerate same-sex marriage and/or same-sex behavior as acceptable morality for Christians, then you have rebelled against biblical authority and departed from the orthodox faith of biblical Christianity."

Land predicted the same-sex marriage issue "will act like a truth serum, dividing true evangelicals from the faux evangelicals who seek to travel under the evangelical banner while denying the biblical faith of their evangelical forefathers." **BT**



Bats in the belfry a serious matter for Church of England

By Trevor Grundy
Religion News Service

CANTERBURY, England — Bats are making life unbearable for congregations by defecating on worshippers from roofs as well as bell towers, according to a report to the Church Buildings Council of the Church of England.

"Bats in churches are no joke for those who have to clean up the mess behind," said Anne Sloman, chair of the council. "Their presence in large numbers is making it impossible for us to open churches for a whole variety of social and community uses as well as making life miserable for worshippers, and we are seriously worried about the irreparable damage bats are causing to priceless church artifacts."

The report prepared by academics at Bristol University suggests that with clever use of lighting systems and acoustic devices, bats can be kept away from parts of churches.

"The research has been helpful," said Sir Tony Baldry, a member of Parliament, "but what we now need is action to ensure that church congregations can worship without being concerned about the impact of bat feces and urine."

Church wardens say that bat droppings can seriously damage your health.

Droppings and urine present a risk of gastrointestinal infection through accidental hand to mouth transfer.

The full research of the number of churches involved was to be published on the government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: We have received no reports indicating that this issue and the one concerning church attendance are related. JDP] **BT**

Inmates help further Mormon genealogy work

SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — William J. Hopkins already knew a bit about genealogy work when he arrived at the Utah State Prison in 1994, an interest that was sparked in his teens by an aunt who is a family historian.

Hopkins, 40, now spends two to three hours a day working on family history projects — his own and that of others — at the Family History Center at the prison's Wasatch unit. He is an arbitrator; someone who reviews duplicate data entered by various indexers to ensure the information corresponds and then enters one copy into a database.

He has traced his family line back to Myles

Standish, his 11th great-grandfather who came to America on the Mayflower as a military adviser to the Puritans and then went on to help settle Massachusetts. Hopkins also has traced his ancestors' trek west as part of the Mormon migrations to the Utah territory between 1847 and 1850.

"You understand the hardships they went through," he said, "and get to feel for them."

The Salt Lake City-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints opened the first Family History Center at the Utah State Prison more than 20 years ago. Today, there are four centers at the prison's various units and one at the Central Utah Correctional Facility. **BT**

Church of England attendance continues slide

CANTERBURY, England (RNS) — Attendance figures released by the Church of England show that Sunday worship attendance continues its downward slide and now stands at about half of what it was 45 years ago.

The report from the Archbishops' Council Research and Statistics Department, released March 21, shows that on average in 2012, 800,000 adults, or about 2 percent of the adult population, attended church on Sunday. That's

down from 1.6 million Sunday worshippers in 1968.

Christmas and Easter services continue to attract the highest number of worshippers. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day bring in around 2.5 million people and Easter services attract approximately 1.4 million.

One of England's top women judges, Baroness Brenda Hale, said the Church of England is in decline because it is so undemanding. **BT**

"A thread called grace"

Jonathan Merritt, son of former SBC president, shares personal faith journey

With his writing career in full swing, faith-and-culture author Jonathan Merritt ended a 2009 *USA Today* commentary with a challenge to his fellow evangelical Christians.

"Now is the time for those who bear the name of Jesus Christ to stop merely talking about love and start showing love to our gay and lesbian neighbors," Merritt wrote. "It must be concrete and tangible. It must move beyond cheap rhetoric. We cannot pick and choose which neighbors we will love. We must love them all."

What no one knew at the time, Merritt reveals in a book released April 1, is how personal those words were for the son of a former Southern Baptist Convention president active in his father's Atlanta-area megachurch.

"I was not just asking that we do a better job loving our neighbors," Merritt, 31, says in an excerpt from *Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined*, published in *Christianity Today*. "I wanted to know I was loved too."

Merritt, senior columnist for Religion News Service, in previous books *Green Like God* and *A Faith of Our Own* dealt with social issues of environmental protection and younger evangelicals' disconnect with culture war issues of the Religious Right. This time he delves into a yearlong inward journey to recover a faith that had grown spiritually dry.

He describes meeting God in unexpected places, including the silence of a desert monastery, amid hopelessness in Haiti and even in the sacrilege of a religious-themed nightclub mocking hypocrisy in American Christianity.

He also reveals being the victim of childhood sex abuse at the hands of an older boy, confusion about his own sexual attractions, and the disgrace of being "outed" by a gay man after a rendezvous in a parked car that Merritt describes in the book as "physical contact that fell short of sex but went beyond the bounds of friendship."

Merritt said in an RNS column that his decision to share those parts of his story



Merritt writes that he's "wholly wrapped up in my pursuit of Christ and his amazing grace."

"wasn't a career move or a brazen attempt to sell more books." Rather, it's because he believes honesty provides a path to holding on, as he says in the book, to "a thread called grace."

By the time he was about 10, Merritt says, isolation and pain prompted thoughts of suicide. He hid a note in a bedroom dresser so if he ever mustered the courage to kill himself his parents would understand. He tore it up over fear that if his mother were to stumble across it while cleaning his room, he would be put in a mental institution.

Things got better as he got older. He was attracted to pretty girls, he says, but also occasionally felt drawn to other boys. He dated girls in high school, but his emotional insecurity always kept him from getting too close to a girlfriend.

After his 2009 column in *USA Today*, Merritt, a graduate of Jerry Falwell's Liberty University and Southern Baptist-affiliated Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, was contacted by a gay blogger named Azariah Southworth interested in continuing the dialogue.

They communicated for months by email and text message before arranging a

face-to-face meeting when Merritt was in Chicago for a Christian conference in 2010. Merritt says he came away from the experience confused, but soon after that the communication between the two came to an end.

That changed abruptly two years later. In a July 20, 2012, article in *The Atlantic*, Merritt opposed a boycott of Chick-fil-A because of the company's support of organizations against gay marriage.

Southworth responded with a July 23 blog alleging that Merritt is gay and explained in *Salon* that it was hypocritical for him to say publicly that homosexuality is a sin while enjoying the company of men.

Merritt answered in a blog interview with Ed Stetzer of LifeWay Research that he behaved inappropriately but doesn't identify as gay "because I believe there can be a difference between what one experiences and the life that God offers."

Merritt says in his new book when people today ask how he identifies himself, he doesn't know what to say. "It doesn't feel authentic to label the whole of my being by feeling and attractions, and my experience has been that those parts of me tend to be somewhat fluid," he writes.

"One day I may feel more one way than another, and the next I feel a little differently," he says. "I am far more than my feelings, so I don't answer that question. Not because I want to evade others but because I want to stay true to myself."

Merritt says his spirituality shapes the essence of who he is far more than his sexuality. "I am wholly wrapped up in my pursuit of Christ and his amazing grace," he writes.

Merritt says he doesn't know if his feelings as an adolescent are connected to his childhood experiences of abuse or are a part of himself that would have emerged anyway. "I'm certain I don't know the answer to this question, and I'm not sure anyone does except God," he writes in the book.

"It's dangerous to assume that those who are attracted to others of the same gender must have had abuse in their past," he added in his column for RNS. **BT**



2014 CBF General Assembly

June 23-27
Atlanta, Georgia

Join us in Atlanta to celebrate how our stories as Cooperative Baptists are *Woven Together* with each other and with God's mission.

Register and learn about fellowship opportunities, auxiliary events, the Assembly schedule and more at thefellowship.info/assembly

Featured Speakers

This year's Assembly features a number of gifted speakers who will lead us as we discover threads of faith and fellowship.



Executive Coordinator Suzi Paynter will address the morning business session with music from the Broadway Baptist Church chapel choir of Fort Worth, Texas. The evening worship will feature a keynote address from former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young about the church's mission in the world as well as music from world-renowned operatic and concert soprano Indra Thomas and songs from the CBF of Georgia youth choir.



Moderator Bill McConnell will address the morning business session, where he will officially transition this role to Moderator elect Kasey Jones. Jones will bring a proclamation and vision for CBE with music from the CBF of Georgia Atlanta Choir. The Friday evening worship will include communion led by Suzi Paynter and a keynote address from Greg Saylor, pastor of First Baptist Church, Asheville, N.C.



Fellowship with friends old and new at meal events with CBF networks, partners and seminaries including:

Thursday

Lunch sponsored by the New Baptist Covenant with keynote speaker Allan Boesak, the Desmond Tutu Chair of Peace, Global Justice and Reconciliation Studies at Butler University and Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis, Ind.



Friday

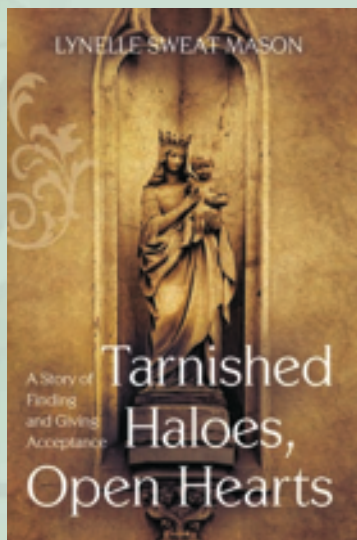
The Baptist Joint Committee's annual Religious Liberty Council luncheon will feature Melissa Rogers, special assistant to the President and Executive Director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.



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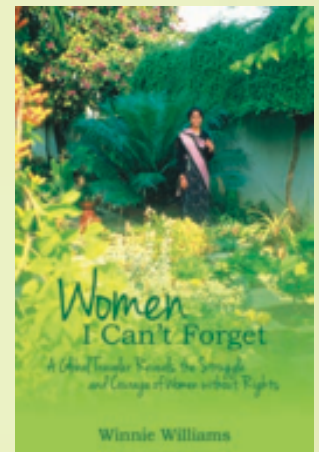
Autobiography

WALKER L. KNIGHT

*The life story of a courageous
Baptist journalist*

LYNELLE SWEAT MASON

*A personal story of giving
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Women's Issues

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Teaching resources at nurturingfaith.net

HOW TO USE THESE BIBLE STUDIES

1. Order a copy of *Baptists Today* news journal for **EACH MEMBER** of the class. The Bible Lessons are found only here.
2. Teachers can go to nurturingfaith.net to access all of the free resources needed for presentation. Simply click on "Adult" or "Youth."

Teaching the Lessons

After reading The Bible Lessons by Tony Cartledge starting on page 18, teachers can access helpful teaching resources (at no charge) at nurturingfaith.net. These include:

- * Tony's video overviews
- * Adult teaching plans by Rick Jordan
- * Youth teaching plans by Jeremy Colliver
- * Tony's "Digging Deeper" notes and "The Hardest Question"
- * Links to commentaries, multimedia resources and more

How to Order

The Bible Lessons in *Baptists Today* are copyrighted and not to be photocopied.

- * Orders may be placed at baptiststoday.org or 1-877-752-5658.
- * The price is just \$18 each for groups of 25 or more — for a full year — with no additional costs.
- * All **online** teaching resources are available at no charge and may be printed and used by teachers of the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies.

For **adults** and **youth**

June lessons in this issue

The Challenges of a Changed Life

1 Peter 5:6-11
Lion Taming
June 1, 2014

1 Corinthians 12:4-13
One and Many
June 8, 2014

Words about Words — from God

Genesis 1:1-2:4a
And God Said ...
June 15, 2014

Jeremiah 20:7-13
Fire in the Bones
June 22, 2014

Jeremiah 28:1-17
War of the Words
June 29, 2014

**Youth Lessons
are on pages
22-23.**



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

Thanks, sponsors!

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

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Peter 5:6-11

June 1, 2014

Lion Taming

Letter writing – with ink, on paper – has become a lost art in many circles. When we can whip out our smart phones and send email to any place that’s also advanced enough to have postal service, why write letters that will take days or weeks to arrive?

Many of us remember the days when friends or family members commonly communicated through personal missives that told the news, asked how the other was doing, and generally showed ongoing care.

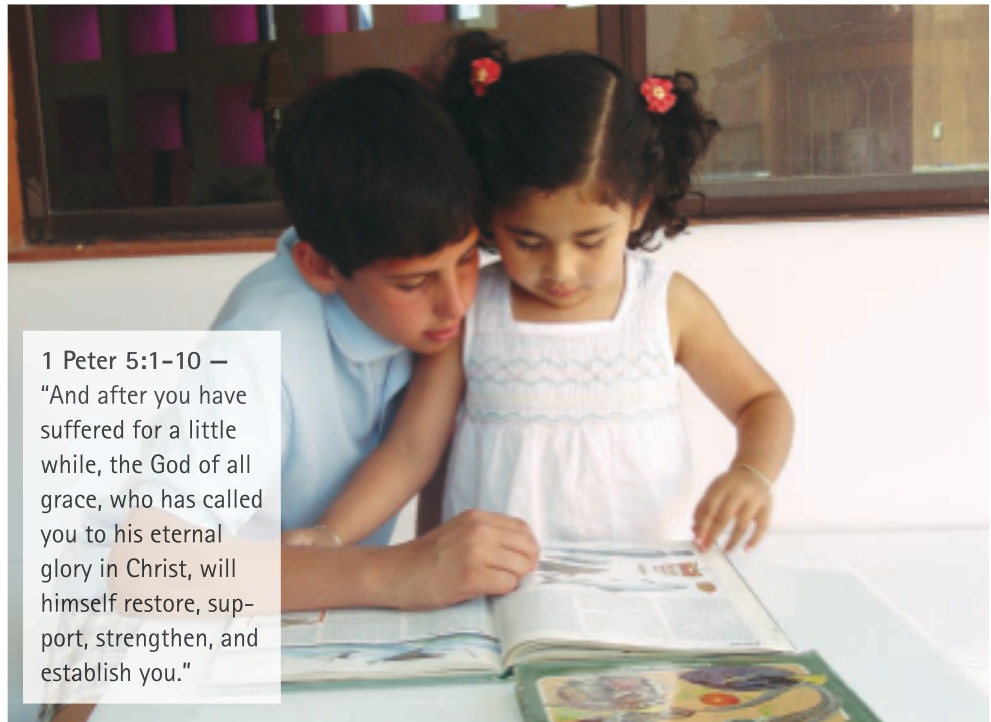
Whether our letters travel in envelopes or cyberspace, they share the need for some sort of conclusion. Formal letters may call for “Cordially” or “Sincerely,” while more personal messages may close with “Peace,” “Love,” “Take Care,” or even “xoxo” to indicate hugs and kisses.

