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NEWS JOURNAL

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OF THE PULPIT**

*Remembering
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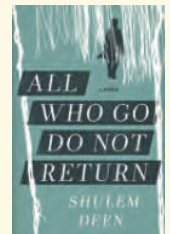
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‘Truly’ faithful

Ruby Brawner strikes up the Gainesville Prayer Band

GAINESVILLE, Ga. — On the first Sunday morning of the month, spry 82-year-old Ruby Brawner pops out of bed very early. As she readies herself, she places phone calls over the next hour or so to some other members of the Gainesville Prayer Band.

At 6 a.m. — well before any congregation’s “early service” — the prayer band gathers at one of the varied and many churches in this northeast Georgia town touted as the Poultry Capital of the World.

Their purpose is simple, yet important: to worship God and to pray for their community — black, white and Hispanic; Protestant, Catholic and otherwise; people from all walks of life.



“Prayer is like food to me,” said Ruby Brawner, who leads the Gainesville Prayer Band that crosses racial lines to bring together the Christian community in this northeast Georgia town. Photo by John Pierce.

‘WITH THE LORD’S HELP’

Ruby took over leadership in 1983 from Blanche Alexander, who had founded the small but faithful prayer band in 1950. A native of Commerce, Ga., Ruby moved to Gainesville in 1955 and joined the prayer band in 1975.

Ruby was surprised when the founder, then experiencing failing health, said to her: “I want you to carry the prayer band on.”

“I promised her before she died that, with the Lord’s help, I’d do my best,” said Ruby.

Initially, the prayer band had met in homes on the early morning of the first Sunday of the month. Then they started gathering at various African-American congregations around town.

Ruby said she has missed only two of the prayer band services over more than three decades — when she had to be in the hospital.

A member of Gainesville’s Antioch Baptist Church, Ruby also attends services once a month with the rural congregation where she was raised. Sundays are full days of worship for her.

And she feels a need for the spiritual nourishment that comes from intentional times of praying alone and with others.

“Prayer is like food to me,” said Ruby.

WIDER REACH

“I don’t see color,” Ruby said reflectively. So several years ago she decided to “venture out” and see what congregations, of any racial makeup, would welcome the prayer band.

In 1995 she approached then-pastor John Lee Taylor of the stately First Baptist Church on Green Street and asked about the prayer band paying a visit. “Pick a Sunday,” she recalled as his quick response.

First Baptist has been on Ruby’s annual schedule ever since. Sleepy-eyed but welcoming friends at the church will host the prayer band again on the first Sunday of this month.

“I thought since I had one white church, I’d find another,” Ruby recalled. “Then I’ll find another.”

And so she did. As pastoral leadership changes, so do some of the churches that host

the prayer band.

“When one drops,” she said, “another picks up.”

Now she intentionally schedules the prayer band to help Christians in the community to cross lines of ethnicity and tradition.

“It doesn’t make any difference what church I go to — black, white, Mexican — there’s just one God and we are praising the Lord,” she confessed.

And Ruby’s presence is often noticed in a service — with her familiar refrain of “Truly!” giving affirmation to a well-spoken word from the pulpit and an inspiring song of praise.

When asked about her signature version (“Truly!”) of the more familiar “Amen,” she said: “I just can’t hold it in.”

GOOD TIMING

The prayer band’s early morning experiences at various churches around Gainesville are kept simple, she said.

“We open with a song, then a prayer and then testimonies,” she added. “Then we leave there and people go to different places.”

Ruby likes to wrap up “no later than 7:20” since some prayer band members attend 8 a.m. services elsewhere. And Ruby has her own church commitments to fill — on time.

“I don’t like to be late for anything — especially church.”

However, the very early monthly worship experiences in different churches are always encouraging, she said.

“That’s what motivates me: seeing people and not color.”

DAILY FAITH

Full Sundays are not enough for Ruby. She is involved in weekday church activities and a Saturday prison ministry.

Even in casual times she is attuned to the needs of others, said several of her friends.

Ken Reid Sr. said he needed a medical test that he couldn’t afford. When Ruby learned of this need, she told him: “Let me see what I can do about that.”

The needed medical care soon followed, he said gratefully.

Such wide and deep care is just the way Ruby approaches daily living.

“When I get out of bed every morning I get on my knees,” she said, “and ask God to help me to help somebody.”

ATTRACTING OTHERS

If you bump into Ruby at the store or elsewhere, expect an invitation.

“Everywhere I go, I say: ‘Come to the prayer band.’ I don’t stop asking. It gets a lot of folks to come out.”

Deacon G.W. “Charlie” Peeples, who was recruited to the prayer band in the mid-’60s after moving from Atlanta, said he’d “never met anyone so sweet.”

He finds the testimonies that are part of the prayer band gatherings to be inspiring.

“I think everybody should testify, to let other people know,” he said. “I have the love of God in my heart and am not ashamed of it.”

Pastor Kai Horn said the prayer band was “the true welcoming committee” when she became pastor of Trinity CME Church.

“It is a group of lay people, not looking for anything but to pray,” said the grateful young pastor who has now been appointed to a church in Elberton, Ga. “You know there is someone praying for you.”

And she was quick to add: “Miss Ruby is the most respected person in this community.”

Prayer band member Nathan Ann Neal often joins Ruby and others on Saturday afternoons at the women’s prison.

“The girls at the jail just love her,” said Ms. Neal. “They call her ‘Miss Truly.’”

Ms. Neal recalled her own experience of being in her 20s when her mother died. She felt the need to focus on living more faithfully and to have a good role model for doing that.

“I wanted to be with a person like Ruby Brawner who was trying to do things the right way,” she said. “I needed that in my life.”

Truly. **BT**

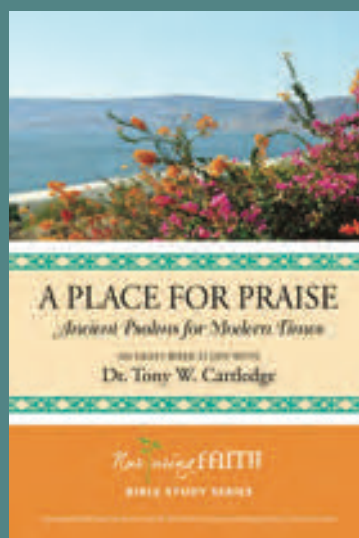
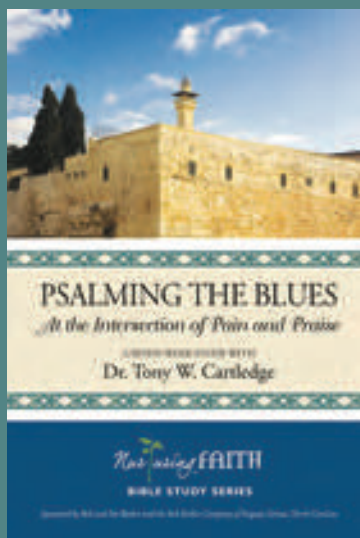


First Baptist Church of Gainesville, Ga., welcomes the Gainesville Prayer Band on the first Sunday in May each year. Associate pastor Bruce Fields said he is “prayed up” for the church’s own services after that early morning gathering. Left to right: Charlie Peeples, Ray Major, Julius Stephens, Bruce Fields, Ruby Brawner, Henry Johnson, Liz Hansen and Doug Hansen. Photo by Lydia Fields.

“It doesn’t make any difference what church I go to — black, white, Mexican — there’s just one God and we are praising the Lord.”

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remarks

“I have the incredible honor of carrying on my grandfather’s legacy by teaching people that they are not what they do, not what they have, and not what people say about them. They are the beloved of God.”

—Bobby Schuller, who leads the smaller version of the California congregation started by his grandfather, responding to the April 2 death of Robert Schuller whose Hour of Power once had a weekly television audience of 20 million (RNS)

“Create nonthreatening space where people feel comfortable; dream bigger than you’ve ever dared to dream; provide hope in a world that needs it.”

—William Vanderbloemen, co-author of *Next: Pastoral Succession That Works*, suggesting three things pastors should learn from the late Robert Schuller (RNS)

“When we refuse to let the extremists rule the debate, we can see that Americans have a large amount of overlap in what they believe about abortion. We truly are on the cusp of a new moment for public discussion of abortion in the United States.”

—Charles C. Camosy, author of *Beyond the Abortion Wars* (Christian Century)

“Why do people who aren’t Christians hate us? They look at us and say, ‘You’re just a bunch of Bible thumpers who are homophobic and you don’t love anybody.’ We’ve brought that on ourselves. I don’t think we’re showing the love of Jesus.”

—San Francisco Giants relief pitcher Jeremy Affeldt, who blogs about “Life, Justice and Major League Baseball” at jeremyaffeldt.wordpress.com

“There are many opinions in the field of modern controversy concerning which I am not sure whether they are right or wrong, but there is one thing I am sure of: courtesy and kindness and tolerance and humility and fairness are right. Opinions may be mistaken; love never is.”

—Harry Emerson Fosdick, from his June 10, 1922 sermon “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” (First published in *Christian Work*; republished by Inside Vero)

“The tension between the [Southern Baptist Convention]’s emphasis on racial reconciliation and support for capital punishment brings to mind Jesus’ parable of the wineskins. Denominations run into problems when they pursue racial healing without rethinking theological and ideological perspectives that have helped sustain practices plagued by racial bias.”

—Antipas L. Harris, associate professor at Regent University School of Divinity

“As the general public became more accepting of divorce, many conservative Christians followed suit. But others found ways to be more inclusive of divorced Christians in their congregations and communities without moral affirmation of divorce itself. It seems quite possible that a similar path may be carved on sexuality.”

—Religion News Service columnist Jonathan Merritt on likely evangelical responses to growing public support for same-sex marriage

“I cannot erase them, but wish I could, because they do not represent the belief of my heart or the content of my preaching.”

—Bob Jones III, former president of the fundamentalist university started by his grandfather, on the younger Jones’ words in 1980 calling for homosexuals to be stoned (RNS)

“While mistrust in the church is nothing new, the cultural acceptance of it is. Whether we choose to affiliate or not, it’s largely seen as an individual decision with little or no social repercussion. Many young people are reconceiving their relationship status with the church and other worshiping bodies as an ongoing reality rather than a one-time pledge.”

—Erin S. Lane is a millennial, recommitted to church, and program director for clergy and faith leaders at the Center for Courage & Renewal (Washington Post)

“Getting the faith community to think about genocide isn’t some armchair theological activity. It’s a call for faith in action.”

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

“Although many politicians and the media at large portray evangelicals as distrustful of science, we found that this is more myth than reality.”

—Rice University sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund on research showing nearly half of evangelicals view science and religion as complementary and that 76 percent of U.S. scientists identify with a religious tradition (Rice University)

Identity, opportunities found at the apex of Baptist life

The ever-quotable Yogi Berra is credited with saying, “It’s tough to make predictions, especially about the future.” Indeed it is, Yogi.

In high school typing classes in the 1970s, few imagined that four decades later we’d all be using that skill all day, every day. It was considered something reserved for those who might be “secretaries,” as they were then known.

In the 1980s, when personal computers were gaining in popularity, a veteran educator assured me: “There’s no need to learn how to use those things; computers will be used by just a few but for the benefit of many.”

Uh ... right!

More recently, VCRs came on the scene and prices fell to affordable levels for many. Video stores — with all kinds of rental plans — popped up in every strip mall. Movie theaters were doomed, we were told.

Now the video stores are shuttered and the people are shelling out big dollars to sit together in cozy darkness and munch on overpriced snacks while watching the latest Hollywood release.

Yogi was right. It’s mighty hard to make predictions, especially about the future.

Guessing at “what’s next?” is a big challenge. Congregational leaders often wonder about how to prepare for an unpredictable future — or even how to respond to the new realities that must continually be faced.

Often I talk with church leaders about the importance in distinguishing between fads — that are here today and gone tomorrow — and trends that make a lasting impact on mission and ministry.

For many of us, it is astonishing to see how much change has occurred over the past few decades — within congregational and

denominational life as well as the larger cultural context. Those of us long invested in Baptist life have witnessed one major shift after another.

One significant shift relates to denominational connection, identity and implementation — particularly in terms of congregational choices.

There was a time of greater homogenization when ministers often received and implemented planned emphases and programming from denominational headquarters. Everyone was on the same page, literally.

Over the past decades, however, this reality has shifted greatly. Some congregations have embraced this new reality more quickly, confidently and even eagerly than others.

Now pastoral leadership calls for helping congregations determine their identities and their own courses of mission and ministry using a variety of resources and working cooperatively through a wider range of voluntary partnerships. And lay leadership plays a more important role as well.

At the heart of this shift is (or should be) the realization and acceptance of something that has long been a distinction of Baptists: the autonomy of the local church.

The breakdown of denominational life (due to fundamentalist uprisings, acts of exclusion and more overtly politic antics than before — as well as major sociological factors) has brought this stark reality (and blessed opportunity) to every congregation.

Such autonomy is not a call to isolation but to a more intentional approach to clarifying and embracing a congregational identity and then forging collaborative ministry efforts with a wider range of organizations and

resource providers based on mutual trust and shared values.

Some Baptist churches had their first real taste of ecumenical ministry when joining congregations of other denominational affiliations in building a Habitat for Humanity home in their community.

And it felt good!

Some congregations were excluded from participation in Baptist associational ministries by theological watchdogs. As a result, they found greater opportunities through partnerships with other congregations and organizations that put the needs of the community ahead of some ever-narrowing definition of orthodoxy.

And it felt good!

Many Baptist congregations are learning to live more comfortably at the apex of Baptist life — where they should always have been.


This shift has impacted how our communication ministry is carried out as well. No longer do we “cover meetings” or report heavily on who got elected or appointed where. Rather, we seek to provide reliable, helpful, practical and inspiring information that enables congregational leaders to better chart their courses in the midst of great change.

While some may yearn for a simpler time, the shifting turf on which we live today is filled with opportunities for effective ministry.

To embrace them fully requires a clear recognition that the congregation (“local congregation” is redundant) is at the apex of Baptist life — not subservient to any association, fellowship or convention; not waiting for a packaged approach to ministry to be delivered.

Congregations have the freedom, responsibility and opportunities to organize, to align, and to chart a course of ministry, attuned to being well informed and sensing the blowing winds of the Spirit of God — whatever the future may hold. **BT**





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Of porcupines and heavy taxes

By Tony W. Cartledge

Israeli authorities have issued a warning to porcupines after a 1,400-year-old oil lamp surfaced at the Horbat Siv ancient ruins, a Roman-Byzantine site near Emek Hefer in central Israel.

The oil lamp was unearthed by a porcupine in the course of constructing its underground burrow, according to the *Jerusalem Post*, and found atop a pile of dirt by inspectors on the lookout for illegal looting of antiquities. Porcupine burrows can be more than 15 yards in length.

The Israeli Antiquities Authority (IAA) noted that the persistent digging of porcupines makes them “excellent archaeologists” while offering a tongue-in-cheek warning that “The IAA calls on all porcupines to avoid digging burrows at archeological sites and warns that digging at an archeological site without a license is a criminal offense.”

In other news from the world of archaeology, a beautifully preserved limestone head of the Assyrian king Sargon II (722-705 BCE) that had been chiseled from a winged bull and illegally sold by an antiquities dealer in Dubai



Photo courtesy Israeli Antiquities Authority

has been repatriated to Iraq after years of delays.

The looted head’s recovery, accomplished by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement branch of Homeland Security, is a reminder that many more priceless antiquities are currently being illegally dug up in Syria and Iraq, then sold by rogues from the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (ISIS) as a means of financing their barbaric enterprise.

While some antiquities are destroyed in staged-for-video demonstrations that claim to be a fight against idolatry, others are blatantly collected and sold to unscrupulous dealers and collectors.

After hooligans from ISIS demolished the Mosul Museum, destroying both plaster copies and genuine artifacts, and bulldozed much of the ancient city of Nineveh, some Iraqi officials are vowing to protect the cultural heritage of Babylon, about 50 miles south of Baghdad, from similar attacks. Let us wish them success in that effort.

A final note from the ancient front: If you think your taxes are heavy, consider a small group of Egyptian investors whose tax bill on a land transfer amounted to 75 talents of silver, plus a 15-talent penalty for paying in bronze. The recently translated tax receipt, written in Greek on a pottery shard, is dated to July 22, 98 BCE, and represents an astounding amount.

Ninety talents of silver would have amounted to 540,000 bronze drachma, about 30 times the annual wage for an average worker. Paying that amount in bronze would have required about 220 pounds of assorted coins.

With April 15 still fresh in our minds, perhaps the thought of not having to haul donkey-loads of coins to the tax collector’s office will leave us feeling some gratitude for the convenience of electronic filing and payment, even if it does leave us feeling financially lighter. **BT**

Nurturing Faith in children

By John Pierce

Beyond our homes, there are many caring congregations that gladly and thoughtfully assist in the important responsibility of helping nurture faith in children. Through our Nurturing Faith publishing venture, *Baptists Today* is developing resources to help with that vital task.

