

>> This is the **June 2014** issue containing the **July Bible Study Lessons**

# Baptists ODAY

NEWS JOURNAL

Does a church's  
history matter?

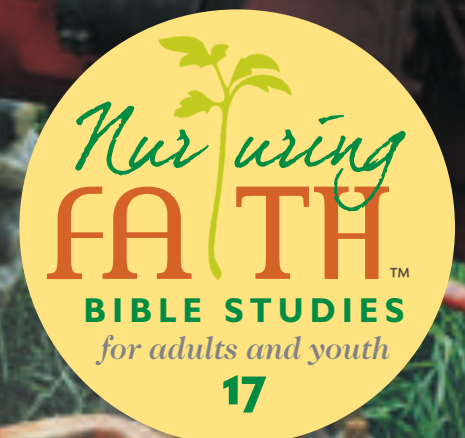
38

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## God's crops

Potato Project keeps growing  
thanks to volunteers **4**

Ask the theologian **34**





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**REDEFINING HOPE:  
A CONVERSATION WITH RICK WILSON,  
LIBERIAN SEMINARY PRESIDENT 'ON LOAN'**

**PERSPECTIVES**

Speak up; stand up **7**  
*By John Pierce*

Rethinking mission for a global church **11**  
*By Steve Porter*

The ministry of nudging  
*By Robert F. Browning* **40**

**IN THE NEWS**

Supreme Court upholds sectarian prayers  
at public meetings **12**

Calvary's Amy Butler recommended as pastor  
of historic Riverside Church **12**

Commission: Double list of  
religious freedom offenders **13**

Survey: When science and faith collide,  
faith usually wins **13**

Fewer people believe Bible is divinely inspired **14**

Army approves "humanist" as  
religious preference **14**

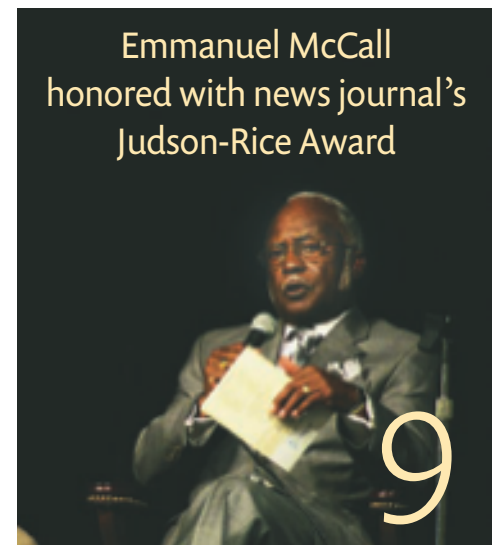
Is support for Israel shifting  
among evangelicals? **43**

**FEATURES**

Ask the Theologian —  
with Fisher Humphreys **34**

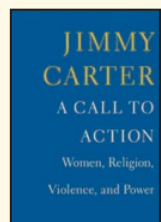
Does a church's history matter? **38**

LOG IN; CHECK OUT:  
Is the Internet bad for religion? **41**



**Emmanuel McCall  
honored with news journal's  
Judson-Rice Award**

Carter's new book  
addresses religion's  
role in harming,  
helping women **16**



Quotation Remarks	6
Editorial	7
Classifieds	28
In the Know	28
Lighter Side	29
Baptists and the Civil War	36
Reblog	37

**Cover photo** by John Pierce. Bill Horn (on tractor) and Doug Sharp, laymen in First Baptist Church of Shelby, N.C., started the Cleveland County Potato Project to feed those in need. **Page 4**

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# God's crops

Potato Project keeps growing thanks to volunteers



SHELBY, N.C. — Sunday school teachers often ask questions of their class members. But usually not: “Why don’t we grow a bunch of potatoes?”

That’s the question Doug Sharp raised a few years ago with the Bible class he teaches at First Baptist Church of Shelby, N.C. And Bill Horn was the first to say, “Let’s do it.”

The two laymen have led the growing volunteer effort — now in its fifth season — to provide tons of potatoes for those in need.

## GETTING STARTED

The Cleveland County Potato Project was started by the simple idea — or divine inspiration that awakened Doug at 4 o’clock on a morning in 2009 — that hunger needs in the area could be met with a little knowledge, sweat and land.

“[Growing potatoes] is what I understood I’m supposed to be doing,” he said of that memorable early morning experience.

Doug admits that he and Bill “had our doubts” when they started.

“Bill and I told the class that our pressing need was for land,” recalled Doug. “And one class member offered 17 acres.”

They then took their cause to the local newspapers and started getting calls from others willing to provide growing plots.

Doug, currently interim president of the Cleveland County Chamber of Commerce, is retired from a wide-ranging business career. Bill, now 90, is a retired banker — who farmed cotton in his younger years and loves being on a tractor.

They prefer smaller plots that congregations or other volunteer groups will “adopt” to provide the needed labor. Currently, there are 15-20 small fields of potatoes each season.

The Potato Project (a nonprofit organization) provides the seeds for white potatoes and

the plants for sweet potatoes along with other assistance.

And Doug, Bill and others provide inspiration by example, as well, that leads to new volunteers, new plots and more potatoes.

“There is a lot we can do if people just make up their minds to do it,” said Doug.

## WHY POTATOES?

“Potatoes are extremely productive,” said Doug of his crop of choice. “Sweet potatoes are even more productive than white potatoes.”

With volunteer efforts and donations, the Cleveland County Potato Project is able to grow potatoes for just 12 cents per pound. Last year’s crop of 156,000 pounds had an estimated cash value of more than \$80,000.

A donated warehouse (for the sweet potatoes) and a cooler (for the white potatoes) help with preserving the crops for effective distribution.

Most excuses for not joining the effort can be easily dismissed, said Doug.



“There’s plenty of farming advice available through the extension service,” he noted. “It just takes somebody to say, ‘I’m going to make it happen.’”

Unused plots of land abound, he said. “And there are thousands of tractors stored in barns.”

While potato production is often cast in terms of acres and tons, the real ministry takes place one meal at a time. And one pound of potatoes, Doug noted, provides three servings.

“Therefore, it’s a very rewarding feeling to dig up potatoes.”

## HELPING HANDS

“We’ve got hardworking people,” said Bill of the many volunteers from churches, schools, community organizations, nearby Gardner-Webb University and elsewhere who work the fields.

“This thing has been trying,” he said. “But these are God’s crops, so there’s no need for us to worry about it.”

Volunteers work mostly on weekends, said Doug. As many as 112 volunteers have been in the fields at one time.

The greatest needs are at planting and harvesting times — which differ for white and sweet potatoes — meaning volunteers are widely used from about February until October.

“They can’t stand too much hot weather,” said Bill of the sweet potatoes. “We need to get them out before August.” The white potato season is longer.

Volunteers range from Bill’s age on down to children.

“We have very senior members of our church cutting seed potatoes before planting,” said Doug. “We have ages 8 through 90 dropping seed potatoes into plowed rows and ages 6 through 90 picking up the mature potatoes when they have been plowed out of the ground.”

## REAL NEEDS

“We could give potatoes away every day of the week,” said Doug of the need.

He recalled one grandmother saying she and her grandchildren had survived on the potatoes during a particularly hard time.

“God provided them, and we’ll get by,” she told the children.

The potatoes are primarily distributed through the Greater Cleveland County Baptist Association, the Salvation Army, U-CAN and the Kings Mountain Crisis Ministry.

Meeting real needs through the Potato Project gives participants the chance to see “a slice of the kingdom [of God],” said Doug.

Those who don’t see such needs and opportunities “have become immune to compassionate thinking,” he surmised. “We’re doing our little bit to change that.”

Doug and Bill never pretend the work is easy.

“It’s not for the faint-hearted,” said Doug. “But we’ve learned that basic, ordinary Christians — when they are doing what God wants them to do — can work wonders.”

One of those wonders, as he envisioned a few years ago, is to meet a real need by growing potatoes.

“We don’t have a food problem,” he said. “We have an unwillingness to face the reality that we can do so much if we’re willing.”

Two pressing questions came to Doug’s mind following his early morning epiphany: Can large amounts of potatoes be grown here? If we grow huge amounts of potatoes, are there those who will help get them to people in need?

Both questions have received a resounding “Yes!” **BT**

—Those interested in participating in or learning more about the Cleveland County Potato Project may contact Doug Sharp at [dwsharp428@aol.com](mailto:dwsharp428@aol.com) or (704) 480-1608.



“We’ve got hardworking people,” said Bill Horn, 90, of the many volunteers who plant, tend and harvest potatoes as part of the growing project he helped start with his Sunday school teacher, Doug Sharp (right).



# quotation remarks

“What I have found is the congregation is very Bible-aware, so it’s definitely fun to go into Bible studies. They know the stories, they know the texts, and they know the rich layers of Scripture.”

—*Pastor Thomas Quisenberry of First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., named by the American Bible Society as the most “Bible-minded” city in the U.S. (ABP)*

“We have three rules in our program that everybody must follow: (1) players must go to class, (2) they must give a good effort, and (3) they must be good citizens. It is as simple as that.”

—*Clemson University football coach Dabo Swinney in a release responding to complaints from the Freedom From Religion Foundation that the public university’s football program is entangled with religion (RNS)*

“We know 88 percent of people say they have a Bible. They think: ‘I have a Bible. I have had one for a long time. I must know what’s in it.’ But people overestimate their knowledge.”

—*Geof Morin, chief communication officer for the American Bible Society (RNS)*

“We felt like too many of the conservative evangelical Christians were allowing their views on immigration to be shaped more by talk radio and other news outlets rather than by the Scriptures.”

—*Atlanta-area pastor Bryant Wright, a former Southern Baptist Convention president who attended a Capitol Hill rally by evangelical leaders in April to push for immigration reform (RNS)*

“Bicyclists are always in danger on the roads, so a little extra mojo going our way couldn’t possibly hurt us.”

—*Dana Albon of Albany, N.Y., who attended the 16<sup>th</sup> annual Blessing of the Bikes at NYC’s Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine prior to the Five Boro Bike Tour (NPR)*

“Let me be clear. Broward County Public Schools respects and upholds the right to bring personal religious material to school, including the Bible.”

—*Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie, apologizing for an incident in which a 12-year-old was told he couldn’t read the Bible privately at Park Lakes Elementary School in Lauderdale Lakes, Fla. (Sun Sentinel)*

“Fundamentalists falsely accused them of not believing the Bible, a nasty canard given the fact that both men were so thoroughly Christ-centered in their moral agenda, unlike the fundamentalists who favored Leviticus over the Sermon on the Mount.”

—*Robert Parham of ethicdaily.com, honoring two mentoring ethicists who died recently, Dan McGee and Glen Stassen*

“A major concern Hispanic evangelicals have with the death penalty is that it is part of what in Christian theology we call a ‘fallen system.’ All systems are imperfect and fallen. In the case of the ultimate penalty, errors in judgment cannot be corrected.”

—*Gabriel Salguero, president of the National Latino Evangelical Coalition (Huffington Post)*

“Your kid won’t remember the score of a single game he played. He’ll only remember the time he laughed so hard in the dugout that Capri Sun came out of his nose. Relax.”

—*ESPN columnist Rick Reilly*

“There was a great deal of comfort in [traditional burial] at a time when generations lived in the same community and worshipped in the same church. You could sit in a pew on Sunday morning and look out the window, knowing it is where your family has been laid to rest, and when your time comes, you will join them... With mobility, that had to be renegotiated.”

—*Bill Leonard, the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Baptist Studies and professor of church history at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, discussing the increasing popularity of cremation (ABP)*



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# Speak up; stand up

A wonderful spring evening brought a large gathering of Baptists together to honor Emmanuel McCall with this news journal's annual Judson-Rice Award.

The story is on page 9, and a full-length video of the conversational-style interview from that event is posted at [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org).

Most inspiring is the gratitude this long-time minister and denominational leader expressed for those who boldly stood up in defense of the dignity of all persons — going against the cultural mainstream.

He specifically identified the courageous students at the University of Louisville, who warmly welcomed him and other non-whites into the Baptist Student Union despite pressures from local Baptist ministers who were blind to a major teaching of the very Bible they claimed to preach each Sunday.

Those of us for whom such student ministries were formative in our own lives might feel a bit of pride. But the greater question than who were the heroes in the past is: Who is speaking up and standing up for those unjustly condemned and excluded and oppressed today?

We often speak of history being the best teacher, but rarely learn from past experiences. We marvel at how Christian people could have been so shortsighted and unloving in the past while rarely moving with a greater passion for justice today.

Too often we fear being lone voices — or excuse modern-day injustices as “different” or justified. Or we simply don't want to pay the consequences of going against those with entrenched views and power.



Therefore, the very force (the church) called to be an agent of change becomes the last to experience and advocate for needed transformation and redemption.

Fortunately, there are those who do not hide in the comfort of group-think or willingly sacrifice justice for the sake of self-interest.

In looking back, we can find inspiration in those hungry college students who left their

plates of food on a table to support a fellow student — or were willing to stand up to the threats of narrow-minded ministers who were more concerned about protecting a social system than living like Jesus.

Other inspiring examples come from courageous preachers and writers, as well as others who simply choose to live out the wide embrace of the Gospel rather than cower in fear when calculating the risks.

But what about us — now?

Do we speak up and stand up for others who are mistreated, condemned, abused — or only for those causes that concern our own interests?

Much of American Christianity has a long history of arriving late — if ever — at the intersection of grace and justice. Sometimes it just seems too costly to speak up and stand up.

Thank God for those who did — and those who still stand and speak today. Such faithfulness is reflective of the life and teachings of Jesus — that which we all claim to follow but rarely show evidence.

There is still time. **BT**

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# NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE

## MONTANA

AUGUST 18-23, 2014

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

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

### **COST**

\$1,200 (based on double occupancy) and includes:

- Ground transportation from time of airport arrival in Bozeman (Aug. 18) until airport departure from Bozeman (Aug. 23)
- Western dinner and housing in Bozeman on Monday night
- All meals from Monday dinner through Saturday breakfast
- Two-day private tour and lodging for one night in Yellowstone National Park
- Three nights lodging, meals and activities at Parade Rest Guest Ranch near West Yellowstone, Mont.

### **LODGING**

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

### **REMINDER**

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

To secure a spot, please send a \$400 deposit to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 marked as “NF Montana.” The balance (\$800) will be due July 1.

### **MONDAY — AUGUST 18**

- Arrive at the Bozeman airport by 4 p.m. (earlier if possible). If someone’s flight is delayed, transportation will still be provided.
- Western dinner and lodging in Bozeman / Get-acquainted time and overview of plans

### **TUESDAY — AUGUST 19**

- Early breakfast in Bozeman; drive to Yellowstone National Park
- Personalized tour by Bruce Gourley
- Lodging and evening session in the park

### **WEDNESDAY — AUGUST 20**

- Breakfast buffet at Old Faithful Inn
- Second day of touring Yellowstone
- Check in and dinner at Parade Rest Guest Ranch
- Evening session

### **THURSDAY — AUGUST 21**

- All meals, meetings and activities at the ranch with a possible side trip

### **FRIDAY — AUGUST 22**

- All meals, meetings and activities at the ranch with a possible side trip

### **SATURDAY — AUGUST 23**

- Breakfast and depart ranch for Bozeman  
(Please make departing flights for noon or later.)



**QUESTIONS?** Email [editor@baptiststoday.org](mailto:editor@baptiststoday.org)



# Bridge builder

Emmanuel McCall honored with news journal's Judson-Rice Award

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. — More than 300 friends, family members and other admirers filled the fellowship hall of Smoke Rise Baptist Church on April 24 to pay tribute to the long and effective ministry of Emmanuel McCall.

“Pontiffs — at least in the sense of hierarchal Christian traditions — don't fit our Baptist understanding of and appreciation for the priesthood of all believers,” said John Pierce, executive editor of *Baptists Today*. “However, in a most literal sense, it would be appropriate to call Dr. Emmanuel McCall a pontiff — which means ‘bridge builder.’”

He added: “No person whom I have known has been a better Baptist builder of bridges than Dr. McCall.”

Music by the Three Inspirational Tenors, who have close relationships with McCall, reunited their classically trained voices to add inspiration to the event.

In a conversational-style interview, McCall shared his life experiences from growing up in rural Pennsylvania to facing opposition and finding support as a minority student at the University of Louisville and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to helping Baptists cross racial divides.

“As I look back on those years now, I see the hand of God shaping me...,” said McCall of growing up on a farm near the steel mills of western Pennsylvania. He credited his parents, grandmother and church with influencing his faith.

“It was from that little group of people at Valley Baptist Church that I got the great impressions of who Christ was and what Christ meant to my life.”

Given the biblical names Emmanuel (“God with us”) and Lemuel (“the wisdom of Solomon”), McCall was dedicated to the Lord on the eighth day of his life.

When he announced his call to ministry at age 14 and was asked to preach, the minister who had led the dedication 14 years earlier



*Baptists Today* Chair Don Brewer and Vice Chair Cathy Turner present the Judson-Rice Award to Emmanuel McCall. Photo by David Cassady.

revealed that he had predicted McCall's ministerial calling.

McCall entered the University of Louisville in 1954, just two years after integration, where he found a warm reception from the Baptist Student Union (BSU) and its director Fred Witty.

However, some local pastors — “the three wise men from the Long Run Baptist Association” — opposed an integrated BSU and let it be known at an on-campus prayer meeting. But the students stood — literally — in opposition to the ministers.

“Seeing they were outnumbered, the brother said, ‘We need to go pray about this,’” Emmanuel recalled. “And they are still out praying.”

He recalled the BSU group stopping to eat in Tennessee en route to a conference in Ridgecrest, N.C. Emmanuel, who was midway in the cafeteria line, was told to get out.

“When [the manager] said that, the students who had already been served got up and left their plates, and we all got back on the bus and we stopped at a grocery store...” he said. “These were my college brothers and sisters who stuck with me.”