Do you have a trademark way of closing your letters? Biblical epistles typically end with words of encouragement and advice, and 1 Peter is no exception. The author closes with a sincere wish that his readers will practice cordial humility toward each other, and live in love.

Humble trust (vv. 6-7)

Having spoken to the issue of family and community relationships (3:1-7, 4:7-11), Peter closed with a few words of advice about relationships within the church (5:1-5). He described himself as an “elder,” and spoke to the “elders among you” (v. 1) along with “those who are younger” (v. 5).

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



1 Peter 5:1-10 –
“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”

Whether we are to think of “elder” as a designation of age or of office, Peter’s appeal was to the experience and wisdom of church elders, urging them to “tend the flock of God that is in your charge” with willing eagerness.

As the elders are called to serve with proper motives, so the “younger” are to respect the elders’ leadership. As with family relationships, all are to live in humble submission to one another, remembering, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (v. 5; the quotation is from the Greek translation of Prov. 3:34).

Can you remember a time when a more mature Christian – whether holding a church office or not – was helpful to you in your pilgrimage of faith? Have you encouraged others who are younger in the faith than you?

Peter’s reference to humility in v. 5 led him back to the recurrent theme of faithful living in a difficult world. He brought his letter to a forceful conclusion with a string of imperative verbs (vv. 6-9) and a comforting promise of future hope for those who follow his

advice (vv. 10-11).

Faithful living requires a healthy measure of humility. Believers are to adopt modest attitudes not because they feel worthless, but because they understand their place in the larger scheme of things: “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (v. 6).

The symbol of “God’s mighty hand” is a common Old Testament way of referring to God’s power, especially associated with divine deliverance (cf. Exod. 13:3; Deut. 26:8; 1 Kgs. 8:42; Neh. 1:10; Ps. 136:12, among many others). Peter wrote to people who may have been forcibly humbled by the mighty fist of Rome. Involuntary submission is a degrading thing, but those who willingly humble themselves before God can be confident that God’s “mighty hand” will hold them firm and ultimately lift them up. “In due time” translates the word *kairos*, which describes “the appropriate time,” in God’s time.

Being humble before God does not mean going about on our knees or

Resources to teach adult and youth classes

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wearing sackcloth and ashes. Mainly, it's about putting our trust in God rather than relying on our efforts alone. "Cast all your anxiety on him," Peter said, "because he cares for you" (v. 7). ↓

Readers often miss the connection between being humble and entrusting one's cares to God, but in the Greek they are closely connected. Holding on to our problems and worries points to a prideful belief that we can go it alone – or to a lack of belief that God can be of help. In contrast, entrusting our cares to God is a sign of humility as well as faith.

Peter's advice does not suggest that we ignore the pressures, debts, or illnesses that may confront us and assume that God will take care of everything. It is our worries we are to turn over to God – the things we can do nothing about – not our responsibilities. We cannot expect God to make our apologies or pay our bills or improve our physical fitness, but we can look positively to God for help and hope as we do those things, and we need not waste energy worrying about them in the meantime.

As the disciples "cast their cloaks" on the colt for Jesus to ride on his triumphal entry to Jerusalem (Luke 19:35), so Christ's followers are to entrust our cares to God as we walk through difficult times but toward ultimate triumph.

The importance of trusting God in times of trial exists through the ages. It is the theme behind Charles A. Tindley's memorable hymn, "Leave It There," written in 1916. The song's verses tell of troubles associated with poverty, illness, enemies, and aging, each one leading to the chorus "Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there." ↓

Steadfast faith (vv. 8-9)

The writer wanted his readers to trust God in times of need, but he did not want them to think that life can be lived without effort. Wise believers should learn to discipline themselves and be alert, for in Peter's words: "Like a

roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around looking for someone to devour" (v. 8).

The words for "be sober" ("discipline yourselves" in the NRSV) and "keep alert" (literally, "stay awake!") were often used together, especially by writers who thought of themselves as living in the last days, and urged others to be faithful until the end.

Like other early Christians, Peter believed that an evil foe lurked behind the many temptations and cruelties of this world, opposing the righteous and advocating evil. The word for "adversary" is a technical term for a legal opponent in court, but could be used in the general sense of "enemy."

"Devil" translates "*diabolos*" (the root of our word "diabolical"). Its root meaning is something like "slanderer." *Diabolos* is the word typically used in the Septuagint (a Greek version of the Old Testament) to translate the Hebrew term *hasatan* ("the accuser"). In the Hebrew Bible, with only one late exception (1 Chron. 21:1), the word *satan* always appears with the definite article (*ha*), as a title rather than a personal name. The accuser was not considered to be evil, but was one of the "sons of God" who served on the heavenly council. His particular responsibility was to observe human activity and report wrongdoing (see Job 1:6-7), like a heavenly district attorney. ↓

By the first century, however, Jews had come to think of Satan as a demonic power that sought to pervert God's purposes by tempting people to do evil. Over time, the devil came to be thought of as a rebellious angel who had been given temporary dominion in the world, but who remained subject to Christ (John 14:30; 1 John 5:19).

Christians make two common mistakes in their thinking about the devil. One error is in taking demonic power too seriously; becoming obsessed with an exaggerated fear and blaming all of

the world's ills on satanic influence. The other mistake is in not taking evil seriously enough. Peter counsels no overt fear of evil – but knows we must contend with many temptations to live at odds with the purposes of God. Whether we think of the devil as a personal being or a powerful metaphor, few can deny the reality of evil in the world. ↓

The temptations we face are not only those of a moral or corrupt nature, but also the endemic sins of a greed-based society that values self-gratification more than a healthy community. The first step in overcoming temptation is to recognize it for what it is, and the first step in enduring tribulation is to recognize its temporary nature. Those who stand firm in their faith and in company with other Christians will find the strength to endure. ↓

True strength (vv. 10-11)

First Peter concludes his letter with a reassuring promise of God's intention and ability to deliver and strengthen God's people. 1 Peter 5:10-11 is a powerful benediction, a promise that God will bless those who are enduring trials and will "restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

The piling up of four active verbs that are near synonyms makes for an emphatic statement. The word for "restore" means "to supply what is needed" or "to mend what is broken." The term translated as "support" can also mean "to make firm," or "confirm." Like the next verb in the series, it could also mean "to strengthen." The end result, found in the final verb, is that believers may become established, firmly grounded in their faith.

Peter's promise of divine deliverance does not preclude suffering or hard times. Difficult days are an integral part of human life, but in the midst of trouble, believers can be confident that we serve a mighty God who can lift us up. We will be tried, we will suffer pain, we will be wounded in this life, but the restoring power of God is strong, and gives us confidence to endure. ↓

Bible Study

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

with Tony W. Cartledge

June 8, 2014

One and Many

Do you consider yourself to be “gifted”? The word gets thrown around a lot, especially in schools, where children as young as first graders may be assigned to programs or classes for the “gifted and talented.” While the intent of such programs is good, programs that identify certain people as “gifted” also have the potential of causing others to feel distinctly ungifted. Resentment and dissension can result.

A similar problem arose long ago in the ancient city of Corinth, where those who identified themselves as most gifted appear to have been guilty of spiritual pride, and those with less obvious giftedness thought of themselves as second-class Christians.

A spiritual church (vv. 1-3)

Paul had an up-and-down relationship with the Corinthian Christians, extending over a period of many years. In earlier chapters, Paul dealt with problems of factionalism, immorality, settling grievances, family life, slave-holding, and eating food that had been offered to idols.

In chs. 12-14, Paul moved to the hot-button topic of “spiritual gifts.” His argument can be summarized briefly: the primary evidence that a Christian is truly “spiritual” is not *glossolia* (“speaking in tongues”), but loving service.

The serious concerns Paul expressed suggest that a misunderstanding or overemphasis on tongues had led to division in the church. Some



1 Cor. 12:12 —
“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”

apparently insisted that speaking in tongues was a necessary sign of the Spirit’s presence.

Paul disagreed. He insisted that the manifestation of tongues was not proof of the Spirit, and reminded his readers that many of them had once worshiped idols, which were incapable of speech (v. 2). Some of the pagan cults and mystery religions also practiced *glossolia*: one can experience religious ecstasy and speak in tongues without knowing the true god.

The proper test of one’s speech — or at, least, the *source* of one’s speech — lies in its content. Thus, Paul turned to another argument: no one claiming to have the Spirit of God would curse the name of Jesus, but would rather confess Jesus as Lord (v. 3). The point is not that Christians are incapable of mouthing the words “Jesus is cursed” (Paul spoke them as he dictated the letter), but that one inspired by the Spirit of God would not (indeed, *could not*) wish Jesus to be cursed.

An energized church (vv. 4-11)

The issue of spiritual gifts had caused division and strife at Corinth, but Paul knew the Spirit promotes harmony rather than discord. “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (vv. 4-7).

In vv. 8-11, Paul lists several of these ministries, but we should note that he does not intend for it to be a comprehensive list. There are other “lists” of spiritual gifts in scripture (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:27-28). All of them are different, and none of them are exhaustive. This list contains nine areas of “giftedness.” Some commentators suggest that they are listed in descending order of importance.

The first two “gifts” are closely related: the ability to speak with

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wisdom (*sophía*) and knowledge (*gnōsis*). Paul had pointed (sometimes sarcastically) to the Corinthians' love of wisdom in chs. 1-4, contrasting their love of earthly eloquence with the deep wisdom that comes from God.

Literally, Paul speaks of the "word" (*logos*) of wisdom and of knowledge. Since the context has to do with speaking, however, his intent is probably the "utterance" (NRSV) or "message" (NET) of wisdom and knowledge spoken by Spirit-empowered believers.

Whether Paul meant to suggest different things by "wisdom" and "knowledge," or simply doubled up the same thought for emphasis, is not clear. Typically, we think of wisdom as reflecting the mature and insightful use of knowledge. While knowledge may indicate no more than the accumulation of information, wisdom suggests the ability to employ knowledge in appropriate ways and at the proper time.

"Faith" in v. 9 is not faith that leads to salvation, for Paul is speaking to persons who are already believers. Rather, he speaks of the kind of faith that stands firm in times of crisis, enables the believer to give spiritual service in all circumstances, and inspires others with its staying power.

The pairing of "faith" with the gift of "healing" does not necessarily imply "faith healing," or the notion that healing is available for those who have sufficient faith. Jesus healed people who had expressed no faith at all. Paul believed that God had blessed other persons with gifts of healing that went beyond ordinary medical skills. Some modern believers claim to have experienced miraculous healing, too, but this has never been the norm. Christians should not doubt their faith if they pray for healing and do not receive it.

The term translated "miracles" (v. 10) is *dunameis* (the root word of "dynamite"), also translated as "mighty works." We can only guess at what some of these displays of power might have been. Such manifestations were thought to be signs of God's new age breaking in upon the world (cf. Gal. 3:5).

"Prophecy," a gift attributed to persons such as Agabus (Acts 11:28; 21:10f) and the daughters of Phillip (Acts 21:9), was thought of as the ability to declare the word of God for a given situation – not just the ability to predict the future.

Paul's readers believed that demonic spirits could also inspire prophetic speech, however. Acts 16:16, for example, speaks of a slave girl Paul had met in Philippi. A "spirit of divination" would reportedly prompt her to prophesy, a "gift" that her owners exploited, charging fees for her services as a fortuneteller.

For this reason, along with the temptation one might have to fake prophetic gifts, it was important that some persons be gifted with the "discernment of spirits" so that the church could determine if a would-be prophet's words came from God, or from another source.

The gifts listed in vv. 9-10 are all things that contribute to the welfare of the community, so we may expect Paul's concluding mention of "various kinds of tongues" and "the interpretation of tongues" to be understood in a similar context: Spiritual gifts are designed for the benefit of the church rather than the enhancement of individuals.

It is notable that Paul put tongues and their interpretation at the bottom of the list. What did he mean by "various kinds of tongues"? Some suggest that Paul may have had in mind the ability to speak actual languages not previously known to the speaker (as in Acts 2:6ff), along with the kind of ecstatic utterances that cannot be understood apart from the presence of one with the gift for "interpretation of tongues." Others note that each individual is unique, and so any person who speaks in unintelligible tongues would do so differently.

If everyone with the "gift of tongues" spoke in the same way, others

could learn the language. Ecstatic utterances, however, were thought to be of a different nature.

No matter what the outer manifestation, Paul concluded, there is one Spirit at work to energize all believers with the presence and the power of God's grace gifts. The gifts are allotted "to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses," but their purpose is communal, to build up the church in unity and love. **U**

A united church (vv. 12-14)

Paul clarified his intent with the familiar and memorable illustration of the church as a body with different parts that must work together if the body is to function properly (vv. 12-27).

Today's text includes only the first three verses of Paul's extended metaphor, but they are sufficient to introduce the concept. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ," he said (v. 12).

Paul went on to extend the metaphor, speaking of feet, hands, ears, and eyes; along with parts that are more or less respectable or honored (vv. 15-25). The different members are part of a single body, and thus experience suffering or honor together, not separately (v. 26).

The Spirit is the source of gifts in all their variety, but also the force that unifies members' giftedness and other differences in service to Christ. The church in Corinth included men and women, Jews and Gentiles, free citizens and slaves, but all belonged to the same body, baptized in and sustained by the same Spirit of God (vv. 13-14).

The complex nature of our bodies is self-evident. Every organ, bone, nerve, and artery serves the larger whole, and the failure of any one part leads to diminished health or ability. Both individuals and churches are part of the body of Christ, which functions best when all the parts are not only present and accounted for, but also working together. **BT**

Youth

June 1 — June 25, 2014

Youth Lessons by **David Cassidy** 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.

The End

1 Peter 5:6-11

"Signing off" used to be reserved for newscasters at the end of their broadcasts. Newscasters were known for the unique phrases they used to end each broadcast. Now we can set our emails, texts and voicemails to be unique to each of us — much like a sign-off for a newscaster.

Peter didn't have the ability to set his letters to automatically end with his unique signature, but he did end his letter with his typical words of encouragement and advice.