In fact, we are ready to publish an excellent church-based children’s Bible study curriculum when funding is secured. Please let us know if you wish to help bring this resource to reality.

Even now, we are offering weekly children’s sermons based on the Lectionary text that is the focus of the Nurturing

Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge found inside *Baptists Today* news journal.

Written by Kelly Belcher of Asheville, N.C., a gifted chaplain and experienced children’s minister, these lessons/sermons can be found at baptiststoday.org/children.

Look for more resources in the future that will help nurture a vibrant and mature faith in persons of all ages. That’s what Nurturing Faith is all about.

Our gratitude and support should flow to all of those faithful persons who teach children by word and example. Over the years my own daughters have benefited much from such wonderful, dedicated teachers and children’s ministers.

It left me with more time to explain the nuances of baseball. **BT**



Future map of religions reveals major shifts for Christians, Muslims and Jews

Projections: Muslims will overtake Christians by the end of this century. India, now mostly Hindu, will become the world's largest Muslim country.

The numbers of people with no religious identity will soar in the United States and Europe, but the unaffiliated will lose worldwide market share as Christians maintain a steady growth.

All these changes are drawn from the Pew Research Center's new projections, released in April, that map global faith traditions and how they're likely to shift by 2050.

The report says nothing about the transcendent message of any religion. It makes no claims about believers' level of devotion or practice.

Instead, it's a story of nitty-gritty statistics: Which group is having babies? Which ones have many young people, and which are slowly gray-ing out? Whose followers are on the move from one nation to another, or switching religions?

"Demographics are an underappreciated force that is shifting the contours of faith," said Conrad Hackett, the Pew demographer who led the six-year study. Hackett analyzed projected changes for Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, folk religions, other minority religions and the unaffiliated.

Those contours matter. The Pew Research Center doesn't delve into political forecasting, but readers of the report's projections from 2010 to 2050 might feel a thumb press down on many sore spots and raise questions beyond the scope of Pew's data:

- Will prejudice against Muslims rise as the percentage of people in Europe who are Muslim climbs to 10.2 percent, up from today's 5.9 percent?

"The projected growth rate is only about 1 percentage point a decade," said Hackett. "But it's a very visible change: More people wearing veils, more behaving in culturally distinct ways."

- Who will assume the minority voice in the U.S. public square as Muslims outpace Jews as the country's third-largest group, after Christians and the unaffiliated?



- Will religious tensions flare as India becomes the world's most populous Muslim nation, supplanting Indonesia?

"The quality of interfaith relations in such a country (about to pass China as the world's most populous) will be of global importance," said Alan Cooperman, Pew's director of religion research.

- How will more secular regions such as Europe and the U.S. relate to deeply religious regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, divided among Christians and Muslims?

"The question is: 'How will we understand each other?'" said Cooperman. "Sub-Saharan Africa is 12 percent of the world population now, and it will be 20 percent by 2050. That's huge growth for people to get their heads around."

The report, sponsored by the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project, offers many more head-spinning numbers and a religion-by-religion, region-by-region analysis of data from 198 countries and territories, representing nearly all the world's population.

"No one has done anything like this before, so we had no idea about the big picture," said Hackett. Among the major findings:

- "As of 2010, Christianity was by far the world's largest religion, with an estimated 2.2 billion adherents. Islam came in second, with 1.6 billion adherents, or 23 percent of the global population." Four in 10 of all the world's Christians will live in sub-Saharan Africa by 2050.
- While Christian numbers will continue to grow, Muslims, who are younger and have a higher birth rate, will outpace them. By 2050, "there will be near parity between Muslims (2.8 billion, or 30 percent of the population) and Christians (2.9 billion, or 31 percent), possibly for the first time in history." Barring unforeseen events — war, famine, disease, political upheaval — Muslim numbers will surpass Christians after 2070.
- Worldwide, the unaffiliated will fall from 16 percent to 13 percent. Christians, Muslims and Hindus live in areas with "bulging youth populations," high birthrates and falling levels of infant mortality, the report said. Even the global tally for Jews is expected to rise, based on the high birthrate of Orthodox Jews in Israel. Meanwhile, the unaffiliated are "heavily concentrated in places with low fertility and aging populations, such as Europe, North America, China and Japan," the report said.
- Nearly two-thirds of all the unaffiliated worldwide live in China, the research found. "If Chinese authorities allow greater freedom of religion, the share of unaffiliated in the world population could shrink even

more dramatically than the report predicts,” said Ariela Keysar, associate director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, who consulted on the project.

- While religious switching has a significant impact in North America and Europe, in many countries, changing one’s religion is difficult — if not illegal. There’s no data on religious switching among China’s 1.3 billion people, with nearly 50 percent of them in the unaffiliated ranks, for example. But in the 70 countries where survey data was available, the report found that Buddhists and Jews are the primary losers on the switch-in/switch-out balance sheet, Hackett said. “In the USA, there are famous converts like Richard Gere, but there’s a lot of disaffiliation among those who grew up Buddhist.”
- In the U.S., Christians will decline, from more than three-quarters of the population (78.3

percent) in 2010 to two-thirds (66.4 percent) in 2050. Religious “churn” — people leaving their childhood faith for a different faith or none at all — is the primary driver of change.

- The Muslim share of the U.S. population is projected to climb to 2.1 percent, up from less than 1 percent today. Jews will fall from 1.8 percent to 1.4 percent.
- In 2010, there were 159 countries with a Christian majority, but that will fall by eight countries, including France, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. By 2050, Muslims will hold the majority in 51 countries, up by two from 2010, including Nigeria, which just elected a Muslim president, and the Republic of Macedonia.

“In many ways the value of projects like this is not to say what the world will look like in 2050. The world could change,” said



Cooperman. “But they tell us about the world today and the recent path. Peering into the future greatly illuminates what is happening today and its consequences.” **BT**

Early data suggests ‘Pope Francis effect’ may be real

By David Gibson
Religion News Service

Pope Francis appears more popular than ever among American Catholics, and he hasn’t even visited the U.S. yet. A trip planned for September could boost his visibility and appeal even further.

But will Francis find American Catholics filling the pews — or just loving the pope from afar? That’s one of the big — and so far unanswered — questions about his remarkable papacy.

Now, one researcher may have found some signs, albeit tentative, of an incipient “Francis effect.”

Mark Gray of Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate crunched the Catholic numbers from the 2014 General Social Survey, the go-to resource for sociologists. The GSS began in 1972 and is conducted every two years using face-to-face interviews with a random sample of adults.

Gray noted that when asked to characterize the strength of their religious affiliation, 34 percent of Catholics said it was “strong,” up from 27 percent in 2012, the year before Francis was elected.

That 7-point rise was a “significant bounce,” Gray said.

There was also a decline in the percentage saying their affiliation with the Catholic Church was “not very strong,” down 6 points,



Pope Francis passes a crucifix as he walks down steps during his general audience in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican. Photo by Paul Haring, courtesy of Catholic New Service.

to 56 percent.

“Again, this is not a massive shift by any means but it breaks a trend of consistently declining numbers of Catholics saying their affiliation is ‘strong’ in the last decade,” Gray wrote in a post on CARA’s blog.

Another marker of the strength of Catholicism, and any religion, is the retention rate — that is, the percentage of those raised in a faith who remain as adults.

Gray noted that the retention rate for Catholicism has been steadily declining since the early 1970s, from a high in the mid-80s to a low of 65 percent in 2012. But the 2014 GSS showed that the rate remained steady for the first time.

“Given recent history, even holding steady is an interesting result,” Gray said.

The endurance of Catholicism is also in contrast to the affiliation rates for Protestants and other Christians, which continue to decline sharply, dipping below 50 percent in 2014 for the first time.

The numbers on Catholic identity and enthusiasm track those found in other public opinion surveys, such as a Pew Research Center poll conducted in February 2014.

Even so, neither the Pew survey nor the GSS data show any bump in Mass attendance, which is viewed as the surest benchmark of success for a pope who sees evangelization and outreach as the priority for the church, and his pontificate. Yet the Pew survey showed that those who already go to church regularly were the most energized by the new pope.

“This suggests that if there was a ‘Francis effect,’ in the first year of his papacy, it was most pronounced among Catholics who were already highly committed to the practice of their faith,” Jessica Martinez of the Pew Research Center told reporters in March.

The upshot: “The best news from the GSS for the church in 2014 is that some worrisome trends have halted,” Gray wrote.

But, he continued, “It will take another survey wave or two of consistent results to discern a real course ‘correction’ in the data,” he said. “This survey could be an outlier.” **BT**

Americans not so defined by ‘God, family, country’

By Cathy Lynn Grossman
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — “God, family and country” might make for a good country music tune, but that’s not really how most Americans see the strongest influences on their personal identity.

The real order is family first (62 percent), followed by “being an American” (52 percent). “Religious faith” lolls way down in third place (38 percent) — if it’s mentioned at all, according to a survey released in March by The Barna Group.

The California-based Christian research company found another 18 percent of those surveyed said faith had a little to do with the idea of who they are, and nearly 20 percent scored it at zero influence.

Christians were the largest self-identified group in the survey and Barna looked at them in two ways.

“Practicing” Christians — defined in the survey as self-identified Catholics, Protestants and Mormons who say they have attended church at least once in the last month and/

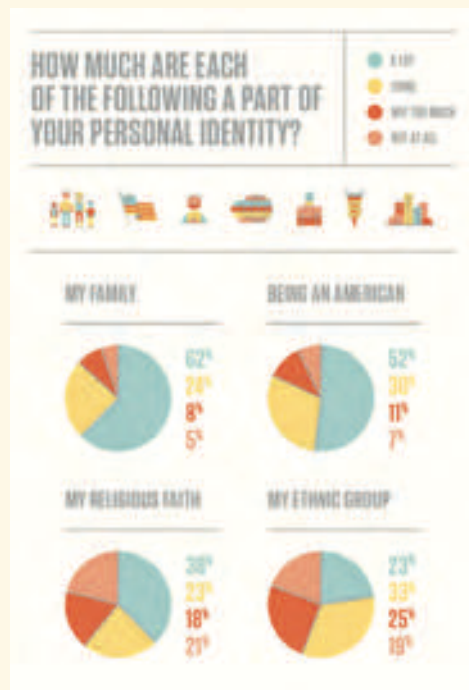


Photo courtesy of Barna Group. Design by Chaz Russo

or say religion is important to them — scored faith first, at a rate more than double the national average.

But they’re not most Christians — not

by a long shot. The survey also found only 37 percent of self-identified Christians are “practicing,” while 64 percent are non-practicing, said Roxanne Stone, a Barna vice president and the designer and analyst of the study. That may account for the third place finish for “faith” in the overall standing.

The results were also skewed by age:

- Family first: Millennials (53 percent); Gen X-ers (61 percent); Baby Boomers (64 percent); Elders (76 percent)
- Being an American: Millennials (34 percent); Gen X-ers (37 percent); Baby Boomers (66 percent); Elders (80 percent)
- Religious faith: Millennials (28 percent); Gen X-ers (34 percent); Baby Boomers (45 percent); Elders (46 percent)

Barna surveyed 1,000 U.S. adults online from Feb. 3-11. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

“Gen-Xers and Millennials have a reputation for wanting to be individualists — for wanting to break away from traditional cultural narratives and to resist being ‘boxed in’ by what they perceive as limiting expectations,” Stone said. **BT**

Anti-Semitism in U.S. spikes after nearly a decade of decline

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — Anti-Semitic incidents in the U.S. spiked 21 percent last year, according to the Anti-Defamation League, unsettling many American Jews who had thought that hatred of Jews and Judaism was on the decline, at least here at home.

The ADL has released a spring report that, for nearly the past 10 years, showed fewer incidents targeting American Jews. That downward trend contrasted sharply to the rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe — witnessed in the January killings of four Jews at a kosher supermarket in Paris.

“The United States still continues to be unique in history” as a safe place for Jews, said Abraham Foxman, the ADL’s national director.

But this new ADL report casts a shadow on the idea that the U.S., which is home to about 40 percent of the world’s Jews, stands in stark contrast to European anti-Semitism and far higher levels of antipathy against Jews in



the Middle East, as reflected in studies of anti-Semitic attitudes worldwide.

“It’s still different here than anywhere else, but don’t take anything for granted, and be concerned,” Foxman said.

The ADL counted 912 incidents in 2014, up from 751 the previous year.

The report includes assaults, vandalism and harassment targeting Jews, Jewish property and institutions that were reported to ADL’s 27 regional offices and to law enforcement.

It shows 36 assaults, up from 31 in 2013; 363 incidents of vandalism in 2014, compared with 315 in 2013; and 513 incidents of threats and harassment in 2014, contrasted with 405 in 2013.

Though the report does not consider anti-Zionist or anti-Israel expressions (unless they cross the line into anti-Semitism), ADL researchers nonetheless correlate the rise in anti-Semitism to last summer’s 50-day war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

During the war, for example, a vandal in Malibu, Calif., painted “Jews=Killers” and “Jews are Killing Innocent Children” near the entrance to a Jewish summer camp last July. Another vandal spray-painted “Free Palestine” and “God Bless Gaza” in red on a synagogue in Lowell, Mass.

Those were among the 139 anti-Semitic incidents reported in July 2014, more than double the 51 reported incidents for the same month a year earlier. The ADL also called 2014 a particularly violent year that included the fatal shootings at a Jewish community center in Overland Park, Kan. **BT**



Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles greets legislators and fellow supporters of Utah Bill 296 which balances religious freedoms and LGBT rights. Photo courtesy of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

Americans split on businesses turning away gay weddings

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

Americans appear divided on whether a wedding-related business should have the right to turn away a gay customer. But it depends on how the question is asked.

A February Associated Press poll found that 57 percent of Americans believe a wedding-related business should have the right to refuse service to a gay couple on religious grounds, as opposed to nearly 4 in 10 Americans (39 percent) who said that religious exemption is wrong.

In addition, 50 percent said that local magistrates shouldn't have to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples if it contradicts their religious beliefs.

Other polls show less sympathy for business owners. A survey on wedding services and gay couples, released last September by the Pew Research Center, found that 47 percent of respondents thought it should be legal for businesses to turn away gay brides and grooms on religious grounds, compared with 49 percent who said they should be required to accept them as customers.

But Americans register far different attitudes about service to gay customers when the question does not mention a wedding. Then, there is little sympathy for those who would invoke religion to turn away gay customers.

A 2014 Public Religion Research Institute survey found only 16 percent of Americans supporting small-business owners who would turn away a gay customer for religious reasons, and 8 in 10 said it should be legal.

Asking specifically about turning away gay couples headed to the altar does seem to make a difference to Americans, who in general come out strongly against anti-gay corporate discrimination, said Dan Cox, PRRI's director of research.

Americans don't like the government telling people what to do when it comes to religion, Cox said, but they also strongly reject discrimination against gays in the marketplace. **BT**

LDS leader says individually, Mormons may back gay marriage on social media

By Peggy Fletcher Stack
Salt Lake Tribune

SALT LAKE CITY (RNS) — An LDS apostle reaffirmed recently that Mormons who support gay marriage are not in danger of losing their temple privileges or church memberships — even though the Utah-based faith opposes the practice.

In a March 13 interview with KUTV in Salt Lake City, Elder D. Todd Christofferson said that individuals in the 15 million-member Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints would be in trouble only for “supporting organizations that promote opposition or positions in opposition to the church’s.”

Backing marriage equality on social media sites, including on Facebook or Twitter, “is not an organized effort to attack our effort, or our functioning as a church,” Christofferson said.

The KUTV interviewer asked further if a Latter-day Saint could “hold those beliefs even though they are different from what you teach at the pulpit?”

Yes, the apostle answered.

“Our approach in all of this, as (Mormon founder) Joseph Smith said, is persuasion. You can't use the priesthood and the authority of the church to dictate. You can't compel, you can't coerce. It has to be persuasion, gentleness and love unfeigned, as the words in the scripture.”

Christofferson echoed this sentiment in two January interviews with *The Salt Lake Tribune*.

“There hasn't been any litmus test or standard imposed that you couldn't support that if you want to support it, if that's your belief and you think it's right,” Christofferson said after a Jan. 27 news conference.

Christofferson made the point again in a *Trib Talk* interview Jan. 29.

“We have individual members in the church with a variety of different opinions, beliefs and positions on these issues and other issues,” Christofferson said. “... In our view, it doesn't really become a problem unless someone is out attacking the church and its leaders — if that's a deliberate and persistent effort and trying to get others to follow them, trying to draw others away, trying to pull people, if you will, out of the church or away from its teachings and doctrines.”

In the KUTV interview, Christofferson further acknowledged that LDS leaders have evolved in their thinking about homosexuality, while maintaining that marriage should be between a man and a woman.

“This is not a doctrinal evolution or change, as far as the church is concerned,” the apostle said. “It's how things are approached.”

All elements of society, “including ourselves, have gained greater understanding, especially in recent years,” Christofferson said.