McCall also found a friend on campus — who had a car — from Pennsylvania: “Every Thanksgiving and Christmas, Johnny Unitas and I rode back and forth.”

McCall entered Southern Seminary as the only African American on campus. A group of students “wanted to be sure my seminary experience was a good one,” he recalled. “These were some of the friends who made seminary great.”

In 1962, he and Louisville pastor John Claypool pulled together black and white Baptist ministers who played a key role in curbing racial violence in the city. “We had more than 800 ministers involved in racial reconciliation.”

In 1968, McCall joined the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to help bridge the racial divide in Baptist life and beyond.

“I had more hope than concern, because the people I related to when I came to the Home Mission Board were on a mission,” he said. “They knew things were not what they ought to be and they wanted to see them change.”

During his 23 years at the HMB, McCall found collegiality there and elsewhere among Baptists. He told of Woman's Missionary Union executive Alma Hunt asking him in 1970 to escort her three blocks through Nashville amid the stares of other Baptists attending the meeting. “Alma was having fun out of that; I wasn't.”

“The truth be told, the Woman's Missionary Union did more for race relations in Southern Baptist life than any other unit,” he said, quickly adding that *Home Missions* magazine editor Walker Knight took courageous stands as well.

Both Hunt and Knight (founding editor of *Baptists Today*) received the Judson-Rice Awards in previous years.

“In this room are people who have allowed me to be in pilgrimage with them,” McCall said appreciatively. “I thank God for the ride.”

The Judson-Rice Award was established in 2001 to honor early Baptist leaders Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, and to recognize a current Baptist who has exhibited exceptional leadership with integrity. **BT**

[Video of the full conversation with Emmanuel McCall is available at [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org).]

By Steven Porter

# Rethinking mission for a global church

In September 1931, a 15-member Commission on Appraisal set sail from New York harbor bound for Bombay. Funded by industrialist John D. Rockefeller and chaired by the Harvard philosopher William E. Hocking, the ecumenical commission worked under the auspices of the Layman's Foreign Mission Inquiry and would spend nearly a year investigating the state of Protestant Christian missions in South and East Asia.

Upon their return to the States, the commissioners published a report, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Layman's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* (1932). The scathing and — to many missionaries — hurtful account reflected the heavy editorial hand of Professor Hocking, who wrote half of the chapters and revised the rest.

The commission purported to offer a “scientific” appraisal of Christian missions during a season of both diminishing donations and increasing awareness of other religions.

Eighty years later, Cooperative Baptists also live in a day of diminishing financial support for missions — at least, in terms of our centralized offering to support long-term field personnel. Likewise, we daily encounter religious diversity on a scale our counterparts in the 1930s could not have imagined.

Despite the troubling theological pluralism of Hocking's commission, the attempt to “re-think missions” was then and remains now a worthy endeavor. And there is no better time than the present for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to pursue such vital work.

In many ways, CBF global missions stands at a crossroads. Thanks to the 2012 Task Force, the Fellowship has more effective leadership structures than at any time in its history. Our new governing board and executive coordinator have had a year to build rapport and momentum. An independent nominating committee will fill the remaining slots on the missions council this summer.

And following a long and challenging interim — for which Jim Smith and the global missions staff deserve our heartfelt thanks — my appointment as the new coordinator of global missions concludes a movement-wide transition process that easily could have written the end of the CBF story rather than the

beginning of its next chapter.

But not only have the structures of CBF changed, the world around us has changed in at least three ways critical to our missionary efforts.

First, as scholars have noted for some time, Christianity has experienced a massive “southward shift.” The church has entered a global era in which the majority of its members no longer reside in the West. Indeed, since the mid 1980s the demographic center of Christianity has been closer to Lagos, Nigeria, than Rome, Canterbury, or Colorado Springs.

Next, the way in which our congregations think about and engage in mission has changed. Whatever you make of recent conversations on the missional and emerging church, they have prompted many of us to view the local church differently — often in missionary terms. And for better or worse, short-term mission trips have become a defining feature of the American landscape with enormous implications for mission funding.

Finally, our communities have changed. We live in an increasingly post-Christian society marked by cultural and religious pluralism. Although a large majority of Americans continue to identify as Christian, awareness of America's diversity rises with every Pew Research poll, including the projection that persons of color may comprise a majority of the population by 2050.

In short, if Christianity has turned from the West to the South, mission from denominational boards to local congregations, and America from a white majority to a rainbow coalition, then maybe it's time for CBF to re-think its 20<sup>th</sup>-century mission structure.

While we should celebrate what God has accomplished through the Fellowship, our attempts to straddle the expanding gap

**Steven Porter** becomes global missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship on Sept. 1. He is the former director of Touching Miami with Love, one of the Fellowship's flagship urban ministries.

Porter holds ordination in the National Baptist Convention (USA) and teaches courses on the history and theology of Christian mission at Baylor University's Truett Seminary. He earned the M.Div. from Emory University's Candler School of Theology and is pursuing a Th.D. from Duke Divinity School.



In Miami, Porter served as a chaplain in a federal prison and was pastor of Downtown Mission at Central Baptist Church from 1998 to 2005. He worked closely with the homeless community and families at risk in the Overtown neighborhood.

Porter served three stints as an international student and, in 2010, received a Henry Luce Foundation Research Grant for work at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

between a previous generation's trusted mission model — which centered on a professional missionary corps — and the evolving missionary identity, initiative and investment of local churches in a global era have not succeeded.

The old structures, which once served so well, no longer adequately support churches “as they discover and fulfill their God-given mission.” Thus, as CBF has asked fundamental questions of the movement's structure and governance over the past two years, so too must we ask hard questions of its global missions enterprise.

I appreciated David Gushee's recent call for CBF to embrace “authoritative leadership,”



## The way in which congregations think about and engage in mission has changed.

but I do not view my appointment as warrant to impose a missiological agenda on churches. Such an effort would undermine what it means to be a fellowship.

Moreover, Baptist convictions about what it means to be church — to gather as congregations beholden to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures and the holy orders of a common priesthood — constrain me. I genuinely hope I never scheme to get “buy-in” from CBF congregations; rather, the vision for our common witness to God’s good news in Jesus Christ must emerge from our conversations with God and one another.

Here, I believe the basic insight of the [Southern Baptist] Cooperative Program still obtains: we can accomplish far more together than apart. Surely that is part of what it means to be a “fellowship.”

So my leadership will begin with listening — to field personnel and staff, to partners, and foremost to congregations.

It’s also important to remember that we aren’t starting from scratch. There is wisdom in the room already.

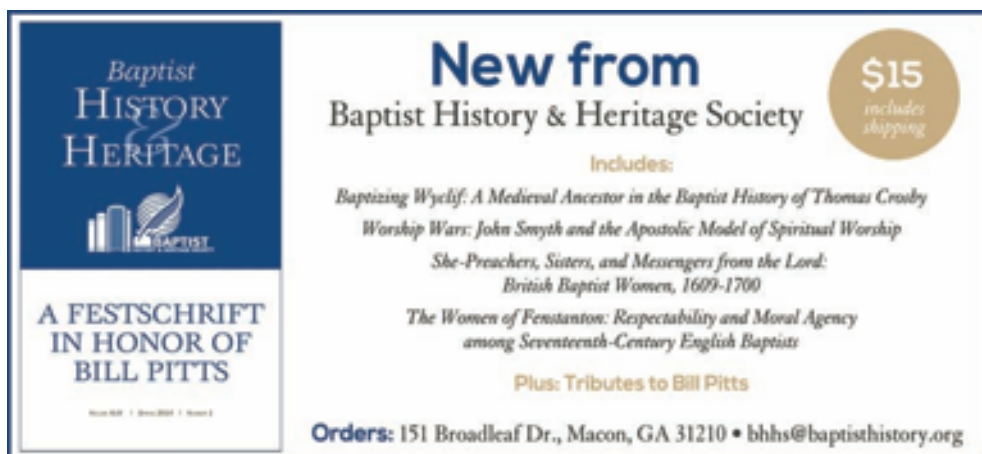
From asset-based community

development approaches such as Together for Hope to the largely untapped resources of mission communities and the Baptist World Alliance, Cooperative Baptists have much to commend to each other and to our neighbors. But the changing world described above invites us to re-think our mission enterprise in ways that strategically narrow our focus, deepen our capacity and stretch our faith.

In the days ahead, I invite you to join this conversation in the firm conviction that “the

gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world — just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and truly understood God’s grace.” (Col. 1:6) May the Triune God find Cooperative Baptists faithful in this task and in the larger work of witness. **BT**

—Steven Porter was announced recently as the new global missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. This column was distributed by Associated Baptist Press.



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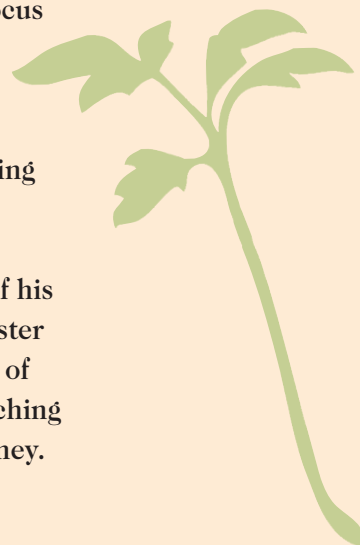
## NEW RELEASE *from Nurturing Faith books*

Published in partnership with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina (cbfnc.org)



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

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



Orders: [nurturingfaith.info](http://nurturingfaith.info)

## Amy Butler recommended as first female pastor of Riverside Church

(RNS) NEW YORK — The famed Riverside Church in Manhattan has recommended Amy Butler as its seventh senior minister, the first woman to lead the congregation in its 83-year-old history.

Butler has been senior minister of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., for 11 years.

The church has about 300 members with an estimated 150 people in attendance on Sunday mornings.

When she arrived at Calvary, she inherited a church that had dwindled from 5,000

parishioners to about 70 on a Sunday.

As pastor, she has pushed the downtown church to be more multicultural and oversaw a massive redevelopment of the church's downtown property.

"Under her leadership the church has become an influential congregation in the nation's capital and she has become a much sought-after voice for Progressive Christianity," Riverside's search committee said in a letter to the congregation.

Butler said she was unable to talk to media before the June vote on her Riverside candidacy. **BT**



## Survey: Most Americans don't see end to global poverty

(RNS) — Despite progress in defeating extreme global poverty, most Americans see no end in sight, according to a survey sponsored by Compassion International and conducted by Barna Research.

Christians who attend church at least monthly and consider religion very important in their life overwhelmingly (96 percent) expressed concern about the world's poorest people. But they were skeptical that global poverty could be ended in the next 25 years. Only 41 percent of the group said it was possible.

And yet Scott Todd of Compassion International, the Christian nonprofit agency that sponsors 1.5 million children abroad, remains upbeat. He sees hope in the numbers of "practicing Christians" who express concern about poverty and a willingness to do more. **BT**

# Supreme Court upholds sectarian prayers at public meetings

By Bob Allen

Associated Baptist Press

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 May 5 that overtly Christian prayers at government meetings do not violate the First Amendment's ban on establishing religion.

Writing for the majority, Justice Anthony Kennedy said the town of Greece, N.Y.'s, practice of opening council meetings with prayers led by a local minister is in keeping with the long tradition of "legislative prayer," consistent with both houses of Congress maintaining a chaplain to open each day's session with prayer.

"As practiced by Congress since the framing of the Constitution, legislative prayer lends gravity to public business, reminds lawmakers to transcend petty differences in pursuit of a higher purpose and expresses a common aspiration to a just and peaceful society," Kennedy wrote.

The majority reversed a ruling of the 2<sup>nd</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that because the prayers were overwhelmingly led by Christians, the practice gave the appearance that the town was endorsing one religion over others. The parties in the lawsuit, *Town of Greece v. Galloway*, did not oppose the use of ceremonial prayer but argued that it must be non-sectarian.

Kennedy said it would be more problematic for the government to decide what constitutes a permissible prayer.

"The First Amendment is not a majority rule, and government may not seek to define permissible categories of religious speech," Kennedy opined. "Once it invites prayer into the public sphere, government must permit a prayer giver to address his or her own God or gods as conscience dictates, unfettered by what an administrator or judge considers to be non-sectarian."

The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty had filed a friend-of-the-court brief asking the Supreme Court to strike down the town's prayer policy, arguing "that prayer is an expression of voluntary religious devotion, not the business of the government."

In a statement, the BJC expressed disappointment with the ruling.

"While the Court ruled for the town under the historic tradition of ceremonial

prayer for lawmakers, local governments can — and should — take steps to ensure that citizens are not forced into religious acts at a government meeting," said Hollyn Hollman, BJC general counsel. "It is hard to square a government-led religious practice in a local municipal meeting with the Constitution's guarantee of equal rights of citizenship without regard to religion."

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the Supreme Court "did the right thing" in reversing the lower court's decision.

"The Town of Greece case is about a government seeking to establish a state-ordered civil religion that crowds out the most basic rights of freedom of speech," Moore said in a written statement. "That is not what our ancestors, and their allies among the American Founders, meant by religious liberty."

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, was disappointed by the ruling.

"The Supreme Court just relegated millions of Americans — both believers and nonbelievers — to second-class citizenship," said Lynn, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. "Government should not be in the business of forcing faith on anyone, and now all who attend meetings of their local boards could be subjected to the religion of the majority."

Joining Kennedy in the majority opinion were Chief Justice John Roberts and Associate Justice Samuel Alito. Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas concurred in part.

Justice Elena Kagan — joined by Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Stephen Breyer and Sonia Sotomayor — said in a dissenting opinion that the town's prayer practice "does not square with the First Amendment's promise that every citizen, irrespective of her religion, owns an equal share in her government."

Kagan said she disagreed with the argument that prayers offered in Jesus' name were "ceremonial" in nature.

"These are statements of profound belief and deep meaning, subscribed to by many, denied by some," Kagan said. "If they (and the central tenets of other religions) ever become mere ceremony, this country will be a fundamentally different — and, I think, poorer — place to live." **BT**



# Commission: Double list of worst religious freedom offenders

By Brian Pellot  
*Religion News Service*

Secretary of State John Kerry should cite 16 countries for severe violations of religious freedom, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended in its 15<sup>th</sup> annual report.

The State Department's "Countries of Particular Concern" list has remained static since 2006, when eight countries — Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan — were designated as CPCs.

USCIRF, an independent watchdog panel created by Congress to review international religious freedom conditions, criticized the government's unchanged list of CPCs and sanctions against them, claiming such measures have "provided little incentive for CPC-designated governments to reduce or halt egregious violations of religious freedom."

"The past 10 years have seen a worsening of the already-poor religious freedom environment in Pakistan, a continued dearth of religious freedom in Turkmenistan, backsliding in Vietnam, rising violations in Egypt before and after the Arab Spring, and Syria's

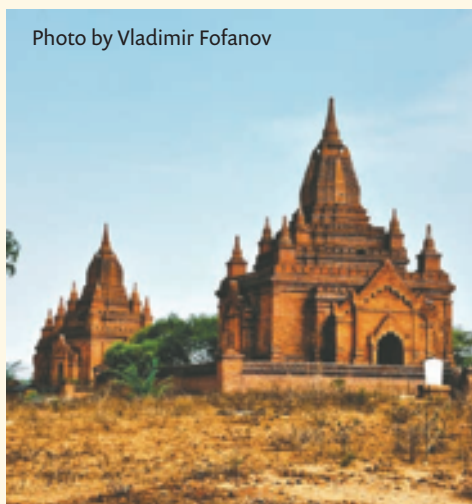


Photo by Vladimir Fofanov

descent into a sectarian civil war with all sides perpetrating egregious religious freedom violations. Yet no new countries have been added to the State Department's CPC list," the report states.

USCIRF recommended that the CPC list be expanded to include these countries along with Iraq, Nigeria and Tajikistan. USCIRF's 2013 report made similar recommendations, with the noteworthy addition this year of Syria.

"Syria was added for the abuses against religious freedom being committed not just by

the Assad regime but by all sides in the terrible civil war those people are suffering through," USCIRF chair Robert P. George said.

"The Syrian crisis has devolved largely into a sectarian conflict," the report states, citing as evidence the regime's targeting of Syria's majority-Sunni Muslim population and extremist opposition groups targeting Christians and Alawites because of their faith. "The existing humanitarian disaster and egregious human rights and religious freedom violations pose a serious danger to Syria's religious diversity post-conflict."

USCIRF was created with the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, which sought to prioritize religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy. IRFA requires the State Department, on behalf of the president, to identify and take action when countries engage in systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.

In addition to its 16 recommended CPCs, USCIRF lists 10 "Tier 2" countries where religious freedom violations are serious but do not fully meet the CPC standard. These countries are Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Russia and Turkey. **BT**

## Survey: When science and faith collide, faith usually wins

By Cathy Lynn Grossman  
*Religion News Service*

Believers don't buy the Big Bang, God-less evolution or a human responsibility for global warming. Actually, neither do many Americans.

But a new survey by The Associated Press found that religious identity — particularly evangelical Protestant — was one of the sharpest indicators of skepticism toward key issues in science.

The survey presented a series of statements that several prize-winning scientists say are facts. However, the research shows that confidence in their correctness varies sharply among U.S. adults. It found:

- 51 percent of U.S. adults overall (including 77 percent of people who say they are born-again or evangelical) have little or no confidence that "the universe began 13.8 billion years ago with a big bang."
- 42 percent overall (76 percent of evangelicals) doubt that "life on Earth, including human

beings, evolved through a process of natural selection."

- 37 percent overall (58 percent of evangelicals) doubt that the Earth's temperature is rising "mostly because of man-made heat-trapping greenhouse gases."
- 36 percent overall (56 percent of evangelicals) doubt "the Earth is 4.5 billion years old."

On the flip side, most people are pretty sure the "universe is so complex, there must be a supreme being guiding its creation" — 54 percent of all Americans, and 87 percent of evangelicals.