Peter begins his ending by reminding his readers to remain humble. This attitude of humility is not lived out because they are considered less worthy than those around them, but because they know their

place in the Kingdom of God. Believers are not to sit around and wait to live out their faith, but are to use their gifts and talents each day.

Even though the hearers of Peter's letter fully trust God, Peter does not promise a life that is carefree and easy. In fact, he says the opposite: there will be troubles and suffering. If you trust God, you will hand over those negative things to God — because you can't control them anyway.

Following the ways of Christ means caring for those whom society avoids or sees as less worthy. It means fighting for the rights and needs of others more than for your own. It means loving others as you love yourself. Those things, it seems, can get the faithful into trouble with a world that puts trust in power, wealth and personal needs first.

JUNE 1

Think About It:

When things get tough, we usually turn inward and rely on ourselves to get us through the tough times. How might it help to look to God instead?

Make a Choice:

Each day we have many opportunities to live as Christ and to treat others as he did. How will you choose to put the needs of others first and to live out your faith in humble ways?

Pray:

God, help us to follow the ways of Jesus even when the world around us wants to play by a different set of rules.

Multi-tool

1 Corinthians 12:4-13

I heard someone recently described as the "Swiss Army Knife of quarterbacks." He could run a 4.6 forty, could stand in the pocket and throw 80 yards down the field, could read defenses like a veteran, and was a leader. This player was projected to be the number-one draft pick because he could do it all.

As the commentators continued their discussion of him, however, their tone changed as they discussed how good he would be in the NFL: As great as he is, his success would depend on the team around him.

The apostle Paul sounds like these commentators as he talks about the

Christians in Corinth: One person cannot do it all.

There is division in the Corinthian church because some of its members are saying they are better, more blessed, more gifted than other Christians in their community. Paul knows that being gifted is a work of the Spirit; that all activities of giftedness are for God's use; that the Spirit brings people together rather than causing division.

Paul reminds individuals that their gifts come from the same place and are to be used for the same purpose. A particular gift is not required to show the presence of the Spirit. All gifts are important, and without them the body of Christ doesn't function at its best.

JUNE 8

Think About It:

Sometimes it is harder to realize the gifts we have than to see the gifts that others have. What gifts has God given to you?

Make a Choice:

The gifts and talents of others may be different from yours. How can you put your gifts together with those of your friends to serve God better?

Pray:

God, thank you for the gifts you have given to us. Help us to value one another's gifts and find your wisdom in our differences.

The Beginning

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Having a solid and strong foundation makes the construction of a building easier. The first moves in a game of Checkers or Chess can decide the outcome. The opening lines of a speech can capture or lose the audience. Beginnings are important.

Genesis introduces us to a God who is involved and cares not only for us, but also for all of creation. The beginning starts out as a mess with God hovering over the waters like a mother hen hovers over her

chicks. Out of this chaos, God brings order and purpose simply by speaking: Let there be ...

First, God establishes a place of sky, sea and dry land: Let there be light. Let there be a separate space for life. Let there be dry lands with vegetation.

Then, God fills those spaces: Let there be lights in the sky. Let there be animals of sea and sky. Let there be male and female.

Creation is personal to God and is emphasized in the creation of male and female in the image of God.

Think About It:

What do we learn about God by looking at what God creates?

Make a Choice:

We fill every moment of our lives with activity. How will you choose to stop some of your activity and rest as God did?

Pray:

God, lead us to see your love in the beauty of creation and to care for it as an expression of our faith.

The Truth

Jeremiah 20:7-13

How often do you tell others what they want to hear instead of what you really feel? It's like when you respond to "How are you?" with "Good." There's really so much more going on, but no one wants to hear all of that.

Jeremiah doesn't take this standpoint in his prayer with God. He says things to God that would make most of us blush. He complains about what God has done. He accuses God of enticing, deceiving and duping him into responding to a call that

would cause Jeremiah grief.

God isn't the only source of frustration for Jeremiah. The prophet is also hearing it from his friends who have turned against him. He claims that they too are enticing, deceiving and duping him, but this time not into a call but into a plot that will be his downfall.

Jeremiah does not run, even when he thinks everyone is against him. He believes the prophecy will be fulfilled, but not for his sake or to save his name, but to show the glory of God.

Think About It:

What we share with others shows our trust. How will you trust God with what you share?

Make a Choice:

How will you choose to be more open with God?

Pray:

God, may we share as openly with you as we do with our closest friends. Forgive us when we have not trusted you with all our feelings and thoughts.

He Said, She Said

Jeremiah 28:1-17

If you watch more than one of the cable news stations, you might never know that they are reporting about the same thing. When you read blog posts about the political landscape of America, you will get strongly differing opinions. But this is nothing new.

Jeremiah was caught up in the same thing during his day. He and Hananiah had completely different views on the direction of Judah.

The Scriptures refer to both Jeremiah and Hananiah as prophets, but with neither of them labeled as false. The narrator doesn't want to play one prophet against the other; he wants the reader to decide who is right by the outcome of the events.

Hananiah and Jeremiah end up in the temple courts speaking their opinions, both believing that their view is true and their outcome is certain. They go back and forth in their debate, but it is Jeremiah's words that remind us to take time and reflect on what direction God may be giving our lives.

Think About It:

How do you discern what God is trying to tell you about the direction for your life?

Make a Choice:

Will you choose to stop and reflect on what God is trying to tell you?

Pray:

God, may we seek your will in all that we do, even when it is not what we want. May we always remember that we may be wrong in what we think.

Bible Study

Genesis 1:1-2:4a

with Tony W. Cartledge

June 15, 2014

And God Said ...

Many Christians routinely refer to the Bible as the “word of God,” but most of the Bible consists of words about God and the continuing story of relationships between God and humankind. A very small percentage of the Bible claims to speak in God’s own words. For the next several lessons, we’ll be looking at Old Testament texts in which poets, priests, and prophets write as if speaking with God’s voice.

The first of those texts is found in the Bible’s opening story, one of two paired accounts of how God created the heavens, the earth, and all that is in them.

☒☒ The first story portrays creation as taking place over a seven-day period. In the first three days, God creates a substrate or framework for animal life, like an artist who sketches an outline as the foundation for a painting. During the next three days, God fills in the canvas with colorful creations of light and life. On the seventh day, God rests.

Creation: round one (1:1-13)

In this first creation story, the author portrays God as being high and lifted up, creating all things by the spoken word alone. ☒ All that exists of the world is a watery chaos called *tohu wabohu* in Hebrew, a “formless void” (NRSV) or “welter and waste” (Robert Alter’s translation).

Many ancient peoples, including both Hebrews and Mesopotamians, imagined creation emerging from a dark watery waste. The writer envisioned



God’s Spirit as somehow moving or brooding over the waters of chaos prior to the act of creation.

The first thing needed is order, and order needs light. Thus, the Bible’s first record of God speaking is this: “Let there be light.”

And there was light. Note that light is created separately from the sun and moon, because the purpose is to show that God creates the whole notion of light, not just sources of light. It is God’s light that overcomes darkness.

As we will see below, it was also important for the writer – who may have written while many Israelites were living in exile – to distinguish Israel’s creation account from familiar stories told by the Babylonians and other ancient peoples who considered the sun, moon, and stars to be gods.

With light bringing the beginning of order to the universe, God speaks again, and day two is marked by the creation of a solid “firmament” to separate and to protect a safe place within the waters of chaos, like a giant bubble in the waters where life-giving air could exist.

The Hebrews lived long before the invention of the telescope, and could only interpret the world as they saw it. The writer of Genesis 1, like others of his day, envisioned a three-story universe in which the earth existed within a primordial sea, separated from the surrounding waters by a disk-like earth with supporting pillars below and the dome-like firmament above. Rain was thought to come in through windows in the sky-dome, while the sun, moon, and stars ran on fixed tracks in the firmament, moving beneath the earth at night and re-emerging during the day.

Having created a space for life to exist, God speaks again on day three, and dry land draws apart from the oceans, providing a substrate for earth-bound life. With another divine word, land-based plants emerge, even before the sun and moon are set into the sky.

The emergence of plants offers a clear reminder that the order of events is designed for theological and rhetorical purposes, not as science or history. By introducing green plants before the sun, the author attributes life’s existence to

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God alone and moves the celestial bodies further down the list as a subtle way of pointing out that in Israel's belief system, they were not gods.

Creation: round two (1:14-27, 31)

Having established sky, sea, and dry land with vegetation in place, God is ready to fill in the lines with life. The ancients knew that the sun's warmth and light were essential for continuing life, but the author wanted to affirm that the sun was merely one part of God's creation.

Thus, when God speaks and the heavenly bodies appear, the author carefully avoids naming them. He describes the sun and moon as "the greater light" and "the lesser light" rather than using *shemesh* and *yarih*, the Hebrew words for them. The Babylonian sun god was named "Shamash," an obvious cognate to the Hebrew *shemesh*, and the writer wants no confusion: He adds "and the stars also" as if their creation was an afterthought. There should be no doubt that the sun, moon, and stars were not divine, but objects created for God's purpose.

On the fifth day, animal life comes to the fore: God speaks, and creatures of the sea and sky appear to bring life to the oceans and the air, joining the plant life that already exists on the dry land.


This is a good place to notice that the author has arranged creation in two corresponding, ordered sequences. Light on day one is followed by creation of the heavenly bodies on day four. Creation of the sea and sky on day two corresponds to the birds and fish that occupy them on day five. We can expect, then, that the creation of the dry land and plants on day three will be matched by the emergence of animal life to inhabit the land on day six.

So, when God speaks again, creatures of *terra firma* emerge in every corner of the earth. Insects and worms that creep and crawl join larger animals that feed on the pre-existing vegetation. Although humans do not yet exist, the writer distinguishes between wild animals and those that would be

domesticated.

With all else in place, God speaks into existence the human race, male and female together, as the crowning glory of all creation. With the creation of humankind, a literary shift describes God as being more personally involved. The word *bara'*, a specific term that refers to God's creative action, is found in v. 1, but does not appear again until v. 27, where it occurs three times. The author thus emphasizes God's personal role in human creation.

According to the story, God said "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness ... (v. 26a, NRSV).

What? Who is this "us," and what does it mean for humans to be made in God's image? 

Some readers have imagined a reference to the Trinity here: that God the Father/Creator was speaking to the pre-existent Son and the Holy Spirit. This notion would be completely alien to the writer, however.

People throughout the ancient Near East imagined that the earth was ruled by a heavenly council of divine beings. In Canaanite belief, the chief god El held council on Mt. Zaphon with lesser gods such as Baal, Dagon, and Asherah. In Babylonian thought, Marduk presided over a council of lesser gods that met each year to determine the fates of humankind.

Hebrew religion had no place for multiple gods, but it did imagine that God ruled over a heavenly court of supernatural beings called "sons of God" (see Job 1-2) who served God in various ways. We would think of them as angels.

The writer was too theologically precise to suggest that humans could be created in God's exact image, but believed that we share something of God's image, perhaps a step down from the heavenly court. (For more, see "The Hardest Question" online).

God's creation of humankind did not come without instructions. As the highest order of creation, humans have a responsibility to care for the earth, sea, and sky – and for the creatures that inhabit them.

To "have dominion" over creation (v. 28) does not imply exploitation, but proper stewardship or management. Humans are put in charge of the earth, but not just for their own benefit.

Some may be surprised to learn that vv. 29-30 call for both humans and animals to eat only plants: only after the flood, according to the primeval stories, were people authorized to eat meat, and then only with respect and care (Gen. 9:1-4).

Having created the earth and given it over to humans to enjoy and to manage, God rested on the seventh day: "So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it ..." (2:3a).

While the text does not instruct humans to follow the same pattern, the author of Genesis 1 clearly considered God's day of rest as a model for humans to follow in observing the Sabbath. In a brief commentary on the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy," Exod. 20:11 specifically recalls how God rested on the seventh day after creating the heaven, earth, and sea, adding "therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it."

As we go about our daily lives, most of us are in far closer contact with the earth and the concerns of physical life than we are with God. The majestic story of creation we find in Gen. 1:1-2:4a reminds us that we can't fully separate the two: The earth upon which we stand, the air we breathe, the vistas we enjoy, the water we drink, the food we eat, and even the rest we take – all are gifts of a loving God.

And the responsibility of caring for this magical creation is the first biblical word of God to humankind. That's something worth thinking about. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

June 22, 2014

Fire in the Bones

Have you ever been caught between two options, and not liking either of them?

Sometimes we find ourselves in a bind, between the proverbial rock and a hard place, feeling damned if we don't and damned if we do.

Jeremiah knew that feeling, and that's precisely what today's text is about. 📖 Words of God can be painful, even to the one who speaks them.

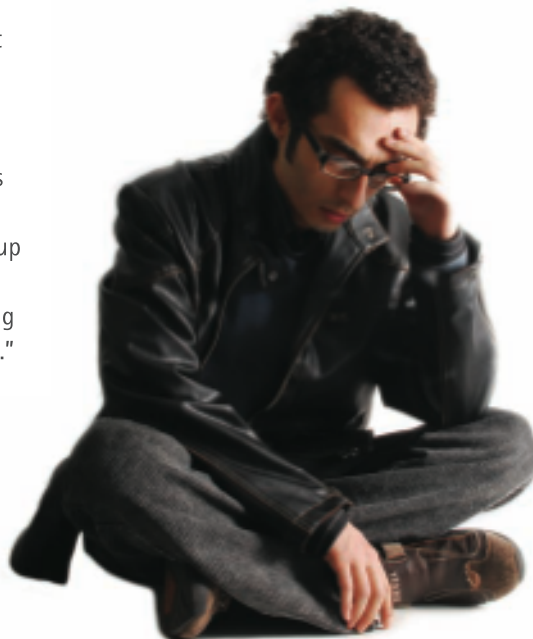
Heated words and burning bones (vv. 7-9)

Jeremiah speaks some hard words in this text, words of fierce complaint, and they are directed squarely at God. 📖 Why? We can understand his bitterness best by looking to the previous chapter.

Jeremiah had a history of antagonistic encounters with Jerusalem's high priest, who appears to have been a toady of king Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE), the same preening monarch who sliced a copy of Jeremiah's prophecies into strips and tossed them into a firepot used for heating (Jer. 36:1-26).