Could there be a time when the LDS Church would change its position on gay marriage?

The apostle was unequivocal.

Nope, he said. **BT**

By Peggy Haymes

Hide it under a bushel?

The children hold up their index fingers as they sing, “This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine.” With the second verse they become even more emphatic. “Hide it under a bushel? NO!” they sing and shout, shaking their heads and wagging those same fingers.

As congregations, we love to watch them sing. If only we could hear them.

Colleagues on a counselors’ forum recently posted that a new service has sprung up. You can call a number and, for a certain amount of money, pay someone to listen to you. It’s not a therapist on the other end of the line or even a life coach. It’s just a kind person who will be present for you.

Hide it under a bushel?

For the first time in nearly 15 years, I didn’t have Sunday morning responsibilities. I’d left my church staff position and had not yet made a move to another church. Perhaps, I thought, I’ll see how these other people live.

So I played volleyball on Wednesday nights instead of going to a choir practice. I had leisurely Sunday mornings with my coffee and newspaper. It didn’t take long for it to feel terribly wrong.

One day I looked around and realized that the only people in my life were people roughly my own age. I wasn’t rubbing elbows with elders. I wasn’t learning from children. I wasn’t enjoying teenagers. It felt boring and small.

Hide it under a bushel?

From the outside, it looked like a perfect childhood. Good family, good health, great teachers and good friends — even the greatest cat in the world.

What people on the outside didn’t see, however, was the man whom I met as a child, who befriended me and then became my abuser for many years. Over and over again he told me how awful I was, how terrible I was, how dirty I was. He fed me a steady diet of shame.

But every week I kept showing up at my church, where they told me that God loved me, and where they treated me like they loved me as well. They told me that I was valuable and that my life mattered. They told me that I was precious in God’s sight and acted as if it was true.

As an adult, as I’ve tried to untangle the strands of grace that helped me survive, I’ve realized that my experience of this church is one of them. Had I been in a church based on fear, that kept preaching that I was one small step away from hell, I probably wouldn’t have made it. I knew too much of fear and hell already.

Hide it under a bushel?

Sometimes we forget how important Christian community can be. A lot of small things go into keeping an institution up and running, and too many details can overwhelm us and distract us. Then there are the big things.



Some days it seems like it takes all that we have just to keep standing with one foot in the past and the other searching for a place in an as-yet-unseen future. Not to mention that in many churches we are our own worst enemies, treating jumping to conclusions like an Olympic sport.

But this thing we do as the Body of Christ is not for nothing.

Church members who are also friends talk about anything and everything. Sharing in a class or small group or choir practice or mission trip weaves the fabric of friendship, and there’s no need for a credit card in order to be heard.

Long ago they retired as teachers but they never retired their love of children, and so every Sunday morning they show up to teach classes of wiggly preschoolers. It doesn’t matter that the teachers are old enough to be their grandparents, or maybe it matters in all the best ways. Where else do generations rub elbows on such a regular basis?

And then there are people like me. One in four adult women (and at least one in six men) was sexually abused as a child. We’re here, in your congregations.

More than likely you have no clue of the pain hidden behind our Sunday best. We are the children who cannot have too many good adults in our lives — because our lives have been touched by one very bad adult (or more).

We are the adults who desperately need to hear over and over again about the blessing of God and the grace of our Lord because we’ve received enough curse for six lifetimes. We are children, and we are wounded children in adult bodies.

You thought you were just giving out butter cookies and apple juice in Sunday school. Who knew you were saving lives as well?

What we have to offer as communities of faith matters, more than we know.

Hide it under a bushel?

Dear God, I hope the answer is no. **BT**

—Peggy Haymes is a minister, writer and counselor in Winston-Salem, N.C. Her latest book is *I Don’t Remember Signing Up for This Class: A Life of Darkness, Light and Surprising Grace*.

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Jennifer Kinard Wylie

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

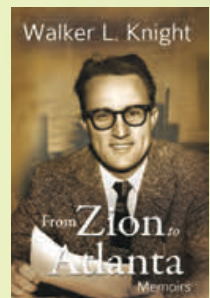


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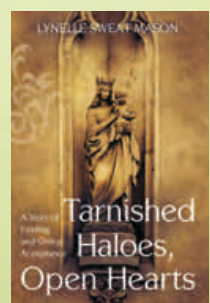


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Goodness and Grief

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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Genesis 3:1-19

June 7, 2015

The Inevitable Apple

“All good things must come to an end,” we sometimes say – but so quickly? The book of Genesis begins with two starkly different but equally inspiring creation stories (Gen. 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-25), both of which describe God’s creation of the earth and of humankind as being good in every way.

One might wish for a recounting of many happy days before life went awry, but the narrator judged that readers should know the truth: Sin and rebellion have been around for as long as there have been people. Humans may be the crown of God’s creation, but they constitute a thorny crown.

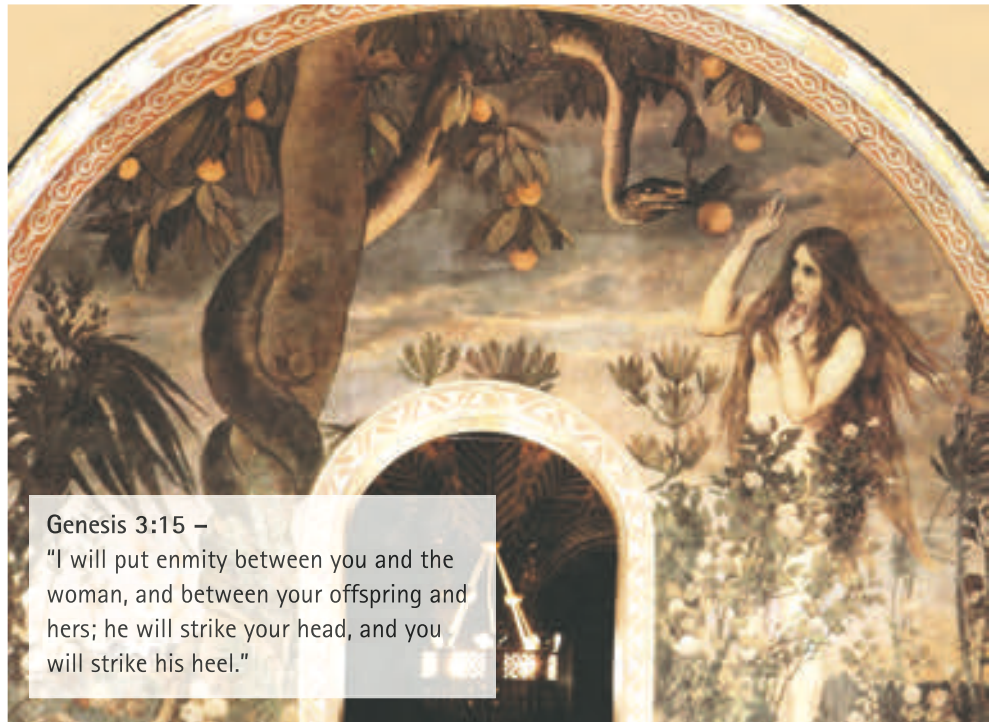
We often call Genesis 3 “the story of the fall,” but that’s a later judgment. The word “fall” does not appear in the story, nor does “sin.” The notion of a “fall” from original perfection is more at home in Greek philosophy than the Hebrew Bible.

It may seem surprising that, despite the prominence of this story in Christian teaching, the remainder of the Old Testament never refers to it. A text in Ezek. 28:11-19 taunts the king of Tyre by suggesting that he was thrown out of Eden, but that’s clearly a major variant or a different story. The prophets often criticized Israel’s worship of other gods or failure to keep the law, but they never mention Adam and Eve or the serpent’s temptation.

An intriguing question (vv. 1-6)

The story is a narrative continuation

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



Temptation, Viktor Vasnetsov

Genesis 3:15 –

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel.”

of Genesis 2, a charming account of creation with special attention paid to the creation of a man and a woman whose names are symbolic of humankind. The Hebrew word *adam* is a generic term meaning “man” or “humankind,” and the word is used with the direct article (“the man”) until Gen. 4:25, the first time *adam* appears as a name. The name we render as “Eve” is *havah*, which means “life” or “living one,” but she is not given the name until Gen. 3:20. Prior to that, she is called “the woman” (*ha-ishshah*).

God continues to be present in the story. As in the previous chapter, the narrator describes God in anthropomorphic terms: “the LORD God” (*Yahweh Elohim*) appears in the form of a human, walking in the garden and talking to the man and woman.

The fourth character is a talking serpent. Despite our common notions of the serpent as being sinister, evil, or identified with the devil, the story does not portray it that way. Indeed, the serpent is not only a part of God’s good creation, but the cleverest of all

the wild creatures “that the LORD God had made” (3:1). The serpent is not described as evil, but as crafty and mysterious. [See “The Hardest Question” online for more.]

Tradition leads us to think of the serpent as a tempter who deceives the woman in hopes of leading her astray. In the story, however, the serpent did not lie as much as ask nuanced questions that prompted Eve to have thoughts of her own, and those thoughts led her to mistrust God’s gracious care. In other words, the serpent’s words awakened the woman’s consciousness to the point of questioning God’s instructions.

As she considered the options, the woman realized that God was holding something back from her and the man by forbidding them to eat from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” For the first time, she wanted to know more. Would she really die if she ate of the fruit? Could she really become like God, as the serpent implied? (vv. 4-5)

A literal reader might wonder how the woman could even understand

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the issue, since she had not yet been exposed to death. This does not concern the narrator, whose main point is that the woman now questioned whether the potential gain of eating from the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is worth the risk.

More than the ability to distinguish right and wrong is at stake. Biblical writers often employed what scholars call a “merism,” a literary device that names two opposite poles but includes everything between. Thus, “the knowledge of good and evil” could imply far more than telling right from wrong.

As the story is told, the woman would have known no more of evil than of death, for it had not yet entered the world – but she wanted to know more. She wanted to know what God knew. 📖

Would we have been any less curious?

As she thought about it, the text says the woman saw that the tree was “good for food, a delight to the eyes, and to be desired for making one wise.” Everything about the mysterious fruit was appealing, so she chose to take the risk and eat. Adam appears to have given the matter little thought. He is described as having been with her, presumably for the entire conversation. When she offered the fruit to him, the text says only: “he ate.” 📖

The woman, at least, gave it some thought.

A surprising answer (vv. 7-13)

After risking that first bite, the pair did gain new knowledge, but not what they expected. They learned the taste of evil, and knew instinctively that their life in the garden was threatened. Guilt and shame quickly arose, experienced as a perception that their nakedness was no longer acceptable. Garments made from leaves might have covered their genitals, but could not hide their actions (v. 7). 📖

Some scholars see this account as a “coming of age” story in which the man and woman lose their innocence, clothe themselves, and discover what it means to be really human. The concern about

nakedness has clear sexual overtones, but specific sexual activity is not mentioned until after they were expelled from the garden, when “the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived” (4:1). 📖

The man and woman were still trying to hide when they heard Yahweh walking in the garden that evening, asking “Where are you?” (vv. 8-9). They knew they had done wrong, but neither party was willing to accept full responsibility. When God confronted them and asked for an explanation, the man blamed both the woman and God: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate” (v. 12).

The woman also sought to pass the buck: “The serpent tricked me, and I ate” (v. 13b). Only the serpent had no one to blame, or as it is sometimes said, didn’t have a leg to stand on. 📖

This story is testimony that humans have sinned from the beginning and have always tried to hide their sin or deny responsibility for it. Even Paul’s later implication that Adam and Eve were responsible for human sin sounds like a further attempt to shift the blame for our failures to someone else.

Does this sound familiar? Haven’t we sought to deny our sins, blame them on others, or offer countless rationalizations? Don’t we also know what it is like to feel shame and separation when confronted by our bad choices and actions?

The story is not all bad news, however. God did not leave the man and the woman to hide forever, but pursued them with concern and gave them an opportunity to repent: “Where are you?”

A painful judgment (vv. 14-19)

The story reminds us that humans have sinned from the start – and that there have always been consequences, for judgment quickly followed. God’s various judgments provided explana-

tions for various aspects of life as experienced in the ancient world.

Why does a snake have no legs? Because God cursed it, saying “upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life” (v. 14).

Why are humans so inclined to fear snakes and desire to kill them? Because God said “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel” (v. 15). 📖

Why is it that women must work so hard and also suffer so much in giving birth? For the Hebrews, it was because God said “I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children” (v. 16a).

Why then would women allow themselves to get pregnant again and be dominated by men? Because God said “yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (v. 16b). God had created humans to live in joyful unity, but that ideal had been corrupted. Men came to dominate women in society, and though it was unfair and painful for them, women put up with it. 📖

But there were other consequences. Food would no longer be easy to come by, but the man would have to toil in hard soil while battling weeds and thorns to raise crops from the earth (vv. 17-18).

Moreover, humans would not live in the sacred garden forever, as the writer believed God intended. The decision to follow their way over God’s way brought death into the world: “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (v. 19). 📖

Things looked bad, but the narrator did not believe God had given up on humans. Acting with compassion in light of their shame, Yahweh made garments of skin for them (v. 21), presumably from a living animal. It’s natural to assume this means that living blood was shed in response to human sin. It would not be the last time. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Ezekiel 17:1-24

June 14, 2015

Cedar Mountain High

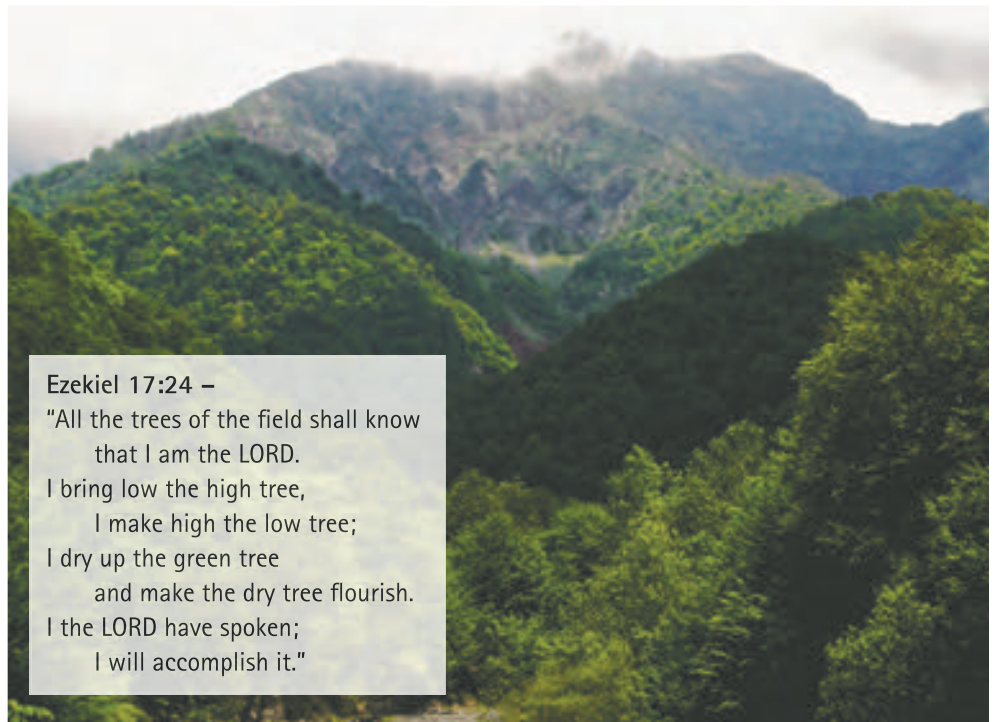
Have you ever learned from stories? Humans have long employed imaginary tales involving plants or animals in order to convey truths or morals: we call these “fables.” The literature of ancient Mesopotamia includes examples such as “The Tamarisk and the Palm” and “The Ox and the Horse,” in which two protagonists debate which one is superior. Characters such as eagles and foxes were also popular.

We’re more familiar with a collection of stories known as “Aesop’s Fables,” named for a Greek slave who told nature stories for moral effect. Aesop reportedly lived during the sixth century BCE, and is credited with stories such as “The Tortoise and the Hare” and “The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse.” Several ancient writers mentioned Aesop, but he did not leave any writings of his own, so there’s no way of knowing which stories actually go back to him.

The Bible also employs stories about animals or plants to convey larger truths, and today’s text offers a prime example. We may feel far removed from the religious, cultural, and political setting that inspired Ezekiel’s story, but we can still learn from it.

Two eagles and a vine (vv. 1-10)

The story will make little sense without its context, so here’s a brief historical review: The prophet Ezekiel had been an active priest in the Jerusalem temple before Nebuchadnezzar conquered



Ezekiel 17:24 –
“All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.”

Judah in 597 BCE. Nebuchadnezzar took king Jehoiachin captive, along with most of the other royal, wealthy, influential, or skilled people. These he marched into Babylon, beginning the period we commonly call “the exile.”

