

>> This is the **June 2015 issue** containing the **July Bible Study Lessons**



**MORE THAN
APPLAUSE**

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Caswell rich in history, beauty
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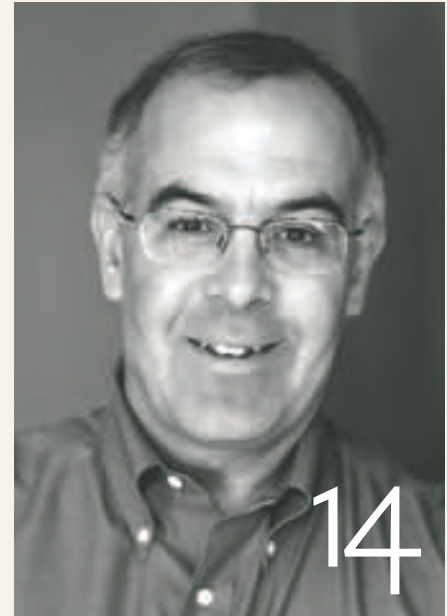
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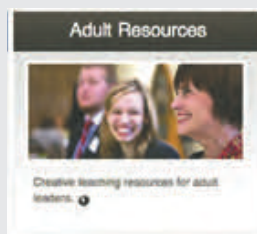
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Bill Leonard honored with Judson-Rice Award

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — Church historian Bill Leonard was presented the annual Judson-Rice Award from *Baptists Today* at a dinner event April 24 at Wake Forest University.

University President Nathan Hatch, in bringing greetings, commended Leonard for his larger influence as an author and church historian — as well as his strategic role as founding dean of Wake Forest’s 16-year-old school of divinity. Currently, Leonard is the James and Marilyn Dunn Professor of Baptist Studies and professor of church history.

Baptists Today editor John Pierce described Leonard as an author, historian, preacher, teacher, administrator and “a visionary leader — that is, one who can look back insightfully and look ahead with great perception.”

He noted that Leonard also is a favored source for news writers — secular and religious — who keep his name and number in their contacts files should they be given an assignment with the word “Baptist” in it.

“He overfills rooms at Cooperative Baptist Fellowship assemblies — much to the detriment of other workshop leaders assigned to the same time slot,” said Pierce. “And what others might present as dry, dusty historical record,



Baptists Today chairman Don Brewer of Gainesville, Ga., and vice chair Cathy Turner of Clemson, S.C., present the Judson-Rice Award to Bill Leonard April 24 at Wake Forest University.

Bill presents as interesting, applicable and often humorous.”

Pierce added that Leonard “doesn’t stay in his corner of Baptist life; he reaches out and across what others consider to be boundaries but Bill sees as boulevards.”

A conversation with Leonard at the event, preceding the award presentation, will appear in the July issue of *Baptists Today*.

The Judson-Rice Award is presented annually by the news journal’s Board of Directors and its supporters comprising the Judson-Rice Society (see listing on next page).

Created in 2001, the award commemorates the contributions of early Baptist leaders Adoniram Judson, Ann Hasseltine Judson and Luther Rice, while recognizing a current Baptist leader who has shown significant leadership and at the same time maintained the highest integrity.

Previous award recipients were Jimmy Allen, Tony Campolo, Russell Dilday, Alma Hunt, Walter Shurden, Cecil Sherman, Wayne Flynt, Walker Knight, James Dunn, Charles Overby, Randall Lolley, the John and Eula Mae Baugh family, Virginia Boyd Connally and Emmanuel McCall.

ADDITIONALLY

During the award dinner Mel Williams was honored as director emeritus for *Baptists Today*. While pastor of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., where the news journal was birthed and housed in its early years, Williams was a strong supporter.

In a written statement, founding editor Walker Knight described Williams as “someone to lean on, always seeing how we could succeed.”



Members of the ensemble “Lift Every Voice” provided inspiring music for the dinner event.

Judson-Rice Society

Individuals making annual gifts to Baptists Today totaling \$1,000 or more comprise the Judson-Rice Society. Gratitude is expressed to the following supporters who made such gifts in 2014.

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Donna and Eddie Wood	Macon	Ga.