The survey of 1,012 adults, conducted in March, has a margin of error of 3.4 percentage points.

Nobel Prize-winning scientists expressed dismay at the findings.

"When you are putting up facts against faith, facts can't argue against faith," Duke University biochemist Robert Lefkowitz, who won a Nobel Prize in 2012, told The Associated Press. He called faith "untestable."

Darrel Falk, a biology professor at Point

Loma Nazarene University and an evangelical Christian, said many biblical scholars do not see a conflict between religion and science.

"The story of the cosmos and the Big Bang of creation is not inconsistent with the message of Genesis 1," Falk said.

A recent survey on "religious understandings of science," by Rice University sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund, found that the two worldviews are not always in opposition.

Ecklund's study for the Dialogue on Science, Ethics and Religion program at the American Association for the Advancement of Science compared views of 10,000 U.S. adults, including scientists, evangelicals and the general public.

She found that nearly 36 percent of scientists have no doubt about God's existence and that they are about as likely as most Americans overall to attend weekly religious services.

However, there's still significant distrust: 22 percent of scientists and 20 percent of the general population say religious people are hostile to science. Most of those people (52 percent) sided with religion. **BT**

# Fewer people believe Bible divinely inspired

(RNS) — Bible films may be raking it in at the box office, but fewer people are reading the original and taking it seriously.

The American Bible Society's latest "State of the Bible" survey documents steep skepticism that the Good Book is a God book.

"We are seeing an incredible change in just a few years time," said Roy Peterson, president of the society.

The study, conducted annually by Barna Research, finds:

The most "engaged" readers — who read the Bible almost daily and see it as sacred — are now matched by "skeptics" who say it's just a book of stories and advice. Both groups measured 19 percent.

While the engaged stayed steady since 2011, skeptics grew by 10 percentage points

— since the same survey was conducted in 2011.

Skeptics cut into the number of folks Barna calls "Bible friendly," those who read the Bible occasionally and see it as inspired by God. The "friendly" demographic fell to 37 percent, down from 45 percent in 2011.

The percentage of people who view the Bible as sacred has dropped to 79 percent, down from 86 percent in 2011.

The study is based on 2,036 interviews with U.S. adults in January and February.

Peterson told RNS that the statistics are "sobering but not discouraging."

The key, he said, is "adjusting our outreach" to reel in the next generation. Millennials, ages 18 to 29, lead the skeptics tally:

- 64 percent say the Bible is sacred literature, compared with 79 percent of all adults.

- 35 percent say the Bible offers "everything a person needs to know to lead a meaningful life," compared with half of all adults.

- 39 percent of millennials admit they never read the Bible, compared with 26 percent of adults as a whole.

"We have to find where they are hurting, what questions millennials are asking," he said.

The society has already started down that road by creating Bible-reading "journeys" to meet people's needs, he said. On its website, people can key in a word such as "hope," "parenting," "job loss" or "loneliness" and be steered to a seven- or 10- or 40-day journey of Scripture selections designed to address that concern. **BT**

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#### QUESTIONS OR IDEAS?

Contact Ben McDade:  
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## Army approves 'humanist' as religious preference

(RNS) — More than two years after first making his request, Army Maj. Ray Bradley can now be known as exactly what he is: a humanist in the U.S. military.

"I'm able to self-identity the belief system that governs my life, and I've never been able to do that before," said Bradley, who is stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina and works on supporting readiness of the Army Reserve's medical staff.

Lt. Col. Sunset R. Belinsky, an Army spokeswoman, said that the "preference code for humanist" became effective April 12 for all members of the Army.

In practical terms, the change means that humanists could face fewer hurdles in trying to organize within the ranks; military brass would have better information to aid in planning a deceased soldier's funeral; and it could lay the groundwork for eventually adding humanist chaplains.

The change comes against a backdrop of persistent claims from atheists and other nonbelievers that the military is dominated by a Christian culture that is often hostile to unbelief. In recent years, activists from the broad spectrum of freethinking organizations have demanded equal treatment as the military grapples with the growth of the spiritual-but-not-religious population.

According to a survey by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, humanists make up 3.6 percent of the U.S. military. **BT**





# 2014 CBF General Assembly

June 23-27  
Atlanta, Georgia

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

Register and learn about fellowship opportunities, auxiliary events, the Assembly schedule and more at [thefellowship.info/assembly](http://thefellowship.info/assembly)

## Featured Speakers

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



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



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



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

### Thursday

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



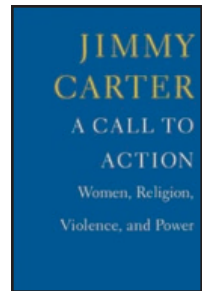
### Friday

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



A review by John Pierce

**A Call to Action**  
*Women, Religion, Violence, and Power*  
 By Jimmy Carter  
 (2014, Simon & Schuster)



## Carter's new book addresses religion's role in harming, helping women

President Jimmy Carter has been a strong and consistent voice for gender equality — and a forceful critic of those who use religion to defend inequality, oppression and worse. Now he brings his passion and insights together in a new book titled *A Call to Action*.

"I have become convinced that the most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the deprivation and abuse of women and girls, largely caused by a false interpretation of carefully selected religious texts and growing tolerance of violence and warfare," he writes.

Carter has long addressed religious discrimination against women in his own Baptist Christian tradition. He widens the scope in this writing to call religious leaders from a variety of faith traditions to rethink their moral values and take corrective actions to assure women and children do not suffer from the misinterpretation and misuse of texts.

Carter digs deeply into religiously justified human rights violations and abuses against women and children worldwide. His writing includes clear and compelling examples of how religion can and is used for gender oppression.

The case Carter seeks to make most clearly is that relegation of women and girls to secondary status can and often does lead to abuse.

"If potential male exploiters of women are led to believe that their victim is considered inferior or 'different' even by God," he writes, "they can presume that it is permissible to take

advantage of their superior male status."

The longtime Sunday school teacher from Plains, Ga., recalls the "ravages of racial prejudice" he witnessed growing up and the timidity of many people of faith to address such inequality and abuse, often considered divinely ordained.

Gender discrimination, and the mistreatment of women and children that is often justified religiously, is "a similar system of discrimination," yet with a global impact, writes Carter.

"This system is based on the presumption that men and boys are superior to women and girls, and it is supported by some male religious leaders who distort the Bible, the Koran, and other sacred texts to perpetuate their claim that females are, in some basic ways, inferior to them, unqualified to serve God on equal terms," he writes. "Many men disagree but remain quiet in order to enjoy the benefits of their dominant status."

Carter, who has long championed human rights, is not quiet on this subject. He recalls the Southern Baptist Convention's move in 2000 to codify male hierarchy in the home and church — a move that led Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, to identify with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship rather than the SBC.

"The change that was most troubling to us was an emphasis on a few specific Bible verses about the status of women and how they would be applied in practical terms..." he writes.

Carter acknowledges that many fellow Christians disagree on gender roles, but opines:

"Jesus Christ was the greatest liberator of women in a society where they had been considered throughout history to be inferior."

In his writing, Carter goes much deeper than the issue of women's roles in church and home and much wider than his own faith tradition. He addresses how religiously justified gender discrimination can fuel spousal abuse, sexual assault, rape and other tragedies globally.

Carter forcefully calls for bold responses to the mistreatment of women and children. He and other former political leaders, in a group brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007 and known as The Elders, have been actively seeking to bring needed social change worldwide including human rights concerns.

Also, the Carter Center has long addressed these issues including efforts to alleviate the mistreatment of women and children worldwide. An initiative called "Mobilizing Faith for Women" provides specific actions listed in the book and detailed at [cartercenter.org](http://cartercenter.org).

All people of faith can, should, and often do play a major role in addressing such discrimination and abuse, according to Carter.

"Despite sharp differences of opinion about the role of women in positions of religious leadership, people of faith offer the greatest reservoir of justice, charity, and goodwill in alleviating the unwarranted deprivation and suffering of women and girls," he writes.

But much more is needed, he pleads. So he calls people of faith to action. **BT**



## NEW RELEASE

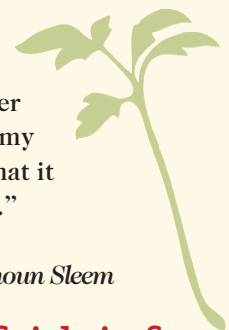
*from Nurturing Faith books*

"When I was a child selling postcards to tourists, I never thought I would write a book. Being raised in the Gypsy culture was like a movie with sweet parts mixed with painful times. In my childlike thinking, I had no idea how that drama would continue or how it would end. Looking back

to the change from that childhood to becoming director of the Domari Center gave me an incentive to tell my story and show the world what it is like to be a Gypsy woman."

—From the memoirs of *Anoun Sleem*

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The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by **Tony Cartledge** in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without "dumbing down" the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.



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## July lessons in this issue

Words about Words—from God

*Zechariah 9:9-13*  
Prisoners of Hope  
July 6, 2014

*Isaiah 55:6-13*  
The Fertile Word  
July 13, 2014

*Isaiah 44:6-20*  
The Real Thing  
July 20, 2014

*1 Kings 3:1-15*  
A Listening Heart  
July 27, 2014

Youth Lessons  
are on pages  
22-23.



Adult teaching plans by **Rick Jordan** of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina are available at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net)

### Thanks, sponsors!

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

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

July 6, 2014

## Prisoners of Hope

**H**ard times are a fact of life for all of us. Sooner or later, less or more, we will encounter rough patches or bleak days that may leave us struggling to put one foot in front of the other.

The hedgerow that seems so impenetrable may be a pile of bills that a job loss has rendered us unable to pay, or an unexpected illness that has put us on the sidelines for an indefinite period. It may have its roots in a strained relationship, a broken heart, or a colossal mistake that we regret but can't change.

How do we move forward when prospects seem dismal?

We go with hope.

Hope will not always guarantee success or grant quick relief from trial, but it keeps us on our feet and moving.

Today's text speaks of a promising future for a downtrodden people who live in exile but have not given up, because they are "prisoners of hope."

### A little-known prophet

The encouraging words are found in the book of Zechariah, which comes next to last in the "Book of the Twelve" (or "Minor Prophets") and in the Old Testament.

The book consists of two main parts. The first eight chapters contain a series of visions precisely dated between 520 and 518 BCE, less than 20 years after some of the exiles from Judah had returned to Jerusalem in hopes of rebuilding the city. 📖

In contrast, chs. 9-14 adopt a different style and take on an apocalyptic cast,



Zechariah 9:12 – "Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double."

looking beyond the immediate future to a day of ultimate restoration. 📖 Many scholars believe these chapters may have been added at a later time, perhaps by a different prophet.

Zechariah, whose name means "Yahweh remembers," 📖 was known as the head of a priestly family (Neh. 12:6). Like Ezekiel, he would have been both priest and prophet.

In chs. 1-8, Zechariah sought to assure the struggling settlers that God was concerned about their welfare, and he spoke of a glorious kingdom to come. In chs. 9-14, he intoned judgment on foreign lands and on Judah's leaders, but promised that God would restore the scattered people of both Israel (10:1-12) and Judah (chs. 12-13). The nations of the earth would come against Jerusalem but be defeated, so that God would rule over all the earth and be worshiped by all nations (ch. 14).

### A peace-loving king (vv. 9-10)

Now for today's text, which contains one of the most familiar and beloved

prophecies to be quoted in the New Testament: the prediction of a powerful but humble king who would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey and establish a reign of peace.

The verses preceding our text (9:1-8) set the stage for his entrance by declaring that Yahweh would clear out Israel's closest enemies, beginning with Syria to the northeast, moving to Phoenicia on the northwest, and moving south to drive out Philistines to the west and southwest before returning to Jerusalem to "encamp at my house as a guard." 📖

In a separate oracle, the next two verses anticipate that a human king would come to join Yahweh in the newly liberated city, riding into Jerusalem amid shouts of jubilation from "daughter Zion" and "daughter Jerusalem."

"Zion," though just part of the city, was often used in parallel with Jerusalem. Here, as in other texts (2 Kgs. 19:21; Isa. 37:22; Lam. 2:13, 15; Mic. 4:8; Zeph. 3:14), the city is personified as female. Zechariah envisioned a future population of Jerusalem gathering to "rejoice greatly" and

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“shout aloud” as they welcomed the coming king.

And what can we know about this mysterious man who rides a donkey to his coronation? God had already eliminated potential enemies, so he would not arrive as a conqueror. 📌 Even so, the coming king would be called “triumphant” and “victorious” as well as “humble” (NRSV).

The NRSV’s use of “triumphant” is puzzling: the word (*tsadiq*) would be better translated in the normal sense of “righteous” (NIV, HCSB). A righteous or just (KJV) king is one who upholds Israel’s covenant with Yahweh and rules wisely with justice for all persons.

The word “victorious” literally means “saved,” or “delivered,” as in the KJV’s awkward but accurate “having salvation.” The term does not carry the New Testament sense of “being saved from sin,” but suggests that Yahweh had delivered the coming king from all enemies and dangers. God had won the victory for him.

Perhaps this helps to explain the king’s modesty. He would not be proud and haughty as Absalom was, or as some other kings of Israel had been. Rather, he would be marked by the humility needed to rule with compassion and justice. 📌

As a mark of his modesty, the king would not arrive in a chariot or astride a warhorse, but on the back of a donkey. Poetic repetition emphasizes the king’s humility, using three different words for “donkey” or “ass.” Literally, he would be “riding on a donkey (*hamor*); on a male donkey (*‘ayir*), the son (*ben*) of a female donkey (*‘atōn*).”

A misunderstanding of this poetic repetition led the translators of the Greek Septuagint to imagine two animals, a stance followed by the KJV, which says he was “riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass” – an image that would have the king straddling two animals, or perhaps standing with a foot upon each, like a circus performer!

Zechariah declared that the coming king’s rule would be so peaceful that weapons of war could be eliminated:

“I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the horse from Jerusalem. The bow of war will be removed, and he will proclaim peace to the nations” (v. 10a).

This poetic promise not only imagines peace, but also the reunification of the northern tribes (called “Ephraim”) who had been scattered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE and the people of Judah (Jerusalem) who had been exiled by the Babylonians in 597 and 587.

Afterward, the king’s dominion would stretch “from sea to sea,” and “from the Euphrates River to the ends of the earth” (v. 10b: “the river” typically refers to the Euphrates).

Zechariah would have had a far more limited vision of the earth’s extent than that of modern readers, but he declared that the king’s peaceful rule would extend throughout the world that was known to him, and beyond.

### A God-blessed people (vv. 11-13)

The new king’s rule would not be the only good news: God would bring new waves of returning exiles to Jerusalem. The promise of deliverance in vv. 11-13 may have originated separately, but is bound to the previous verses in such a way that the prophet continues to address daughter Jerusalem: the “you” in “As for you . . .” is feminine.

The oracle is unusual because it speaks of God having a “covenant of blood” with Jerusalem (v. 11a). Similar expressions are found only in Exod. 24:8, a reference to blood sprinkled on the altar during the covenant ceremony at Sinai, and in Jesus’ words of institution at the Lord’s Supper (Mark 14:24).

In this context, the “covenant of blood” may refer to God’s promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 that one of his descendants (that is, of his bloodline) would always sit on the throne. This was considered to be an “everlasting” covenant (2 Sam. 7, 23:5; Ps. 89:4, 29, 132:11). Thus, later prophets foresaw

a time when God would fulfill the “forever promise” and return a Davidic king to the throne.

The oracle looks to a time when all of Israel’s exiles would be released from the “waterless pit” of their imprisonment (v. 11b), possibly a reference to Joseph’s release from a pit into which his brothers had thrown him (Gen. 37:18-28).

As “prisoners of hope” who had not given up on God during their exile, Zechariah said, they would “return to the stronghold” (Jerusalem) and find new prosperity (v. 12). That the exiles would include persons from both Israel and Judah becomes clear in v. 13. With a striking metaphor, the prophet declares that Yahweh would bend Judah as a bow, and “fill” it with Ephraim as an arrow to be released against the people of Greece, who followed the Persians as empire builders. 📌

The military imagery of v. 13 may seem at odds with the peaceful king who enters the city in v. 10, but the prophet used both pictures to capture his readers with the hope of a new and better future.

Jesus modeled his ministry and teaching on the image of the peaceful king who would bring spiritual deliverance through humility and service. All four gospels recount the story of how Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in just the manner described by Zech. 9:9 — riding on a young donkey. Both Matthew (21:5) and John (12:15) quote portions of Zech. 9:9, while the shouts of “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” found in all four gospels derive from Ps. 118:25-26.

Zechariah, like Jesus, spoke to a discouraged and downtrodden people who were desperately in need of hope, lest they give up on God altogether. Their messages served – and continue to serve – to capture our hearts with a sense of expectancy. Though we may sometimes feel shackled to the daily grind or bound by moments of crisis, we can find inspiration to keep pushing forward, for in Christ we are prisoners of hope. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Isaiah 55:6-13

July 13, 201

## The Fertile Word

We know what it's like to suffer through a bitter winter that seems interminable. We long for the warmth and the green and the blossoms of spring as daffodils do battle with lingering snow and overnight freezes to lift their yellow faces sunward.

In time, the Bradford pears burst into clouds of bloom, the redbuds blossom, the cherry trees explode, the dogwoods unfurl their crosses, and all seems right with the world.