Jehoiachin, perhaps in the company of other royal family members, was held captive in the capital city of Babylon, but most of the deportees, including Ezekiel, were settled in an area called Tel Abib, near the city of Nippur.

Knowing the value of a functional city to administer his new vassal state, Nebuchadnezzar left Jerusalem intact and appointed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin’s uncle, to rule as a client king. In that role, Zedekiah was sworn by oath to deliver taxes and tribute to the Babylonians on a regular basis.

As time passed, Zedekiah chafed under the Babylonian yoke and hosted a meeting of other vassal kings to plot a rebellion, believing that the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus II would help them defeat the Babylonians.

Nebuchadnezzar easily crushed the attempted insurrection. To diminish

any chance of another mutiny, he sent his army to destroy Jerusalem, burning the city and leaving it a wasteland. The Babylonians forced the rebel king Zedekiah to watch as his sons were executed, then blinded him and took him into exile along with any remaining Hebrews who might be capable of supporting further unrest. He died in captivity.

Ezekiel was aware of these events, and incorporated them into a prophetic fable for the benefit of the exiles. God told him to declare “a riddle and an allegory” (NRSV) or “a riddle and a parable” (NET, HCSB, KJV), he said (vv. 1-2).

Ezekiel first introduced a great and beautiful eagle, the king of birds, with huge wings and richly colored feathers. The eagle flew to Lebanon, known for its forests of cedar, and broke a shoot from the top of a tall tree. He then carried it to “a land of trade” and planted it in a “city of merchants” (vv. 3-4).

Cedars of Lebanon, expensive and typically reserved for use in palaces or monumental buildings, also carried

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royal connotations. As the transplanted cedar grew in its new home, the eagle planted a native seed in its fertile and abundantly watered homeland, intending for it to produce a healthy but low-growing vine. The vine grew as intended, with its branches reaching toward the great eagle (vv. 5-6).

In time, another great eagle appeared, though less impressive than the first. The native vine, apparently hoping for better prospects, twisted its roots and branches toward the second eagle, which also promised good soil and abundant waters (vv. 7-8).

Speaking through the prophet, God declared that the vine would not in fact prosper with the second eagle, but would wither and grow so weak that it could easily be pulled up (vv. 9-10).

Has the analogy become obvious yet?

Two kings and an oath (vv. 11-21)

The prophet offered an interpretation of the parable, if not the riddle. The first great eagle represented the king of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar), who broke off Judah's king, the topmost shoot of the royal cedar, and transplanted him and his officials to Babylon (vv. 11-12). 📖

Having taken Judah's king (Jehoiachin) to Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar chose another offspring from the royal house and planted him in Jerusalem as a vassal king who was expected to thrive but remain loyal to Babylon, paying tribute without growing tall and proud (vv. 13-15).

The new king, Zedekiah, was required to swear an oath, entering a binding covenant of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar. It was typical for the Babylonian kings to require vassals to swear by their own gods as well as the Babylonian gods. In typical fashion, Zedekiah would have called on the name of Yahweh to punish him if he did not uphold his oath of fealty to Nebuchadnezzar. 📖

Zedekiah remained loyal for the better part of 10 years, but ultimately broke his oath by turning toward

Egypt's pharaoh – the second but less magnificent great eagle – in hopes of gaining military aid for a revolt against Babylon. Because he had sworn by Yahweh, the violation of his oath was an offense against God as well as Nebuchadnezzar. Neither could allow the rebellion to go unchecked, and the end result was the destruction of Jerusalem and Zedekiah's own miserable demise, as described above (vv. 16-21).

The overriding emphasis of the story is on the importance of keeping covenants. God and Israel had entered a binding covenant at Sinai, a covenant in which God promised to bless the people so long as they remained faithful. Persistent violations of the covenant over the next several hundred years resulted in the Babylonian exile. Zedekiah's breaking of his treaty oaths was yet another illustration of the Hebrews' inability to keep their promises.

A cedar and a promise (vv. 22-24)

Despite Zedekiah's failure, God had not given up on Israel. The exile would not be forever, for God still had a good future in store. Ezekiel speaks to this in the closing verses of the chapter, where he returns to the imagery of Israel as a royal cedar.

In days to come, another shoot would be transplanted. No eagle representing an earthly king would be needed, for Yahweh declared "I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out" (v. 22a). God would plant the tender shoot "on a high and lofty mountain, on the mountain height of Israel," with the intention that it "may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar" (vv. 22b-23a).

While Zion is not named, it seems clear that a renewed Jerusalem is where the new shoot – a reference to a scion from the house of David – would take

root and grow into a majestic or "noble" tree. 📖 That tree would become the most powerful on earth, giving shelter to all and signaling that Yahweh alone has the power to determine the course of nations (symbolized by the various trees) and of the world (v. 24).

What might such a text say to modern readers? The initial parable could remind us to keep our promises, especially those we have made to God. When we trust Christ as savior, follow him in baptism, and enter the community of faith, we are making a covenant pledge that calls for faithful expression of love for God and for others.

The latter parable, which looks to the day when God will take a branch from the line of David and plant a new tree to rule over all others, recalls other prophecies that speak of a future hope for God's people. Isaiah spoke of a shoot that would come from the stump of Jesse (Isa. 11:11) and Jeremiah predicted that God would "cause a righteous branch to spring up for David," one who would "execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer. 33:15, see also 23:5).

Christians from New Testament times onward have interpreted these as prophecies of Christ, a descendant of David who would become the savior of all and ultimately, the ruler of all. The world-ruling eschatological dimension of such prophecies remains in the future, but the lordship of Christ in the lives of his subjects is a present reality.

We note that Ezekiel characterized his oracle as "a riddle and a parable." The meaning of the parable is self-evident, but what is the riddle? On the one hand, we could consider it a puzzlement that the Israelites so persistently proved unfaithful, despite their covenant with a God who had both the power to punish and the compassion to forgive. On the other hand, the real riddle might be why God would remain faithful and caring toward people (including us) who seem incapable of keeping their promises to love and obey.

That's a riddle we may never solve, but for which we may be eternally grateful. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 107:1-42


June 21, 2015

Gratitude Squared


Have you ever found yourself in such a difficult or dangerous situation that you felt there was no recourse but to pray for divine aid? Have you ever felt so burdened by guilt that you knew there was no way forward without praying for forgiveness?

Most believers have been there. Once you emerged from the troubled times and regained a level footing, did you express appreciation to God for helping you through the traumatic time?

Have you ever thanked God publicly?

The psalmist understood the importance of recognizing the ways in which God has provided forgiveness, encouragement, or deliverance in our lives – and the importance of thanking God for it. 

Let the redeemed say so (vv. 1-3)

Today's text begins with a familiar appeal: "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (v. 1). The call to thanksgiving rings a bell because we also find those exact words or similar ones in 1 Chron. 16:34, 41; 2 Chron. 5:13, 7:3, 6, 20:21; Jer. 33:11, as well as in Pss. 106:1, 118:1, and repeated throughout Psalm 136. 

This brief credo in praise of divine love and faithfulness is grounded in God's self-revelation to Moses from Exod. 34:6-7: "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love



for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." Echoes or quotations of that divine description appear frequently in the Old Testament, including such diverse texts as Neh. 9:17; Jon. 4:2; Joel 2:13; Ps. 86:5, 15, 103:8-14, and 145:8.


The people of Israel believed many things about God, with whom they had been called to live in a covenant relationship, and whom they knew by the personal name Yahweh. When thinking of Yahweh's various attributes, divine goodness and steadfast, enduring love were preeminent. Such love did not preclude the necessity of divine discipline, but it also prompted God to remain faithful to the Hebrews even when they were not faithful in return.

The history of God and Israel was bound up in stories of deliverance: God had saved Israel from captivity in Egypt, from starvation in the wilderness, from defeat in battles, from various oppressors in the land, and from the time of exile in Babylon.

What God could not do was deliver the people of Israel from themselves,

from their proclivity to worship other gods and to choose selfish behavior over love for neighbor. In many cases, the people believed that God had sent other nations to punish them before delivering them from their power.

The prime example of that was the exile. The prophets and authors of the Old Testament narrative believed that centuries of Israel's rebellious behavior prompted God to send the people into captivity as a disciplinary and educational measure.

The Assyrians devastated the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, scattering its inhabitants across the empire. The Babylonians later conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, beginning a period of exile that would see waves of Hebrews sent to Babylon in 597, 587, and in years following. God's steadfast love endured, however. The Persian king Cyrus – whom Isaiah referred to as God's anointed (Isa. 45:1) – defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiles to return, giving the Hebrews another chance to leave their captivity and live once again in Israel. 

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Psalms 107 appears to celebrate that return, as well as the presence of pilgrims from all over, for vv. 2-3 celebrate how God had redeemed the Hebrews and gathered them in from north, south, east, and west. Such deliverance called for public praise: “Let the redeemed of the LORD say so!” 📖

**Let the redeemed say why
(vv. 4-32)**

Generic praise is one thing, but thanksgiving tied to specific acts of divine benevolence can be more meaningful, and that’s what we find in the main body of the psalm. It falls into four obvious sections (vv. 4-9, 10-16, 17-22, 23-32), each an image of potential trials from which people could be delivered. For each situation, the psalmist describes a crisis that led to a prayer for deliverance, an account of God’s redeeming acts, and a concluding call to thank God for what has been done.

The first picture is that of travelers who are lost in the wilderness, perhaps a caravan of merchants who have run out of food and water, not knowing where to find an inhabited town (vv. 4-5). When they cried out to Yahweh, God delivered them from their distress and led them safely to a town (vv. 6-7). Echoing the initial call for the “redeemed of the LORD” to declare it openly, the psalmist calls such travelers to give public thanks for God’s steadfast love that replaced their need with goodness (vv. 8-9).

This picture calls to mind Israel’s wandering in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, when God provided food and water in the desert before ultimately leading them to the land of promise. It may also recall the long and dangerous trek required for the exiles who chose to leave Babylon and return to their homeland. The term translated “inhabited town” in vv. 4 and 7 carries the literal sense of “a city (for) dwelling.” Thus, NET has “they found no city in which to live.” Yahweh, however, led them to the best city they could imagine: to Jerusalem.

The second image is that of impris-

onment or exile itself. While individuals might have experienced the misery of life in chains for ordinary crimes, leading families of the entire nation had suffered the dark gloom of life in exile. In the spirit of the prophets, the psalmist attributed their plight to having “rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High” (vv. 10-11). With no one else to help, they prayed for deliverance, and Yahweh “broke their bonds asunder,” saving them from their distress (vv. 13-14). Such deliverance calls for praise to Yahweh “for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind” (vv. 15-16). 📖

Sickness is the subject of the third picture, which describes a group of people who have suffered illness that they brought upon themselves “through their sinful ways” (vv. 17-18). The NRSV obscures the harshness of the description in v. 17, which describes such people as fools for behaving so unwisely: “They acted like fools in their rebellious ways, and suffered because of their sins” (NET). But even foolish people can pray to God for deliverance, and these found healing in God’s mercy (vv. 19-20). No less than any other, they should give thanks and offer sacrifices in praise of God’s steadfast love, “and tell of his deeds with songs of joy” (vv. 21-22).

In a culture filled with people who habitually poison their bodies by smoking cigarettes, sicken themselves through overeating, and weaken their systems by avoiding exercise, these verses are sobering. Lung diseases, cardiovascular ailments, and Type II diabetes are leading causes of death that shorten many lives – but are largely preventable.

The final image of people in need of deliverance describes a perilous journey by sea, something few Israelites would

have experienced, but that would have been the subject of popular stories, such as the harrowing account of Jonah being lost in a stormy sea stirred up by Yahweh. Seafaring merchants would have told tales of surviving storms that they also credited to divine activity (vv. 23-26). Knowing there was nothing left to do but pray, they sought God’s help and found deliverance, for “he made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed” (vv. 27-30). No less than others whom God had saved, they were urged to offer public praise for God’s steadfast love and wonderful works (vv. 31-32).

**Let the redeemed not forget
(vv. 33-42)**

The last section of the psalm contains elements of wisdom teaching, and was probably added as a way of summing up the lessons taught through the various examples. It is a reminder that God has power over land as well as sea. Yahweh can turn rivers into a desert if the people follow sinful ways, but can also transform a parched wilderness into fertile and well-watered land for those who turn their lives toward God (vv. 33-38).

Whatever troubling situation God’s people face – whether oppression, trouble, or sorrow (v. 39) – God has the ability to overthrow repressive rulers and redeem the downtrodden from their distress (vv. 40-41). Those who are wise will take note of such truths, the psalmist says, and should learn from them as they “consider the steadfast love of the LORD” (vv. 42-43).

What kinds of trouble have been most common in your life? We may not have been captive in Egypt or Babylon, but we may have felt exiled or excluded, put down or unappreciated by others. We may have experienced sickness that we brought on ourselves, or found trouble for which we have no one else to blame.

And yet ... God’s steadfast love endures forever, the psalmist says. We can trust God to hear our prayers, and give glad testimony for God’s wonderful deeds. They are wonderful, indeed. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Lamentations 3:1-33

June 28, 2015

Goodness and Grief

If you've ever listened to much traditional American folk music or have seen the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, you'll remember the mournful song that begins "I am a man of constant sorrow, I've seen trouble all my days." ↓

Have you ever felt that such a sad ballad could be your theme song?

The man we meet in Lamentations 3 could compete with Job as the original "man of constant sorrows." Indeed, that is how he introduces himself: "I am the man who has experienced affliction" (v. 1a, NET).

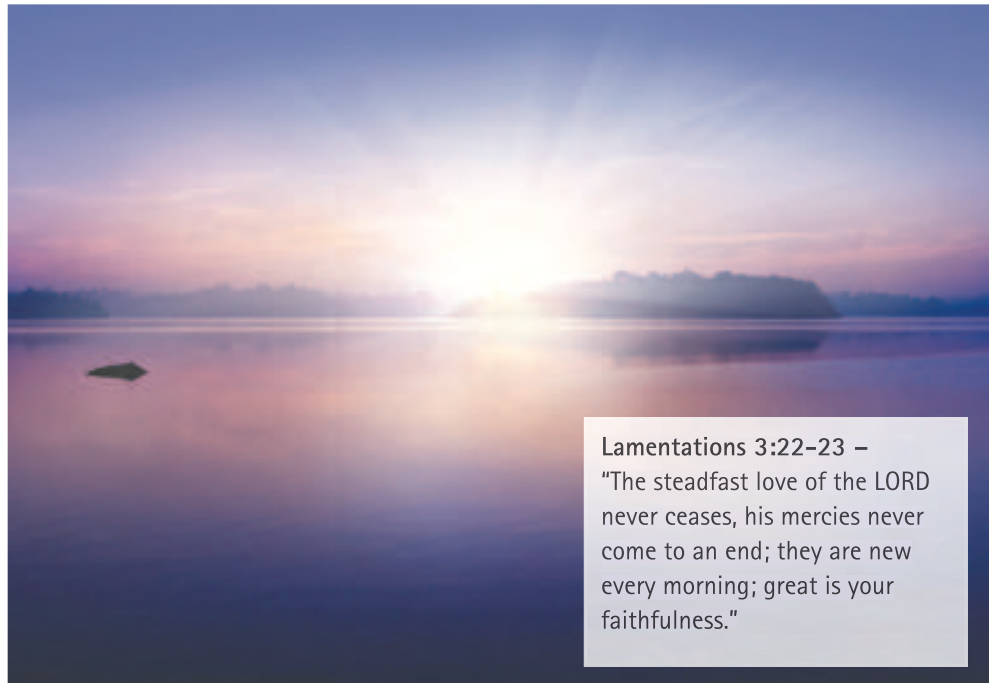
We've known sorrows, too. Can we learn from his glum tale? ↓

When all is lost (vv. 1-20)

The book of Lamentations, as one might guess from the title, is the saddest book in the Bible. Its five chapters of heart-breaking poetry mourn the destruction of Jerusalem, search for meaning in the face of loss, and ponder the possibility of hope. ↓

We can date the book with some confidence to the sixth century BCE, shortly after Nebuchadnezzar's troops razed and burned the city in 587. It is one of the few sources of insight we have to what life was like for the poor Jews who remained in Judah while their more affluent or influential countrymen were carried into exile. Some scholars believe all or parts of Lamentations may have been read in an annual fast day amid the ruins of Jerusalem, a painful way of remembering what had been lost – and why.

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



Lamentations 3:22-23 –
"The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."

An old tradition ascribes the book to Jeremiah, the so-called "Weeping Prophet." There is little evidence to back this up, however, and several reasons to question it. While the book's poems sometimes reflect uncertainty about why the people had to suffer so much, Jeremiah's prophecies reflect no such questioning. He was quite certain that Jerusalem's fate was well deserved, and due to centuries of sin.