Williams retired in 2012 after 24 years as pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, N.C. His current community-based ministry in Durham was featured in the March issue of *Baptists Today*.

Jack Glasgow, longtime pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., and a *Baptists Today* director, presented the new “TOGETHER- We Can!” campaign (see page 41) to support, strengthen and secure the independent news journal with an expanded publishing mission.

Inspiring music was provided by “Lift Every Voice,” an ensemble that leads worship for Wake Forest University School of Divinity and in the larger Winston-Salem community. The group counts Leonard among its best supporters. **BT**



Above: Bill Leonard expresses appreciation for the many who gathered April 24 to share in the presentation of the Judson-Rice Award. Below: Jack Glasgow, a *Baptists Today* director and longtime pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., encourages support for the news journal and its expanding publication ministry through the TOGETHER — We Can! campaign.

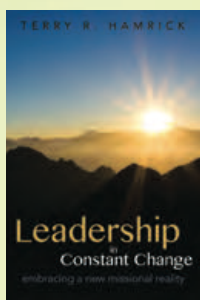
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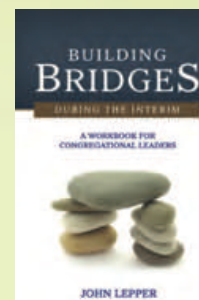


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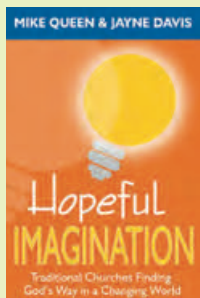


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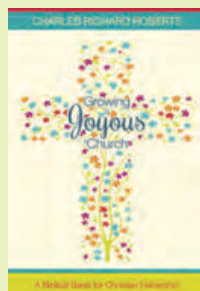


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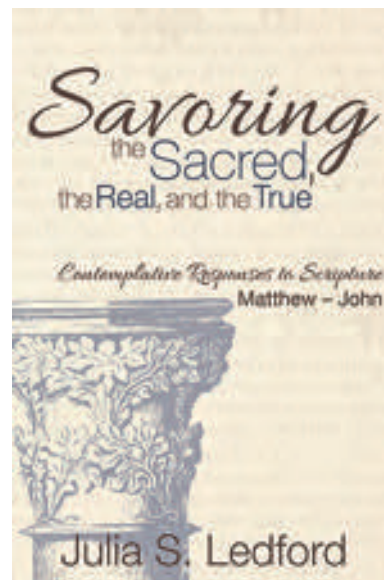
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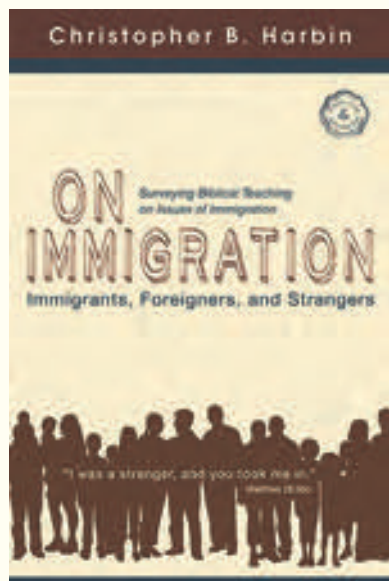


While emerging from the author's own responses to reading through the Gospels, these prayers are also written with a sense of community to foster dialogue between the Word of God and the reader — and with the world.

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The issue of immigration is an old one. Often as not, the church has remained silent on dealing with groups that the larger society has attempted to exclude or place in some controlled category.

In writing about this matter, Chris Harbin does not deal with

the politics of immigration but rather focuses on the relevance of the biblical text to the issue from a personal perspective.

He poses questions to the church on what the Bible has to say about our interactions, attitudes, and reactions to immigration and immigrants.

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“Earth’s loss is heaven’s gain.”

—*Washington Post* writer Ron Charles reporting on Baptist pastor Rick Warren’s weight-loss book *The Daniel Plan: 40 Days to a Healthier Life*, written with two doctors, winning the *Christian Book of the Year Award* from the *Evangelical Christian Publishers Association*

Giving is a spiritual act of humility, a statement of priority. Giving requires that we live with enough financial margin to remind ourselves that we are more than consumers.”