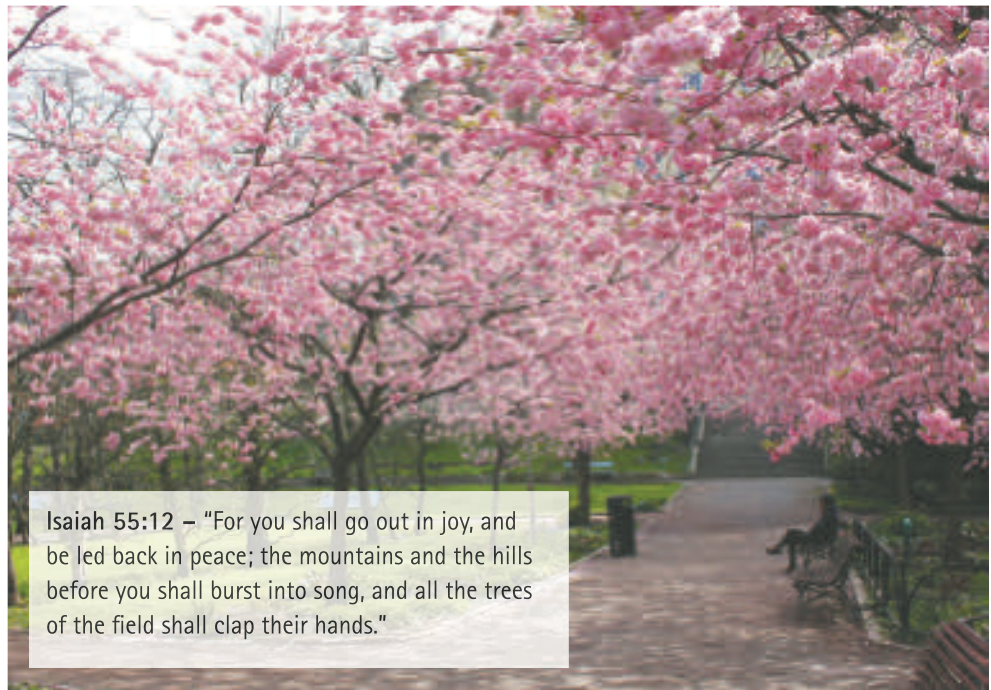
Today's text imagines a day when God will spark a spring to end all springs, a day when mountains will shout and trees applaud the homecoming of God's people. ↓

The text is an enthusiastic invitation for Israel – and for all who will – to get on board with God, to accept God's gift of covenant promises, and to follow God on a journey of justice that leads to the Promised Land. The spiritual and metaphorical appeal of Isaiah 55 is universal, and it remains one of the Bible's most beautiful invitations to relationship with God. ↓

### A thirsty people (vv. 1-5)

The oracle in Isaiah 55 may have been preached in a public marketplace, for it sounds like a sales pitch from someone hawking wares in the crowded streets of Babylon. Vendors selling potable water, bread, wine, milk and other comestibles would have been commonplace in any ancient urban setting, just as they are today.

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



Isaiah 55:12 – "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

Isaiah offered food and water that is beyond price, but freely offered. It may have been a hard sell, however, for there was no visible food or drink in his hands.

Isaiah's offer appears to work on two levels. On the surface, he may have been promising the availability of good water and abundant provisions in the Promised Land for those who would return. On another level, Isaiah spoke of priceless spiritual food that can be found only – but freely – in relationship with God.

In either case, Isaiah charged that the "bread" his hearers were buying in Babylon was not real bread, and that their efforts to build fortunes in exile could not fully satisfy. The prophet offered "rich food" to those who would "listen carefully" and choose rightly. ↓

In addition, the prophet promised that the eternal covenant God had made with David – that his descendants would always lead Israel (2 Sam. 7:8-16, 23:5; 1 Kgs. 8:23-26; Ps. 89) – would be transferred or extended to all Israel (vv. 3-5). ↓

"I will make with you an everlasting covenant," Isaiah said, echoing language from God's promise to make for David

an everlasting house. The promise, however, carried with it a responsibility. Because of God's blessings, David became "a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples" (v. 4).

Israel was also called to be a witness, no longer in the sense of political leadership, but as spiritual guides. In particular, they were to live as a testimony before nations that do not know God: "You shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that you do not know shall run to you ..." (v 5a).

While David in his promised "house" was a witness to the people he ruled, Israel is also promised an everlasting future in which she is to be a witness to people who do not know God.

The prophet believed that if the exiles would take God at his word and return to build up Jerusalem as a people fully committed to God's way, they would become such an inspiration that other nations would "run" to them in search of the secret to success and life that they have discovered in "the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you" (v 5b).



## An awesome God (vv. 6-9)

How does one enter this promised relationship? How does one “Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near” (v. 6)? In cultic-oriented contexts such as Deut. 12:5 and Ps. 105:4, “to seek the LORD” is to come and worship in the temple. For the prophets, however, seeking the Lord involved more than temple worship. It called for a commitment to following God’s way. 🇺🇸

Isaiah and his fellow exiles in Babylon could not “seek God” by going to the temple, but God’s presence was not dependent on a temple. For Isaiah, seeking God began with repentance (v. 7). Thus, he called on the wicked to forsake their wicked ways, and the unrighteous their unworthy thoughts. 🇺🇸 Isaiah, writing at the end of the exile, may also have been encouraging people to accept Cyrus’ offer to return home and rebuild the temple while the opportunity was available.

The prophet’s call to repentance led to a promise of pardon. If the people would seek the Lord, they would find mercy and pardon. Isaiah believed that the exiles’ time in Babylon had paid the penalty for the sins of the ancestors. They were now free to “get out of jail” and return home to live a better life.

For some hearers, accustomed to Babylonian ways and settled in their Babylonian homes, Isaiah’s words may have sounded like foolishness. From a human point of view, the call to pull up stakes and return to an uncertain future made little sense. But God knew things the people did not know, Isaiah said. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD” (v. 8).

Human minds are limited, but God’s knowledge knows no boundaries: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (v. 9). As much as we may like the idea of understanding everything, we have to acknowledge that God remains far beyond our full comprehension, always shrouded in mystery. God’s ways are

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higher than our ways, but how can we know when a prophetic message truly reflects God’s ways?

## A fruitful word (vv. 10-13)

Isaiah returned to the image of the heavens as higher than the earth and built on it to assure the people he was an authentic channel of God’s powerful and effective word. The metaphor takes on more depth when we understand that in Hebrew, the notions of “word” and “deed” are connoted by the same term. God’s words and God’s deeds go together. Just as rain and snow come from the heavens to water the earth and make it fruitful, so God’s spoken word would accomplish its purpose (vv. 10-11).

And what was that purpose?

It was the return of Israel to the land of promise. Isaiah painted the kind of glorious image you’d only expect to see in a happy-ending movie. He envisioned a joyful journey of gleeful people enjoying a new era of peace, with nearby mountains happily serenading and roadside trees applauding the people as they marched past like heroes on parade (v. 12).

We can almost hear Julie Andrews singing, “The hills are alive with the sound of music . . .”

The rough thorn bushes and briars in the ruins of Jerusalem would give way to fragrant cypress and myrtle trees, Isaiah said, which would stand as a living reminder of God’s deliverance for Israel. 🇺🇸 The true memorial of God’s work, however, would not be seen in tall trees, but in a faithful and fruitful people.

Unfortunately, those who did return to Jerusalem did not experience a happy homecoming. The city was a ruin, the neighbors were rude, and the land was in the midst of a drought. How do we square the prophet’s pretty picture with

the ugly scene the returnees actually faced?

Isaiah’s over-the-top metaphor may have been sparked by the overwhelming joy of realizing that the exiles could finally return home. Though his hyperbolic description of their return did not match the desolate scene they would find in Jerusalem, the prophet looked beyond the ruined land to a spiritual spring when God and people would live together in a joyful setting not unlike Israel’s tradition of Eden.

Sometimes, things have to get worse before they get better.

How often have we anticipated a delightful vacation, only to be sidetracked by cranky children, long lines, or bad weather? Despite the difficulties, we manage to make good memories and remember the trip fondly, carsickness and all.

I can remember imagining how much enjoyment a small shaded patio might add to my backyard – but before the first relaxing glass of lemonade, there were weeks of backbreaking labor to dig out the spot, build a retaining wall, level the ground, fill in the substrate, fit the pavers, and landscape the surroundings. I can sit in the glider and read to the music of birds and wind chimes now, but it didn’t spring from the earth like flowers leaping up to greet one of Disney’s cartoon heroines.

There is a future for us, and it is bigger and more beautiful, happier and more peaceful than the Jerusalem we know will ever be. Despite the best prophetic efforts, from Ezekiel’s visions to John’s apocalypse, we cannot know exactly what that future will be like.

The one thing we can hang our hopes on is that we serve a God who wants to be known, and who wants to bless us. As we “seek the LORD while he may be found,” we embark upon a journey through valleys and hills that may be more stressful than musical, but we do not travel alone – and when we can be confident that the end of the road brings us closer to God, every step will be worth the effort. **BT**

# Youth

July 6 — July 27, 2014

Youth Lessons by **David Cassidy** and online youth teaching resources (at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net)) by **Jeremy Colliver** build off



of the Bible lessons by Tony Cartledge.

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

## Promises

*Zechariah 9:9-13*

"I promise!" How many times has someone pleaded with you, "I promise I will ..."? Or how many times have you pleaded with someone, "I promise ..."?

We promise people that we will do things all the time. Sometimes we are more desperate with our pleas than at other times, but our promises always offer hope that things will get done or that situations won't occur again.

Promises are about hope. In our scripture today, Zechariah promises something the people need.

Many times this text is read during Lent, Holy Week or Easter because it speaks of a king who will ride in on a donkey and establish a reign of peace. A large crowd will gather to welcome the new king that

the people have longed to see since they were dispersed from their homelands. The king does not ride in as a conqueror (God has already taken care of all the enemies), though, but as a victor.

The people will have no more struggles and only peace for years to come. And if there was any doubt as to the peaceful times that will lie ahead, the prophet promises that this will be a time when weapons of war will be discarded. The people will not have to worry about the character of the king riding in because he will be a righteous man who upholds Israel's covenant with Yahweh.

Zechariah is giving the scattered people of Israel everything they hope for, and God is supporting it. The people no longer will be prisoners of a foreign king, but rather prisoners of God bound by hope.

JULY 6

### Think About It:

*Promises bring about hope between two people. What hope did you have from the last promise you received?*

### Make a Choice:

*When we feel beat down, we tend to turn inward to look for answers. But we can also turn to God for hope. Which way will you choose?*

### Pray:

*God, when our days seem dark, let us remember our unending hope rests in you. Help us to remember your promise to always be with us.*

## An Invitation

*Isaiah 55:6-13*

Invitations are fun. Whether we receive one through email or an event notification through Facebook or Twitter, invitations usually get us excited. Invitations bring about excitement because they are usually about celebrations. We want to invite our friends to share in what we have done so they can be excited with us.

Isaiah 55 is an invitation to something the Israelites had looked forward to receiving. It invites them to something that will not end: a relationship with God.

Isaiah begins his invitation with food — a rich bread that is different than the fake bread being sold in Babylon. If those who hear his invitation will listen carefully and choose correctly, they will be able to

have this bread that will bring life.

If the promise of "food" is not enough, Isaiah then promises that the covenant God made with David will be extended to everyone in Israel. Isaiah promises that if the people do as he says, Israel will be such a light that all other nations will hurry to them to learn the secrets of their success. No longer will Israel be second class.

So how will the Israelites seek God? In the past, they sought God in the temple, but Isaiah claims that seeking God begins with repentance. After repentance comes mercy in the form of a pardon from God. Many Israelites feel that their banishment is because of some sin, so this pardon is not only an inward action, but it also means they will be able to return home to Jerusalem.

JULY 13

### Think About It:

*You choose to follow people on Twitter or "friend" people on Facebook all the time without much thought. You might have already chosen to have a relationship with God. How much do you think about the impact your relationship with God has on your life?*

### Make a Choice:

*How do you choose day-by-day to be in a relationship with Jesus?*

### Pray:

*God, may we accept the invitation to be in relationship with you.*



JULY 20

## The One

Isaiah 44:6-20

In his book *American Gods*, Neil Gaiman pits the gods of the old versus the new. The premise is that the new gods are taking over because people are spending their time, money and memory on the new gods of television, electronics and the newest "thing." You don't have to read all 600-plus pages to see that Gaiman is on to something: We treat "things" like idols, and these new gods take our attention away from God.

Isaiah challenges us in much the same way, but he doesn't take 600-plus pages to do it!

The people of Israel are living in the land of Babylon where there are many gods. The Israelites must constantly remind themselves — or be reminded by the

prophets — that they have one God, the one true God: Yahweh. Yahweh brought the people of Israel out of exile before and promises to do the same for them again. If the people question the promise, they are reminded that Yahweh is the unchanging king. Isaiah does not claim these things for God, but it is God who claims these things. These claims are personal and are directed directly at the worshippers of other gods. The silence of the other gods reveals the truth to the Israelites about who is the one, true God.

The cries of Yahweh then are relevant to us today. We may not have physical statues of false gods in our homes like the Babylonians, yet we are still tempted to give attention to other gods. May we each be reminded of the one true God: Yahweh.

### Think About It:

*You might have heard people say, "Put your money where your mouth is." In many cases where you put your money reveals what is important to you. How do your spending habits show what is important to you?*

### Make a Choice:

*What are the other "gods" or idols that seek to gain a foothold in your life? These may be clothing, gadgets or activities. How will you choose to follow only God?*

### Pray:

*God, forgive us when we are tempted to turn our eyes from you.*

JULY 27

## One Wish

1 Kings 3:1-15

We've all played the game: If you had one wish, what would it be? Your imagination starts to spin and wander ... unlimited wishes, money, fame, a long life, world peace ... the list goes on and on. Then you snap back to reality, and the game is up. Nothing actually happens through wishing.

In today's scripture, Solomon finds himself in a similar circumstance while in Gibeon. God appears to him in a dream and asks, "What should I give you?" The game has become a reality for Solomon. God, who can grant any wish, has asked Solomon what he wants.

The beginning of his reign as king couldn't have started off in a better way.

Solomon seems to be awaiting a response from God. He has been making thousands of sacrifices to God and has even set up a camp in this holy place where he can wait for God to speak to him. His wait is not long, because God comes to Solomon in a dream.

Solomon answers God with a sense of humility and then praise. He asks for wisdom. He wants to know how to govern his people as God desires. This response pleases God, and Solomon's wish is granted. God also grants the king those things Solomon did not ask for but considered requesting: riches and honor. All of these things God grants to him as long as Solomon "walks in my ways."

What a great way to start your reign as king, but we'll see how long Solomon walks in God's ways.

### Think About It:

*Solomon was given the opportunity to have any wish granted by God, so he asked for wisdom. Where would wisdom fall on your list? What else would you ask from God?*

### Make a Choice:

*God has not asked us what we desire so that it will be granted, but through Christ we have been offered grace, love and hope. Will you choose to accept these things, or are you still holding out that your wish might be granted?*

### Pray:

*God, help us walk in your ways and seek those paths that are pleasing to you.*

# Bible Study

Isaiah 44:6-20


with Tony W. Cartledge

July 20, 2014

## The Real Thing

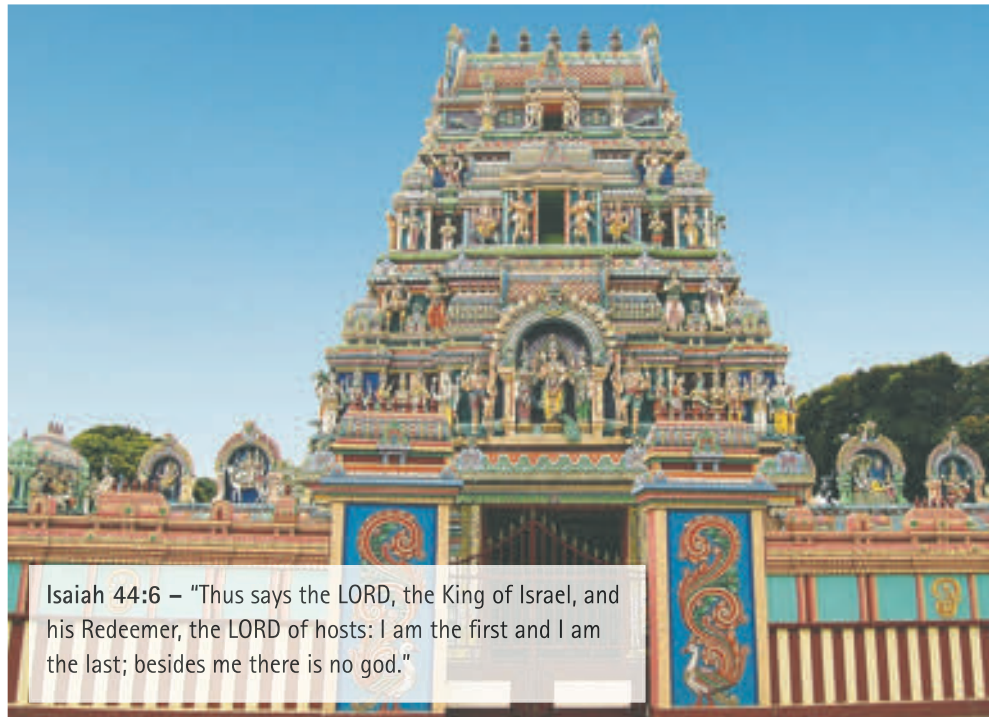
**I**dolatry: It's not a word that often comes to mind; not one we would typically apply to our lives – but it's the subject of our text for the day. Why should we care? Why should we not? Perhaps we're not as guiltless as we think. Read on.

### The first and only God (vv. 6-8)

When you live in a land that worships many gods, how do you choose between them? This section of Isaiah was probably written in the last years of the Babylonian exile, and it contains several confrontational speeches in which the prophet speaks for the God of Israel, insisting that Yahweh is the only true god, and that all others are pretenders (41:1-5, 41:21-28, 43:8-15). The oracle in 44:6-8 takes up the same theme, along with elements of salvation or encouragement for Israel. 