The first four chapters of Lamentations are written as acrostics: each verse begins with a corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 3 takes the acrostic a step further: it consists of 22 three-line stanzas, with all three lines in each stanza beginning with the same letter. Each line was numbered as a verse, giving it 66 verses. ↓

The first two chapters are lamentations over the fate of "Daughter Zion," the city of Jerusalem personified as a woman. ↓ The third chapter begins with a lament by the "man of constant sorrows," an anonymous person whose personal afflictions parallel and perhaps represent the suffering of the city.

And does he suffer! Using figurative

language more commonly found in the psalms of lament, the man describes how one disaster after another has befallen him – all of which he believes are due to God's anger. Verses 1-9, as noted by Delbert Hillers, are like Psalm 23 in reverse: God is like a shepherd who leads the man astray, who pounds him with his rod, who locks him up in darkness and who blocks his every move. ↓

If that were not bad enough, he portrays God as a wild bear or lion who has torn him to pieces (vv. 10-11), as an archer who has shot him full of arrows (vv. 12-13), as one who has made him a laughingstock and filled him with bitterness (vv. 14-15).

The sad result of such humiliation is that he has been left cowering in the ashes of the city, chewing rocks (v. 16). "My soul is bereft of peace," he says. "I have forgotten what happiness is" (v. 17). Even worse than the loss of happiness, v. 18 suggests that he had lost all hope of deliverance, leaving him with nothing but bitter and depressing thoughts (vv. 19-20).

Have you ever felt like "the man of constant sorrow"? Has it ever seemed


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that the world had turned completely against you and that God not only failed to protect you, but also was the driving force behind the trouble?

Does it feel that way now?

**When hope is found
(vv. 21-24)**

Given the morbid resignation found in vv. 1-20, the affirmation in vv. 21-24 comes as a surprise. In the midst of his manifold miseries, the poet remembers the central credo of Israel's belief about God, and in this he finds new hope: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end" (v. 22). 

The steadfast belief in God's steadfast love had its roots in Yahweh's self-description to Moses as being "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Exod. 34:6-7). That promise came in the wake of Israel's having turned to worship a golden calf. Despite the people's persistent idolatry, immorality, and oppressive behaviors, God was willing to forgive and start anew (Neh. 9:17; Joel 2:13; Ps. 86:5, 15, 103:8-14, and 145:8). The prophet Jonah believed it so strongly that he cited the text to express his anger that God would show mercy even to the Ninevites (Jon. 4:2).

Despite his own sorrows, the poet of Lamentations 3 clung to the belief that God's steadfast love and mercy had not come to an end, but were "new every morning." In this belief he could declare "Great is your faithfulness," a phrase celebrated in the memorable hymn by Thomas Chisolm, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness."

How could the man of sorrows come to such a change of attitude? Perhaps it is because he did lose hope – in his old way of hoping. If all of his hopes were centered in God's coming to his rescue, he was bound to be disappointed. By shifting his hope from deliverance to the God who stands behind it, he found a new way of hoping.

"The Lord is my portion," he declared. "Therefore I will hope in him" (v. 24). The word for "portion" or "share" recalls traditions about the division of the land among the tribes of Israel. The priestly tribe of Levi was not given a section of the land because, God told Aaron, "I am your portion." Because of their service to God, the Levites would live in cities scattered throughout the land, and they would receive a share of tithes for their support, but their ultimate "portion" was in their special relationship with God.

The poet of Lamentations 3 had run out of hope when considering his disastrous life alone, but he found new hope when he considered that God had not forsaken him – that even in administering discipline or allowing misfortune to occur, God's steadfast love and mercy yet endured.


How we feel about life – and God – often has to do with our perspective. While we are less likely than the poet to attribute every misfortune to God's punishment for sin, we may harbor unrealistic expectations of divine protection, and grow angry with God when tragedy strikes.

Like the poet, we may find it helpful to lose our over-expectant hopes of supernatural safekeeping and learn to appreciate the present care of a God who goes with us into the dark valleys of life.

**When grief is good
(vv. 25-33)**

Having found a new way to hope in God, the poet's reflection led him to consider ways in which misery and sorrow could be seen as avenues toward a positive outcome. He turns first to the virtue of patience, expressing faith that "the LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him" (v. 25). Instead of complaining, he

concludes, "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" (v. 26).

Trials can have educational value even for young people, the poet says, that they learn "to bear the yoke" – apparently the yoke of suffering – while they are young (v. 27). 

The poet stresses humility in the next three verses, urging sufferers to find profit from sitting alone in silence, from prostrating oneself before God to the point of eating dust, from offering one's cheek to persecutors who would slap it (vv. 28-30).

Like the prophets and the authors of Israel's historical narrative, the man of constant sorrows believed that God could and should discipline the Hebrews when they deserved it, but he was convinced that God would not reject them forever (v. 31). Any grief God caused would be balanced by compassion and steadfast love that does not give up on people (v. 32).

The poet had no doubt that Jerusalem's destruction, Israel's exile, and his own sufferings were the direct consequences of divine discipline, but he did not believe for a minute that God enjoyed it: "for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone" (v. 33). Prior to a spanking, many parents have cited the old adage: "This is going to hurt me more than it will you," a thought not unlike what the writer is saying here. He believes there is a time when God must punish, but he understands that God suffers along with the people.

A more literal translation of v. 33 would be "he does not afflict or grieve the sons of men from his heart." Our modern idiom would be "his heart is not in it." Punishment brings God no pleasure, but has the purpose of turning human hearts toward repentance and a return to right living (vv. 40-42). Divine discipline may be necessary, but God's compassion never ceases, God's steadfast love never falters.

When one of the worship hymns is "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," can you sing it with confidence? **BT**

In the Know

Ed Beddingfield is pastor of Memorial Baptist Church in Buies Creek, N.C., coming from First Baptist Church of Fayetteville, N.C.

James A. Christison Jr. died April 5 in Tampa, Fla., at age 87. His leadership among American Baptists included service as executive secretary of American Baptist Home Missions Society and associate general secretary of ABCUSA from 1969-1976.

John Laurence (Bud) Carroll died Feb. 18 in Newtown Square, Penn., at age 86. He was an American Baptist leader in education, youth, camp and conference ministries.

Ka'thy Gore Chappell received the 2015 Anne Thomas Neil Award from Baptist Women in Ministry of North Carolina. She is leadership development coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina.

William Rush Comer Jr., 91, died March 25 in Louisville. He was one of the first graduates of the School of Religious Education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and was a leader in the field of religious education. He was a professor at Southern for 41 years, where he had the longest classroom tenure of any Christian education professor.

David Lockard of The Villages, Fla., died March 14 at age 89. He and his wife, Susie, served as Southern Baptist missionaries in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) for 14 years beginning in 1952. He then directed the SBC Foreign Mission Board orientation center located in Georgia at the time. He served on the SBC Christian Life Commission 1981-1988.

Molly T. Marshall and **A. Roy Medley** will receive the Luke Mowbray Ecumenical Award to be presented in June by American Baptist Churches Committee on Christian Unity. Marshall is president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas, and Medley is general secretary of ABCUSA.

Emily Hull McGee has been called as pastor of First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem, N.C., coming from Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., where she served as minister to young adults. **BT**

Explore God's love with **Shine** Sunday school curriculum! **Shine: Living in God's Light** has engaging stories and activities that will teach children the Bible and help them understand that they are known and loved by God and learn what it means to follow Jesus. Find sample sessions, Bible outlines and more at shinecurriculum.com.

Senior Minister: First Cumberland Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., established in 1841 and a flagship church of the Cumberland Presbyterian denomination, seeks a minister who will lead our congregation as we grow in mind, body and spirit while honoring a heritage of faith, stewardship, traditional worship and community ministry. Average Sunday worship attendance is 180-200. The church campus is home to a daycare center, summer outreach program for 200-plus children and a community pool. Complete details are available at firstcumberland.com. We welcome applicants from other denominations, with the understanding that the selected candidate will affiliate with the Cumberland Presbyterian denomination.

Senior Pastor

Winnwood Baptist Church
Kansas City, Mo.
Information: Winnwood.org

Associate Pastor for Family Ministry and Education

Full-time position requiring seminary training

Church profile:
moderate, mission-minded
affiliated with BGAV, CBF
open to pastoral leadership by men and
women equally

Salary and benefits:
\$40,000+, based on education and
experience

Résumés:
Search Committee
First Baptist Church
23 Starling Ave.
Martinsville, VA 24112

Minister to Youth, Children and Families

Church profile:

- dually aligned with CBF and SBC
- adheres to 1963 Baptist Faith and Message
- has a traditional style of worship
- located in a small town 18 miles north of Athens, Ga., just off I-85

Candidate:

- seminary graduate or working toward a seminary degree
- some ministry experience

Résumés: First Baptist Church, 1345 S. Elm St., Commerce, GA 30529 or carlton@fbc-commerce.org

Classifieds

Senior Pastor

First Baptist Church, Roswell, Ga.

Church profile:

- traditional in our worship and contemporary in our message
- believe in time-honored hymns and the power and value they bring
- sermons come directly from the Bible and are positive, relevant and grace filled
- conservative in our biblical beliefs, generous in sharing our love and non-judgmental
- men and women serve equally

Information / Applications: fbroswell.org/PastorSearch or egaissert2@fbroswell.org

Church Administrator

The First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., is seeking an individual to oversee the administrative functions of our congregation and staff team. This position is a senior level position with a primary focus on financial management, personnel management and property oversight, as well as serving as the administrative troubleshooter for the staff team. All applicants should have at least 3-5 years of experience in managing a significant organizational/ministry budget. The strongest applicants will also have some combination (though likely not all) of the following elements in their background:

- undergraduate or graduate education in a business-related field
- business experience
- theological education
- experience working on a church staff
- experience working in a non-profit organization
- experience supervising multiple direct reports

Please send all inquiries, recommendations and resumes to:
searchcommittee@fbcwilmington.org
(subject line "Administrator Opening")

Are you a church millennial?

Many people think a millennial is any young adult born after 1980, but if you go to church you know that millennials are defined by more than their age. Their church experience is different. This scientific quiz will help you understand how “church millennial” you are. According to my best guesses, these questions will reveal whether you share the values, attitudes and behaviors of a typical church millennial.

1. Did your parents take you to church when you were a child?

- a. It depends on which parent I was with that weekend.
- b. Sometimes
- c. Every Sunday, even though they didn't want to go either.

2. Where is your Bible?

- a. On my phone
- b. God's Word is all around us.
- c. On my nightstand, next to my reading glasses

3. What is the primary purpose of the church?

- a. Care for God's children
- b. Christian formation
- c. To stay bigger than the Methodist church

4. How often do you attend church?

- a. Not as much as my parents think
- b. Every Sunday
- c. Sunday, Wednesday and twice a month for committee meetings

5. When you visit a church, how do people welcome you?

- a. “I'm sorry we don't have a class for your age group.”
- b. “We love young people.”
- c. “Here's a quarterly.”

6. Has your phone ever rung during worship?

- a. Yes, but it was during a drum solo.
- b. No, I keep it on vibrate.
- c. How would I know? I'm at church.

7. Has your church established Twitter hashtags for your services to encourage people to share sermon quotes?

- a. #yescaptainobvious
- b. #interestingidea
- c. #huh?

8. When you hear something in a sermon that you want to remember, what do you do?

- a. Make a note on my iPad.
- b. Make a note on my bulletin.
- c. Tell my wife.

9. Would it be appropriate to take a selfie during a baptism?

- a. Yes, baptism is a milestone that would be beautifully commemorated with a photo.
- b. No, baptism is a sacred event that should be treated as such.
- c. Wouldn't the water ruin your camera?

10. What kind of bread do you eat at the Lord's Supper?

- a. Gluten free
- b. Hawaiian
- c. Styrofoam chiclets

11. What do you think 20-somethings want in worship?

- a. A sense of purpose
- b. A casual atmosphere
- c. Expensive lattes

12. Does your church have a Facebook page?

- a. Yes, it makes the old people happy.
- b. Yes, that's how I found the church.
- c. Yes, we're doing it to reach out to millennials.

13. Does your church website include online giving?

- a. Yes, of course.
- b. We're working on it.
- c. No, but we recently updated the picture of our church on the offering envelopes.

14. How many of your friends go to church?

- a. I don't know.
- b. Most of them do.
- c. The only friend I have who doesn't go to church is the mailman.

15. If you want to invite people to a church event, what do you do?

- a. Tweet a clever encouragement to attend.
- b. Send an e-vite.
- c. Hand a batch of invitations to my pagan mailman.

16. Do you think evangelical Christianity is too political, too exclusive and hostile to LGBTs?

- a. Exactly
- b. In some ways
- c. What does the “T” stand for?

17. Do you think churches focus too much on sex?

- a. Yes, it seems to be the only issue.
- b. The church has a responsibility to speak to fidelity.
- c. We will quit talking about it when they quit doing it.

18. Is Christianity too focused on rules?

- a. Yes, churches are too legalistic.
- b. We need law and grace.
- c. These kids today need to straighten up and fly right — and get off my lawn.

Grading your quiz

This quiz can give 442,368 (or so) different combinations of answers. Compare your responses with what you imagine might be the responses of thousands of millennial wannabes nationwide. Weigh each answer and make up the score that represents your resemblance to the typical church millennial.

75-100 = You are a real live ridonks church millennial.

50-74 = You appear to have some millennial tendencies, but it likely embarrasses people when you rap the scripture.

25-49 = You may know some people at church in their 20s.

0-24 = You only read this column because the series on “Baptists and the American Civil War” ended last month. **BT**

By J. Randall O'Brien

Integration, interrogation of faith vital to Christian critical thinking, learning and living

In some quarters today, rejection of Scripture as a divinely inspired record of God's revelation is in vogue.

Some scholars insist: The Gospels are not literally true, but history metaphorized; the Bible is not divine; there was no virgin birth, nor bodily resurrection. Jesus was not divine. The Bible is not the word of God. So runs the hermeneutic of cynicism.

Does Luther's Reformation cry yet ring?

Richard B. Hays insists Scripture is *norma normans*, the norming norm for Christians, meaning Scripture is authoritative for the church.

James D. Smart, in *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, warns, "When the book [Bible] is no longer read and understood by Christians, they have been cut off decisively from the roots of their distinctively Christian existence."

In short, he writes, "No Scriptures, No church! No Scriptures, No revelation!"

The words "authority" and "author" derive from the same Latin root, *auctor*, meaning, "writer, or progenitor." To rid ourselves of the authority of Scripture is to rid ourselves of its author. Who might that be?

The Bible is an antidote for all forms of idolatry. When Jesus becomes Lord, there is regime change.

Whoever, or whatever, has been king, queen, boss, most significant other, addiction or god, is dethroned. Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not; mammon is not, (Fill-in-the-blank) is not.

All truth is God's truth. In the Christian university every thought, word and deed is in service to our Lord. We are called to be

Christ-centered, academically rigorous, and service-oriented, especially attuned to the needs of the poor, the marginalized, the needy.

While we seek to glorify Christ by reaching our full potential as educated citizens and servant-leaders, our desire and calling is to serve others.

Of course, a Christian university is an academic institution, a learning community and a school. So we read, think, question, research, present, dialogue, listen, write, create art and music and literature, exercise, play, pray, worship, do good work and make friends in gratitude to God. We love the Lord with all our heart, soul and mind.

Our life is ordered by the way of Jesus Christ, whose teachings — such as the Sermon on the Mount, featuring a radical call to enemy-love, forgiveness and purity of heart, along with his sayings, parables and example — become normative.

The cross of Christ saves us mystically, yes, but also practically. We live in light of the cross, ourselves given to God and to others. Yet, there is more than Christ's selfless example in play.

Empowerment to live the Christ-life is our thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit. Holy Spirit! Game changer!

Both the integration and interrogation of our faith are vital to Christian critical thinking, learning and living. Jesus questioned much in his day, especially entrenched religious belief and



behavior.

Should we not question all things, too? How else do we separate the wheat and the chaff among truth claims?

Surely truth will stand. Falsehood will not.

Why not ask, "What is good? What is true? What is the common good? WWJD? WDJD? (What did Jesus do?) What does God desire?"

One devout scholar noted, "The faith that is afraid to think is not faith at all, but unbelief hiding behind a mask of piety."

To journey from a non-questioning stage of faith, to a questioning stage, on to a place of commitment is a pilgrimage in maturation. Ideally, Christians are thinkers, questioners, disciples, evangelists and revolutionaries courageously confronting falsehood, hypocrisy, ignorance, oppression and evil.

The daring Christian calling must not be lightly accepted. Jesus sternly warned, "Count the cost."

Once he probed, "Can you drink from this cup?" Frankly, not everyone can, or will. Yet, Christ calls each of us, and all of us, personally and communally, to come follow him, learn from him, to die to self, be changed, then, in his power and love, boldly go and change the world.

Few people I know would argue with the critique of our world today as "messed up," a place where things have gone terribly wrong. I am not naïve enough to believe that Christian universities will somehow transform earth into a Garden of Eden, where we all live happily ever after in Paradise Regained.