—*Matt Sapp, pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Canton, Ga. (EthicsDaily.com)*

“It doesn’t take a lot of theological perspicuity to notice that conservative Christians argue from the Bible while liberals appeal to Jesus.”

—*Alan Bean, executive director of Friends of Justice (BNG)*

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quotation remarks

“This is not so much a recruitment effort as it is a global marketing campaign...”

—*An unidentified senior U.S. law enforcement official on the Islamic State’s slick multimedia productions, and use of social media and personal “peer-to-peer” communication aimed at the West (RNS)*

“We try to practice the most basic form of Christianity: bread, wine — grape juice in our case — water, a meal, singing and a community relationship and connection. I preach, but so does everyone else. We learn from each other.”

—*Emily Scott, 34, who founded St. Lydia’s Church that draws “actors, singers, seminarians and new parents” to a Brooklyn apartment for worship on Sunday and Monday nights (Huffington Post)*

“I never met a person whose presence could totally still a room in a powerful yet pleasant way like Dr. Winfred Moore.”

—*Pastor Howard Batson of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, remembering the Texas Baptist leader who served the congregation from 1959-1989 and died May 8 at age 95 (Waco Tribune)*

“My concern is how the identification of ISIS with the religion of Islam is impacting our active engagement in representing Jesus’ kingdom fairly and honestly among Muslim people in the entire world. While the Islamic State has taken the religion of Islam as its tactic, we must realize that Islam is every bit as diverse and multifaceted as Christianity and other world faiths and philosophies.”

—*Professor Mike Kubm of Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Beirut (EthicsDaily.com)*

“Evangelicals will undoubtedly maintain conservative political positions on topics such as the value of life, the meaning of marriage and the primacy of religious liberty, but they need to be wary of cozying up too much with political candidates. They especially need to drop any notion that kingdom work will be primarily accomplished through government and politicians. This is both an issue of mission focus and gospel clarity.”

—*Thomas Kidd, professor of history at Baylor University (EthicsDaily.com)*

“The majority of the U.S. population in 2010 said that they pray at least some, with about 1 in 4 Americans saying they pray several times per day.”

—*Lindsey Cook, data reporter for U.S. News & World Report*

“The arts are a source of healing that touch the deepest part of ourselves.”

—*Tina Bailey, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship representative who ministers through the arts in Bali including at a prison rattled by recent executions (BNG)*

“In a time when the church faces many disagreements over social issues, worship, theology and structure, one area of agreement appears to be the need to treat the stranger with kindness and justice.”

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

Is our way God's way?

Want to cause a stir in a church? Move an entrenched Sunday school class' meeting location, alter the time of worship services or fail to turn a worship service near Memorial Day, Independence Day or Veterans Day into a red-white-and-blue political rally.

Skipping the Church's birthday (Pentecost) is not as big of a deal as not making a big-enough deal out of cultural holidays such as Mother's Day, Father's Day or Valentine's Day.

Once someone told me of a church that "forgot to have the Lord's Supper" during a long pastoral transition but then "all hell broke loose" when the American flag was not in the sanctuary one Sunday.

Welcome to American Christianity — which often reflects more of the modifier than the subject.

It is easy to assume that the religious beliefs and practices in which we are raised reflect the Christian faith accurately — and are a true continuation of the faith handed down from one generation to another. Jesus, the disciples, Paul and Timothy would feel right at home.

Surely they were the first to voice offertory prayers that included "lead, guide and direct us."

I confess to having no awareness of how the Christian faith of my upbringing was shaped by the cultural values of family, community and country. A college introduction to sociology of religion — and later a seminary reading of James D. Smart's *The Cultural Subversion of the Biblical Faith* — were eye-opening experiences.

The gospel should shape us. But it is helpful to realize how we shape the gospel.

Such awareness never frees us fully from the cultural impact on our understanding and practice of faith. But it helps us to take notice of those ways in which the Christianity we claim takes on the flavor of our cultural values.

For many of us, the American Way and the Way of Christ were often merged in indistinguishable ways. And even pointing out that reality makes one's patriotism suspect.