Jer. 19:1-13 recounts how Jeremiah – at God's instructions – had called for senior leaders and priests to gather in the valley of Hinnom near the "Potsherd Gate," where Jerusalem's garbage was hauled away. There he preached a blistering sermon against Judah's kings and its people. He accused them of deserting Yahweh and participating in all manner of wickedness, from theft, murder, and lying to worshipping Baal and sacrificing children on a raised altar or "high place" they had built in the valley,

Jer. 20:9 –
"If I say, 'I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot."



called "Tophet." 📖

Jerusalem's residents apparently believed the priest's smug assertions that Yahweh would protect the temple and never allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. Similar themes of judgment and false confidence are found in ch. 7, where Jeremiah lambasted the people, asking how they could worship other gods "and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' – only to go on doing all these abominations?" (7:10).

Jeremiah stood among the potsherd in the valley and symbolically shattered a pottery jar, declaring that God would break the city and its people so thoroughly that it could never be mended and that passersby would hiss at the horror of the city's destruction and the bloody slaughter of its people.

If that were not enough, Jeremiah returned to the city, entered the temple, and preached a similar sermon (19:14-15), declaring Yahweh's word of disastrous judgment against a stiff-necked people.

To no one's surprise, the high priest – a man named Pashur – took offense at

Jeremiah's criticism. He had Jeremiah beaten and locked in stocks for public ridicule through the night. (Being a prophet is not always easy!) But Jeremiah only increased his criticism after his release, nicknaming Pashur "Terror-all-around" and predicting that he would be taken captive to Babylon (7:1-6).

This is the literary setting that precedes Jeremiah's sharp complaint against God in 7:7-9 – accusations so fierce that similar grievances came to be known in English as "jeremiads."

Jeremiah accused God of "enticing" him, of deceiving and duping him into answering a call that would bring him only grief, making him a laughingstock (v. 7). God impelled him to speak, but would give him only words of doom and destruction. When those fierce proclamations weren't immediately fulfilled, Jeremiah became a subject of derision and scorn (v. 8). The false prophets who claimed that Jerusalem would never fall seemed more accurate than Jeremiah.

What to do in a situation like that? Jeremiah was tempted to simply keep his mouth shut and not subject himself

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



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to ridicule, but when he tried to remain quiet, the message from God fought to get out, like a fire in his bones that cried for release (v. 9).

Wouldn't you have complained, too? God had put Jeremiah in a no-win situation. He could preach the divine word and suffer public ridicule, or stifle it and face inner torment.

What would *you* choose?

**Fearful words and a
fearsome God
(vv. 10-12)**

Jeremiah sensed that he was the target of a whispering campaign by those who sought to discredit him. As if to mock him, their whispers echoed the nickname Jeremiah had given the false priest Pashur (v. 3): "Terror is all around!"

Were they taunting Jeremiah with sarcasm, quoting his own words against him?

Even the prophet's "friends" had turned against him, watching for him to stumble. The NRSV translates the idiom "men of my peace" (a typical description of those who care about one's well-being) as "my close friends," but it's likely that Jeremiah's language was ironic, and "my so-called friends" (NET) is probably a better translation.

Notice how v. 10 repeats themes from v. 7. Jeremiah had accused God of "enticing" or "deceiving" him and prevailing against him. Now Jeremiah accuses his "friends" of plotting to do the same, hoping they could lure him into a bumble so they could engineer his downfall and prevail over him.

The prophet was not without hope, however. He was confident that Yahweh stood with him "like a dread warrior." As a result, it would be his opponents who would stumble, not him. It is they who would bear lasting shame, not him (v. 11).

As painful as it was to suffer ridicule for declaring a judgment that was slow in coming, Jeremiah was confident that the prophecy *would* be fulfilled. His faith might be tested along the way, but in the end, God would prevail and Jeremiah would be vindicated (v. 12).

God does not engineer hard times for the sole purpose of trying us, but hard times do come, and when they do, they are a trial. How do we respond to the trials of life? God sees "the heart and the mind," Jeremiah says. What does God see in us?

**Happy words and hopeful praise
(v. 13)**

We are taken aback when the painful cries of vv. 7-12 suddenly give way to confident praise. How do we explain the sharp transition? Even a casual reader can see that v. 13 seems totally out of place. Between Jeremiah's bitter complaint (vv. 7-12) and a wretched wish that he had never been born (vv. 14-18) is a lilting call to praise: "Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers."

It's as if a heartbroken person who was pouring out his or her grief in counseling should pause between sobs to jump up and sing, "If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!"

An obvious and possible explanation is to suggest that a later editor of Jeremiah's work couldn't bear to let the prophet's aggrieved indictment of God stand as the last word, and so he inserted the confident call to praise to indicate that the prophet fully expected God to deliver him. This is implied by an extra space separating v. 13 from vv. 12 and 14 in the NRSV, as if it doesn't fully belong to either.

If that were the case, however, why would the writer not have placed the joyful call at the end of v. 18, following Jeremiah's embittered complaint: "Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?"

If an editor wanted to lighten the mood or ameliorate Jeremiah's charges against God, that would be the place to do it.

While the jarring shift in mood may seem strange to us, however, it is not uncommon to similar laments found in the book of Psalms, where joyful outbursts interrupt painful pleas with some regularity. (See "The Hardest Question" online for more.)

The book of Jeremiah, in its final form, was composed after the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had defeated Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried many leading Israelites into exile. It was written, then, with an exilic audience in mind.

If Jeremiah had seen or heard that Pashur and other former tormentors had been led away as he had predicted, it could have been cause for rejoicing, and the addition of a short chorus celebrating his exoneration would be fitting.

For most of his career, though, Jeremiah preached warnings that went unheeded and made predictions that went unfulfilled. He sought to serve God and faithfully live out his calling – indeed, the fire in his bones would not let him do otherwise – but it was a hard road to travel, and rewards were few.

Jeremiah's complaint is the prayer of an honest man who is willing to be honest with God. God did not respond by blasting Jeremiah for impertinence or by assuaging his fears, but by simply giving him another hard word to proclaim (if the events of ch. 21 follow those of ch. 20). Such satisfaction as Jeremiah found would have to come in the knowledge that he was being obedient to the call.

Painful prayers such as this one remind us that God respects an honest prayer, and almost certainly prefers a plainspoken prayer to a pretty one. Whether we are called to speak hard words, to do hard things, or to love hard people, faithful service to God can be difficult. We may wonder if it's worth the effort. Our prayers may echo more complaints than confidence, but God can take it.

Don't be afraid to pray with vigor and candor, for God understands our complaints and cherishes our hopes – and will send us right back to work. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Jeremiah 28:1-17

June 29, 2014

War of the Words

Our society features many “experts” and commentators who offer such differing opinions that it’s hard to know whom to believe. One politician predicts national disaster if a certain bill is passed, while another sees only ruin if it doesn’t.

Radio talk show hosts speak as if they know with certainty what is best for the country, while others dismiss their diatribes as political spin or a play for ratings. Who really knows what course we should take? How does one tell?

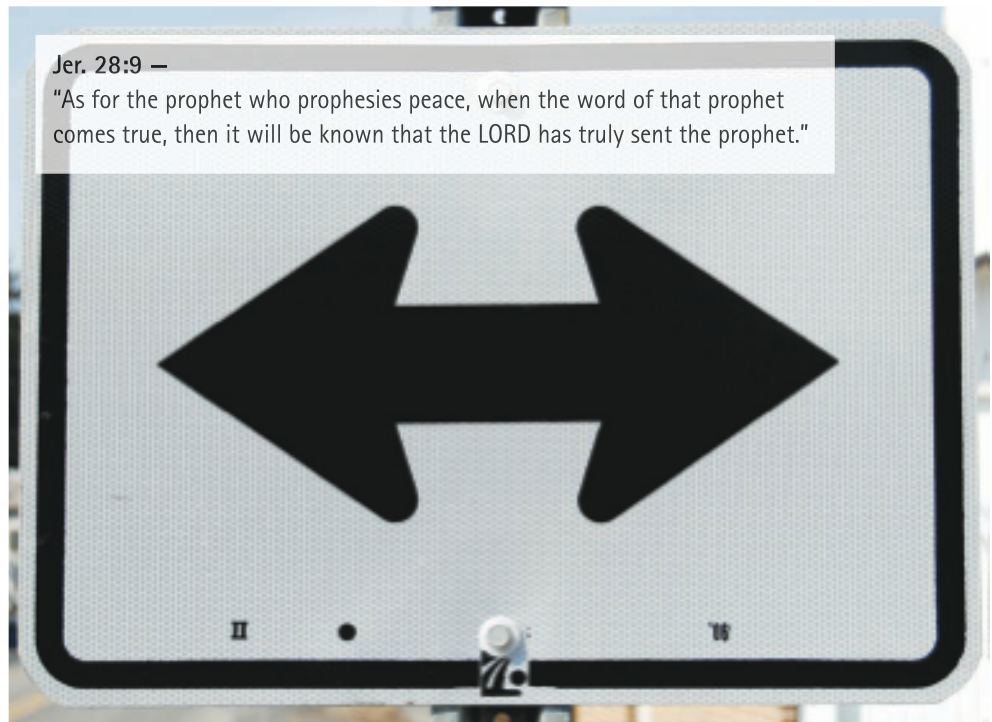
Our text derives from a tumultuous period in Judah’s history, when national policies were up for debate and prophets stood on opposing sides, each claiming to have a word from God. Perhaps a look at Jeremiah’s experience can offer insight for our own time.

A symbolic yoke

Here is the setting: About 597 BCE, the stout armies of Babylon swept through Judah, encamped around the gates of Jerusalem, and demanded that the city surrender. After a long siege, the victorious invaders looted the city’s treasures, including vessels of gold and silver from the temple and palace (2 Kgs. 24:13). King Nebuchadnezzar forced thousands of the city’s leading citizens into exile, including its young king, Jehoiachin (also called Jeconiah, 2 Kings 24:6-15).

Nebuchadnezzar replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle Mattaniah, changed the new king’s name to Zedekiah, and required him to pay an annual tribute to Babylon in return for allowing the city to remain intact. 📖

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



During the early years of Zedekiah’s reign, there was much inner turmoil among the leaders who remained in Jerusalem. Should they resign themselves to Babylonian domination, or rebel and refuse to pay the demanded tribute?

At some point, envoys from nearby kingdoms came to Jerusalem to consider making common cause to resist their common conqueror. Nationalistic prophets predicted that Babylon would fall, while the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed a vastly different message. 📖

Jeremiah, who often used visual aids to get his point across, fashioned a yoke of wooden bars and leather straps, then wore it on his neck as a symbol of Babylon’s sway over Israel and its neighbors (27:3-7). 📖 📖

Those who refused to accept the Babylonian hegemony would be doomed to lose everything, he said, while those who submitted could retain their holdings. Jeremiah cautioned the people to ignore “your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, ‘You

shall not serve the king of Babylon,’” for their prophecy was a lie (27:7-11). 📖 📖

Jeremiah found no joy in Babylonian rule, but he believed Judah’s defeat was a justified punishment for the nation’s desertion of Yahweh. Resisting Babylon would be tantamount to rebelling against the God who had given them into Nebuchadnezzar’s hand. Willing submission to Babylon was not ideal, but still better than a deeper disaster. 📖

A prophetic conflict (vv. 1-11)

Today’s text, from Jeremiah 28, is tightly connected to ch. 27. Both begin with “In the same year,” both are concerned with a conflict between prophets over how Judah should respond to Babylon, and both involve the symbolism of a yoke.

Certain unnamed prophets had predicted that the sacred implements taken from the temple would be returned soon. If they were really prophets, Jeremiah said, they would understand God’s purpose and also would be praying that the remaining temple furnishings would not be carried away (27:16-22). 📖 📖


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Can you imagine what it would be like to walk around with a symbolic yoke around your neck, as Jeremiah did? Today, many people wouldn't recognize a yoke if they saw one, or know its purpose. Try to imagine what it would be like if God called you to wear or carry an outward symbol of the spiritual bondage in which so many persons live. What might it be?

In 28:1, we finally meet one of the prophets with whom Jeremiah had been sparring. Hananiah, surprisingly, is not identified as a "false prophet." Rather, his credentials appear to be good: the narrator refers to both of them as "the prophet." Both use the proper form for prophetic oracles ("Thus says the LORD of hosts . . ."), and both speak for God using the word "I." Rather than prejudice the text with pejorative labels, the narrator allows the reader to judge which prophet is true.

A day came when Jeremiah and Hananiah faced each other in the temple courts, as if meeting for a debate, with a crowd of both people and priests looking on (v. 1).

Hananiah spoke first, expanding an earlier message. "Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon . . ." (v. 2). 

Hananiah went on to predict that the temple's sacred items would be returned within two years, along with king Jeconiah and the rest of the exiles (vv. 3-4).

Did Hananiah believe his own forecast? It is unlikely that he should be seen as a court prophet pushing King Zedekiah's agenda, for his prediction of Jehoiachin's return would not be welcome news to the man who had replaced him.

Is it possible that Hananiah wanted so badly to see the vessels and people returned that he convinced himself it would happen? If so, he would not have been the first or last to practice self-deception.

When we want something to be true, we have a way of convincing ourselves that it is true or acceptable. For

example, we may want to think that God is fine with it if we choose to live extravagantly while ignoring the poor, to enhance our comfort by excluding those who are different, or to get blissfully high while endangering others. If we want something to be true, we can often talk ourselves into believing it – but that doesn't make it so.

Jeremiah wished Hananiah's prediction could be true. Thus, he responded with a hearty "Amen," or "So let it be!" A limited sentence in bondage to Babylon would certainly be welcome news (vv. 5-6).

Jeremiah didn't believe Hananiah, but he knew that Yahweh sometimes changed course despite earlier declarations (Exod. 32:11-14, for example). In the absence of a clear word of the Lord, Jeremiah simply reminded Hananiah and the other listeners that Israel's greatest prophets were known mainly for their prophecies of judgment (vv. 7-8). Prophecies of peace were rare, and no one who predicted peace should be regarded as a prophet until his or her words came true (v. 9).

Hananiah responded by taking the yoke Jeremiah had been wearing from his neck and breaking it. Turning Jeremiah's object lesson to his own purposes, he declared that God would break the yoke of Babylon and bring restoration within two years (vv. 10-11a).

It seems a bit surprising that Jeremiah meekly submitted to Hananiah's actions, despite his disbelief that the competing prophet was correct. Apparently, Jeremiah thought the matter was worth additional consideration and prayer. He refrained from further comment and "went on his way" (v. 11b), at least until he had something clear to say.