However, I do believe a Christian university and its Christ-followers can make a huge difference in this world.

Can we make well the hurting and the hurters everywhere? How I wish!

So we can't change the whole world? But we can change the world for one person. Then another. And another.

The Christian university is a home, however imperfect, a sacred place to come to, to become a transformed, educated child of God, and holy ground to go from to touch and transform other lives in the loving spirit of Christ Jesus, our Lord and hope. O Lord, may it be so. **BT**

—J. Randall O'Brien is president of Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, Tenn.



Tested by trials

Football great Jim Kelly and family are sustained by faith

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Pro Football Hall of Fame quarterback Jim Kelly is considered one of the NFL's all-time best quarterbacks. He led the Buffalo Bills to a record four consecutive Super Bowls in the 1990s — and they famously lost all four.

Nonetheless, he earned a reputation for a gridiron grit that became known as “Kelly tough.”

But for Jim and his wife, Jill, that Kelly toughness was tested most profoundly by what followed off the field: a terminally ill son, problems in their marriage and Jim's struggle with cancer.

“You can only be tough so much. And I've just been very blessed that I have an open heart now,” Kelly told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*.

“Those things that we go through that cause us to be tested, or to doubt, or to fear,” his wife added, “those things make us stronger in our faith.”

The thing that sustains them, they say, was and is their faith.

The Kellys met and married at the height of Jim's football career and enjoyed the celebrity that came with it. They had a daughter, Erin, and then in 1997, just a few weeks after Jim retired from the Bills, their son, Hunter, was born. Daughter Camryn came along in 1999.

When Hunter was just four months old, he was found to have a genetic disease called Krabbe Leukodystrophy, which affects the nervous system. The Kellys were told he likely wouldn't survive to his second birthday.

Both Jim and Jill had been raised Catholic, but neither was very religious. Jill said her devastation over the diagnosis sent her on a desperate spiritual search that ultimately led her to become a born-again Christian.

“It was Hunter's suffering that caused me to seek after God,” she said. “Everything changed then.”



Former Buffalo Bill quarterback Jim Kelly is all smiles after being named to the 2002 Class of Enshrinees by the Pro Football Hall of Fame in February 2002 in New Orleans. Photo courtesy of REUTERS/Adrees Latif.

Jim Kelly said that at the time, he was angry with God and told his wife not to push her newfound beliefs on him. “I didn't come to faith until after Hunter passed away,” he said.

Neither of their daughters has Krabbe. The Kellys were determined to help Hunter live the best life possible. They launched the Hunter's Hope Foundation to promote awareness and research about the rare disease.

In 2004, the Kellys and the foundation helped found the Hunter James Kelly Research Institute at the University at Buffalo. Through their efforts, more and more newborns are now screened for Krabbe so they can be given an umbilical cord blood transplant in the narrow window of time when progression of the disease can still be slowed.

“The bottom line is, you want to make a difference,” Jim Kelly said.

Beating all medical expectations, Hunter lived until 2005, when he was 8½, although he was never able to walk or talk.

“God used him in so many ways,” said Jill Kelly. “We learned patience and love, unconditional love, selflessness, all of the things that you don't learn in books, and that neither of us had learned up to that point in our lives as an adult.”

Jim Kelly calls Hunter a role model: “Talk about people that you admire, I admired

his toughness in what he went through, and how he changed my life.”

The Kellys have been open about their marital problems. They don't speak about it in detail, but in Jill's 2010 book *Without a Word*, they describe how after Hunter's death, Jim confessed he had been unfaithful. He sought pastoral counseling and decided to embrace his wife's newfound faith for himself.

“I wanted to be able, for my two daughters, to walk in that front door and when they do, to look at their daddy with respect. I was losing all that,” Jim Kelly said during an appearance at Liberty University. “I knew that if I didn't change my life, I was going to lose everything that I worked so hard for.”

The Kellys still live in western New York, where they attend The Chapel, a large non-denominational church. They say their faith has been crucial in dealing with their latest battle.

In June 2013, Jim was found to have cancer of the jaw. After surgery, he was proclaimed cancer-free. Last year, more cancer was discovered in his nasal cavity, and more aggressive treatments followed.

At first, Jim didn't want to go public about their latest ordeal. But he said his wife convinced him the family needed as many prayers as possible. Jim's former teammates and the western New York community have rallied around them. Although Jim still has some lingering health issues, a recent MRI declared him again cancer-free.

“I live every day to its fullest,” he said.

Jill and their eldest daughter, Erin, have written a newly-released book about the family's experiences, called *Kelly Tough*.

“It's not, ‘Oh, look at the Kellys.’ It's ‘Look what God has done,’” said Jill Kelly. “Even though it's our story, it's really about the greater story.” **BT**

(A version of this story was first broadcast on the PBS television program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*.)

“I wanted to be able, for my two daughters, to walk in that front door and when they do, to look at their daddy with respect. I was losing all that.”

Piety power

Memoir reveals the controlling influence of Jewish fundamentalism

Just a few miles north of New York City, an all-powerful religious leader controls every aspect of his followers' lives. Accounts detail welfare fraud, educational fraud and even gang violence.

Private lives are micromanaged: Matches are arranged, books are banned, and the slightest details of personal appearance are carefully monitored, with uniformity enforced by authorized thugs.

Cult compound? Fringe Christian sect? Nope. New Square, N.Y., home of the extreme Hasidic Jewish sect known as the Skver Hasidim.

These details come not from an outside investigative reporter — but from a heretical ex-Hasid, Shulem Deen, in his astonishing new memoir, *All Who Go Do Not Return*.

Hasidism — literally, the way of the pious — began in 18th-century Europe as a movement of Jewish spiritual revival. Although shunned by the religious authorities of the time, it became enormously popular, sweeping throughout Eastern Europe.

Centered on personal spiritual experience, devout prayer (think Pentecostals in Jewish garb) and charismatic leaders (known as rebbes), Hasidism revolutionized Jewish life, especially among less-educated, less-urban populations.

But it quickly changed its character. With the threats of emancipation and assimilation looming, Hasidism turned sharply conservative in the 19th century.

Practices ossified, authority was centralized, innovations were prohibited, and any accommodation to modern life was rejected. Today, Hasidim dress like 18th-century Poles.

Unlike far-right Christian or Muslim fundamentalists, Jewish fundamentalists are often depicted as cuddly, harmless and quaint. *Fiddler on the Roof*, which in its original



Shulem Deen, author of *All Who Go Do Not Return*. Photo courtesy of Pearl Gabel.

serialized novel form was a sharp satire of religious life, is a good example.

But as Deen describes, in passage after passage, this is myth, not reality. In fact — and here numerous others buttress his account — the tightknit Skver Hasidic community exercises enormous political power to create a world within a world, where the rebbe's dictates are law.

Deen begins his story in the middle — the night he is ordered to leave New Square under threat of excommunication. The scene is almost Kafkaesque: “rumors” of disbelief, “people are saying” that action must be taken.

But Deen also knows that the community court — unsanctioned by any civil law, but with absolute authority in the village — is actually right. He is an unbeliever.

Yet he can't just leave. At the time, Deen is married, with five children. If he were excommunicated, they would all be marginalized, if not shunned. Even a move to nearby Monsey

— considered ultra-Orthodox to everyone else, but not-quite-kosher-enough to the Skver sect — would be problematic. What to do?

Entranced by the holiness of the Skverer rebbe, in contrast to the “indistinctive and uninspiring” rebbes near his home in Brooklyn — Deen enrolled in the Skver yeshiva and began his life in New Square while in his teens. At 18, he met his future wife, whom he had neither seen nor spoken to before.

The shocking details emerge almost as asides: a rabbi teaching 18-year-olds to “be vigilant” lest their wives lead them into hell (and telling them not to call their wives by their names, but only say “Um” or “You hear”); witch hunts for people suspected of smuggling a radio or portable television into the Skver community; and widespread corporal punishment, both when Deen was a student and, later, as a teacher in yeshiva.

And the contempt for non-Jews. “The kindness of the goyim (non-Jews) is for sin,” Deen quotes the Skverer rebbe as teaching. Even when a non-Jew does a good deed, his real purpose is evil.

Then there's the poverty. Most Hasidic men (and nearly all women) are uneducated; they speak Yiddish and disparage the teaching of English. They don't know math or history; they have no employment skills.

Deen falls behind on rent, has trouble feeding his children, and can't hold a job. Indeed, holding a job is beneath the dignity of a Hasidic man, who, if he is fortunate, should be able to study all his life — while collecting unemployment, food stamps and welfare benefits.

Deen finally finds work as a teacher, where his duties involve fraudulently completing progress reports for New York state while not teaching any of the subjects he is reporting on, and collecting government subsidies.

How does it all unravel? Slowly.

Deen's first explorations of the outside world take place in books. The provocative title of his memoir, we learn midway through,

refers to books — not just a “woman of loose morals.”

His sins are intellectual, not carnal.

First, a few Jewish books. Then, a radio. Then, secular books at the library. And then the Internet, where Deen meets non-Orthodox Jews for the first time.

Already, we see the fault lines appear between Deen and his wife, Gitty. Deen protests that his explorations are harmless. Gitty knows he is going astray. And she does not go with him.

As Deen’s curiosity turns to skepticism and then to doubt, Gitty watches him fall “off the path” and eventually decides she’s had enough. They separate, then divorce.

Now it’s time for the spoiler alert. Deen loses everything: his wife, his children, his family, his friends, and his community.

And his faith. Even before his expulsion from the community, Deen finds he can no longer pray, can no longer believe the stories he’s been told.

“What is the meaning of right and wrong when there is no guidance from a divine being?

... What, then, was the point of it all?”

He finds his way, somewhat, but *All Who Go* does not end happily.

Yes, Deen finds a popular blog for ex-Hasidim, gets a job, and finds his way in the secular world. But there’s hollowness to his new life and a bitter sadness over the loss of his children.

Not only does Gitty get sole custody, the entire community warns them against him. Even his few-and-far-between visits become unsustainable; his children shut him out.

All this unfolds against a backdrop of institutional Jewish indifference. The multimillion-dollar Jewish federations do nothing for these communities, other than distribute charity — usually through the Hasidic power structure, thus reinforcing its control.

Footsteps, an organization helping ex-Hasidim

navigate the secular world — job training, GEDs — remains a small and independent outlier. (Deen is now a board member.)

Despite numerous sex scandals; exposes

in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *The Jewish Daily Forward*; widespread power abuses; and nauseating episodes such as the herpes epidemic spread by Hasidic mohels (ritual circumcisers) who insist on sucking the blood directly off of circumcision wounds, the mainstream Jewish establishment is silent.

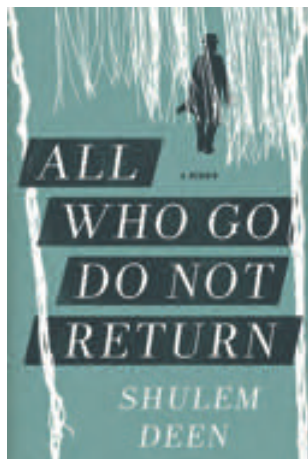
Partly this is out of fear, and partly out of the peculiarly American Jewish notion that Jewish fundamentalists are better Jews than the rest of us.

Meanwhile, politicians are terrified of Hasidic voting blocs. Hasidim now control the East Ramapo school district, which includes New Square, and are starving secular schools (almost all black and Hispanic) to enrich their own religious academies.

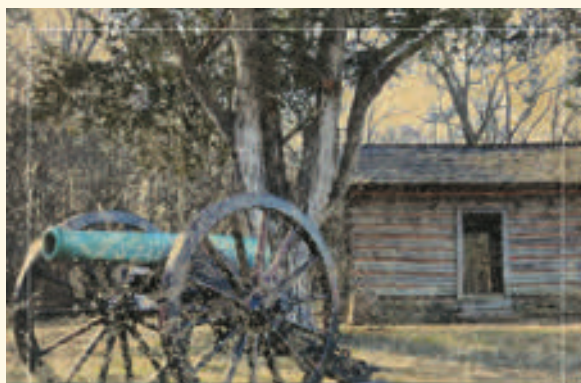
Deen’s harrowing story, then, is also an indictment of those who are standing by and allowing it to be.

To many, the Hasidim are quaint throwbacks, their lives pious scenes set to the tune of “L’Chayim” and “Sunrise, Sunset.” But to those trapped inside the Hasidic world, the tale is not comedy but tragedy. And there is often no soundtrack at all. **BT**

—Jay Michaelson is a columnist for *The Daily Beast* and author of *God vs. Gay? The Religious Case for Equality*.



Courtesy of Graywolf Press.



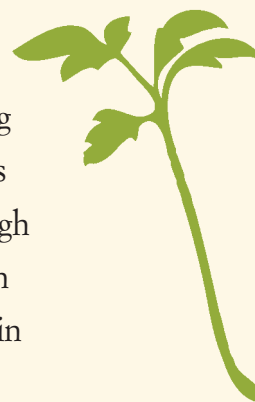
BEHIND ENEMY LINES

A NOVEL FOR READERS
AGES 10 AND UP

LYNELLE SWEAT MASON

A new release FROM *Nurturing* faith BOOKS

View the world through the eyes of 12-year-old Bobby as he takes a grueling journey to reunite with his father who is serving in the Confederate Army. Though fiction, the story will generate interest in true events of more than 150 years ago in the Chattanooga area.



nurturingfaith.info

‘Poet Laureate of the Pulpit’

REMEMBERING GARDNER C. TAYLOR

EDITOR’S NOTE: In the July 2006 cover story, legendary preacher Gardner C. Taylor, then 88, tells of feeling “the spray of the Jordan in my face.” Yet he lived to age 96, dying this past Easter Sunday. In a tribute to his remarkable life and ministry, that earlier feature story is reshaped and presented here.

RICHMOND, Va. — A Louisiana native and son of a preacher, Gardner Taylor served as pastor of Brooklyn’s Concord Baptist Church of Christ for 42 years before retiring in 1990. *Time* magazine called him the “dean of the nation’s black preachers” and *Christian Century* deemed him “poet laureate of the pulpit.”

A civil rights activist who helped birth the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Taylor received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2000. At 88, Taylor retained the sharp mind and gifted oratory skills that have drawn spiritual seekers for more than half a century.

In May 2006, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond hosted Taylor for the Chester Brown-Hampton Baptist Church Preaching and Worship Conference.

“I was born some 50 years after slavery,” Taylor said in one address. “I knew people who passed through that dark night.”

Deliverance, he said, noting Israel under Moses’ guidance as an example, leads us out of one difficulty into another.

Throughout his long ministry, Taylor faithfully used his pastoral sensitivity, spiritual insights and gifts of proclamation to help persons of faith move from difficulty to deliverance again and again.

Noting his 88th birthday, Taylor said he could “feel the spray of the Jordan in my face.” But for many touched by his preaching, the longevity of his life and ministry is a gift to be cherished.

During the Richmond conference Taylor responded to questions submitted by participants and posed by Charles

Smith, then pastor of Hampton Baptist Church in Hampton, Va. (now of Madison Baptist Church in Madison, Ga.), and Len Keever, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dunn, N.C.

The following conversation is adapted from that session and an interview by Editor John Pierce.

Q: Will you share about your calling to ministry?

GCT: I wanted to be a lawyer, though no person of color had ever been admitted to law school in Louisiana. I got sidetracked into this business.

I was in a horrible accident as a senior in college in 1937 in which a white man was

killed. There were two white witnesses, including a Southern Baptist minister named Rev. Shockley. They told the exact truth.

That impacted my call. I came to look upon myself as the Lord’s lawyer ... I have not represented him well all the time, but I make his case.

Q: How do you develop a sermon?

GCT: Well, in retirement, I’m reworking material and seeing how inadequate the first working was. I loosely, not slavishly, follow the lectionary.

I believe pastors are to be open to the reception of things all around — engaged in the human situation. God does not come to us frontally.

In black life there’s been a misinterpretation, largely by blacks themselves, that blacks are [more spiritual than others]. But there’s always been that strain of anti-faith in black life.

So I’ve had to come at the gospel from the skeptic side — because we are surrounded by believers and non-believers.

The best of black preaching comes out of a theodicy of wrestling with why God would allow a people to be in an untold situation. But we are all tenting [on earth]; we don’t have houses.

Preaching has to come out of that temporality, impermanence. The preacher’s job is to remind us we are strangers and pilgrims — and, yet, with an almost paradoxical sense of creating common unity.

Q: How do you care for your private spiritual life?

GCT: I learned too late in my ministry the importance of sitting in silence before God. I got the idea [of spending 20 minutes in silence at the beginning of each day] from Alexander Maclaren, the greatest expositor of scripture.



However, I must add that Maclaren had a serious flaw in not addressing the social concerns in England at the time.

Q: Can you tell us about your relationship with Martin Luther King Jr. and your part in forming the Progressive National Baptist Convention?

GCT: Martin King was my friend, but I don't use his name often. Everyone claims to have been his close friend, so I refrain from talking about him publicly.