However, we must guard against limiting the Christian gospel to our cultural comfort.

Otherwise, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" carries as much or more weight than "love your neighbor as yourself."

When bathed in a sea of American exceptionalism, it is easy to conclude that one is therefore more exceptional than all those beyond our national borders.

I even remember hearing how lucky the Cherokees were that our ancestors invaded their lands and took their homes in order to tell them about Jesus. Otherwise, they'd never have known the love and grace of God.

The idea of American exceptionalism greatly impacts American Christianity — and it gets elevated with the announcement of each presidential candidacy.

Without awareness and caution, it is easy to forget that "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." Grace is exceptional — not those of us fortunate to be born in a prosperous place with a bent toward freedom.

Ironically, those who claim to reject prevailing culture in favor of pure biblical allegiance often are most reflective of their culture. Sometimes, however, it is a culture that is a few decades removed.

Claims of biblical fidelity have been used to argue for or against all kinds of cultural preferences from opposing Sunday recreation and women wearing pants in church to demanding thrice-weekly church attendance as a sign of faithfulness.

Writing about American Christianity in a blog posted at patheos.com last year, Baylor University theologian Roger Olson made an important distinction: The cultural accommodation that should cause us concern is not the contextualization needed for effective ministry but a subversion of the Christian gospel that changes its very nature.

"Even churches that claim to resist cultural accommodation often fall into it," he noted. "In fact, I suspect that every church will succumb to cultural accommodation unless it consciously guards against it."

However, raising such warnings — or, more specifically, pointing out some ways in which we conform the gospel to our cultural values — can be risky for congregational leaders. Cultural accommodation creates great comfort for those who prefer no tension between the gospel they claim and any other priorities.

Most church members want their "toes stepped on" just enough to feel some self-gratifying guilt, but not enough to challenge their true allegiances. **BT**



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‘Bible freak’

David Trobisch lends Museum of the Bible a scholarly edge

In 2006, New Testament scholar David Trobisch abandoned such lofty outlets as Oxford Press and the *Journal of Papyrology and Epigraphy* for a more mainstream venue: *Free Inquiry*.

In that feisty secular humanist journal, Trobisch identified the likely editor of the New Testament as second-century Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna and suggested that Polycarp, not Luke, was responsible for the inclusion of the book of Acts. Trobisch shared the magazine’s cover billing with Christopher Hitchens and the atheist animal rights theorist Peter Singer.

None of this would be unusual — serious New Testament scholars constantly probe its cloudy origins, wherever that leads — if Trobisch were not now prominently employed by one of the most famously conservative Christian families in America.

The Green family of Oklahoma City financed the 430,000-square-foot Museum of the Bible set to open in 2017 just off the National Mall in Washington. It will showcase biblical artifacts from the 40,000-piece Green collection, one of the largest in private hands.

As director of the collection, Trobisch does not run the museum (its director is Cary Summers), but in addition to enlarging, curating and cataloging the trove, he participates in the crucial conversation about which items will go into the museum, and how.

A former Heidelberg University professor, Trobisch also acts as roving ambassador to the worlds of high academia and top-rate museums. His presence poses a conundrum to the Greens’ many critics: As believers that the Bible is God-given and inerrant, could the family — and the museum that is their brainchild — be more open to dispassionate scholarship than previously assumed?

Trobisch, 56, splits time between Germany, where his wife, son and two grandchildren live, and a home in Springfield, Mo. He grew up speaking four languages in Cameroon, where his parents were Lutheran missionaries.

Trobisch eventually gravitated to New Testament criticism, the close study of ancient manuscripts for clues as to how the 27-book New Testament came together.

He met the Greens when he asked permission to look at their 850 ancient New Testament documents.

Soon, he was advising the family on acquisitions (“My strategy was to buy fewer items but only the highest quality”). In February, he was hired as director. Trobisch recently revamped the content in the Greens’ 400-item Bible exhibition “Passages” and created one-off exhibits in places such as the Vatican, Jerusalem and Cuba.