Jeremiah's response suggests that everyone – and especially those who claim to speak for God – could benefit from taking time to reflect and seek divine direction before speaking

potentially divisive words.

How often have we popped off in the heat of the moment and made claims that were either hurtful or simply wrong? What can we learn from Jeremiah's decision, when he had no clear word from God, to hold his tongue?

A certain word (vv. 12-17)

The prophet waited, and "sometime after," things became clear, as "the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" (v. 12). Yahweh instructed him to tell Hananiah that the wooden yoke he had broken would be replaced by one of iron. Nebuchadnezzar and his descendants would rule with an even harsher hand until their own time of judgment came due (vv. 13-14, cf. 27:6-7). The reference to wild animals, as in 27:6, was a means of underscoring the extent of Nebuchadnezzar's ruling power.

The chapter closes with a harsh warning to those who mislead God's people by misrepresenting God's word: Jeremiah predicted that Hananiah would die within the year (vv. 15-17), and the narrative says that the prediction was fulfilled.

Perhaps you have noticed that every few years, especially as significant dates approach, contemporary "prophets" arise to predict the end of the world or the return of Christ. When natural disasters or terrorists strike, we can be sure that one or more self-styled or high profile prophets will label the calamity as divine punishment against wayward nations or cities.

Jeremiah's words remind us that prophecy is serious business. Those who take it upon themselves to speak for God face an awesome responsibility, and those who misrepresent the divine word must answer to a fearsome God.

The responsibility doesn't end with the speakers, though. Those who listen have a duty to judge carefully and prayerfully whether they believe a message accurately reflects the teachings of scripture and the love of Christ.

God gave us good minds and receptive hearts for a reason. Let's use them. **BT**

Classifieds

Senior Pastor: First Baptist Church Ashland, located in a small college town minutes north of Richmond, Va., has an average combined attendance in two services of 300. We just completed the intentional interim process and desire to expand young adult, youth, and children's ministries. Candidates should exemplify strong spiritual leadership, be devoted to pastoral care and the Great Commission, and preach the inspired Word of God. A seminary degree is preferred, and 6+ years of senior pastor or equivalent experience are required. Send résumés by June 15 to First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 928, Ashland, VA 23005 or to fbcsearch14@gmail.com.

Pastor: Cedar Grove Baptist Church in Blount County, Tenn., a CBF/SBC church, is seeking a full-time pastor. Average worship attendance is 80-90. We desire a pastor who can motivate members and relate to different age groups. Send résumés to Pastor Search Committee, Cedar Grove Baptist Church, 5302 Nails Creek Rd., Maryville, TN 37804.

Minister to Youth and Young Adults: Derbyshire Baptist Church is a vibrant, moderate church located in the west end of Richmond, Va. We are affiliated with the Richmond Baptist Association, Virginia Baptist Mission Board,

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention. We are a multi-staffed church with many gifted people. We are seeking a seminary graduate with at least 5 years of experience in youth ministry. The position will focus mainly on middle school and high school students and also work closely with the young adults in our church. If you have a passion for guiding youth and young adults in discovering God's plan for their lives, please send your résumé to youth@dbcrichmond.org.

Minister to Children and Families: First Baptist Church of Griffin, Ga., a moderate congregation affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and with historic ties to the Southern Baptist Convention, is seeking a skilled and passionate minister to children and families. This staff minister is responsible for planning, coordinating and evaluating a comprehensive ministry to children, birth through fifth grade. This can be a part-time or full-time position. Send résumé and cover letter to Children's Minister Search Committee, 106 W. Taylor St., Griffin, GA 30223 or to searchcommittee@fbcgriffin.org no later than May 15.

Minister to Children and Families

Broadway Baptist Church
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EXPLORING THE 'OTHER' BAPTISTS

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Keynote speaker

BILL LEONARD

*James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Baptist Studies and Professor of Church History
Wake Forest University Divinity School*



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In the Know

Tom Clery died March 19 in Tampa, Fla., at age 76. He was a former campus minister in Florida and served as a missionary in Austria and Poland, with his wife Joyce, through both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In retirement, the Clerys were full-time volunteers in Florida with CBF-related ministries Touching Miami with Love and Open House Ministries.

Dorisanne Cooper is pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, N.C., coming from Lake Shore Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.

Ricky Creech resigned as executive director/minister of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention to lead a faith-based nonprofit working with children in eastern Kentucky and Ohio.

Charles R. (Dick) Hurst died March 31 in Tyler, Texas, at age 80. A physician, he served for more than 20 years as a missions volunteer through

the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, traveling the world to provide medical care to those in need.

Richard E. Ice died March 15 in Alameda, Calif., at age 83. He was president and CEO of American Baptist Homes of the West for 23 years before retiring in 1995 and being named president emeritus.

Mark Newton has taken a newly-created position as director of church engagement for Baylor University. He comes from the pastorate of First Baptist Church of San Marcos, Texas.

Marie Onwubuariri will become executive minister for the American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin this summer. She currently serves as director of admissions at the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, Calif., and is immediate past president of the Alliance of Asian American Baptist Churches.

Willene Pierce, a former leader in Woman's Missionary Union and the Baptist World Alliance, died March 18. In 1997, she launched a ministry called The Native American LINK, Inc. (Living in Neighborly Kindness), which became best known for its Native Praise Choir,

representing more than 20 tribes singing the languages of the Cherokee, Muscogee and Choctaw tribes, performed at the Baptist World Congress in England in 2005. In 2013, Pierce was recognized for 50 years of service among Native American women.

Carrie and Kurt Smalley have been appointed as associate missionaries by American Baptist International Ministries to serve as church planters in Hungary.

Joshua Speight is ministries manager for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, providing leadership for spiritual formation and leadership development as well as resource Fellowship churches, partners and constituents. He comes from the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, where he had served as associate coordinator of missions since 2008. Earlier, he was associate pastor of North Riverside Baptist Church in Newport News, Va.

Larry and Rebecca Stanton were commissioned on Feb. 16 as American Baptist International Ministries missionaries to serve in Liberia. **BT**

Roots and vines

By Tony W. Cartledge

Vines have covered my roots — in a way. In Philadelphia for meetings of the Baptist World Alliance and North American Baptist Fellowship in March, I finally had an opportunity to search for my first American ancestor's headstone.

In November 1682, at age 43, Edmund Cartledge of Riddings Parish in Derbyshire, England, married Mary Need of Nottinghamshire. Soon thereafter, they joined William Penn in his religious liberty project and helped him settle the city of Philadelphia.

On the list of First Purchasers in the Pennsylvania Archives, Edmund Cartledge is the third name. He was entitled to choose a 250-acre plot after arriving in Pennsylvania, and he chose a spot a few miles west of town in a settlement called Darby. Later, he bought more.

“Edmund” was already a long-running family name. When he and Mary had children, they named them John, Mary and Edmund (2). Edmund died in 1703, a few days after composing his last will and testament, which included this paragraph as the first order:

First, I Commend my Souell into the hands of Almighty God my maker and Redeemer: And my Body to be buried in Such Decent place and manner as to my Loveing wife, Relations, and ffriends Shall Seem meet and Convenient (original spelling).

What seemed “meet and convenient” to his family was to plant Edmund in the Darby Friends Burial Ground, on a shaded hill overlooking Darby, and to honor him with a nice headstone and footstone made of Pennsylvania bluestone.

However, Edmund was a Quaker, and Quakers generally frowned on “monuments to the dead,” considering them to be “vainglorious.”

Later on, the Quaker displeasure with such monuments turned into a rule, and for much of the 1700s, Quakers were not allowed to erect any sort of marker. At some point, Edmund's decorative headstone and footstone were sunk from sight so as not to violate the prohibition.

More than 100 years later, in 1862, a man digging a grave uncovered Edmund's markers,

and they were set into a wall near the bottom of the cemetery.

While doing research on Samuel Cartledge, an early Baptist pastor in Georgia and South Carolina, I had read that the headstone had been set into a wall “around the cemetery.”

A free morning in Philadelphia offered a long-awaited chance for Susan and me to go in search of the stone. It turned into quite a treasure hunt.

We went first to the Friends Cemetery in Upper Darby (not knowing there was a difference), where the keeper advised us to head a few miles south to the Friends Burial Ground in just plain Darby.

We found an old Friends Meeting House (founded in 1682, built in 1805) first, but the cemetery was a couple of blocks away.

The burial ground is located on a hill beside a housing project in what is now a rather run-down neighborhood and contains lots of stones, but all of them lying low to the ground and containing only names and dates. We scrambled through snow and scrub looking for remnants of a wall around the cemetery, to no avail.

The only wall we could find was at the bottom of the hill, a good distance from any of the graves, and it was obviously old but covered with plaster.

Finally, we noticed a short abutment on the end of the wall to the right of the gate, maybe 10-12 feet long, fronted by a chain link fence and covered with ivy. We decided to give it a look, and *voila!*

Set into the wall, completely hidden by the ivy, were Edmund's headstone and footstone. The headstone was broken and a slice was missing from the middle, but when we pulled the vines back we could make out, clearly enough, “For the memory of Ed-und Cartl--ge,” along with what remained of the date. The footstone was marked with the initials “EC” and the year, 1703.

It felt a bit odd to stand on ground that my ancestors farmed and helped to develop more than 300 years ago, and even odder to walk across the street to a local pizza joint, where an immigrant from Albania made up a fine veggie pizza for us.

It was a helpful reminder that all of us,



save the Native Americans we displaced, were immigrants at some point, and even the Indians had to migrate here, though many thousands of years before.

I can trace 10 generations of Cartledges on American soil: Edmund1 (the settler); Edmund2 (a backslidden Quaker and Indian trader); Edmund3 (a planter who became Anglican, moved to North Carolina and later Georgia, and served as a king's constable); James (a planter who was converted to the Baptist faith by Daniel and Martha Stearns Marshall); James2 (a well-known physician in those parts); Jesse Mercer (clerk of court for Lincoln County, Ga., apparently named for the famous Georgia Baptist); William Mell (who followed his father as clerk of court); William Crawford (my grandfather); William Crawford Jr., and me.

My family's role in helping to shape America is a source of some pride, but being heir to a longer history doesn't necessarily make me more American, or a better American, than more recent immigrants who come here with the same hopes of a better life that brought Edmund and Mary Cartledge across the Atlantic 330 years ago.

My hope is that all of us immigrants may learn to appreciate each other and work together in making this evermore the land of our dreams. **BT**

Christianity & homosexuality

A conversation with Ralph Blair of Evangelicals Concerned

There is no more controversial and potentially divisive topic in many church circles today than homosexuality. Since conflict and division are unpleasant, one might fairly ask: Why address this topic here and now?

The “here” part of that question is easily answered. This news journal is committed to addressing topics and trends that are actually being discussed today.

The “now” part is that issues related to the church and homosexuality are not going away. Study after study shows that the fuller acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships is growing at a faster rate than any other social change in many decades.

So the options are to ignore it, fight it or address it. And the more constructive approach is to address it in ways that allow for thoughtful ideas to be exchanged without any notion that everyone ends up with the same conclusions.

Ralph Blair is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City and the founder of Evangelicals Concerned, Inc. (ecinc.org) who has spent many years relating to gay and lesbian Christians.

A graduate of Bowling Green State University, the University of Southern California Graduate School of Religion, and the Graduate School of Pennsylvania State University, he also studied at Bob Jones University, Dallas Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary.

BT: When someone asks about the work of Evangelicals Concerned (EC), how do you describe it?

RB: [Evangelicals Concerned] is a ministry of support for evangelicals who find themselves or family members and friends unprepared for the

necessary integration of their Christian faith and homosexual orientation.

Helping them to take scripture and the Gospel seriously and to understand homosexual orientation, this poor preparation can be overcome. Sound biblical and psychological awareness can prepare them to move ahead into a thoroughgoing Christian discipleship.

We’re also dedicated to share the Gospel with non-Christian gay men and lesbians and to help them distinguish between caricatures and the truth of the Gospel.

BT: Many argue that one cannot be an evangelical and advocate for the full acceptance of gay and lesbian persons. How do you counter that argument?

RB: In their book, *Theological Education in the Evangelical Tradition*, Southern Baptist seminary president Albert Mohler and Orthodox Presbyterian historian D.G. Hart admit: “No single evangelical tradition exists.”

Still, as evangelical historian Bruce Hindmarsh of Regent College says, through all the “balkanization of evangelicalism in America and Britain today over issues of gender, sexuality and politics, [the central evangelical message of the Gospel is] worth heeding.”

Well, EC has always heeded that central Gospel — in spite of attacks from the Left — and we’ve always supported same-sex couples — in spite of attacks from the Right. Since our founding in 1975, we’ve been encouraged by the support of evangelical leaders.

They’ve included Bob Rayburn, Eugenia Price, Rosalind Rinker, Marten Woudstra, John F. Alexander, Mark and Joan Olson, Harry Boer, Clark Pinnock, Nick Wolterstorff, Lew Smedes, Charlie Shedd, Bob Wennberg, Kay Lindskoog, Reta Haltemann Finger, Fisher Humphreys, Donald Dayton, Dave Myers, Walt Hearn, Randy Balmer, Chuck Smith Jr., Wally Howard, Chip and Nancy Miller, Henk Hart, Cynthia Clawson, Tom Key, Ken Medema



and many more.

They have been an Evangelical Theological Society president; head of Old Testament translation for the NIV Bible; national leaders in IVCF, Campus Crusade, Young Life and Youth for Christ; college professors at Anderson, Calvin, Hope, Westmont, Messiah and Houghton; and seminary professors at Covenant, Fuller, Beeson and Western.

One was the number-one author of evangelical influence in the second half of the 20th century — as judged by the editors at *Christianity Today*. Baker, IVP, Eerdmans, NavPress, Revell, Word and Zondervan have published their books.

BT: Often there is more shouting than civil discussion about the biblical perspective on same-sex relationships. How do you keep the temperature down?

RB: Anger is prompted by fear and frustration. Both sides want to be *right* but can fear they’re *wrong*. So, the shouting can be defensiveness.

Anger reveals a perceived need that things must be different. Feelings of hurt on the part of those who deal with their deeply

experienced sexual orientation can prompt hostility toward those who blame them for what they didn't choose and who fight against their having the rights and opportunities their attackers take for granted for themselves.