Dr. King and I talked about the need for the new convention over and over. But L.B. Booth called the people together in Cincinnati (in 1961). Neither Martin nor I attended.

More recently I've urged upon black Baptists to come together. And, thank God, we did come together in Nashville last year (2005).

The civil rights movement lifted from the nation an awful pall of shame and hypocrisy. It not only freed black people; it delivered the nation to be free from shame.

Q: What is the present status of civil rights?

GCT: It's been a mixed kind of results. It's been a mixed bag for which partly blacks are responsible. I believe if Dr. King were alive today, he would be very embarrassed.

The greatest hazard, I think, is to see individual recognition as group advancement. Color is not enough; you only have to look at the Supreme Court to see that.

All of us, black and white, have to keep moving against the grain.

Q: It has been said that 11 a.m. on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week. Is the church improving on that?

GCT: That was my thing that I got from a Presbyterian preacher in Albany, N.Y. I repeated it at a Baptist World Alliance meeting saying that 11 o'clock on Sunday is the most segregated hour.

We are coming closer together in our worship. And these preachers — and I hate to call them preachers — but these performers, black and white, on television are pretty much merged.

Q: What is your impression of Billy Graham's ministry?

GCT: I've known Mr. Graham since 1956 when he came to Madison Square Garden. To his credit, he was the first to open his audience

to people of all color.

It's been a tremendous ministry ... partly conditioned by culture. I have great regard for him. We are of the same vintage.

Q: How has your preaching changed over the years?

GCT: It has softened ... from the harsh rhetoric of the civil rights movement. I have come to see much more that we are social/solitary beings. ...

"I" is the slenderest pronoun; I think a preacher should not try to hide behind it.

Q: You became pastor of Concord Baptist Church at age 30. What was it like?

GCT: It was intoxicating, but highly stimulating. I've never known a congregation more anxious to hear the gospel. I never lost the excitement of that congregation and New York City, the crossroads of the world.

There's a joke about three ministers being together. One confesses that he sometimes takes a little money from the offering. Another said he occasionally drinks a bit too much. The third preacher applauds their honesty and then admits his own problem: "I can't help but tell everything I hear."

I don't think a normal person does this. Preachers have to be a little angular.

I believe — in fact, demographics show — that the pulpits of America will be filled partly, and perhaps largely, by women.

Q: You paid tribute to two former Southern Baptist leaders — later connected to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship — Phil Strickland and Foy Valentine, both of whom have passed away. You credited them with "opening before Southern Baptists and others ... what faith is all about."

You noted that they "came out of the inspired teaching of T.B. Maston." How important was Maston and his students to race relations among Baptists?

GCT: I went out to Southwestern Seminary for some lectureship that allowed me to meet Dr. Maston. I went to his house for dinner and we talked.

I had learned something of the enormous influence this man had in a very difficult time in the South in sending forth, somehow, out of his own spirit, young men who had a vision of what the South might become in the name of Jesus Christ. I was privileged to meet him, but didn't know him well after that.

He gave me several of his books, and I

went through them. I have never stopped marveling at how back then, in the '30s and '40s, he could, first himself, have such a vision and who could by the magic of personality and the grace of God communicate that to young men.

That was a tremendous thing. And Foy was one of my most cherished and dearest friends.

Q: There is an effort through the New Baptist Covenant to find more cooperation among what you described as "non-creedal Baptists," such as American Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the historic black conventions. Is this a worthy and realistic effort?

GCT: Yes, yes, yes. That may be the most hopeful possibility for Baptists in this country. Because Baptists, like all other Christian communities, are under a grave threat.

The new heresies, ... the motivational speakers, all of this which is a bastardization of the faith, take hold of people's fantasy and imagination. The New Testament speaks about itching ears. Somehow, the Christian faith has been susceptible to heresies.

All of our Christian conventions are under a grave threat. While Southern Baptists have been protected by an iron curtain of region, they are susceptible also.

American Baptists are feeling it more strongly. Black Baptists are feeling it. A part of the problem is that our separateness and alienation are a good talking point for those who don't want to have anything to do with organized Christianity.

So I think it is very important that we come together. But, of course, the faith has always done better as a minority undertaking. It doesn't do well in a majority position. It just doesn't.

Q: Some see the Baptist World Alliance as the vehicle for bringing "non-creedal" Baptists closer together. Do you?

GCT: The Baptist World Alliance was begun with Alexander Maclaren as its first president. He had been a tremendous influence.

Now Southern Baptists have come out. This separatism, this withdrawal, will do no more good for Southern Baptists than the old Elijah Muhammad movement did for blacks. It just does not wash.

The strangest thing is the kind of meanness that can accompany supposed orthodoxy. The worse part of all of this is that it is not about orthodoxy; it is about power.

*“T is the slenderest pronoun;
I think a preacher should not try to hide behind it.”*

Q: It seems like anytime you pull together various Baptist groups it requires giving up some turf, power and control.

GCT: That's the problem. Not only giving up power, but the lust for power.

Q: How hard is it to balance the priestly/pastoral and prophetic/preaching roles of a pastor?

GCT: I think the balance occurs when the preacher or the congregation recognizes that it is both societal and solitary. We are in a community of believers, a civic community, but we are ultimately individuals — with all the gifts and hazards of individuality.

I think preaching that forgets either one is in a bad fix.

I had an invitation from one of the Southern Baptist seminaries to come preach in chapel [fall 2006]. The man who sent the invitation said, “Now we want you to be sure and present an expository sermon.”

I think I know what he meant; he wanted me to stay inside the Bible. So I've created a word now: “in-pository.”

Because there is a kind of preaching that can be an escape from reality. And there is a kind of preaching that can be all flat — horizontal — without the vertical aspect.

I think our job is to put together “Thou shall love the Lord thy God *and* thy neighbor.”

Q: So are you going to give that seminary sermon?

GCT: Yes. I penciled in my poor writing at the end of the letter to please call and let me know what you mean by an expository sermon so I will not transgress. But I've not heard from him. But I think I know what he meant. He wanted it internal.

Q: If you did that kind of preaching Sunday-in and Sunday-out, would you fail the church?

GCT: I'd fail the church and I'd fail my Lord

— because the Word became flesh. I think preaching *about* the Word without *what it became* is an obscurity-style preaching. I think the preaching that's all flesh does not go back to the Word.

Q: Is it important to you to be a Baptist?

GCT: Yes and no. Yes in the sense that — let me go at it this way: My friend Felton Clark, president of Southern University, said he was proud to be a Baptist because it meant that you are really free.

I think that one of the reasons so many blacks became Baptists — apart from the sociological reasons — was that they found in the Baptist church a lack of an ecclesiastical system, a kind of looseness.

I would not give up anything for our soul competence and for the sovereignty of our individual congregations.

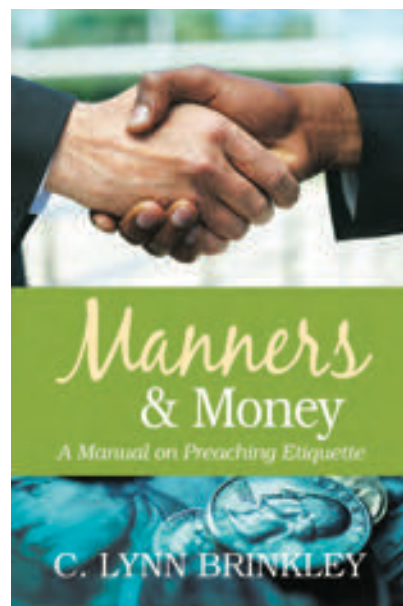
Yeah, I like our Baptist thing. But like any other wonderful thing, it can be prostituted and is often. **BT**

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Learning to listen, after moving from pulpit to pew

By Ken Massey

After 32 years of pastoral ministry, I moved from the pulpit to the pew. To borrow a term coined by a former president from Texas, I "misunderestimated" the challenges of being on "the other side" of a sermon.

My sabbatical from speaking has changed my perception of proclamation: my awareness of how difficult listening can be and also what people need from sermons (or at least what I need).

Let's start with the work of listening. I thought active listening in counseling and conversation took concentration, but that's a piece of cake compared to staying with 20 minutes (or more) of even the best meandering monologue.

Honestly, my early listening experiences in the pew were as convoluted as my first sermons. All I could seem to do was deconstruct and reconstruct the sermon as it was being delivered. I would pick up on ideas, phrases or illustrations, imagine how I would rearrange or edit them if I were preaching, draft a revision, add a poem and then wake up to see that the sermon was over.

Even when I was able to put that runaway rewriting to the side, there were other distractions, both internal and external. My struggle during sermons was not the mind drift of boredom. It was mind detour triggered by the sermon itself! There were too many interesting thoughts and images only loosely related to the theme.

I wish this were my rare form of attention deficit, but I fear it is fairly common for those formed in a super stimulating culture, and commonly magnified by ministers who want to wake the dead and challenge the inert. When I was writing sermons, I had no idea my mind-grabbing connections could become mental exit ramps. Their purpose was to keep listeners engaged. Now I fear that many of my hooks became listening hurdles.

While the Spirit may speak through our mental mania, I think "faith that comes by hearing" might happen more often if our minds were less cluttered. I'm suggesting that staying with a sermon is like another spiritual discipline that doesn't work well when our brains are in the fast lane.

I'm thinking of prayer, and I find that "centering" is also a helpful way to listen to sermons. This concept has implications for how worship might help still rather than stimulate our cranial cacophonies.

Which brings me to a new perspective on what people may need from sermons — in the macro, not micro sense. No single sermon or series can touch the deepest need of those who want to hear a word from God. Yet over the course of a year, for instance, recurring themes have an opportunity to take root and grow, producing the fruit of life in Christ.

What surprised me about my own needs was how simple and central they were once I became aware of them. I assumed I would crave hearing from "the most interesting man/woman in the world." Yet instead of exploring the edges of spiritual/biblical/social thought, I discovered a strong desire to be pulled back toward the center of life with God.

Answers to life's pressing questions didn't invite me into that middle space; reminders of God's love did. Theological arguments were wasted breath, while calls to love all of God's creation were a breath of fresh air.

The best sermons I hear move beneath the biblical text and beyond the social superficiality that shapes our personal opinions and reduces everything to "either/or." They don't pander to prejudices.

In a world of copious cultural commentary, good sermons dig down to find a rare jewel called spiritual discernment. This perception, Jesus said, comes by knowing we don't know and being open to truths that transcend our old patterns of believing.

Such preaching is pleased with paradox and comfortable with seeming contradiction. It does not rightly "divide" the word (unfortunate KJV language), but rightly brings together (reconciles) what humankind has split apart for all of history. You know you've heard such a sermon when it pulls you toward personal integrity instead of pushing someone else toward repentance.

Good sermons enlarge my awareness of, and point me toward presence with God. They speak to my true self rather than offering pointers on how to manage my ego, or false self.

To this end, I offer a quote referenced by Richard Rohr from the German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Letters to a Young Poet*:

Have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms... Do not now look for the answers. They cannot now be given to you because you could not live them... At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day. **BT**

—Ken Massey is a retired pastor in North Carolina currently called to interim ministry.



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The wildly popular Christian writer offers an exclusive sneak peek into her new book and its pointed message. Image courtesy of Rachel Held Evans

Q&A with Rachel Held Evans

on revitalizing the church

Rachel Held Evans has grown into a powerful voice in American Christianity, first as the author of *Evolving in Monkey Town* and later with the *New York Times* best seller *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*.

Those who follow her writings often note that her thinking has become increasingly progressive, especially on hot-button theological issues such as gender and sexuality. That shift culminated in her leaving evangelicalism for the Episcopal Church.

Her new book, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving and Finding the Church*, oscillates between stinging critiques of American Christianity and prescriptions for how she believes believers can more faithfully participate in church life.

In an interview with Religion News Service, she talked about the key to revitalizing the church and defended her exit from evangelicalism. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: You say that the way to stop the exodus of millennials from churches isn't cosmetic changes like better music, sleeker logos and more relevant programming. Why are these methods ineffective?

A: These aren't inherently bad strategies, and some churches would be wise to employ them. But many church leaders make the mistake of thinking millennials are shallow consumers who are leaving church because they aren't being entertained.

I think our reasons for leaving church are more complicated, more related to social changes and deep questions of faith than worship style or image.

If you try to woo us back with skinny jeans and coffee shops, it may actually backfire. Millennials have finely tuned B.S. meters that can detect when someone's just trying to sell us something.

We're not looking for a hipper Christianity. We're looking for a truer Christianity.

Q: If these aren't the answer, what is?

A: Sharing Communion. Baptizing sinners. Preaching the Word. Anointing the sick. Practicing confession. You know, the stuff the church has been doing for the last 2,000 years.

We need to re-articulate the significance of the traditional teachings and sacraments of the church in a modern context. That's what I see happening in churches, big and small, that are making multigenerational disciples of Jesus.

Q: You talk about seven sacraments in your book that you think are critical for the church. Which of these will surprise people the most?

A: The one that surprised me the most was anointing of the sick. I used to think such a practice involved superstition and false hope, but that was before I learned the difference between curing and healing.

We may not be able to cure what ails our friends and neighbors, but as Christians we are called to the work of healing — of entering

“We’re not looking for a hipper Christianity. We’re looking for a truer Christianity.”

into one another’s pain, anointing it as holy and sticking around no matter the outcome.

An anointing is an acknowledgment. In a culture of cure-alls and quick fixes, the sacrament of anointing the suffering is a powerful, countercultural gift the church offers the world.

Q: You left evangelicalism for the Episcopal Church. Much of the Episcopal Church has failed to embrace the cosmetic changes you critique, and they practice the things you say will draw millennials back. Yet Episcopalians in America have been in steady decline and are rapidly aging. How do you reconcile this with your thesis?

A: Just about every denomination in the American church — including many evangelical denominations — is seeing a decline in numbers, so if it’s a competition, then we’re all losing, just at different rates.

I felt drawn to the Episcopal Church because it offered some practices I felt were missing in my evangelical experience, like space for silence and reflection, a focus on Christ’s presence at the Communion table as the climax and center of every worship service, opportunities for women in leadership and the inclusion of LGBT people.

But I know plenty of folks who were raised as Episcopalians who have become evangelical, drawn by the exciting and energetic worship or the emphasis on personal testimony and connection to Scripture.

It’s common in young adulthood, I think, to seek out faith traditions that complement the one in which you were raised. It’s not about rejecting your background, just about finding your own way. I don’t want to project my experience onto all millennials.

Q: Many evangelicals criticize the liberal theology of the Episcopal Church, even claiming that it is now outside of orthodox Christianity. What say you?

A: Every Sunday morning, I stand in my Episcopal church and join in a chorus of voices publicly affirming the Apostle’s Creed. Together, we declare that there is a good and almighty God who is the creative force behind all things seen and unseen; that this God is One, yet exists as three persons; that God loved the world enough to become flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived, taught, fed,

healed and suffered among us as both fully God and fully human; that Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born to Mary; that he was crucified on a Roman cross and buried in the ground; that after three days dead, Jesus came back to life; that he ascended into heaven and reigns with God; that he will return to bring justice and restoration to our broken world; that God continues to work through the Holy Spirit, the church and God’s people; that forgiveness is possible, resurrection is possible and eternal life is possible.

If that’s not Christian orthodoxy, I don’t know what is.

Q: Related to this, you say the American church shouldn’t be afraid to die. What does this mean?

A: G.K. Chesterton said, “Christianity has had a series of revolutions, and in each one of them Christianity has died. Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.”

Lately I’ve been wondering if a little death and resurrection is exactly what the American church needs.

Q: Some of your critics might point to the explosive growth of the church in the New Testament. Shouldn’t the church be concerned if it is not making disciples or, as you say, if it dies?

A: The New Testament church grew when Christians were in the minority, not the majority.

We’re still a long way from that in the U.S., but now may be a good time to remind ourselves that ours is a kingdom that grows not by might or power but by the Spirit, whose presence is identified by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Plus, I’m not convinced discipleship is something we measure best in numbers. A church might produce thousands of attendees without producing any disciples. **BT**

—Jonathan Merritt, senior columnist for *Religion News Service*, is the author of *Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined* and *A Faith of Our Own: Following Jesus Beyond the Culture Wars*.

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Left: Randel Everett of 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative visits priests and parish members displaced by violence in Iraq. **Right:** Everett helps distribute coats, given through Samaritan's Purse, to displaced Iraqi Christians.

A task worth pursuing

A conversation with Randel Everett about elevating religious freedom globally

FALLS CHURCH, Va. — Housed in the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) headquarters outside Washington, D.C., is an interdenominational organization actively seeking to “create a world where everyone embraces religious freedom as a universal right.”

The 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative was co-founded by U.S. Congressman Frank Wolf, who retired in January after 17 terms, and Baptist minister Randel Everett, who serves as the organization’s president.

Baptists Today editor John Pierce asked Everett, who served pastorates in Florida, Virginia, Arkansas and Texas and founded The John Leland Center for Theological Studies, about this strategic mission.