In April, Trobisch was alighting in New York after a three-week trip involving at least six countries on four continents, having discussed Green extension museums with professionals from Africa and Asia. He considered a Bible for sale in Istanbul, hired a curator in Germany and helped open the latest Passages in Santa Clarita, Calif.

The museum’s burgeoning relationship with blue-chip institutions is partly attributable to Trobisch’s prestige and contact list. When several manuscripts — which had been deposited by the Bible Society at Cambridge University Library — were in danger of being auctioned, the Greens bought them and left them with Cambridge.

There was no quid quo pro, but Cambridge owns the Codex Bezae, which Trobisch calls “the fourth most important manuscript of the New Testament.” The strengthened relationship increases the chances the Washington museum might someday show it.

Trobisch might have expected some philosophical friction with the Greens, who famously turn to the Bible for everything, including business decisions. But he says Hobby Lobby chain president Steve Green is open to new scholarship.

“We agreed that if I say something about the Bible he disagrees with and I can show him the quote, he will concede. If I cannot support it by a quote, I will concede.”

Green’s bedrock belief in God allows him some flexibility and even curiosity. “He’s a Bible freak,” Trobisch said. “Like me.”

Trobisch disagrees with some in “the media and my scholarly peers” that his employment by the museum represents a faceoff of “fundamentalism against sound scholarship.” Instead, he said, it constitutes “two parties standing at opposite ends of the Christian spectrum talking to each other and working together. This almost never happens in the U.S.”

Time will tell how that conversation will play out in the museum. Steve Green envisions the museum as “nonsectarian,” saying, “The Bible can speak for itself.”

Yet that phrase assumes the existence of a master text and God’s power to achieve a potent reading. Trobisch calls it a “theological belief: It might be true, it might not be true. But that’s not what my team is concerned with.”

Were the museum to be “some kind of missionary activity,” he said, “it would be an enormous disappointment. I could not identify with or work for a museum that wanted to do that.”

But he foresees harmony. Recently he and other scholars met the museum designers in Washington and discussed such questions as the Bible’s use by the Founding Fathers, “who in public perception are treated as good Christians, but when you look closer, it doesn’t hold up.”

Ideally, he said, the museum would present a “story that is challenging, but that is not threatening, based on evidence we can show; and if we can’t show it, we keep quiet about it.”

For now he is clearly enjoying himself. “I spent 25 years in the university, where you manage poverty,” he said. “You have really good ideas, and no money to support them. When I reintroduce myself to my scholarly friends, I say, ‘If someone asked you to do this job, would you want to do it?’” **BT**



David Trobisch

Ray of hope

White House celebration provides insight into gospel music

WASHINGTON — First lady Michelle Obama hosted a discussion with musicians and students on gospel music at the White House in April, praising gospel's role as "a ray of hope" in American history.

"Gospel music has really played such an important role in our country's history," she told students gathered in the State Dining Room, "from the spirituals sung by slaves, to the anthems that became the soundtrack of the civil rights movement, and to the hymns that millions of Americans sing every single day in churches all across the country."

Here are some of the lessons learned during the 75-minute event, where Grammy Museum Executive Director Bob Santelli interviewed a panel of singers and songwriters ahead of a star-studded concert that will air on PBS on June 26 as part of the *In Performance at the White House* series.

1. Gospel music is personal for the first lady.

"I'm really thrilled that we're really focusing on gospel," Obama said of the series that has previously featured classical, country and soul music. "It's something that I wanted to do since we started."

As Obama grew up, her aunt directed the church choir and her mother was one of its members.

"Gospel music is what fuels my love of music in general," the first lady said. "I know that for so many folks across the country and around the world, there's nothing like hearing a choir sing an old gospel classic. When you hear that music, it gets your feet tapping and your heart pumping. It gets you ready and prepared to take in that sermon for the day. It is what helps connect us to God, to that higher power, and for so many when times are dark and when you struggle, gospel music is that ray of hope and it gives you that strength."

2. Much of American pop music has its roots in gospel.

"Even though it is a sacred music form, essentially born in the church and sung in the church,



Grammy Museum Executive Director Bob Santelli, introduced a panel of musicians for a discussion of gospel music at the White House on April 14, 2015. The panel included, left to right, Michelle Williams, Lyle Lovett, Darlene Love, Rodney Crowell, and Rhiannon Giddens. Religion News Service photo by Adelle M. Banks.

it has a lot of connections to the kind of music that's on your iPod today," said Santelli.