Discussion can be more civil if each side resolves its own source of defensiveness and stops imputing nasty motives to the other. Among Christians, a prioritizing of the biblical call to love each other — including perceived enemies — would help.

In church history there've been plenty of controversies: inclusion of Gentiles without circumcision, abolition of slavery, racial integration, interracial marriage, women in church leadership, instrumental music in worship, drinking wine, dancing, etc.

These challenges have been resisted with Bible proof-texts. These Bible verses are all still in the Bible, but few if any use them for previous misuse. Perhaps such history lessons can inform today's controversy with much needed perspective.

BT: You address the so-called “clobber texts” that are used by those who claim that homosexual behavior is biblically unacceptable. What are your primary conclusions about those texts?

RB: Serious Bible interpretation must try to decipher what the *original authors* could have intended and what the *original hearers* could have heard. This requires help from those who know the original languages, cultural settings and assumptions.

While people readily admit that they don't know Hebrew and Greek, they fail to realize how hard it is to relate to the original cultural settings and assumptions of the ancient world.

We can't expect folks to simply ignore Bible passages that they think make perfect sense to them. But we must caution against reading into these passages what they find convenient as proof texts for their arguments and prejudices in today's world.

Both the Right and the Left are guilty of *eisegesis*. The Right reads today's homosexuality into Paul's letters, and the Left reads today's homosexuality into the friendship of David and Jonathan. We must help them all to read the Bible as accurately as possible, within the context of the *immediate* text, the *overall* scriptural context and the *original cultural* context rather than *our* cultural context.

And, of course, serious Christians need to have a clearly informed conscience with reference to these verses since it's neither

psychologically nor spiritually wise to violate conscience — in either direction.

The fullest scriptural context for any question must take the heart of scripture seriously. This is well summarized in Jesus' saying that all of the Law and Prophets are summed up in this: “You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength [and, Jesus added to his citing of Deuteronomy 6:5] and all your *mind*. And love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Luke 10:27).

Paul adds the Gospel context in this succinct statement: “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And He has given to us this message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Paul further explains: “In Christ, there is *neither* Jew *nor* Greek, there is *neither* slave *nor* free and there's no ‘male *and* female’” (Galatians 3:28).

This “*male and female*” clause shifts from the structure of his other two contrasts. It's his climax to the argument that, indeed, in Christ, there's no *theological* relevance to *socially constructed* distinctions and there's no *theological* relevance to the *naturally physical* “male and female” — a term he lifts from the creation account (Genesis 1:27).

This is especially important for those who rest their case in the story of Adam and Eve — a model that was almost immediately impacted by their fall into sin — and misuse it against gay couples today.

To read *our* marriages of same-sex peers into the Bible is clearly anachronistic.

Classics scholar Sarah Ruden explains: In Paul's day, “there were no gay households; there were in fact no gay institutions or gay culture at all.”

To the contrary, same-sex *rape* in the ancient world — as at Sodom — was a brutal power play over dominated men and other “others.”

As Ruden notes, “Society pressured a man into sexual brutality toward other males. To keep it unmistakable that he had no sympathy with passive homosexuals, he would tout his attacks on vulnerable young males.”

She points out that such “homosexual rape [was] *divinely* sanctioned [with the] idol of sexual aggression, Priapus, the scarecrow with a huge phallus.”

She cites a Roman poet's describing being “cut to pieces [as] the ordinary term for ‘to be the passive partner’.” She assumes that, as a boy, Paul saw, “at any slave auction ... boys his

own age ... knocked down to local pimps at high prices, to the sound of jokes about how much they would have to endure during their brief careers.”

So, if Paul makes any reference to same-sex acts, he could have had in mind only such terrible abuses and not a lovingly committed same-sex marriage. In her *Books & Culture* interview for *Christianity Today*, Ruden repeats: Paul “could have had no idea of anything in homosexuality that was not exploitative and cruel.”

BT: What have you experienced in your practice that would be helpful for congregations to know?

RB: Whether we know it or admit it, we all have someone around us — in our family, among friends, in our neighborhood, at school, at church, at work — someone who is gay or lesbian or who has a loved one who is gay or lesbian.

And, for most of us, there's more than one such person. It's crucial for Christians to relate to such persons via the Golden Rule.

And the first step in such a relating is to give these persons the respect of challenging one's own preconceived notions, prejudices, misunderstandings. Listening to them and learning from them is a good way to begin.

And, where there's a real desire to know that other person, there's a vested interest in learning what it's like to be in that person's shoes. If we have a vested interest to love the others as we love ourselves, we're much more likely to get to know who they really are.

And, when we do that, we'll find that they're much like ourselves.

BT: On a personal level, how does one go from being a Bob Jones University student to a psychotherapist who advocates for same-sex couples?

RB: I've learned that, since “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself,” there can be reconciliation, as well, between reconciled *people*.

But, what keeps us apart are our many efforts to assert *our own self-righteous reconciliation* with God, our finding faults in others in order to *religiously* save ourselves.

Ungrateful people can concoct reasons for separating themselves from others. And the closer they sense they resemble others they don't like, the more they must claim their defensive difference.

So, people tend to misunderstand and even to “bear false witness” against each other.

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Inspired Creativity

I've observed this throughout my rather diverse personal history.

Having been reared within a 1950s mainline Protestantism, having heard the clear Gospel from an evangelical Sunday school teacher and over the radio from Billy Graham, having spent two years at fundamentalist Bob Jones University, two more years in a state university where I was an officer in IVCF, having studied at Dispensationalist Dallas Seminary and at Calvinist Westminster Seminary, having earned both my graduate degrees at secular universities (USC and Penn State), having worked on the IVCF staff at Penn and then on the ecumenical staff at Penn State, having been on the faculty in the City University of New York and then spending many decades in the private practice of psychotherapy with gay New Yorkers as well as founding and leading EC, I've had plenty of opportunities to observe that though folks in each of these venues assume that they understood those in the other venues, they really don't.

They're isolated within their own "comfort zones" with people very much like themselves, people who think as they do, share the same political and religious prejudices, consume the same media and tend, in unison, to *disdain* others, i.e., their reassuring *stereotypes* of others.

So, given my sojourning in these *intentionally insular* communities, and seeing for myself how everyone so self-servingly misunderstands "outsiders," it hasn't been hard for me to go from Bob Jones University to where I am today — especially with God's chastising grace all along the way.

BT: Public opinion among American Christians and the larger U.S. population is swinging at an unprecedented rate in support of equal rights for gay and lesbian persons. Has this surprised you? Do you see personal experiences with family and close friends as the primary reason? Are there other factors?

RB: I can't say I'm all that surprised since I assumed it would be coming to this point. Along the way, I paid more attention to doing what I needed to do at the time rather than putting much attention on eventual outcomes.

Results are always up to others and, ultimately, up to God. But, we have come a long way in a relatively short time.

I think a big reason for this more recent acceleration of change has been the fact that increasingly, more and more family members are coming out as gay or lesbian and that gives their families and friends a real vested interest

in challenging their preconceived negative notions.

In the days of the black civil rights struggle, for example, white folks did not discover a black son or a black daughter in the family. Now, folks discover a gay son or lesbian daughter in the family, making it more urgent to come up to speed sooner.

But, sadly, abandonment of gay children is not uncommon among fundamentalist Christian parents. Some are estranged for years.

BT: Churches and denominational groups on the theological/ideological ends have taken solid — and opposing — positions regarding homosexuality. But sandwiched in between are many church groups that find this to be a challenging and often very divisive issue. How would you advise congregational leaders who fear addressing this timely but often explosive subject?

RB: People on both ends of the ideological spectrum have knee-jerk reactions in these matters. So, we all need to reduce our programmed rhetoric and relate to real-life individuals who need to be heard and understood.

Nothing's gained by a frontal attack against defensive posturing.

Congregations that are divided on homosexuality issues have an opportunity to work through the problems *together* with folks they already know more broadly. This allows for more patience with one another.

They can share their stories of experienced struggles and changed minds and identify with others who are now where they used to be.

We don't want others to demand that we change our minds in sync with them, so when we change our minds we can't expect others to change their minds in sync with us. Besides, it does no good to try to get others to violate conscience.

At the end of the day, what church historian Philip Schaff called "the watchword of Christian peacemakers" can save the day and the communal life together: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity."

Though some may still call "non-essential" what others here call "essential," hopefully all can see the wisdom of *charity*.

Besides, when some no longer feel *pushed* by others to change their minds, they may be better able, on their own, to afford to be less defensive, less argumentative, and actually come around to changing their minds after taking their own good time to do so. **BT**

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Virginia. Louisiana. Georgia. The Union's military offensives spring forward throughout the South, reaching ever deeper into the heart of the Confederacy and waging a contest of attrition and willpower against the numerically inferior Confederate armies.

The fiercest clashes take place in Virginia, where U.S. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's Army of the Potomac relentlessly attacks Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, only to be repulsed in the battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House. After Spotsylvania, Grant and his officers sit on pews in the church yard of the Massaponax Baptist Church and plot their next move. Then on they go, doggedly pursuing Lee and engaging the rebels yet again the last day of the month in the beginning of the Battle of Cold Harbor.

Churches are often the casualties of army movements, as is the Enon Baptist Church of Chesterfield County, Va., which is dismantled by Union forces and the lumber appropriated for the building of a military hospital.

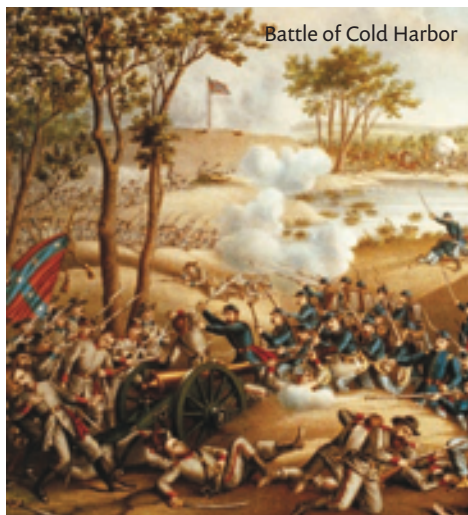
Confederates also score a victory in Louisiana this month, thwarting Union efforts to reinforce Alexandria. The occupying federals torch and desert the city, an event witnessed by American Baptist minister Charles H. Corey, working for the U.S. Sanitary Commission:

The city was soon wrapped in flames; houses, stores, churches, everything seemed on fire; women and children were in tears....

Yet the Union offensive in Louisiana continues, including the federals' liberation of thousands of slaves as the army marches southward from the city.

Meanwhile, the much-anticipated Atlanta campaign begins when Union Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman moves his armies southward out of Chattanooga and into Georgia, the federals relentlessly pushing Gen. Joseph E. Johnston's Army of the Tennessee southward, day after day.

Reaching Paulding County west of Atlanta on May 25, Sherman attempts to out-flank Johnston but is prevented from doing so in the Battle of New Hope (Baptist) Church. Fighting takes place in the church's cemetery,



Battle of Cold Harbor

and the battle ends in a draw. Sherman's offensive is thus temporarily stalled as the month comes to a close.

Meanwhile, far northward, American Baptists gather at the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia for the 50th anniversary celebration of the American Baptist Missionary Union. Among the resolutions offered is the following:

Resolved, That we regard the rebellion inaugurated by the Southern States for the purpose of destroying the Union which our fathers founded, and establishing a slaveholders' confederacy, as utterly causeless and inexcusable — a crime against civilization, humanity, freedom, and God, unparalleled in all centuries.

An address delivered to the American Baptist Home Mission Society also speaks to slavery and abolitionism, rejoicing that "more than a million of slaves have obtained the blessed boon of freedom," while looking forward to ultimate Union victory and noting that America is a nation "in the throes of its second birth. In the hot furnace of civil war its purification is being accomplished."

In the midst of the intense battles this month, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln is growing ever more anxious to bring the war against the South to a successful conclusion. Northern Baptist ministers routinely encourage the president in his prosecution of the war and his efforts to emancipate slaves.

150 YEARS AGO

May 1864

Upon receiving a copy of the preamble and resolutions of the Home Mission Society's recent gathering, Lincoln responds in writing, evidencing biblical familiarity mixed with a passion for justice and cautionary humility:

... I can only thank you for thus adding to the effective and almost unanimous support which the Christian communities are so zealously giving to the country, and to liberty. Indeed it is difficult to conceive how it could be otherwise with any one professing christianity, or even having ordinary perceptions of right and wrong. To read in the Bible, as the word of God himself, that "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread,["] and to preach there — from that, "In the sweat of other mans faces shalt thou eat bread," to my mind can scarcely be reconciled with honest sincerity. When brought to my final reckoning, may I have to answer for robbing no man of his goods; yet more tolerable even this, than for robbing one of himself, and all that was his. When, a year or two ago, those professedly holy men of the South, met in the semblance of prayer and devotion, and, in the name of Him who said "As ye would all men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them" appealed to the christian world to aid them in doing to a whole race of men, as they would have no man do unto themselves, to my thinking, they contemned and insulted God and His church, far more than did Satan when he tempted the Saviour with the Kingdoms of the earth. The devils attempt was no more false, and far less hypocritical. But let me forbear, remembering it is also written "Judge not, lest ye be judged." BT

—Bruce Gourley is executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society. For a daily log of "This Day in Civil War History," see civilwarbaptists.com.

Letter to the guest preacher

Dear Martha:

I am glad you are coming to preach for our congregation, and I am excited about getting a break. You know the old saying, "If the preacher is good, he deserves a Sunday off; and if he's not, the congregation does." I'm not sure who is looking forward to this weekend the most.

I want to tell you a few things that might be helpful. I have been the pastor of First Baptist for 10 years, so I know them pretty well. I can already name a couple who are probably going to like you.

I'm not sure what to tell you to wear. I wear a suit with a white shirt and a blue tie, but that's not going to work. Pick your favorite outfit and set that aside for your next party. Then aim somewhere between Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton.

Google Maps will tell you it will take two hours, but the construction is horrible. Give yourself an extra 30 minutes, and don't expect a short line at Dunkin' Donuts.

When you get here, park wherever you want except for the "Reserved for the Pastor" spot. Sam Myers is upset that there's a spot for me—something about the priesthood of the believer—so he parks there.