BT: What is the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative and how did it come about?

RE: I have been involved with the BWA for over 25 years and have had the privilege of meeting men and women from around the world who have increased my commitment to Christ and our Baptist ideals. Some have shared stories of great hardship and persecution.

Also I have heard their concerns about the lack of response from churches in the West about situations they were facing including, at times, poverty, persecution, natural disasters and other challenges.

When I moved to Midland, Texas, I met two men who endured persecution themselves: Getaneh from Ethiopia and Bob Fu from China. As I learned more about their work

with the persecuted church in their home countries, I became more personally involved and concerned.

At the same time two men from Washington, D.C. — Michael Horowitz, a Jewish attorney, and Congressman Frank Wolf, who had spent 34 years in Congress fighting for the rights of the oppressed — began to discuss the idea of a Wilberforce Initiative that would engage churches to become involved in these efforts.

After the counsel of several trusted friends, I believed that I should resign as pastor of First Baptist Church of Midland to lead this effort.

BT: This is an interdenominational effort, but clearly some Baptist engagement beyond your own. What is the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative doing with the Baptist World Alliance and with any other Baptist connections?

RE: Even though I continue to live in Dallas, we recognized the need for our primary offices to be located in the D.C. community. Because of my familiarity with the BWA and since their facility is across the street from Columbia Baptist Church where I was once the pastor, the BWA building was a perfect location for us.

Our staff and board reflect the diversity of our denominational affiliations, but the 40 million global Baptists affiliated with the BWA gave us a great network. Also the emphasis on freedom and justice within the BWA reflects our Wilberforce vision.

BT: This effort is described as a “do tank” rather than just a “think tank.” Precisely, how does the Wilberforce Initiative “innovate strategies to elevate religious freedom” and carry out the resulting mission?

RE: We have already sent a Wilberforce team to both Iraq and Hong Kong/Taiwan to personally interview Christians and other religious minorities who were facing persecution, and in the case of Iraqi Christians genocide.

In Iraq we interviewed key religious, political and military leaders. We actually went to the front lines with the military just two kilometers from ISIS-controlled territory.

We saw hundreds of Christians and Yezidis who had been driven from their homes by ISIS. We interviewed at least 75 of them.

There were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq about 10 years ago and fewer than 300,000 today. A majority of the ones remaining are in IDP camps living in very difficult situations.

When we returned we told their story through our report “Edge of Extinction” and did numerous television, newspaper, radio and social media interviews. We have received reports literally from people around the world who saw or read these stories.

In my recent visit to Taiwan, our translator for the vice president told me she had written the subtitles for my interview with CBN when it was telecast in Taiwan. We have also met with Congressional leaders, the State Department, churches and other groups involved with issues of religious freedom

attempting to alert them to the needs of these folks.

Elijah Brown, chief of staff for Wilberforce, joined me and leaders with ChinaAid in a recent trip to Hong Kong where we met with and participated in the training of 1,800 leaders from the house churches in China.

We learned specific situations where Christians were harassed and persecuted. We interviewed some who spent years in prison.

ChinaAid has issued a report documenting some of these abuses. We are told that religious persecution in 2014 in China is the worst since the Cultural Revolution.

We traveled from Hong Kong to Taiwan where we met with the key top officials in their government about a religious freedom conference that Wilberforce and ChinaAid will sponsor in December. All of these leaders gave enthusiastic support for the conference where we will bring leaders from the U.S. and from around the Pacific East to discuss the importance of religious freedom being the foundational freedom.

BT: Many people care deeply about the clear abuses of religious freedom that they witness each day on the news — especially in places such as Syria and Iraq, and where Boko Haram is so destructive in Africa. Yet they feel helpless and often hopeless. What can really be done about these atrocities?

RE: The first step is awareness. Many of the sufferers have no idea if anyone else knows of their situation.

While the whole world was rightfully outraged by the brutal killings in Paris, the

thousands who were being massacred in Northern Nigeria and surrounding areas was largely ignored. They are strengthened when they learn of others' concern (Heb. 13:3).

As Christians, we must pray for them. We must also offer humanitarian assistance and persuade our government to pursue policies that protect the world's most vulnerable. The forces of evil never tire in their efforts of oppression, and neither should Christians grow weary in sharing the compassion of Christ.

BT: Aren't Christian populations being lost in places where the Christian faith has very deep roots?

RE: Christians have lived in Iraq since the early church. Now Christians are being driven from many areas of the Middle East.

BT: Religious persecution is often hard to validate. On one hand we have many American Christians screaming "persecution" when, in fact, what they seek is preference for their particular brand of faith. And, overseas, reports are often sketchy and at times inaccurate. How do you get reliable information on religious persecution?

RE: We were not able to validate some of the stories of the atrocities we had heard before making our trips. We wanted to learn as much first hand as we could.

We also seek reliable sources of information. When stories from unreliable resources are passed along as truth, credibility is lost.

The stories we have documented from Iraq and China are bad enough and do not need to be exaggerated. We hope our website

will become a reliable resource for preachers, journalists and the social media.

BT: Where in the world is the Wilberforce Initiative putting its energies right now — and how?

RE: We have begun in the Middle East and in China because of the global significance of these situations and also because of unusual opportunities of access we have received. We also have resources and partners who are able to help us to offer follow up. This summer we will host a training conference similar to the one in Hong Kong for pastors in Ethiopia and surrounding areas.

BT: What can individuals or congregations do to help?

RE: We must become global Christians. The problems facing our brothers and sisters around the world are our concerns.

If we want to experience the presence of Christ, we need to serve in the areas where he ministered (Luke 4:18). We also need to get involved.

I believe every person and every congregation has a Kingdom assignment. We can't serve everywhere, but we must serve somewhere.

We must be involved politically. Not every solution is a policy decision, but some are. Our government should defend the oppressed as much as we can.

We need to find ministry partners that are being effective in addressing issues such as international religious freedom. The 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative depends on the prayers and donations of individuals and churches.

BT: Why was the name of William Wilberforce chosen to associate with this venture? And how does the Wilberforce Initiative carry out an old, needed mission in new ways?

RE: Wilberforce's Christian calling and ambition for the abolition of slavery was seemingly an impossible task in a world whose economy was based on this horrible practice. Yet he spent his entire life building a coalition of partners that brought this about just prior to his death.

International religious freedom appears to be an impossible task, yet by the grace of God, skillful strategies, prayerful efforts and effective coalitions, we believe it is a task worth pursuing. **BT**



Sister Diana and other Dominican Sisters tell Randel Everett about their displacement.

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President Molly Marshall (right, in sunglasses), students and faculty from Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas visit with staff at the Myanmar Baptist Convention. CBTS photo

Descriptions of Myanmar don't reflect experience

By Molly T. Marshall

Religious News Service has generated recent articles about experiences in Myanmar. Picked up by *Christian Century* and *Baptists Today*, as well as other outlets, these articles sound an alarmist note about what is going on there.

As one who travels to Myanmar once or twice a year, I want to question the wisdom of these exaggerated perceptions. After a pilgrimage there in January, I had persons contact me to ask about my safety. Information from these articles had prompted their concern, thus I want to respond.

One article describes “religious noise pollution,” which comes from the competing sounds of Buddhist religious sites and mosques (much fewer) in this religiously plural country. Apparently no one is complaining about church bells — a rare entity in this country where Christians comprise only about 6 percent of the population. One colleague has observed persons stopping to hear Christian congregations as their singing permeated their neighborhoods through open windows.

I wonder if this alarm is a Western template applied to a context in which the capacity to live with competing religious claims is more refined. Much as the “rules of the road” are carefully deployed with horn signals, attentiveness to pedestrians, and awareness of bicycles and horse-carts, so the ability to navigate tensions religiously is apparent.

No one questions that over the years Myanmar has sustained strict curbs on religious freedom; however, things are really

changing there. The government is issuing building permits for religious institutions and churches; churches can invite foreign guests to preach; and Christian higher education is developing apace. The government recognizes that investment of resources and human capital can be transformative as the nation seeks engagement rather than isolation.

There are places in the country where skirmishes between religious bodies, e. g., Buddhists and Muslims in the Rakhine State in western Myanmar, erupt. Many interpret this as agitation from external bodies, not the adherents of these religions. Also, cease-fires come and go in the far north where local militias continue to make separatist stands. Progress is slow, but incrementally resolution is emerging.

Central Seminary has had a working relationship with Myanmar Institute of Theology since the mid-'50s, following the destruction of World War II. For a period of half a decade, Central was the degree-granting institution for the Myanmar school as it regained its bearings. In the fall of 2006 our school renewed this historic partnership, and we now collaborate on a Doctor of Ministry degree, intercultural experiences, faculty development, and training of resettled refugees in the U.S.

Forging partnerships with congregations, denominations leaders and schools there can only benefit the pursuit of global Christianity. Westerners can learn from faithful Christian witness in Myanmar, and alarmist articles should not dissuade our collaborative initiatives. **BT**

—Molly T. Marshall is president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Shawnee, Kan.

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To build a strong reserve fund of \$800,000

3. SECURE

To grow the endowment to \$3 million through direct gifts and estate designations

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Holy disruptions

Worship leaders know that not everything goes as planned

Those of us who have been in church all our lives have undoubtedly witnessed a lot of unintended disruptions to worship and ministry. Here are a few from my experience.

Every July our church produces a children's musical day camp. The platform area of the sanctuary is transformed into a theater set.

We put away the pulpit furniture and fixtures, returning them to their proper place after the final performance.

One Sunday following production week, the ushers came to the front of the sanctuary during the morning service to prepare for collecting the offering. I noticed a panicked look on their faces when they suddenly realized the offering plates were not in their usual place.

So during the prayer, there was a frantic scramble as we searched for and, thankfully,

found the missing offering plates tucked away on the floor near the organ.

All was well — or so we thought.

A minute or so later, there was a loud shriek of surprise from one of our youth sitting in the third pew. As she put her offering in the collection plate, she suddenly noticed there were spiders crawling around in it.



In the early 1970s I taught choral music in a South Georgia high school and was part-time music minister at a Baptist church. The school's music building was a mobile unit located far enough away from the main building that the band director and I couldn't hear the bell ring when classes changed.

The clock in the unit was so unreliable that we used our wristwatches to keep our classes on time.

But one day my watch suddenly quit.

I didn't have time to get it fixed right away, so I carried my small, wind-up alarm clock in my purse for a few days. (Those were the dark ages of technology.)

The next Sunday morning I parked my purse at the left end of the front pew in my church's sanctuary before the service.

After conducting the choir anthem, I settled onto the far right end of the same pew to hear the sermon.

A few minutes after the pastor began his sermon, a loud ringing noise emanated from the other end of my pew. I gasped as my head jerked left, my eyes riveting on my purse.

The pastor paused; everyone looked around. I was so embarrassed I

couldn't move. Besides, my purse was too far away to reach it discretely.

I just slumped in my seat and prayed for the alarm to wind down quickly. Finally, I announced, "It's my clock!"

We all had a good laugh. And I suppose everyone wondered why I would have an alarm clock in my purse in the first place.

When I was a small child in Mississippi, my mother, who was the church organist, arrived late for worship one Sunday, so I've been told. In the midst of the gathering congregation, she hurried down the center aisle toward the organ.

Only later did she realize that in her haste to put on her sheer, voile dress that morning, she'd forgotten to put on her slip.

As a young college student, I was singing Haydn's *Creation* with an oratorio chorus in Louisville's Southern Baptist Theological Seminary chapel.

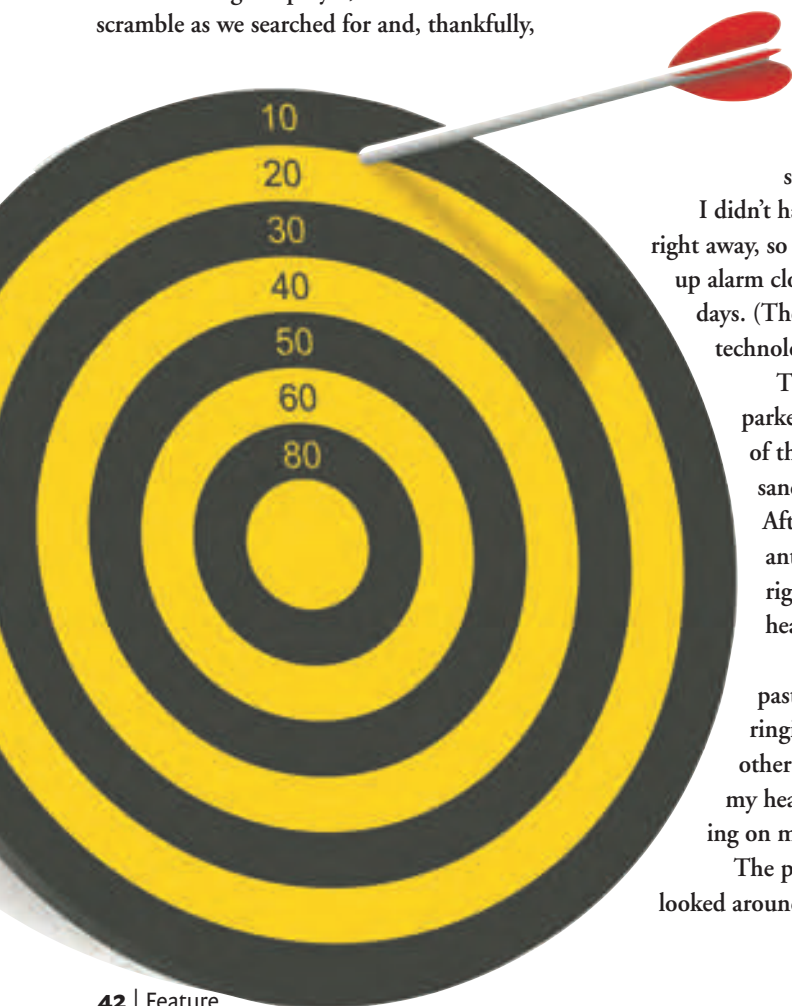
We reached the dramatic climax of the piece. The choir was singing fortissimo, the instruments were giving it their all, and the conductor was gesturing furiously.

Suddenly, the baton slipped out of the conductor's hand, bounced off the high ceiling of the chapel, and landed in the second row of the center pews with a force that would have skewered someone had they been seated there.

He kept going, but I think even Haydn would have been surprised by this ending to his composition.

A small-town Georgia church I served had more than its share of colorful characters. One was a crusty, outspoken, but dearly beloved deacon, the son of a well-known senator.

During a revival service, he was sitting against the back wall of the sanctuary. Midway through the sermon, I glanced up from the choir loft to see several rows of people toward the rear of the sanctuary nearly collapsing with stifled laughter.



The late Henri Nouwen once said, “My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered the interruptions were my work.”

Apparently when our nationally-respected guest preacher had made one of his stronger points, the elderly deacon commented loud enough for people around him to hear: “Oh, (expletive), I don’t believe that!”

During much of my growing-up years, my family did church planting in the Northeast. My dad was pastor of several small mission churches, and was used to babies whimpering and toddlers walking around during his sermons.

Only one thing came close to unnerving him while he preached: the jingle bell shoelace holders one mom put on her wandering toddler’s shoes every Sunday.

When I was a small child, my dad held a student pastorate in rural Mississippi. On Sunday evenings Mr. Green led gospel hymns.

He was an elderly farmer with very questionable musical skills, but a willing spirit. He always wore overalls, even on Sundays.

I was always fascinated by how, several times during each hymn, he would use the upbeat of his conducting pattern to scoop his dentures back into his mouth.

There are more stories I could tell. And if every minister were to share all the disruptions experienced during well-planned church services, we would never stop chuckling.

Disruptions come with the territory, however. They are part of the fabric of congregational life.

The late Henri Nouwen once said, “My whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered the interruptions were my work.”

If worship planners and others look closely at the disruptions that invariably occur, we will discover a treasure trove of unique opportunities for ministry. **BT**

—Naomi King Walker is music/worship pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in Frankfort, Ky.

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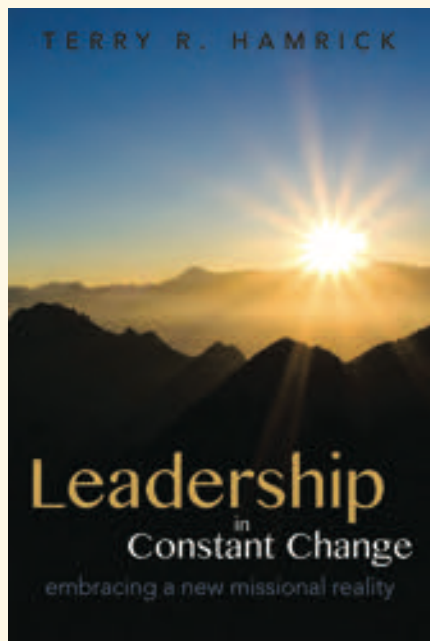
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