The speech begins with God's self-identification as "Yahweh of hosts," both the king and redeemer of Israel (v. 6). The use of "redeemer" would remind the exiles that God had stepped in as a loyal kinsman and delivered Israel before. The same Yahweh who had brought the Israelites from captivity in Egypt could bring them home from Babylon. The same God who had defeated Philistines and Ammonites and Syrians in Israel's behalf could deliver them again.

The naming of God as "king" was a reminder that God's rule was unchanged. Israel was in bondage because of God's discipline, not




Isaiah 44:6 – "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god."

because of God's weakness. Israel owed Yahweh both loyalty and service.

The introduction to the oracle, then, calls for faithfulness even as it offers hope in the one true God: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god" (v. 6b). 

While v. 6 is addressed to Israel, v. 7 is directed toward any would-be gods the people might be tempted to worship. The Babylonians recognized many gods, from leading deities such as Marduk and Ishtar to minor ones like Ninkasi and Ninkilim, the goddess of beer and the god of rats.

Individuals kept small statuettes of personal gods in their homes, but massive temples to deities such as Shamash (the sun god) and Ishtar (goddess of love and war) featured large effigies ensconced on platforms in the innermost sanctums. The images were commonly made from a wooden core covered with thin plates of iron, bronze, silver, or gold. 

Verse 7 is a direct challenge to such gods, as Yahweh asks the demanding question: "Who is like me? Let them

proclaim it, let them declare it and set it forth before me."

The first evidence of the other gods' impotence is their inability to speak or to answer Yahweh's challenge.

In contrast, the God of Israel not only speaks, but also has the ability to announce in advance what will happen. In other settings, the proof of a true prophet is that when he speaks for God, his words come true (Deut. 18:22, 1 Sam. 3:19, Isa. 48:3-5, Jer. 28:9, Ezek. 33:33). Here, it is the test of a true god: Can other deities declare what is yet to come? Yahweh issues a dare: "Let them tell us what is yet to be."

With v. 8, the prophet addresses the exiles, but on the same theme. Still speaking for God, he tells them not to fear, but to remember: "Have I not told you from before and declared it? You are my witnesses!"

Prophets who spoke for Yahweh had long predicted that Israel's faithlessness would lead them to national ruin and to exile. The deportees to whom the prophet spoke were witnesses that the forecast of national judgment

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





had come to pass.

If God could send the people into exile, however, God's power could surely bring them out. Returning to the thought of v. 7, Yahweh asks: "Is there any God besides me? There is no other rock; I know not one."

The image of God as a steadfast rock was common to Hebrew thought, especially in the Psalms, including Ps. 18:31, which echoes Isaiah: "For who is God except the LORD? And who is a rock besides our God?"

The prophet's challenge remains as pertinent today as it did to those who lived and mourned by the waters of Babylon more than 2,500 years ago. Exile can take many shapes, not all of them related to physical captivity. Broken relationships leave us feeling exiled from others. Depression can be as isolating as solitary confinement. Poverty brings its own kind of exile.

In bleak times of relational, emotional, economic, or spiritual exile, where do we turn? Can we also trust in the God of Israel as the eternal one who will never forsake us, a rock on which we can stake our hope and build our future?

Is there any other god in whom we can trust?

The trouble, we know, is that we all have tried other gods. We have sought to find peace and fulfillment and happiness in other people, in financial security, in pleasure, or in enlightenment.

We have tried these things, and found them little more capable than the gods who inhabited Babylonian temples, to which we now turn.

### The fake and phony gods (vv. 9-20)

The style of the text shifts with v. 9. While vv. 6-8 are in the poetic form of an oracle, vv. 9-20 read like a satirical essay on the foolishness of idolatry. The text is so different in approach that most critical scholars consider it a later addition, and its sarcasm is so biting that one doubts it would have been added while the author was still living among the people he was mocking.

Those who make idols are "nothing," the writer says, "and the things they delight in do not profit." The word translated as "nothing" is the same term (*tohu*) that describes the empty formlessness existing before creation (Gen. 1:1). The expression "does not profit" was a favorite of Israel's wisdom teachers: something that does no good is useless.

While the people of Israel were witnesses of Yahweh's mighty acts of deliverance (v. 8), the writer insists that idol worshippers have nothing to talk about. Their "witnesses neither see nor know" because their gods do nothing to be seen or experienced, offering their worshippers nothing but shame.

In the preceding oracle, Yahweh asked, "Who is like me?" Now the writer asks, "Who would fashion a god or cast an image that can do no good?" (v. 10). Why would a human artisan make something that can do nothing and call it a god? (v. 11).

In the process of critiquing those who worship idols, the writer provides an interesting description of the craftsmen's work in fashioning them. The blacksmith works over a forge, shaping an image or hammering plate metal, so intent on his work that he neglects to eat or drink and grows weak (v. 12).

The unspoken question is, "How can a mortal man with failing strength make a god with divine powers?"

The woodworker takes a large block of wood and marks the parts to cut away, then shapes it into an image to be set up in a temple (v. 13). To illustrate the foolishness of the enterprise, the writer takes the image backward to its time as a tree in the forest, then a seedling to be planted and nourished by the rain (v. 14).

We can almost hear the writer laughing as he sets up the inanity of someone who starts with a tree trunk, chips and carves away to fashion an idol, then builds a fire to warm himself

and roast his dinner from the scrap wood. Part of the wood he burns, and part of it he makes into an idol to which he bows to and prays "Save me, for you are my god!" (vv. 15-17).

The silliness of the project seems mind-boggling to the writer, who cannot comprehend how anyone could fail to understand its foolhardy nature (vv. 18-19). "He feeds on ashes," the author concludes. "A deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot save himself or say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'" (v. 20).

We should acknowledge that the satire is overdone. None of the ancients who employed idols in their worship were foolish enough to think that the idol and the god were the same thing. The images used in worship were physical representations of what they believed to be a spiritual reality.

The Hebrews were to be different. As far back as the second commandment, they were forbidden from making images to depict God. But, humans have always wanted something to see or hold, and the Israelites were prone not only to acknowledging the idols of their neighbors, but of making images for the worship of Yahweh, too. (See the online "Hardest Question" for more.)

Christians also must be careful to remember that devotional objects are, in themselves, not sacred. Crosses, icons, and statues of saints may remind us of God – as do country chapels and soaring cathedrals – but they are neither God nor God's abode.

The true God is known through faithful acts of power and deliverance, Isaiah insisted, acts that were witnessed by ancestors and saints that have come before us. But the Israelites delivered from Egypt and the believers present at Pentecost are not the only witnesses. We also may know the joy of God's saving grace, the peace of God's presence, and the assurance of God's steadfast love.

Steeple and stained glass may be inspiring, but the God we seek is known through Spirit and power that changes hearts and lives: we are witnesses. **BT**

# Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

1 Kings 3:1-15

July 27, 2014

## A Listening Heart

“Did you hear me?” Most of us heard those words at some point as we were growing up. Perhaps one of our parents told us to mow the lawn, or wash the dishes, and we were slow to comply.

“Did you hear me?” – usually conveyed with impatience – sent a clear message that life would be much better if we would listen to our parents and do what they say.

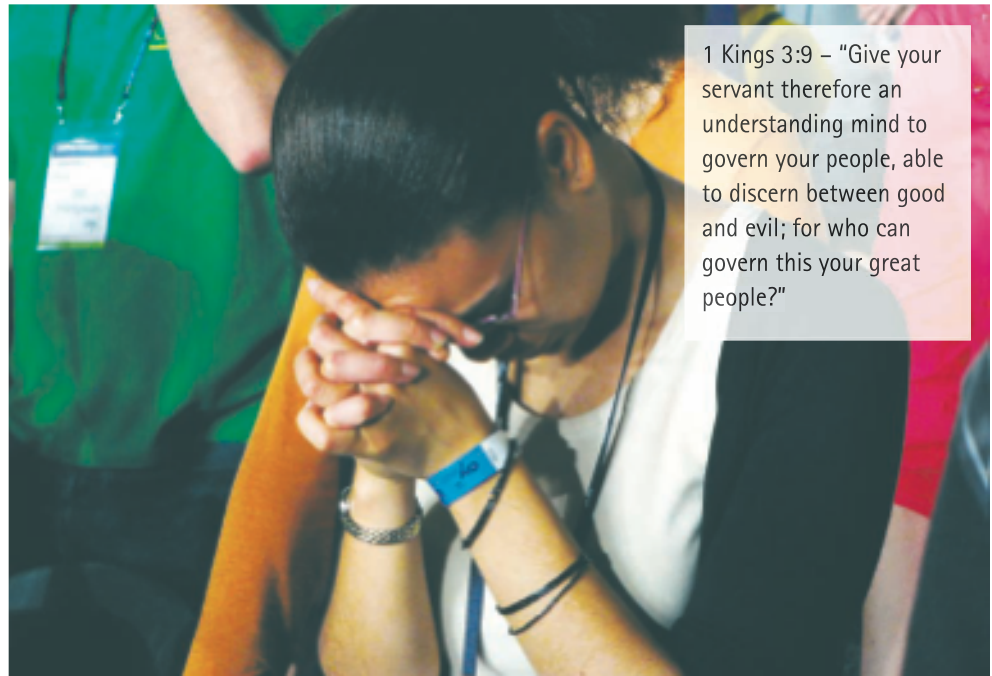
We may as well confess that those of us who have children of our own, or who have taught school, have probably used the same words. We want to get across the lesson that successful people listen to those who are wiser, and learn to follow their lead.

Solomon understood this, or so we surmise from today’s familiar text – but there’s more to the story than meets the eye (or ear).

### Pharaoh’s son-in-law (vv. 1-2)

When we come to 1 Kings 3, Solomon has recently succeeded his father David as king of Israel, and over a short period of time was able to revamp the royal court and consolidate his rule. 📖

What we often overlook is that Solomon is presented as a living conundrum. His name (*shlomoh*) is derived from the word *shalom*, which relates to peace or wholeness, but Solomon began his reign by executing three persons who could threaten his rule (the military chief Joab, his brother Adonijah, and a critic named Shimei), while banishing another (Abiathar the priest). He gained



1 Kings 3:9 – “Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?”

peace by dint of the sword. 📖

A second disconnect is that Solomon would become known as a man of unmatched wisdom, but the wisdom he is first known for was rooted in brute force. David had instructed Solomon to keep close to God and follow the law (2 Kgs. 2:1-4), but then charged him to see that neither Joab nor Shimei should die in peace (2 Kgs. 2:5-9). In both cases, David told Solomon to use his wisdom in determining how and when to do the deed (vv. 6, 9).

A third surprise is that, while Solomon emerged as the chosen son of David, he also chose to become the son-in-law of Egypt’s pharaoh (3:1). The narrator carefully avoids naming the pharaoh, probably because he wants the reader to keep in mind the story of the cruel pharaoh who had oppressed the Israelites long before, and to be wary of Solomon’s penchant for marriage alliances.

With these narrative touches and more to come, the editor of 1 Kings manages to praise King Solomon as a monarch of unparalleled wisdom and prosperity, but with a shadow over him.

He wants to praise Solomon, but the praise is not unqualified. For example, in telling us that Solomon brought his new wife into Jerusalem, there is a reminder that he had not yet finished “building his own house and the house of the LORD and the wall around Jerusalem.” The implication that Solomon was completing his own palace before building the temple or fortifying the city suggests that his priorities may have been off.

Furthermore, we read that those who wanted to worship Yahweh were still sacrificing on outdoor shrines or “high places,” a practice that would later be expressly forbidden, but which remained popular precisely because Solomon had not yet built the temple, where sacrifices could rightly be offered. 📖

### David’s son and successor (vv. 3-9)

The theme continues in v. 3, where we are told that Solomon “loved the LORD” and “followed in the statutes of his father David,” 📖 but with a qualifier: “only, he sacrificed and offered incense at the high places.”

In fact, Solomon sacrificed there on

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





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a massive scale: v. 4 says that he went to the principal high place in Gibeon (about 7 miles northwest of Jerusalem), and offered a thousand burnt offerings. 📖

Even allowing for exaggeration, why would anyone offer such extravagant sacrifices? The words used speak of whole burnt offerings, rather than the more typical “peace offerings” that were ritually sacrificed but mostly eaten by worshipers. The verb forms suggest that this was Solomon’s custom, rather than a one-time event. Was the new king seeking legitimacy by demonstrating loyalty to Yahweh in public fashion, or did he wish to stress by example the importance of serving Yahweh?

Or, is it possible that Solomon was actively seeking to receive a word from God? The ancients sometimes offered sacrifices and then slept in holy places in hopes that God would speak to them in a dream. 📖 Whatever Solomon’s motive, he evidently had a royal pavilion set up during these sacrificial outings so he could stay overnight. On one occasion, whether Solomon had sought the encounter or not, God spoke to him in a dream (v. 5). 📖

God, according to the story, offered to bless Solomon and asked him to name what he wanted most. Solomon replied with a show of humility, praising God for the loyalty shown to his father David, and recognizing that his place on the throne was a continued sign of God’s “great and steadfast love” (v. 6).

Even though he was already a father, had eliminated his rivals, had established a core of supporters, and had entered at least one political marriage alliance, Solomon spoke of himself as “only a little child” who did not know how to go out or come in. That was an obvious exaggeration, but designed to indicate Solomon’s awareness that he still had much to learn if he was to govern Israel well (vv. 7-8).

Perhaps Solomon was already smart enough to know that if he had the discernment to do the right things, success in other areas would follow. In either case, he chose wisdom as his wish: “Give to your servant therefore

an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil . . .” (v. 9).

The NRSV’s “an understanding mind” is an apt translation, but it is helpful to recognize that Solomon’s literal request was for “a listening heart.” The Hebrews considered the heart to be the place where options were considered and decisions made. They also connected the act of listening with obedience: to truly listen is to obey.

Solomon’s desire to “discern between good and evil” employs a figure of speech called a merism, which states two very different things while meaning to include everything in between. It wasn’t just an ability to label things as “good” or “evil” that Solomon needed, but an ability to judge rightly and make good decisions, to lead wisely and to establish justice for all people. Solomon recognized the enormity of the multiple tasks of good governance and leadership as he asked, “For who can govern your great people?”

Asking for a “listening heart” showed that Solomon sought to understand God’s desire, and to follow it. He was still new to the “game of thrones,” but knew enough to recognize that he would need God’s help in order to rule effectively over a people who had demonstrated their willful ways many times over.

Can you imagine what it would be like to have a conversation in which God offered to grant anything you wished? Solomon asked for a heart that was open and obedient to following God’s way. What would be on your wish list?

### God’s chosen leader (vv. 10-15)

Solomon’s request was pleasing to God, according to v. 10, who was impressed that the king had asked for

“understanding to discern what is right” rather than for long life, riches, or the lives of his enemies (v. 11). 📖

To reward Solomon’s astutely humble request, God agreed to grant him “a wise and discerning mind” unmatched in either history or prospect (v. 12). God also promised to grant Solomon what he had not asked for, “riches and honor” beyond that of any other king for all of his life (literally, “days,” v. 13).

Note that God’s promise replaces the potential request for triumph over enemies with “honor,” a word that could also mean “glory.” Solomon could enjoy those blessings for as long as he lived – but how long would that be?

In v. 14 we find a conditional element that was absent from God’s promise to David. Solomon could have a long life, but only “if you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and my commandments, as your father David walked – then I will lengthen your life.”

Awaking from his dream, Solomon realized the importance of the vision. The first fruit of his “listening heart,” apparently, was the realization that sacrifices to Yahweh should be offered in Jerusalem, on the altar before the tent housing the Ark of the Covenant.

Solomon wasted no time in returning to Jerusalem, where he offered both whole burnt offerings and “sacrifices of well-being,” with which he “provided a feast for all his servants” (v. 15).

That was a good start, but would Solomon live up to the ideal of a listening heart that obeys God’s ways? Would God live up to the divine promises? (See “The Hardest Question” online for the verdict.)

We might be curious about Solomon, but more importantly, to whom are our hearts listening? God has not pledged to us the worldly riches, power, or legendary wisdom of Solomon, but through Christ we have the offer of forgiving grace, steadfast love, and the abiding hope of God’s present Spirit – all of which call us to faithful service.

Are our hearts open to God’s promises and God’s leading? Are we listening? **BT**

## Classifieds

You are invited to join a **Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and Petra**, April 14-25, 2015. Dr. Tom Jackson, pastor emeritus of Wake Forest Baptist Church, N.C., has been organizing and hosting Holy Land tours for more than 25 years with Doron Heiliger, one of Israel's most respected guides. For information, contact (919) 395-1290 or PastorTJ@aol.com.

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### Associate Pastor of Children and Families:

First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., affiliated with CBF and Churchnet, is seeking a full-time associate pastor of children and families. This position will develop, administer, and promote a seamless ministry spanning birth through childhood that will help cultivate strong, godly families and loving relationships in our fellowship and community. This position also coordinates recreation for all ages with the assistance of a part-time recreation associate. A bachelor's degree in a related field is required, with a master's preferred. Please send résumé to Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, 301 E. Capitol Ave., Jefferson City, MO 65101 or to [doyle@fbcjc.org](mailto:doyle@fbcjc.org). A complete job description is available at [fbcjc.org/jobdescription](http://fbcjc.org/jobdescription).

### Minister to Children and Families

Broadway Baptist Church  
Louisville, Ky.

Information:  
[broadwaybaptist.org/employment](http://broadwaybaptist.org/employment)

## In the Know

**Clarence Adams** died April 30 at age 81 in Charlotte, N.C. A successful banker, he was a key lay leader in Charlotte's Providence Baptist Church and a supporter of many good causes.

**Joe Babb** of Arden, N.C., died April 25 at age 84. He was a longtime pastor and denominational leader, mostly in North Carolina. He helped form a regional network of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship participants in Western North Carolina.

**Tom Black** died April 9 at age 81 in Columbus, Ga., where he had been an active layman in the First Baptist Church since 1968. He served many causes including Mercer University where he and his wife of 59 years, Doris, established a chair in pediatrics. He also served on the Board of Directors for *Baptists Today*.