The new contemporary service begins at 8:30. The attendance is less than we hoped. We talked about cancelling it this week since I'm at the beach, but the worship leader is committed. Corey Hodges likes to joke, "Not a lot of 50-year-old drummers with only two months' experience have a gig every week."

The Rebecca/Ruth class wants you to teach Sunday school. Rebecca and Ruth used to be the two oldest women's classes, but when the Rebeccas started to pass, they combined. They began working through 1 Timothy last week. You get chapter 2. Let me know what you do with "Women will be saved through childbearing." Elaine Von Diest, by the way, doesn't have any children.

The traditional service is at 11:00. Be prepared to offer the welcome and offertory prayer, because Hank Berry is Deacon of the Week. If the weather is nice, he may go to the lake.

Any translation of the Bible is fine as long as it is King James or NIV.

The acoustics are terrible, so speak up.

Preach whatever God lays on your heart, but skip the hot-button issues: health care, gun control, homosexuality, materialism, militarism, ecology, immigration, abortion, world religions, and the unimportance of college sports.

They like sermons about being good neighbors as long as you are talking about their actual neighbors. I haven't preached from Revelation for a while, so that's an option. If you preach on stewardship, make it clear that I didn't suggest it.

We have never had a woman preach. Our deacons talked about it a couple of years ago, but the discussion didn't go well, so I dropped it. I didn't ask permission this time.

Elmer Wilson will probably make a show of walking out when you get up to preach. He may come to the 8:30 service and then come back for the 11:00 so he can do it twice. Feel free to make a joke, maybe, "Most people wait until I say something to walk out."

I preach 20 minutes, but go longer and they might appreciate me more. Carl Myers will fall asleep five minutes into your sermon. If you see teenagers reading the hymnal, they are texting the person seated next to them. Dave Breeden takes notes. If he doesn't have a page of complaints, then you haven't really preached.

After the service is over, walk to the foyer to shake hands. Most people go out the side doors, so don't take it personal.

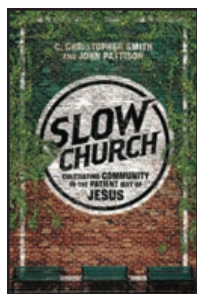
Talk is cheap and so is our honorarium, but Earl Scroggins, chair emeritus of the deacons, will take you to lunch. I'm sorry about this. Earl loves Waffle House. I recommend you get something "smothered and covered."

Thank you for preaching for us. If we both live to tell about it, I may ask you again.

Mentioning these details makes this seem less sacred, but I don't mean it that way. Preaching doesn't always feel holy. But the more I preach, the more I believe it is. Not much is better than getting to say, "This is what I believe God wants us to think about." Make them laugh. Make them cry. Make them feel like the sinners and saints they are. Even when you hear the ding that signals a text message's arrival, God is at work.

Grace and joy,
Your partner in preaching the Gospel

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



Slow Church

*Cultivating Community
in the Patient Way of Jesus*

By C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison

By *Bob Smietan*, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

‘Slow church’

Movement fights the ‘McDonaldization’ of church say authors

Going to church these days can be a bit like eating at a fast food joint. It might be quick and tasty, but it won't satisfy your soul.

You can't franchise the kingdom of God, say the authors of *Slow Church*, a new book from InterVarsity Press that applies the lessons of the slow food movement to congregational life.

C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, the book's authors, are part of a loose network of writers, friends, theologians and pastors worried about what they call the “McDonaldization” of church. They say too many small churches try to mass-produce spiritual growth by copying the latest megachurch techniques.

Instead, Smith and Pattison advocate for “slow church” — an approach to ministry that stresses local context and creativity over pre-packaged programs.

About 15 years ago, Pattison said, leaders from his home church in Lincoln, Neb., tried to import some programs from Willow Creek, a megachurch outside Chicago. But those programs didn't fit in their small town, he said. And he sees other churches doing the same thing today.

“Our biggest concern with megachurches,” he said, “is the fact that they typically draw their members from such a large area that they become churches of nowhere, not belonging to any particular place.”

Both Smith and Pattison are members of small urban churches that have reinvented themselves in recent years.

Smith, who runs an online magazine called the *Englewood Review of Books*, is a member of Englewood Christian Church in Indianapolis. The church was once booming — drawing more than 1,000 people to services in the 1970s. Today the congregation is more modest, around 180 people.

Most of its ministries are focused on improving life in the neighborhood. The church runs a well-respected day care ministry and has renovated a number of local homes.

Most Englewood members live in the neighborhood around the church. Many gather on Sundays for an all-church conversation about



C. Christopher Smith, co-author of *Slow Church*. Photo courtesy of Mary Bowling Photography/RNS

social issues and faith.

“Conversation is a lost art in our culture,” he said. “People don't talk to one another. And the church can suffer from that lack of conversation.”

Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn., says the slow church movement makes for good theology. But it likely won't work for most churches, he said, for the same reason that the slow food movement failed to gain mass appeal.

“We'd all like to have a slow-cooked, three-hour meal, with locally grown produce,” he said. “But few of us have the time or money for it.”

Likewise, few people would be drawn to the ideas of slow church. All the pressures of modern society, he said, would be against them.

“This would likely appeal to an educated, younger hip group of people,” he said. “There aren't many of them in small churches.”

Joshua Stoxen, pastor of Vineyard Central Church in Norwood, Ohio, met Smith a few years ago at a conference on urban gardening.

Like other slow churches, Vineyard Central is inspired in part by a verse from the book of John (1:14), as translated by Eugene Peterson (*The Message*): “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

Other groups are also thinking about the troubles of industrialized faith. There's also the Parish Collective, based in Seattle; the new monastic movement; and the Ekklesia Project, which made the idea of slow church the theme of its 2012 national gathering.

Phil Kenneson, professor of theology and philosophy at Milligan College, just outside of Johnson City, Tenn., spoke about slow church at that Ekklesia Project meeting.

Kenneson says the pace of American culture isn't very conducive for spiritual growth, which requires stability and patience. It often means staying put in one place long enough to develop deep ties with a specific place and groups of people.

“You need to commit to a place and people — and let God throw you into the rock tumbler with those other people until the rough edges get rubbed off.”

Kenneson says the language of slow church is helpful in getting people to pay attention to the need for deliberate spiritual development. But he also said the term is often used in a tongue-in-cheek fashion.

“This isn't some great new thing,” he said. “This is an old thing that we are trying to slow down and pay attention to.” **BT**

Making disciples

Changing times bring challenges, opportunities for Christian formation

Making Christian disciples is as old as the Gospel, but as challenging as the ever-changing context for congregational ministry.

How might current challenges be faced in order for congregations to be more effective at disciple making? What new opportunities have arisen?

Christian educators have wrestled with such questions for many years — as they explore new ways of helping people grow in faith despite the growing competition for their time and attention.

TIME SQUEEZE

“Traditionally, we have been a minimum of three-hours-per-week people as members would give us two sessions on Sunday morning and another session later in the week, most often on Wednesday evening,” said Michael McCullar, formations pastor for Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga. “Today we are hoping for two sessions — and often have to settle for one.”

A result, he said, is that some churches have restructured worship around “fill-in-the-blanks” teaching sermons.

On the other hand, worship attendance

may be what gets sacrificed in the time squeeze, said Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas.

“We often see folks who come to Sunday school because they find community there but don’t stay for worship because they think they only have one hour to give, not two,” he said.

Jill Jenkins, children’s pastor at Atlanta-area Johns Creek Baptist Church, said that programs previously offered in the evenings on Sunday and Wednesdays can get lost in the time squeeze.

“So we have incorporated mission education and action opportunities in our Sunday morning schedules,” she said. “We also have involved Sunday-school-wide participation twice a year in singing a song for corporate worship ... so that all the children are exposed a little to choir music.”

Bible drills, she said, have become an add-on before Sunday school. But the absence of less-formal Sunday evening services still creates a gap.

“Those were great opportunities to involve children in leadership,” she said. “And our denominational ties have been weakened without the chance to have Baptist doctrine teaching.”

COMMUNITY

Though less time is available for programming, the need for discipleship remains high, said Kathy Dobbins, minister of spiritual formation at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga.

“I don’t think any of us can be persons of faith alone,” she said. “We need to meet together to process the journey of life and faith.”

Church still provides the best opportunity for this, she added — “keeping in mind that church may not mean the church building.”

Long-time Christian educator Terry Maples, who now serves as field coordinator for the Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, agrees that faith is best formed in community.

“Building authentic community is much more difficult when folks are together as infrequently as once or twice a month — and the same people are not there at the same time,” he said. “... Without meaningful relationships, folks are not likely to share at the deep level necessary to shape and nurture faith.”

This lack of face-to-face interaction drives many to make connections through social media, he added.

“In classes where participants are digitally connected, folks can learn a lot about what is happening in each other’s lives,” he said. “This digital connection can be utilized to follow up on class conversations, to post reflections, and to nudge folks to go deeper.”

CHANGES

One shift in Christian education includes gathering at times and places other than church classrooms on Sunday morning. And various approaches to teaching and learning are now apparent in many congregations.

“The biggest change I’ve witnessed in Christian formation is the shift from the ‘schooling model’ ... to Christian formation as a process,” said Maples.

He points to Robert Mulholland’s definition of Christian formation, in the book *Invitation to a Journey*, as “the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.”



Sandra Higginson teaches a young adults class at Vineville Baptist Church in Macon, Ga. Class members said they enjoy being with one another in ministry and social settings beyond Sunday morning Bible studies.



Christian education and its related programs have evolved in more ways than just name changes, say those who lead such ministries during a fast-moving cultural shift.

“We should have known the schooling model has significant limitations if our goal is to nurture a relationship with a person (Jesus),” said Maples. “The schooling model focuses on the teacher, not the learner. The teacher takes responsibility for the teaching/learning process and consequently hinders students from discovering truth for themselves.”

Maples urges moving to a more holistic understanding of faith formation that focuses on mind, heart, hands and will.

“We’ve also been awakened to the reality that any and all areas of congregational life can nurture faith, not just the educational ministry of the church,” he added.

Wingfield said his congregation makes use of a variety of educational approaches including intergenerational classes, special short-term studies, itinerant teachers in adult classes and various curricular resources.

CHALLENGES

Cultural shifts make it harder to provide meaningful small-group experiences for learning the basics of faith as well as for helpful interaction, said McCullar.

“Sunday school was evolved from its earliest design to become the formative arm of the church,” he said. “Along the way it became the primary outlet for learning — but also for developing community, missions and overall church support.”

“Today’s small groups outside of Sunday offer a form of this — and I will admit this appears to be the future model of Christian formation,” McCullar added. “But the Sunday morning event for teaching and learning still offers the best avenue to achieve all of the needed facets of Christian development.”

Maples said it is important to realize that

people want to “know God, not just acquire information about God.”

“They long for meaningful practices that cultivate an intimate connection to the God of all creation,” he said. “... They need reassurance that God works through their lives *now* even as they continue to grow in maturity and insight... They seek a blessing from God and others on the spiritual journey with them.”

With growing intolerance and incivility in much of popular culture, churches must intentionally provide “safe places to dialogue about substantive life-and-faith issues,” said Maples.

“We must have places where people can ask and wrestle with difficult questions and remain close friends,” he added. “By creating contexts in which people can practice openness, folks will discover different is not bad and diversity is part of God’s good creation.”

JOURNEYS

There is a growing awareness that the Christian life is a journey or pilgrimage, not a transaction, said Maples. This awareness, he said, reinforces the necessity of ongoing growth and maturation for those seeking to follow Christ.

“No longer are folks content to come together and learn what they already know,” he said. “Biblical teachings must be re-framed for today’s context.”

And he added: “The disciple journey never ends; the destination is the journey.”

Many congregations, said Maples, are discovering the faith-forming potential of the church year — which “reinforces essential rhythms” for Christ-followers all year long.

“Faith is enriched when congregations design experiences connected to the seasons of the church year,” he said.

During the Lenten season last year,

Dobbins created a Facebook discussion page and invited Smoke Rise members to join. Together they read through Parker Palmer’s book, *A Hidden Wholeness*, and shared their thoughts.

“It was a different way to walk through the season of Lent,” she said.

OPPORTUNITIES

Educators agree that the importance of Christian discipleship remains high despite the shift away from once-familiar times and methods. And some suggest that these cultural shifts, though filled with challenges, have provided a new window for better understanding and addressing the mission of disciple making.

Maples, former associate pastor for education and discipleship at Huguenot Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., helped transition adult classes from “Sunday school” into “LIFE Communities.”

“The acronym was contextual for where the church was in its spiritual journey and captured what we hoped to accomplish through these community gatherings: Loving relationships, Intentional caring, Faith formation and Empowering gifts,” he said. “This name change acknowledges our desire for a holistic understanding of what it means to form faith in Jesus.”

The two biggest shifts in his 35 years of ministry, said McCullar, are the “freeing up of the overall Sunday school structure to allow for experimentation” and the move toward using small groups with a “seven-days options for teaching and learning.”

“Personally, I have opted for the Sunday morning new approaches,” he said. “But, in a larger move, many of my colleagues are using the outside-of-Sunday-morning small groups.”

The large and looming question for congregational leaders, he added, remains how to offer the kind of depth that people need and often seek.

“I am finding a greater hunger for serious Bible study which seems to be more intense than in recent memory,” said McCullar. “If the people ask, we must listen.”

INNOVATION

When Johns Creek Baptist Church formed as a relocated congregation 20 years ago, said McCullar, an innovative approach to Sunday school was created to focus on the many people who would be moving to the fast-growing, highly transient Atlanta suburbs.

“It was decided to try a model that would first and foremost provide for Christian community as these people might not have family

or close friends locally,” he said. “To accomplish this, we developed the mantra: ‘We must exist more for the people we haven’t yet reached than we do for ourselves.’”

The focus was placed on making entry into the groups “easy and friendly,” he said.

Community leaders — rather than teachers — direct the groups that are loosely age graded such as “late 30s to early 40s” to allow wiggle room when choosing a group. Seminar leaders, who teach one subject, move between the communities every 10-week term.

However, the goal must be higher than adding up numbers, said McCullar.

“The key is to seriously commit to making disciples and seek to create a congregation and a committed people rather than simply drawing a crowd,” he said. “And that is much easier said than accomplished.”

Maples said it all comes down to the priorities of a congregation.