"When Africans came to this country by way of slavery, they weren't able to bring too much with them in terms of material possessions, but they brought the most important and the most valuable thing," he said. "That's what was in their heart, what was in their soul, and that was almost always music."

3. The church birthed musicians of numerous genres.

"I sang my first solo at the age of 7 — a hymn called 'Blessed Assurance,'" said former Destiny's Child member Michelle Williams, who continued as a solo gospel artist. "Gospel music really is my first love."

Santelli cited others — Sam Cooke, Aretha Franklin, James Brown.

"I had a chance to see Whitney Houston when she was 16 years old," said Santelli, who, like Houston, grew up in New Jersey. "She sang in the New Hope Baptist church choir in Newark. ... It's not surprising that she became who she was in terms of a singer. She learned it in the church."

Country music singer-songwriter Lyle Lovett told the gathering that he sang in his church's children's choir before becoming a country music name.

4. Churches didn't always celebrate the musicians they birthed.

"Like Aretha and Sam Cooke, my father was a pastor," said Darlene Love, who sang backup for Elvis, Cher and Cooke and is an inductee of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. "My father actually got a lot of flak when I started singing secular music or, as they called it, 'the devil's music.'"

When she appeared in the 1960s on the *Shindig* television series, her father really heard about it when members spotted her on the show.

"They would go to my father and say, 'I can't believe you're allowing your daughter to sing that devil's music,' and my father would say to them, 'Well, why were you watching it?'"

5. Elvis loved gospel music.

The "King of Rock 'n' Roll" may have been a hit on the secular stage, but the three Grammys he received were for gospel music, Santelli said. He won two for "How Great Thou Art" and one for "He Touched Me."

Love attested to Presley's love for the genre.

"He said that he used to go on a Sunday night to a black church in the South, and back then they didn't have air conditioning," she recalled. "The windows were open and he would go and just stand at the windows and listen to the music." **BT**

5 TAKEAWAYS

U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom releases new report

The independent watchdog panel created by Congress to monitor religious freedom conditions worldwide issued its 16th annual report last month.

Here's a roundup of the report's key recommendations:

1. Double the list of worst religious freedom offenders.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom isn't satisfied with the State Department's "Countries of Particular Concern" list, which remained static for nearly a decade until Turkmenistan joined Myanmar, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan last year on the list of worst offenders.

USCIRF wants Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Syria, Tajikistan, Vietnam and, for the first time, the Central African Republic to be added.

2. Add the Central African Republic to the baddies.

The ethnic cleansing of Muslims, the destruction of hundreds of mosques and the displacement of a million people amid violence between majority Christians and minority

Muslims was more than enough evidence for USCIRF to recommend that the Central African Republic be downgraded to CPC status.

While that designation has historically been reserved for government violations, CAR has been without a functioning government for two years, allowing sectarian militias to carry out these abuses. USCIRF recommends the U.S. government prioritize ending sectarian violence and reducing interfaith tensions in its ongoing engagement with CAR.

3. Watch out, Malaysia.

In addition to its 17 CPC recommendations, USCIRF lists 10 "Tier 2" countries where religious freedom violations are serious but do not meet CPC standards. This list remains unchanged from last year (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Malaysia, Russia, Turkey), but Malaysia is on the brink of CPC recommendation after government officials and religious leaders pushed through a slew of new laws and policies diminishing legal protections for religious minorities.

"Deviant" religious groups, including Shiite, Ahmadiyya and Baha'i communities, are banned. Non-Muslims cannot use the word "Allah," and civil and Shariah courts increasingly police religious expression.

4. Prosecute Islamic State militants.

USCIRF wants the International Criminal Court to prosecute Islamic State violations against religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and Syria. To do so, it's asking the U.S. government to support a referral by the U.N. Security Council to the International Criminal Court to investigate Islamic State atrocities.

It also wants Congress to amend the International Religious Freedom Act to allow CPC designation of countries where non-state actors violate religious freedom in political vacuums, such as parts of Iraq, Syria, CAR and Nigeria.