**Jeremy Davis** is student pastor at First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla., coming from Hephzibah Baptist Church in Troy, Ala.

**Lucas Dorion** is associate coordinator for Alabama Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

**Nikki Carroll Hardeman** is minister of youth and families at First Baptist Church of Forsyth, Ga.

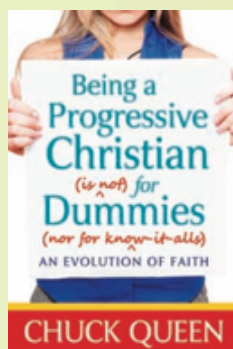
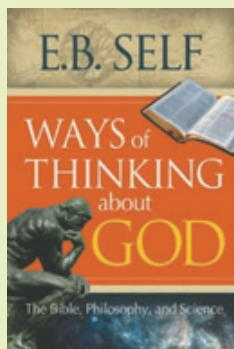
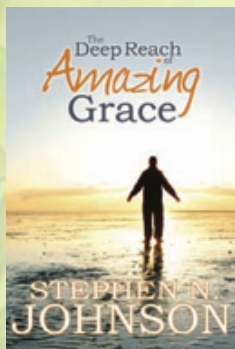
**Charles Kwok** died April 9. He was a co-founder of the Asian American Baptist Caucus, and a former General Board member of American Baptist Churches USA. He served as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New Haven, Conn., and founded the Chinese Baptist Church of Greater Hartford.

**Bill Rotan** was named minister of music emeritus by First Baptist Church of Morganton, N.C., May 4. A hymn was commissioned in his honor. Composed by David Schwoebel, the words were written by Fred Schuszler, minister of education and Rotan's colleague for 33 years.

**Orlando L. Tibbetts Jr.** died March 26 in Penney Farms, Fla., at age 94. He was a former executive minister for American Baptist Churches of Connecticut.

**Randy Tumblin** is vice president of institutional advancement for Northern Seminary.

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# When we're not the first choice

**D**uring my first semester at Baylor University my father *suggested* that I visit his great-aunt in Gatesville, 40 miles away. At first, Aunt Ruby and I had trouble finding anything to talk about. But just as I started working on an excuse to leave, she said: "I've got a photo album that you might enjoy."

My parents had told me about my great-great-grandfather who was a circuit-riding Methodist preacher. They failed to mention, however, the great-great-grandfather who was a foreman on the railroads. He hired workers who spoke no English, so he could pay them half of their salaries and keep the other half. I knew that my grandpa was married for the fourth time, but I hadn't really thought about why I had so many ex-grandmothers.

Aunt Ruby gave me details I didn't need to know. She showed me a faded photograph of a family reunion and went down the line giving commentary:

"Your great-great-uncle was a good person when he was sober, but that wasn't very often. My aunt slept with anything that wore pants — back then that limited her to half the population. My cousin — your fifth or sixth cousin twice removed — was quite a gossip, so I spent a lot of time with her."

The best stories in the Bible are the ones that parents would skip. The story of Jacob's two weddings is the kind of R-rated, embarrassingly candid story that great-aunts tell. God promises that Jacob will be the father of a great nation, even though Jacob, as his mother points out, is not married or getting any younger. Then Jacob gets thunderstruck.

Rachel's father Laban is as big a con artist as Jacob, and Laban has an advantage: Jacob is madly in love with Rachel. She is the kind of Jennifer Lawrence woman with whom lots of men think they are in love. Jacob will pay any price, so Laban comes up with a ridiculously excessive demand for a dowry. Without thinking — since he's in love — Jacob agrees to work *seven* years for Rachel. (Don't go into business with your family.)

Laban conveniently omits a minor detail in his verbal contract with Jacob. He says



something a father-in-law would say: "I guess it's better to give her to you than to some other guy." They shake hands, and Laban *forgets* to tell Jacob that in his culture the oldest daughter has to marry first. Jacob labors for seven sweaty years. At the wedding, Jacob makes a sacred promise to the woman standing beside him who is covered by an extremely dark veil. Jacob has too much to drink at the reception. The wedding night passes, and the morning sun shines on the plain face of Leah.

The writers of Genesis are careful not to say that Leah is ugly. They only report: "Leah's eyes were lovely." This is the ancient equivalent of "She has a great personality." The text is extravagant in its praise of Rachel — "graceful and beautiful." Leah is the old maid, the second choice. On her first morning as a married woman, Leah's lovely eyes gaze into the petrified face of a disappointed husband. (How horrid would it be to have your new husband tell you that he wanted your little sister on the honeymoon?)

Leah is the patron saint for those who have drawn the short end of the stick. Leah played the hand she was dealt, and ended up a great heroine of Israel. This Jerry Springer mess is a profound reminder of God's grace. Sisters married to the same man simultaneously is not recommended in the best of circumstances, but the writers of Genesis make it clear that God's promise to bless Jacob would have been made null and void had it not been for Leah, his second choice.

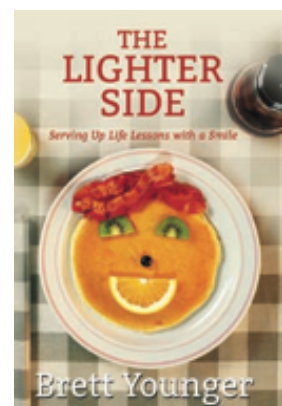
Leah's story is a word of hope to anyone  
 ...who's been the last one picked for basketball  
 ...who gets a "B" on the paper on which she worked twice as hard as her roommate who gets an "A"  
 ...who wants to be married but isn't  
 ...who is married to someone who doesn't want to be  
 ...whose parents wish for a different child  
 ...whose child wishes for a different parent  
 ...who avoids looking in mirrors  
 ...who congratulates a co-worker on the promotion that should have been his  
 ...who's never mentioned on Facebook posts  
 ...who's been told she is too old, too young or too middle-aged.

This story gives hope to all the second choices who keep trying. We are not defined by what we can't do, but by who we are in God's grace.

We don't have to be the brightest crayon in the box, because we are God's children. We don't have to be the best at everything we do. We don't have to be the best at anything we do. We need to be the one God created us to be. **BT**

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

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# Redefining hope

*A conversation with Rick Wilson, Liberian seminary president 'on loan'*

PAYNESVILLE CITY, Liberia — On March 13, Richard F. Wilson became the sixth president of Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary since 1976. He is on loan for one year from Mercer University where he chairs the Roberts Department of Christianity.

**A**t the installation service Liberian Baptist leaders recounted the dark days of a lingering civil war and other challenges, yet welcomed brighter days they see on the horizon.

Olu Q. Menjay, president of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention, introduced his mentor and friend as “a scholar, teacher and administrator with more than 30 years of experience in higher education.”

In response, Wilson pledged to “listen, learn, respect, collaborate, plot a course and move forward” with the Liberian Baptists.

*Baptists Today* asked Wilson about his relationships with and work among Liberian Baptists.

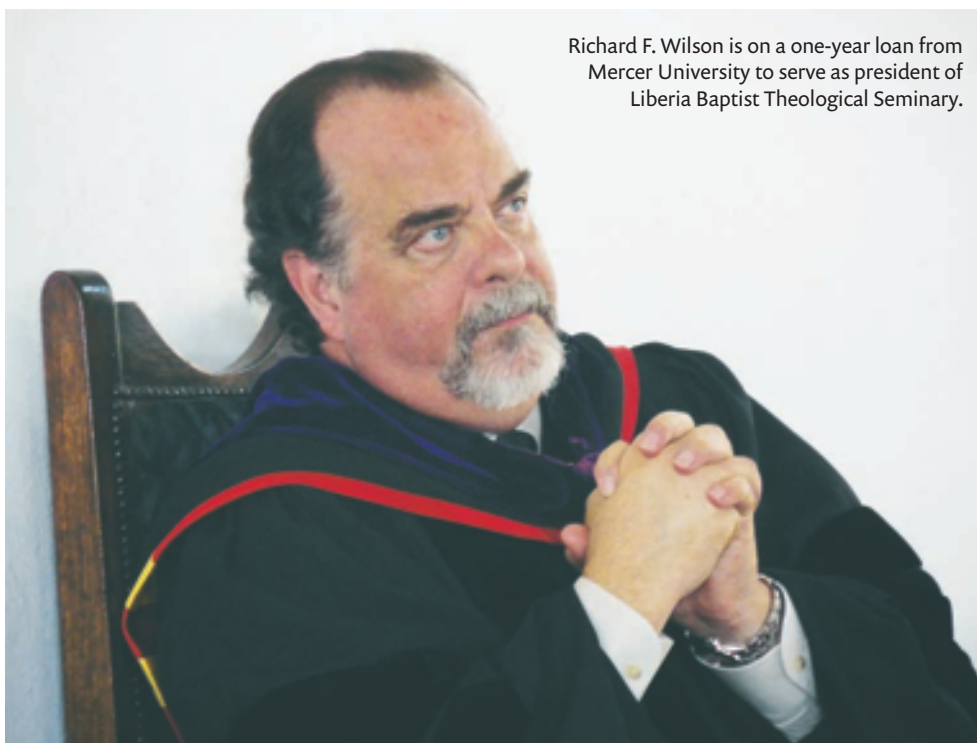
**BT: When did Liberia first get your attention?**

RW: In 1993 I met Olu Q. Menjay, a recent graduate of Truett-McConnell College, a refugee from Liberia’s civil wars, and a new student at Mercer, with a major in Christianity — and, also, sociology.

**BT: How did that early interest grow into a passion?**

RW: Olu went on to Duke (M.Div) and Boston University (MTS); he made the efforts to keep up with me and seek advice/assistance in his work.

In 2002 Olu surprised me at a Baptist World Alliance meeting in Seville, Spain. I had delivered a paper for the Commission on Christian Ethics. When the session ended, there was Olu in the hallway. It was a reunion that sparked further contacts and collaboration.



Richard F. Wilson is on a one-year loan from Mercer University to serve as president of Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary.

By 2005 Olu had completed his work at BU and accepted the position as principal for Ricks Institute, a K-12 boarding school in the outskirts of war-ravaged Monrovia. He began a quiet, persistent pleading for me to come to Liberia “to see the work.”

In 2007 I went. It was crushing. After a few days I confessed to Olu that “Liberia is a hard place to be.” I told him I wanted to leave.

He suggested that I was “looking at the wrong things.” He encouraged me to see how each day was getting better. I learned “small, small,” which is how Liberians measure progress.

“Did you see the fresh paint on a wall, or that the grass had been cut?” Olu asked.

That afternoon I started looking at different things. He was right. I was changed in the process.

By the end of nearly 10 days I had the seed of passion that still is growing. With each return my passion *with* Liberians grows.

**BT: How many trips have you made to Liberia and what have you discovered about the people and their history, culture and perspectives?**

**RW: When I returned to Liberia on April 28 it was my 11<sup>th</sup> trip. On five trips I have traveled alone.**

One trip (2009) was part of an adventure with First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga. Five of us came to Liberia to help Ricks get a new tile floor — 7,000 square feet — in the auditorium.

Five trips have been with Mercer on Mission adventures, all but one with students from Mercer’s Tift College of Education. My trips, especially since 2008, have prompted me to become an amateur historian of Liberia, especially Liberian Baptists.

Four times I have taught a course, “Peace and reconciliation in post-war Liberia.” In that context I have encountered the grittiness of war, its horror and destructiveness.

I have been stunned, however, by the resilience of Liberians. They have taught me to hope in ways I could never have imagined.

In the contexts of teaching about Liberian history, especially the civil wars that smoldered and raged for 14 years, I have, with Menjay’s help, been able to introduce Mercer students to many key figures in the wars and their aftermath.



We have met with the president of Liberia, the wife of Charles Taylor (Jewel Howard Taylor is now a senator in Liberia), Prince Y. Johnson (who murdered Samuel Doe, sitting president of Liberia, in 1990). Johnson also is a senator in Liberia and professes to be “born again” and is a minister.

We have conducted class in the sanctuary of the St. Peter Lutheran Church where, during the Doe administration, 630 Liberians who sought refuge from the war were slaughtered. (Prince Johnson told our students that the massacre at St. Peter’s was the reason he led the *coup d’état* against Doe.)

I have immersed myself, too, in the larger history of Liberia. Being in Liberia and studying the history shows me every day the lingering effects of colonialism (despite what many of us learned in school, Liberia was a colony of the United States), including the issues of class and race.

The American colonists — who were mostly freed slaves, but under the patronage of white governors of the American Colonization Society — emerged as a ruling class of foreigners who displaced the indigenous peoples. In contemporary Liberia there has been a resurgence of the indigenous races, including 16 distinct ethnic groups with their own languages, customs and geographical regions.

From my earliest trips I have become acquainted with Baptists. I have preached and taught in churches in the cities and in the bush. As early as 2008 I was on the campus of the Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary.

Menjay is an indigenous Liberian. In March 2012 he was elected president of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention (LBMEC). In June that year he invited me to preach the Service of Consecration. I did so gladly.

This year I was privileged to participate in a month-long adventure associated with the Centennial Celebration of the Annual Session. Liberian Baptists visited key sites of their founding, including New Hope Baptist Church in Marshall City (where the charter was signed in 1880), First Baptist Church of Edina (where the LBMEC was born in 1880), Shiloh Baptist Church in Brewerville (where Liberian women first formed a Woman’s Missionary Union) and, finally, Ricks Institute (established in 1887 as the first Baptist school in Liberia).

The final punctuation of the month came on the last day of March on the campus of the

Liberia Baptist Theological Seminary, where we celebrated the history of the school, established in 1976, and conferred six honorary degrees.

Among the awardees were three indigenous Liberians, two Americans (including a former white president of the seminary and a passionate supporter), two Georgians, two LBTS graduates, two women, and one African-American Baptist philanthropist.

The rich and diverse cultures of Liberia are teaching me about hope, endurance, character and resilience.

In faces of what *Business Insider* called “the second most miserable place on earth,” I see Liberians redefining hope every day. In crippling circumstances of poverty, unemployment at 80 percent, unsafe water, few medical resources, significant rates of illiteracy, and a still-tenuous peace, Liberians are, as a people, striving for better.

The cliché “two steps forward, one step back” is daily reality in Liberia. Nonetheless, most Liberians seem willing to take those two steps each day, knowing that the next day only one step of progress will be visible.

Despite widespread corruption and self-serving, I regularly see the character of a few shine brightly and encourage others to make good choices. The net effect is that every day good choices prove to be productive and healthy.

There is a line in a patriotic Liberian hymn, “The Lone Star,” that describes the country as “a nation long forlorn.” The hymn was written by Edwin Barclay, the 17<sup>th</sup> president of Liberia, in the 1930s.

Barclay and his successor, William V.S. Tubman, appeared to bring Liberia out of obscurity. But, with the assassination of William R. Tolbert Jr. on April 12, 1980, the nation slipped back to worse than before the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now Liberia seems to be recovering from the horrors of the 1980s and 1990s that stretched forward until 2003, when the civil wars ended. Liberia is resilient because the citizens refuse to remain in despair.

### **BT: Why spend a year of your life in ministry with Liberian Baptists?**

RW: It was not my idea! In fact, twice I had deflected the suggestion to become the president of the seminary.

In 2012 the issue came up as I began to explore options for a sabbatical. I did entertain the possibility of being “theologian in residence”

at the seminary, however.

By January 2013 I was in Liberia, on sabbatical at Ricks Institute, doing research on Edward Wilmot Blyden, a black immigrant missionary who came to Liberia in 1850 and emerged as one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s most compelling figures as a missionary, linguist, educator, journalist, statesman and pioneer in Christian-Muslim relations.

When I returned to Macon after the sabbatical, I was settling back into my life when President Bill Underwood surprised me with the suggestion that I return to Liberia for a year and help the seminary find some stability.

Menjay and Underwood are friends. When Underwood asked how Mercer could help Liberian Baptists, Menjay suggested that Underwood help find a president.

It took several weeks to work through the possibilities. In the end, I accepted a modern-day Macedonian call.

Because I know Liberia and identify with Liberian Baptists, I was willing to accept the challenge. Sheesh! I’m still finding out what I have gotten into!

### **BT: Will you give a brief overview of Liberian Baptists organizationally?**

RW: Liberian Baptists have a polity that reflects global Baptists, by and large. The local church is where Baptist life begins.

Associations were formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond as Baptists spread throughout the nation. In 1880 the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention was formed in Edina, Grand Bassa County.

As a side note, Edina is named after Edinburgh, Scotland, reminding historians that many streams of Baptists flowed into Liberia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lott Cary was a freed slave who came to Liberia in 1822 and established the first Baptist church, Providence Baptist Church.

Cary’s name survives in the Lott Cary Missionary Baptist Convention, an African-American group in North America. Baptists were in Liberia long before the Southern Baptist Convention was formed.

Southern Baptists did not establish their Liberian mission office until the 1970s; there was only one Southern Baptist head of the mission. In the 1990s the SBC left Liberia altogether.

Today Liberian Baptists number more than 90,000 in just under 300 churches in all 15 counties of the country.

‘I have been stunned by the resilience of Liberians. They have taught me to hope in ways I could never have imagined.’



Ricks Institute choir enters the opening session of the centennial gathering of the Liberia Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention.

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Inspired Creativity

### **BT: What are the challenges and hopes you see?**

RW: The greatest challenge I see among Liberian Baptists is the need to overcome the twin obstacles of the colonial era and the post-colonial dependency created by mission agencies of all denominations, foreign aid from many nations, and a withering political paternalism that still dominates all features of Liberian life.

What gives me hope are the Liberians who endured the war years — either at home or as refugees — and now are demonstrating their capacities to lead the nation in business, education, politics and religion.

On a daily basis I'm trying to find a way to feed 25 to 30 of our 89 students who are work grant recipients. This requires about \$21,000 U.S. annually — with less than half of the money raised or pledged.