“As a congregational teaching pastor, it became clear to me that disciple-making had to be elevated in terms of its importance in the life of the congregation,” he said. “Jesus indicated that out of all the wonderful things the church would do, the body of believers must make disciples. The spiritual maturity of a congregation cannot exceed the depth of corporate discipleship.”

FORMATION, TRANSFORMATION

Bo Prosser, coordinator of missional congregations for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, believes something more significant has changed than what programs are called. It is “a real shift,” he said, from “spiritual information” to “spiritual formation.”

In the good old days, people hungered for the information, the content, the depth of biblical knowledge,” said Prosser. “Nowadays, they hunger for the story, the transformative moment, and the depth of spiritual experience.”

Prosser said no one lacks access to biblical information, which is readily available online — though the quality varies widely. It is a matter of discerning trusted resources and then engaging in meaningful ways.

“We grew to accept that ‘time at the church’ equated to spiritual maturity,” he said. “Not true!”

Conversely, however, many Christians undervalue what is offered in terms of community and spiritual growth, he said, including vital, age-graded programming.

“Parents will sacrifice for gymnastics or soccer but not for Bible learning and formative skills development,” he said. “We also lose out on a sense of congregational community.”

People may find community in groups outside the church, said Prosser. But these likely will not address the bigger concerns in life.

“Who celebrates life with you or props you up when crises occur if we lose our faith community?” he asked. “I have no idea how to counter that except to keep trying to be present with people — and, if they don’t come to us, we have to be the presence of Christ with them where they are.”

Social media, Prosser agrees, can help provide connections in the fast-paced world.

“Sunday school classes are forming some virtual conversations via social media,” he noted. “I’m not talking about debating in the marketplace but supporting one another through private conversations through the web.”

Prosser said that CBF’s “Dawnings” initiative is helping with congregational renewal.

“We are calling people back to spiritual conversations that clarify vision, deepen formation and broaden engagement,” he said. “As we allow ourselves to be open to God’s Spirit, community bubbles up in ways that help us discover what God has in store for us. This is not something we predict, invent and plan — but rather something we pray through, discover and engage.” **BT**

NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE

MONTANA

AUGUST 18-23, 2014

This “experimental experience” in Big Sky Country, Aug. 18-23, will be a unique retreat opportunity. While addressing key issues impacting congregational ministry today, the group also will shape a model for future events in Montana.

Sponsors include *Baptists Today*, Baptist History and Heritage Society, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina and The Pittman Center of Gardner-Webb University. Programming will make good use of the many talents within the group as well as leaders in Montana.

COST

- \$1,200 (based on double occupancy) and includes:
- Ground transportation from time of airport arrival in Bozeman (Aug. 18) until airport departure from Bozeman (Aug. 23)
 - Western dinner and housing in Bozeman on Monday night
 - All meals from Monday dinner through Saturday breakfast
 - Two-day private tour and lodging for one night in Yellowstone National Park

- Three nights lodging, meals and activities at Parade Rest Guest Ranch near West Yellowstone, Montana

LODGING

Housing at the ranch and Yellowstone Park varies. These are cabins and lodges, not the Ritz. For anyone insisting on a private room throughout the week, please add \$250.

REMINDER

- Each person is responsible for his or her own travel to and from Bozeman. Reservations should be made as soon as possible.
- Much time will be spent in the great outdoors with a variety of optional activities.

To secure a spot, please send a \$400 deposit to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 marked as “NF Montana.” The balance (\$800) will be due June 15.

Beacon Hill to Bishop Bling

Excesses are placing clergy housing under new scrutiny

Bye-bye, “Bishop Bling.” So long, “Pastor Perks.” The so-called “Francis effect” may be real, at least when it comes to clerical housing, and could be coming to a church near you.

Pope Francis famously eschewed the trappings of the papal office, including deluxe digs in the Vatican’s Apostolic Palace, and the pressure of his example seems to be making itself felt.

In March, the pontiff accepted the resignation of the most ostentatious offender, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst of Limburg in Germany, aka “Bishop Bling” who spent a cool \$43 million on a swank new residence and office complex while cutting staff.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta is the latest to feel the peer pressure. In late March, Gregory responded to anger over his decision to move into a new \$2.2 million home by repeatedly apologizing in a letter to his flock. News reports now say the mansion will be sold.

Here are some of the recent controversies over clerical lifestyles:

“Bishop Bling” was in a class of his own, spending nearly \$500,000 on walk-in closets, nearly \$300,000 on a fish tank, more than \$200,000 on a spiral staircase and \$20,000 on a bathtub. Tebartz-van Elst also spent more

than \$600,000 on artwork — at a time when some dioceses in the U.S. are selling their collections.

The seminary of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia recently announced it would auction off several Thomas Eakins works.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory led off his column of apology with this complaint from a parishioner, which sums up the new dynamic: “We are disturbed and disappointed to see our church leaders not setting the example of a simple life as Pope Francis calls for.”

Gregory explained the rationale behind his move and the purchase of the new home, using a bequest from the nephew of *Gone with the Wind* author Margaret Mitchell. But he conceded the reasons weren’t nearly sufficient to justify the move to the 6,000-square-foot house in Atlanta’s tony Buckhead neighborhood.

In New Jersey, Newark Archbishop John Myers defended the expenditure of some \$500,000 to add a three-story, 3,000-square-foot addition to his already spacious retirement home. The new wing will include an indoor exercise pool, a hot tub, three fireplaces, a library and an elevator.

“Archbishop Myers obviously is not paying any attention to the pope,” says Charles Zech, who has studied bishops’ spending as faculty director of the Center for Church Management and Business Ethics at Villanova University’s business school.


The Diocese of Camden, N.J., includes one of the poorest cities in the country, which is partly why Bishop Dennis Sullivan made headlines in January for spending \$500,000 to buy an historic 7,000-square-foot mansion with eight bedrooms, six bathrooms, three fireplaces, a library, a five-car garage and an in-ground pool. The diocese said Sullivan needs the space to entertain dignitaries and donors.

Not everyone’s buying that. “This is a joke,” parishioner John Miller told the local paper. “Jesus was born in a stable.”

Catholics aren’t the only ones feeling the heat. Trinity Church in Boston, an Episcopal congregation with a blue-blood heritage and an extensive ministry to the poor, sparked controversy in February for purchasing a \$3.6 million Beacon Hill condo for Rector Samuel T. Lloyd III. The church says the outlay is a good investment and won’t dent its \$30 million endowment, but some in the pews aren’t happy.

Last fall, the 33-year-old pastor of Elevation Church in North Carolina, Steven Furtick, came in for criticism for plans to build a 16,000-square-foot estate with 7.5 bathrooms and an electrified gate.

Furtick, a Southern Baptist who heads one of the nation’s fastest-growing congregations, probably didn’t help his cause when he said that the \$1.6 million home is “not that great of a house.” But the purchase seemed to be moving ahead nonetheless. **BT**



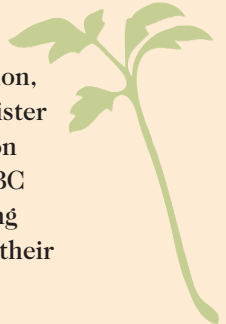
NEW RELEASE

from *Nurturing Faith* books

Hopeful Imagination recounts the journey of change from inward to outward focus at historic First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C. over the past two decades, while offering hope to other churches as they consider the future to which God may be calling them.

Longtime pastor Mike Queen tells the story of his congregation, while spiritual formations minister Jayne Davis offers reflections on the meaning of the story for FBC Wilmington along with coaching questions to help churches on their own journey.

Orders: nurturingfaith.info



Flip-flop

World Vision's double reversal reflects evangelical angst as culture shifts



World Vision announced that it would allow employees who are in same-sex marriages. Then, within 48 hours, the \$1-billion Christian organization reversed course, saying that it had made a mistake.

The World Vision flip-flop reflects the struggle within evangelicalism over how to respond to a growing cultural, legal and even religious acceptance of homosexuality, particularly same-sex marriage. Like other evangelical institutions and businesses, World Vision is facing a catch-22.

At stake is not only the financial bottom line, but also issues of reputation and social acceptability. Caught in the middle are rank-and-file evangelicals, particularly younger Christians who are trying to come to grips with a rapidly changing culture.

The flip-flop has created a mess for World Vision, with observers suggesting that the organization could lose confidence from its conservative evangelical base while raising the hackles of same-sex marriage supporters. Beyond the issue of homosexuality, the dust-up could threaten the agency's ability to attract supporters from all sides on issues such as global poverty and sex trafficking.

While World Vision may be the latest evangelical institution to get caught up in the culture wars, it won't be the last, and the pressures facing its board are likely to affect others.

Shifting legal landscape

Seventeen states have now legalized same-sex marriage, including World Vision's home state of Washington. In the wake of those changes, organizations across the country are trying to figure out how, or if, to adapt to those new laws.

Part of what confounded supporters was that World Vision was under no immediate pressure to make the change, in Washington

state or elsewhere. World Vision President Rich Stearns admitted as much in an interview with *Christianity Today* magazine.

"There is no lawsuit threatening us," Stearns said. "There is no employee group lobbying us. This is simply a decision about whether or not you are eligible for employment at World Vision U.S., based on this single issue, and nothing more."

Grass-roots support

The initial policy change had the potential to result in enormous financial loss from many evangelical leaders; the Assemblies of God, a large Pentecostal denomination, urged its members to drop support.

By the time the policy was overturned, the agency reportedly saw a loss of 2,000 child sponsorships — an initial drop of at least \$840,000 per year.

While significant, donor support was likely not a factor in the initial decision to change policy. A drop in support from World Vision's evangelical base likely outweighed any possible income it could recoup from new donors who might support a policy change.

For groups such as World Vision, even though the culture may be shifting, the grass roots aren't.

In 2001, Americans overall opposed same-sex marriage by 57 percent to 35 percent, according to the Pew Research Center. By 2014, however, the figures had nearly flipped — 54 percent of Americans now support same-sex marriage, compared with 39 percent who oppose it.

Not so for evangelicals, however.

"Despite a modest increase over the past decade, white evangelical Protestants are the main exception to the more recent trend of growing support for same-sex marriage," Pew Research Center's Fact Tank wrote recently. "The new poll found that 23 percent of this group supports same-sex marriage, the same share as last year."

Demographic changes

While institutional leaders such as Russell Moore, Franklin Graham and the National Association of Evangelicals were outspoken in their opposition to World Vision's initial policy change, younger Christians were more divided.

Research on evangelicals suggests that younger evangelicals are more likely to support same-sex marriage than those of an older generation. In 2012, Pew found that 29 percent of young white evangelicals (age 18-29) expressed support for allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally, higher than older evangelicals at 17 percent.

But it was far below the level of support for same-sex marriage expressed by young adults as a whole (65 percent).

A 2014 Public Religion Research Institute survey suggested that white evangelical Protestant millennials are more than twice as likely to favor same-sex marriage as the oldest generation of white evangelical Protestants (43 percent compared to 19 percent).

"Nearly half of practicing Protestants under 40 today support changing laws to enable more freedoms for the LGBTQ community, while just one-third of their parents' and grandparents' generation feel the same," writes Barna Research.

While World Vision's base has always been strongest among evangelicals, it does count employees and support from churches that now allow same-sex marriage.

World Vision has been extremely broad in terms of church relations, but they have an evangelical base," said David Neff, retired editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*. "They were trying to figure out how to keep that broad base as things are changing. It was clearly a poorly timed misstep."

World Vision may have gone back to the status quo, but the larger issue of how religious institutions will handle a growing acceptance of same-sex marriage will not go away. If anything, this is just the beginning. **BT**

Fred Phelps' hateful legacy may be opposite of all he intended

WASHINGTON — Fred Phelps, the 84-year-old founder of Westboro Baptist Church and media-master of hate speech campaigns, died March 20 after devoting decades to damning Americans for tolerating homosexuality. All told, the church in Topeka, Kan., claims to have staged some 53,000 protests.

But by the time of his death, Phelps had lived long enough to see American public opinion soar in exactly the opposite direction — in favor of gay rights, including marriage.

The message he spread across the country never took root, and in fact helped galvanize the gay rights movement and put other Christians on the defensive. The image of Christianity he painted was a hateful, judgmental collection of rabble-rousers — an image that, paradoxically, did more to help

his targets than it advanced his message.

Experts say Phelps' ultimate legal and social impact on the American religious landscape will be a footnote. Religious leaders lament the damage they say he did to Christians who preach God's love and mercy.

Born on Nov. 13, 1929, in Meridian, Miss., Phelps reportedly quit West Point to study at Bob Jones University and became an ordained Southern Baptist minister in 1947.

But he left the SBC for a more fundamentalist theology and launched the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka in 1955.

While once considered a champion of civil rights, Phelps turned to focus lifelong enmity toward gay rights and began his notorious picketing campaign in 1991.



Fred Phelps

In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 8-1 that Westboro's picketing was "free speech however hateful," said Steven Shapiro, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Association, which filed a friend of the court brief on Westboro's behalf. Free-speech advocates uncomfortably embraced Phelps' cause, if not his message.

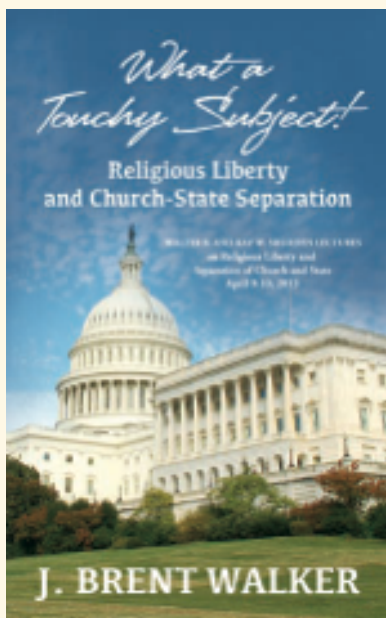
Phelps' lasting legal impact may be the 2006 Fallen Heroes Act and similar laws in 20 states that drastically limit where, when and how people can protest at military funerals.

In 1992, Kansas state legislators passed laws against funeral picketing and banned stalking and outlawed telephone and fax harassment — early tactics of the church, said Mark Potok, senior fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center.

"He specialized in being impossible to ignore in the modern media climate," said Potok. "...Still, I think his lasting impact was on the other side of the debate. He turned people off from the far right to the far left." **BT**

"He specialized in being impossible to ignore in the modern media climate."

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