### **BT: What do you see as your roles in the work you are doing?**

RW: I am a partner, not a patron. My roles include listening, learning, respecting the culture, collaborating, participating in creative plotting of a different path, and moving forward with Liberians.

As president of the seminary, I have to be patient and take the time to model ways to use the available resources. I have to work to restore confidence in the seminary, at home and abroad. I have to become one of the mentors to those who will be the leaders of Baptists in the near future and in the next generation.

### **BT: What have you learned — or what are you learning — from Liberian Baptists? How does that perspective help you to better understand and practice your own faith?**

RW: What I am learning is that Baptists will be Baptists. Those Baptists who rely upon the power and influence made available to them by the structures of the local church, the association and/or the convention will become enslaved by the lures of prestige.

On the other hand, those who risk the freedoms of Baptist life and trust Baptists from the bottom of the ladder to the top can find new resources.

The Liberian Baptists I have seen this year are the most diverse group under one umbrella I ever have witnessed. Leadership is spread among women and men of all classes and ethnicities, with varying degrees of education and experience, from the hinterlands to the cities.

Over the many years I have been traveling to and from Liberia, and most certainly this year of being in Liberia and among Liberian Baptists, I think I have a better sense of "Baptist" than ever.

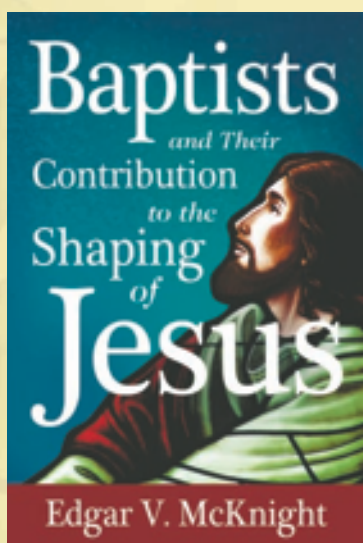
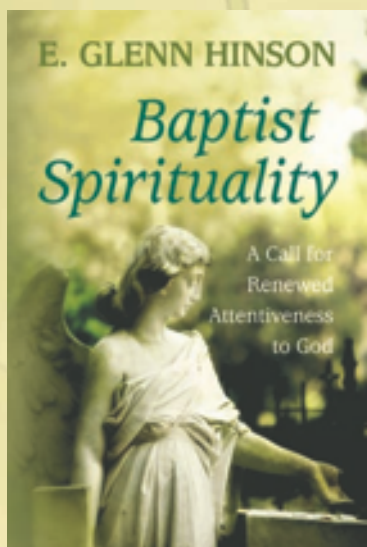
What I sense is a vibrant community that has the courage of its convictions and is willing to risk the freedoms of faith in order to truly be a welcoming, hospitable and encouraging example of the hope for the kingdom of God.

I'm not suggesting that Liberian Baptists have arrived, but I think that they are on the way. **BT**



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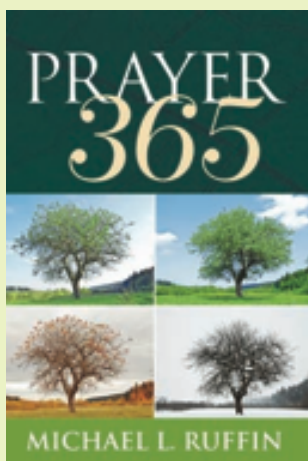


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**FAITH**

# Ask the Theologian

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. — At the April meeting of the Board of Directors of *Baptists Today*, editor John Pierce posed questions to theologian Fisher Humphreys during a session titled “Ask the theologian.” The questions, submitted by those who serve on the board with Humphreys, were wide ranging.

The questions and insightful responses, beginning here, will appear in the next several issues of *Baptists Today* as well as on video at [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org).

**QUESTION from Jack Glasgow, pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C.:**

*How do you think we can best communicate the idea of atonement to those both inside and outside of the church today?*

FH: When I began studying theology there was a popular slogan among seminary students: “I don’t believe in any theory of the atonement; I believe in the fact of the atonement.”

The longer I’ve thought about it, the wiser it seems. The fact of the atonement is the gospel, the good news that in Christ God has acted to save the world. That’s what we all believe in and what we most need to communicate.

In addition to preaching the gospel, the early church offered interpretations of the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Each one of them showed some connection between salvation and what happened on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. There are about two dozen of them in the New Testament.

I will give three examples from three different writers:

The first is an end time or eschatological interpretation. On the Day of Pentecost Peter asserted that the resurrection of Jesus marked the end of the age. People were now living in a new world, a new era. In this new era, forgiveness was freely available and also the gift of the Holy Spirit. So by his resurrection Jesus brought a new era of forgiveness.

Second, in Hebrews 9 the writer interprets Jesus’ sacrifice in terms of animal sacrifices for sin, in particular, the sacrifice of goats and calves on the Day of Atonement. He argues that Jesus’ sacrifice is superior to the blood of sacrificial animals in two ways: His sacrifice doesn’t have to be repeated, and his blood can take away both spiritual and fleshly sins.

A third example is from Galatians 3. Paul says that those who attempt to earn God’s approval by keeping the Law actually earn God’s curse because they don’t keep the Law perfectly. Paul was drawing upon a passage in Deuteronomy which said that those who fail to keep the Law perfectly are cursed.

Paul then argued that Jesus freed human beings from that curse by taking another curse on himself, the curse of crucifixion. Deuteronomy had said that it was a curse to be hanged on a tree.

I believe these and all other biblical interpretations of Jesus’ sacrifice are true and important. In order to understand them, we have to study them carefully because we haven’t had the kinds of experiences that made these interpretations so natural for Peter and Paul and the author of Hebrews.

We don’t live in a society where everyone shares the end-time hope that the Jews had, we have never offered animal sacrifices, and we didn’t inherit the beliefs about blessings and cursings that were widely held in the Ancient Near East. We have to use historical imagination to retrieve their meaning, and we must do that.

In addition we may, if we wish, look for experiences in our modern world that offer us ways of understanding Jesus’ sacrifice, ways that come naturally to us. This work can never replace the biblical interpretations, but it can supplement them and make them more accessible to modern people.

Here is an example: Many people today have noticed that it is not easy to forgive those who hurt you. When you are wronged and hurt, you naturally want to retaliate. When you forgive, you give up your right to retaliate. So forgiveness is costly.

Drawing on that insight, many Christians think of Jesus’ sufferings as God’s experience of the costliness of forgiveness. God did not forgive the world by declaring an amnesty from the safety of heaven. God was incarnated as a



human being, Jesus.

He lived among us, and on Good Friday he accepted the most outrageous consequences of human sin as his way of forgiving us. That’s the best way I know to help people today connect Jesus’ suffering with our forgiveness.

**QUESTION from David Hull, pastor of First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala.:**

*Concerning God’s revelation to us, how do we know that what we are sensing/thinking/feeling is truly from God and not a projection of our own minds and hearts?*

FH: In the Bible God communicates frequently and in a variety of ways including epiphanies, visions, dreams, ecstatic experiences, and through nature and prophets and in Scripture.

Christians believe that God’s fullest communication was given in Jesus. John said that Jesus is the Word of God incarnate. Paul said that Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God.

The New Testament is indispensable to our knowledge of Jesus and his revelation of God. The primary reason we treasure the Bible is that it tells us the story of Jesus.

We believe that Jesus provides all the revelation of God that we need in order to live and die as faithful Christians. If God never gave us any other revelation, we would be fine.

However, God is free to give further revelations. For example, many Christians feel that God calls some individuals to do particular tasks such as, for example, missionary work. How can we discern whether a sense of call to missionary work is from God?

One thing we can do is to talk to fellow Christians. There is no reason we have to act



privately in our attempt to discern whether God is speaking. When God called Paul to become a missionary, God did not communicate the call directly to Paul but indirectly through the church at Antioch.

We can be practical. For example, if we have chronic health problems that require specialized medical care, it probably is unwise for us to attempt mission work in areas where medical care is unavailable.

We can pray. In our prayer we can listen quietly in an effort to discern God's leadership. Also, in our prayer we can commit ourselves to obey God's calling to us.

I think that sometimes our traditions have caused anxiety about this. They trained us to worry that we might innocently miss God's call. I think this is a mistake.

The New Testament understanding is that the Holy Spirit is always guiding and empowering Christians for their life and work. That is the normal state of affairs, the default setting. The only time we miss God's calling is when we are defiant or irresponsible.

Instead of feeling anxious, we should trust that God will guide us and then do the best we can to live as wisely and faithfully as we can. We should love and not be afraid.

Many Christians carefully avoid saying that they have received a revelation from God other than the revelation given in Jesus. Their claims about what they know are more modest. They say simply that they are grateful for the life God has given them and they are trying to live it as responsibly as they can.

I think this is a wise idea. It honors the sufficiency of the revelation that God gave to us in Jesus. It recognizes the fallibility of all human knowledge. And it is compatible with the biblical teaching that God's Spirit is always guiding and empowering the church.

**QUESTION from Cynthia Wise, lay leader in Vestavia Hills Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.:**

*What do you think about angels?*

FH: Well, I know that a lot is said in the Bible about angels.

Jacob wrestled with an angel. Isaiah saw seraphim in his vision in the Temple. Angels celebrated the birth of Jesus, comforted him following his temptations, strengthened him in the Garden of Gethsemane, and were the first witnesses of his resurrection.

Two angels are named in the Bible, Michael and Gabriel. A third, Raphael, is named in the book of Tobit.

The word "angel" means messenger, and often the work of angels was to bring a message. The background image for angelic messengers probably was a royal court. God, like an oriental monarch, dispatches angels to broadcast his decrees. Other things that angels do are to protect, warn, help and guide the people of God.

Apparently some of the early Christians were tempted to worship angels. There is a warning against doing this in Colossians (2:18).

In the 1990s, here in America, angels became a very popular topic, but that was atypical. For the most part the American church today neglects angels. It seems to me that there are two possible reasons for this.

One is that in our increasingly secular world our instinct when dealing with spiritual things is to reduce them to a minimum. We believe in God and Jesus and the Spirit, but we feel that it might be over-reaching to believe in angels, too.

This instinct is understandable, but it isn't always wise to follow it. In many cases the best way to help secular people is not to present a minimal message that's easy to believe but to present a maximal message that is worth believing. Whether angels should be included is a pastoral question.

The other reason for the modern neglect of angels is that theologically they seem superfluous. If God is present everywhere at all times, why would God need angels to do God's work?

Guided by this insight, some Christians tend to take many of the biblical stories about angels as ways of speaking about God's presence and activity.

This can't be done, for example, when angels are said to worship God: "Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding" (Ps. 103:20).

But it can be done sometimes, and in fact it sometimes was done already in the Bible. For example, in the story of Moses at the burning bush, the angel of the Lord tells Moses to take off his shoes and then adds, "I am the God of Abraham." **BT**

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# BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Fierce battles and tense politics mark the month of June. The Union strategy focuses on wearing down the inferior Confederate armies and taking Richmond and Atlanta. Wearied and depleted Confederate forces hope to halt the enemy's advance long enough to stir up a political backlash against Abraham Lincoln in the North.

Ten miles from Richmond in the Battle of Cold Harbor, one of the bloodiest and most lopsided battles of the war, Conf. Gen. Robert E. Lee secures what will prove to be his last victory. Fighting in the battle is Col. Jeremiah C. Drake, formerly pastor of the Westfield Baptist Church, New York, and now commander of the 112<sup>th</sup> New York. Raked by enemy fire, Drake suffers fatal injuries. His last words are: "Give my love to my wife. Tell my friends and tell my countrymen I die a brave man, I die at peace with the world, and I trust at peace with my God."

Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant accepts defeat but does not give up. Retreating from Cold Harbor, Grant lays siege to Petersburg, a major supply center for Richmond. Lee quickly digs in nearby. Grant's strategy of choking off Richmond before a final assault marks a worrisome turn for the Confederacy. The capital city cannot survive without Petersburg. Lee had earlier predicted that should the federals lay siege to Petersburg, it would be "a mere question of time" before the Union won the war. Lincoln, realizing the stakes, visits Grant's entrenched army this month.

In Georgia, Union Gen. William T. Sherman, slowly advancing toward Atlanta, continues pressuring Conf. Gen. Joe Johnston's rebel forces. A series of maneuvers and battles take place in which Sherman's forces are victorious, including the Battle of Gilgal Primitive Baptist Church, in which the log meeting house is destroyed. Shortly thereafter the Confederates score a much-needed, if temporary, victory at the Battle of Kennesaw Mountain.

While battles take place in other states, their significance pales to the action in Virginia and Georgia.



Meanwhile, Lincoln is re-nominated as the Republican Party's presidential candidate, with Andrew Johnson of Tennessee as the vice-presidential nominee. Believing that the United States will win the war, Lincoln perceives Tennessee to be critical to reconstruction efforts.

Baptists of the Shiawassee Baptist Association in Michigan meet and offer sentiments reflective of most Baptists of the North:

*Resolved, That we deeply sympathize with our Government in its efforts to suppress this rebellion, and will ever aid her to the best of our ability, with our lives, our property, our counsels and our prayers.*

*Resolved, That as human slavery is a sin and an abomination in the sight of God — a terrible misery and disaster to man, and wholly inconsistent with the teaching of the word of God, and opposed to the genius and spirit of our institutions; therefore we do most earnestly hope and pray that when God, in His providence, shall remove the portentous clouds of war now darkening and desolating our land, no relic, except the lifeless and horrid remains of that institution, shall be found on any part of the soil of these United States of America.*

For more than three years now, many Northern Baptists have been praying for victory over the rebellious Confederacy and for an end to slavery, while many white Baptists of

150 YEARS AGO

June 1864

the South have offered prayers to the contrary.

While the prayers of the latter remain unchanged in substance, the petitions are growing ever more intense. That the Confederacy is outmanned and outgunned is obvious to all. Samuel Boykin, editor of the *Georgia Baptist Christian Index*, this month repeats yet again a mantra affirming God's favoritism upon the slave-based Confederacy:

*The Lord Almighty alone can give us victory, and he alone can make our victories prove blessings to our country. Let us confess and forsake our sins, and turn to the Lord with all our hearts. Then we can say in pious faith, "The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusteth in Him, and I am helped, and therefore my heart rejoiceth, and with my song I will praise Him."*

As always, black slavery was not thought to be a sin, nor is the blessed institution to be forsaken. But by now, many white southern plain folk have their doubts about fighting to preserve the wealth of the nation's elites. **BT**

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



# A long way to drop a chisel

By Tony W. Cartledge

Archaeologists working at the base of the southern and western walls of Jerusalem's Temple Mount recently discovered a metal chisel that they believe was dropped from a high course of the wall during its construction some 2,000 years ago.

That chisel could have fallen a long way.

The Western Wall, part of which is celebrated as the holiest place in Judaism, where the faithful come to pray and study and celebrate bar mitzvahs, was built as a retaining wall to support a larger platform for a huge expansion and renovation of the temple. The work was begun by Herod the Great and finished some time later.

The wall is a wonder in itself, consisting of gargantuan blocks of limestone that were rough cut in a quarry, dragged to the site, and somehow lifted into place on a wall that was more than 100 feet high when measured from the foundation.

Today it's more like 62 feet. Over time, as the city grew up and built things around it,



Herodian stone from the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount. Photo by Tony W. Cartledge.

the ground level was raised, and now 17 of the wall's 45 stone courses are underground.

A trademark characteristic of Herodian stonework is that the outside faces of the stones are framed by a carefully chiseled edge.

Try to imagine a hard-working stonemason doing his thing near the top of the wall when his worn chisel, mushroom-headed from many blows, falls from his hand and clatters to the ground below.

Did it hit some poor soul on the way down, leaving him embarrassed to go and get

it? Or, more likely, was he just unable to find it amid the big pile of chips that had fallen from the edge?

In either case, the chisel lay undisturbed for two millennia before being discovered last year, almost 20 feet below the surface of the street in the Second Temple period.

The finding was quite exciting as such tools tend to rust away and are rarely found. It offers a rare view into the life of an ancient stonemason, and an opportunity to be grateful that's not our job. **BT**

## Generic prayer can't be both

By John Pierce

Americans like the idea of having prayer at official public meetings — “as long as the public officials are not favoring some beliefs over others.”

Such was the finding of a recent national survey by Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind. In fact, 73 percent of voters sided with that position.

On the other hand, only 23 percent agreed that “public meetings shouldn't have any prayers at all because prayers by definition suggest one belief or another.”

I side with the minority — not because prayer is unimportant, but because it is too important, too specific and too personal to be generic.

According to a Religion News Service

report on the survey, Peter J. Woolley, professor of comparative politics at Fairleigh Dickinson University, said: “This has always been a praying nation, despite its very secular Constitution.”

Then he added: “People generally see generic prayer as harmless, if not uplifting, not as something that is oppressive.”

Harmless?

Was Moses' prayer in the wilderness harmless?

Was David's prayerful confession generic?

Were the prayers of the prophets harmless?

Is the prayer Jesus taught his disciples generic?

Was Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane harmless?

The more people try to use public prayer for coercive religious and/or political purposes or try to make official prayers generic enough for one size to fit all, the more it makes sense to heed Jesus' call to enter the closet and pray to a very specific God in private.

Prayer should never be reduced to a weapon used to demonstrate one's religious dominance over others. And any officially approved generic prayer gets watered down to the point of not being prayer at all.

Those who value prayer the most should be those least willing to have it used for lesser purposes than its divine intentions. **BT**

[Note: The Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision last month, upheld the tradition of offering prayers, including sectarian ones, at government meetings.]

# Does a church's history matter?

## Congregation considers the impact of its past on ministry today

INWOOD, N.C. — Is a long, rich history an asset or a liability for doing congregational ministry today?

“Yes,” said Reid Smith who has spent all of his 37 years as part of Jersey Baptist Church, constituted in 1755 by settlers who came to North Carolina’s Piedmont region from New Jersey.

“You realize the struggles and sacrifices of others to make this happen,” he said. “It’s inspiring.”

On the other hand, he noted, “The world’s not static.”

### RICH ROOTS

The fertile valley land became home to what a historian called “a colony of younger, ambitious, hard-working families.” Driving sheep while carrying families on carts and wagons pulled by horses and oxen, these settlers endured a long, treacherous journey to their new home.

Founding pastor John Gano, a young itinerant preacher sent from New Jersey, led Jersey Baptist Church to organize and then join the newly-formed Charleston Baptist Association of South Carolina in 1759. Before arriving in the area, he had been warned that “most of the Baptist ministers were uneducated and gave evidence of more zeal than knowledge.”

Don Durham, the current intentional interim pastor who has been reading the church’s history titled *Saints and Sinners*, describes Gano’s journey from New Jersey to North Carolina as a five-week road trip by horseback and wagons.

“It was punctuated with rain, camping in the woods after being unwelcome in town, horse trading, visiting friends, random preaching, stops for brandy, eating food hunted along the way, and culminated in the conversion of the unreligious traveling companion assisting his family with the journey,” he summarized.

“My own arrival was slightly less adventurous,” said Durham, who ministers among bikers and farms in nearby Denton, N.C., adding: “However, I too often prefer unreligious traveling companions.”



Some members and staff of historic Jersey Baptist Church near Lexington, N.C., talk about how the congregation’s rich history impacts ministry today.



“If you go back 170 years, the church was completely different than what we grew up with,” he said.

### CONSTANT CHANGE

Pam Shoaf, the church’s ministry assistant, said the church history records that the pastor in 1942 went from leading worship at Jersey once a month (“quarter time”) to twice a month “half time” — which must have been a big change and likely subject to debate.

Pudge said he remembers, from his teen years in the 1950s, when the church began holding services every Sunday (“full time”) rather than just Sunday school every week and worship every other week.

He also recalled “the big decision” during that time to add an indoor baptistery to the sanctuary.

According to the church history, Pam noted, the congregation long debated adding a new door from the sanctuary to adjacent buildings in 1951.

In more recent years, an activities building — where basketball and other recreation once considered sinful now occurs as well as casual Sunday worship — was erected to keep the young people in church, said Pudge.

“I wonder what the conflicts were back

### FAMILY TIES

Lindsay “Pudge” Smith farms the same land today that the settlers once tilled. At age 71, he has been engaged in Jersey Baptist Church for his entire life.

His mother, who lived to be 104, was the church pianist and organist for more than 45 years. He watched his parents and grandparents invest their lives deeply in their church and their farm.

“When you’re born into a church, and you’ve given your whole life to it, you want to see it succeed,” Pudge said.

He admits, however, that he is often resistant to changes such as new worship music.

“It’s hard to sit back and see some of the changes,” he said. “But you’ve got to go with them.”

Dairyman George Smith, who also has been at Jersey his entire life, noted that the church has gone through many changes during its long history spanning more than two and a half centuries.



when they put air conditioning in the church,” Reid wondered aloud.

The irony, he added, is that to preserve the church required change — “because the world changed around them.”

## RESPECT, NOT RESTRICT

“I think we are all proud of the church’s history,” said Brian Lewis, who like the founders is a transplant from New Jersey. He married into the church family 21 years ago.

His 18-year-old daughter is “at least a fourth-generation female born into the church.”

Current leaders, he said, have a responsibility to keep the church’s history known.

“When I sit on committees I remind them that we are to respect the history but not let the history restrict us,” he said. “Respect it, but it doesn’t need to be the only factor when decisions are made.”

Reid Smith added that the church’s history can be a source of inspiration and fear. He is inspired by the vision that led earlier members to build “a pretty big building in the middle of a field.”

“What bold gumption!” he said, noting that either vanity or vision had to be at work. Also, the church became the “mother to many” in starting congregations in other communities.

The church’s long history of risk-taking, faithful and sacrificial service provides both inspiration and fear, he said.

“My biggest fear is in seeing it as my responsibility to tap into why Jersey Baptist Church was formed...,” he said of earlier bold ventures. “There’s something about that; I don’t want to be the person to drop the ball.”

## BAPTIST IDENTITY

History has helped shape the congregation’s identity even through changing times. Don noted that the early decision to join the Charleston Association rather than the closer Sandy Creek movement among Baptists helped define the church’s faith and practice.

Missions, said George Smith, has long defined the Jersey congregation. He recalled when half of the church’s budget went toward mission causes.

“Missions tied our church together more than history,” he said.

Pudge credits the women of the church for setting the missions priority in both raising money for mission causes and for serving those locally with needs.

Longtime church member Charlotte Cook Smith agreed: “The women started everything that was started [in local missions].”

Brian Lewis said that both the mission spirit and the church’s identity will be carried on.

“My daughter is going to Gardner-Webb [University] and then to the mission field,” he said. “She’s going to take Jersey’s history with her.”

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST

While there are some older congregations with deeper roots, Don told his new friends, “for two-thirds of the time there have been Baptists on the planet, there have been Baptists in Jersey.”

In a recent newsletter, Don reminded the Jersey congregation of an event from the church’s history that occurred in March 1771:

*“The armed forces moved first against the Baptists at Sandy Creek [for resisting the governor’s vestry tax for the support of a state sponsored denomination to which they did not belong]. After inflicting heavy damages and driving many of the people away, [NC Governor] Tryon led his army westward and encamped ... about 4 miles south of Lexington and two miles east of Jersey Church. Three divisions of the army, consisting of about three thousand or more troops, were assembled for this campaign against the Regulators and Baptists near Jersey Baptist Church.”*

Don added: “Feel free to ask me sometime why I so staunchly support the separation of church and state, and why I want no part of a government that sponsors, promotes or hosts religious activities of any kind. Once we head down that road, it always ends badly as the ‘Saints and Sinners’ at Jersey Baptist Church learned first hand.”

Reid Smith said it’s helpful to reflect on all that the church has been through from this early

episode to enduring such tough times as the Civil War and the Great Depression.

“You realize the struggles and sacrifices of others to make this church happen,” he said. “It’s inspiring. That’s a bigness you want to be a part of.”

The reality, however, is that the church is not guaranteed another 250 years, he added.

“But we’ve got a history we can tap into — a living history to do something positive in the world,” he said, “something that connects people with God.”

## CLOSE, NOT CLOSED

Gracious hospitality is essential for effective and faithful ministry, said Don. It requires an intentional effort to be inclusive of those who may not have deep roots in the church and community.

Pudge Smith recalled when “five families were the mainstay of the church.” One needs only to walk through the historic cemetery between the church buildings and the adjacent farmland to discover those family names.

Compared to some members, Lester Darr is a “newcomer” to Jersey. A retired industrial engineer, he joined the church in 1985.

He doesn’t have the same feelings about the church’s history, he confessed, as those with deeper roots. “But I’m interested in knowing where we came from, and I have respect for the history.”

## WHAT, WHY, HOW?

Reid Smith said the church can respect and learn from its history, and be inspired by it, yet remain flexible enough to change with the times — if the larger vision and mission are what inspires and guides the congregation rather than entrenched methodologies.

“The *what* we’re doing here and *why* haven’t changed,” said Reid, “but the *how*.” **BT**



# The ministry of nudging

By Robert F. Browning

An almost 40-year-old church newsletter seemed to provide the tipping point in a long, agonizing, decision-making process. Soon after arriving at a former pastorate, I became engaged in an ongoing discussion about the need for a new sanctuary. I listened carefully to the reasons for and against this proposal.

After a couple of years and several meetings, we formed a feasibility study committee and also hired an engineer to weigh in on this decision.

It was his opinion that the current sanctuary had suffered severe structural damage, which would add considerably to the cost of remodeling it. But after three more years of debating the pros and cons, the committee was no closer to making a decision than it was when I arrived on the field.

Granted, this was a big decision that pulled at a lot of heartstrings. The current sanctuary had been the site of baptisms, weddings, funerals and other significant events in the lives of these good people. It was sacred space and the catalyst for recalling life's most precious memories.

In spite of this, I felt that replacing the sanctuary was best. Repairing and remodeling the current sanctuary would cost a lot of money, yet it would still not address the need for enlarging the seating capacity and making the sanctuary more accessible for an aging population.

Nothing anyone in favor of the proposal said broke the stalemate until I brought to a meeting a church newsletter from almost 40 years earlier. In that newsletter was an article written by a beloved former pastor titled, "Five reasons why we need a new sanctuary."

"Forty years is long enough to debate this," I said. Soon afterwards, the committee recommended and the church voted to build a new sanctuary.

When I entered ministry, I was not prepared for how long it would take church members to make decisions that would lead to

changes in their personal lives and in the life of the church. I had been taught that one role of a minister is to be a change agent, and I received instructions from seminary professors on how to proceed. Then I became the pastor of a church.

As much as I have loved the people in the pews and enjoyed serving alongside them, I have felt my share of frustration because I failed to see changes in their attitudes, beliefs and lifestyles — at least not to the degree I had hoped.

Repeated efforts to portray Jesus as a change agent who challenged every person he encountered to make changes in his or her life did not always register. At times, changes in how members arranged their priorities, spent their money, did their jobs, treated their neighbors, handled their problems, embraced new challenges, reacted to those who hurt them and responded to victims of injustice were negligible — or so it seemed to me.

I recall venting my frustration to a friend who was a church and community leader. "What keeps you from getting frustrated?" I asked.

Calmly, he looked at me and said, "Bob, I stay frustrated, but I have learned the value of nudging people along. Very few will make radical changes in their lives, the kind Jesus talked about and modeled. They will, however, make changes in small increments if we are faithful

to nudge them along."

This is some of the wisest advice I have ever received. I would like to think there is something I could say that would cause someone to have a Damascus Road experience like Paul did, but this rarely occurs. The impact of our words and influence is cumulative. Seeds planted in the spring don't bear fruit overnight.

This advice has lowered my level of frustration and probably my blood pressure. It has changed my focus and measurement of effectiveness. Now I look for shifts in people's behavior and beliefs, and I celebrate even the slightest progress.

About three years ago, I moved back to my home state of Kentucky after serving Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., for 12 years. This move to Central Kentucky has enabled me to reconnect with classmates, colleagues and members from churches I previously served.

Recently, I saw a former church member at the local mall. After exchanging pleasantries, he said, "Over 20 years ago you did something which I have never forgotten. I was sitting at a table in the fellowship hall on a Wednesday night eating with family members and friends. You came by with a pitcher of tea in your hand and asked if I wanted more to drink. I was shocked to have the pastor of the church serve me tea. I've been trying to serve others in small ways like this ever since."

I believe I'll keep nudging people along. **BT**

—Bob Browning is pastor of First Baptist Church of Frankfort, Ky.



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# log in: check out

## Is the Internet bad for religion?

A new paper draws an intriguing conclusion to a question scholars have wrestled with for several decades: Why are Americans dropping out of church?

One reason? They're logging on to the Internet.

Allen Downey, a professor of computer science at Massachusetts' Olin College of Engineering, found that between 1990 and 2010 the share of Americans claiming no religious affiliation grew from 8 percent to 18 percent while the number of Americans connected to the Internet rose from almost nothing to 80 percent.

Downey cautions — as do his critics — that correlation does not equal causation.

"We can't know for sure that Internet use causes religious disaffiliation," Downey said. "It is always possible that disaffiliation causes Internet use, or that a third factor causes both."

But Downey, whose paper, "Religious affiliation, education and Internet use," was published at — where else? — an online site dedicated to scientific papers, is pretty sure he's onto something.

Examining data from the General Social Survey, an ongoing and multigenerational study of Americans, Downey draws a link between higher levels of education and income and lower levels of religious identification.

His study shows that as Americans reported more Internet use, their religious identification dropped. Those who reported only a few hours of weekly Internet use were 2 percent less likely to claim a religious affiliation than those who use no Internet. And those who use the Internet more than seven hours weekly are even less likely to adhere to a religion — by an additional 3 percentage points.

"That effect turns out to be stronger than



a four-year college education, which reduces religious affiliation by about 2 percentage points," he said.

Other scholars say Downey's finding may be too pat.

Stephen O'Leary, an associate professor at the University of Southern California who studies religion on the Internet, thinks the situation is more complex and nuanced.

"Let's call it the influence of the religious marketplace," O'Leary said. Since the 1960s, with the influx of non-Christian immigrants to the U.S. and the increased mobility of society, Americans' exposure to a wide range of spiritual, religious and nonreligious ideas has burgeoned.

"Internet use is part of that, but what it really does is magnify to a dramatic level the degree of choices one has," O'Leary said.

Other forces unrelated to the Internet are at work, too. O'Leary said younger Americans are less likely to trust religious authority in the wake of the Catholic Church child sex abuse scandals.

"That has, more than almost any other thing, alienated a whole generation," O'Leary said. "And it is not just Catholics. It goes to all religious authority by extension."

Still, O'Leary cautions that the decline in religious affiliation — due to the Internet or otherwise — does not mean an equal rise in atheism.

"They haven't given up their belief in the supernatural. They just don't feel they need organizations or institutions to bring it to them," he said. "And you don't have to believe in any god to light a candle or hold hands and utter a mantra or chant."

Downey's findings dovetail with those of the Pew Research Center's 2012 look at the "nones," the terminology for Americans with no religious affiliation. That study found that almost 20 percent of all Americans — and a third of those under 30 — are nones.

By examining data from the CIRP Freshman Survey, conducted among first-year college students, Downey discovered that between 1985 and 2013 — approximately the same amount of time that the GSS measured Internet usage — the percentage of freshmen who identified as nonreligious tripled, from 8 percent to 25 percent. He predicts on his blog that number will reach almost 26 percent next year — more than the share of students who identify as Catholic.

"I think this is an underreported story," Downey said.

Still, Downey is cautious about blaming the Internet, which he figures accounts for only about 20 percent of the overall decline in religious affiliation. An additional 25 percent, he says, can be attributed to fewer people being raised with a religious affiliation, and 5 percent might be due to increases in college education.

"That leaves 50 percent of the decrease unexplained by the factors I was able to include in the study, which raises interesting questions for future research," he said. **BT**

O'Leary cautions that the decline in religious affiliation — due to the Internet or otherwise — does not mean an equal rise in atheism.



# 5 baptiststoday.org great reasons to visit the enhanced website

The *Baptists Today* website has a fresh look with added features — along with the popular offerings that have long been enjoyed. Here are five good reasons to check out [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org).

## 1. More content, easier to access

All the content usually found at [baptists-today.org](http://baptists-today.org) is still there, including Daily News Headlines and *Baptists Today* blogs.

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

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

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

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

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

about great new books from Nurturing Faith publishing.

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

## 2. Tablet and smartphone friendly

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

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

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

## 3. Enhanced online edition

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

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

So when you're relaxing in your favorite

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

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

## 4. Photo sharing

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

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

## 5. Help us help you

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

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

Please visit [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org) and let us know what you think. **BT**

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



# Is support for Israel shifting among evangelicals?

American evangelicals have played a significant role in U.S. support for Israel; by some measures they are even more supportive than American Jews. But in the spring issue of *Middle East Quarterly*, David Brog, executive director of Christians United for Israel, wrote that “the days of taking evangelical support for Israel for granted are over.”

New films made by Christians are beginning to question support for Israel — including *Little Town of Bethlehem*, funded by Mart Green of Oral Roberts University and the son of Hobby Lobby founder David Green.

Oral Roberts president Billy Wilson spoke at a conference, “Christ at the Checkpoint,” that began in 2010 as a biennial conference with the idea that Jesus was a Palestinian who could be suffering under Israeli occupation today as he once suffered under Roman occupation.

It’s difficult to measure long-term support for Israel among evangelicals. Findings from the Pew Research Center, though, suggest that it has remained relatively stable in the past five years.



“There’s deep attachment to Israel and I don’t see that changing,” said Todd Deatherage, executive director of Telos, a group that seeks a middle way that supports peace. “Anecdotally, it’s not that some Americans and some evangelicals are in any way becoming anti-Israel, but they’re defining their support in terms of conflict resolution.”

For years, the source of that attachment was a specific, literalistic approach to biblical prophecy, called dispensationalism. Dispensationalists believe the Israelites’ return to the Promised Land is a requirement for the Second Coming of Jesus. They therefore rejoiced when Israeli troops captured the

Old City of Jerusalem from Arab forces in June 1967 and saw it as a sign that Jesus was coming.

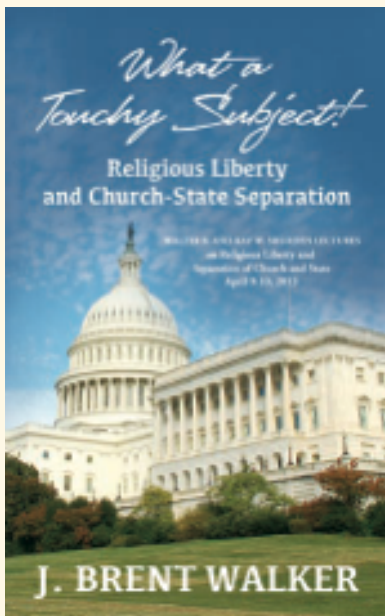
Before he switched his theological views, California-based pastor Kim Riddlebarger sold Bible prophecy books for 25 years. Now Riddlebarger, who co-hosts a popular radio show called the *White Horse Inn*, believes God has fulfilled his promise to Israel through a covenant with Jesus, so he sees no theological need for a state of Israel.

David Gushee, Christian ethicist at Mercer University, said he sees more tourist trips to the region wanting to include a Palestinian perspective.

Jews for Jesus director David Brickner said some Christians are grappling with how to handle Israel’s relationship with Palestinians.

“I long to see the church have a balanced perspective on the Middle East, where you don’t have to throw out the concern for Palestinians to support Israel,” Brickner said. “I really believe there’s a large middle ground, but it’s hard to do when people are in their polar positions.” **BT**

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