5. Commend Cyprus, Nigeria and Sri Lanka.

Despite much gloom and doom, there were a few silver linings in the report. Religious freedom and harmony have improved in Cyprus, resulting in greater access to houses of worship across the Green Line separating north from south.

Nigeria witnessed its first peaceful democratic transfer of power earlier this year when Muslim northerner Muhammadu Buhari ousted Christian southerner Jonathan Goodluck at the polls. And Sri Lanka's new government has taken positive steps to promote religious freedom and unity in the face of violent Buddhist nationalism. **BT**

Children of Holocaust survivors more anxious about Iran nuclear threat

By Michele Chabin
Religion News Service

JERUSALEM — A study by researchers at Bar-Ilan University has found that the adult children of Holocaust survivors are more fearful than their mainstream peers about the threat of Iran developing a nuclear weapon.

Given that many studies over the decades have found that children of Holocaust survivors are deeply affected by their parents' traumatic experiences, Amit Shrira, the study's author, set out to discover whether these second-generation survivors were more anxious over a potential Iranian bomb than others

of their generation. His study was published in *Psychological Trauma*, a journal of the American Psychological Association.

Shrira compared the feelings of 63 children of Holocaust survivors whose parents lived under a Nazi or pro-Nazi regime to those of 43 children whose parents either fled to unoccupied countries or immigrated to Israel. The study found that second-generation survivors "exhibit greater preoccupation with the Iranian nuclear threat" than the comparison group.

In addition, second-generation survivors are "more sensitive to nuclear threat" and have a "more ominous outlook on the world in general — a world of threat and significant danger

that can fall upon them."

"The link between the Iranian threat and the Holocaust is frequently made by Israeli politicians, the Israeli media and the Iranian regime," Shrira said. "Offspring of survivors are sensitive to these statements."

A follow-up study of 450 subjects — 300 second-generation survivors and 150 of their contemporaries — found identical results.

"In second-generation survivors we most often see that they are a group with resilience and mental resources, and they generally exhibit good functioning on a daily basis. But they do have vulnerabilities which can be manifested during times of stress," Shrira said in a statement. **BT**

By Tom Ehrich, RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

A cure for mile-wide, inch-deep religion

CORVALLIS, Ore. — I am in this lovely college town to help a congregation discern its path forward.

It faces challenges that many church leaders will recognize: leadership, finances, isolation from the surrounding community, not enough young and middle-age adults to carry the congregation forward.

It also has pluses. The members aren't deeply divided or mired in distrust and disdain. They aren't afraid of change. They don't bury the future in grand laments about a lost "golden age."

I think they have a good shot at turning a corner and building a healthy next phase. I hear reports from across the nation that things are improving for Christian congregations.

A new generation of clergy is exploring new ideas. Fresh energy is emerging. Denial is losing its hold, as congregations whose average age is 60 to 65 realize they must change or die.

Denominations are slower to adapt, but they, too, are moving forward in practical ways such as training in leadership and stewardship, and flexible deployment of resources.

Yet for this fresh day to last, church leaders will need to embrace a truth that goes beyond organizational development and resolving present issues. It's a truth that many congregations simply cannot hear.

That truth is this: There is too much shallowness, not enough depth.

Over the years, in a process that isn't at all unusual, we have equated faith with attending Sunday worship, maybe pitching in on a committee, and forming friendships within the fellowship. People enjoy belonging to the congregation. They radiate a palpable joy in being together. They seem content.

But that contentment isn't working. It isn't working for members who want more than 60 minutes of worship and a few minutes of conversation. It isn't working for children and parents, who want more than 1950s Sunday school redux. It isn't working for leaders, who sense a weak follow-through.

It isn't working for visitors, who enter in hope and leave in frustration over apparent

shallowness. And it isn't working for cities, suburbs and towns that have serious needs but aren't getting sustained, life-transforming help from churches in addressing them.

Their contentment has come to seem fragile. "We do good face," says one leader here. But more and more members sense something is missing: conviction, perhaps, a sense that what they do here has meaning and purpose beyond institutional survival, a burning zeal to transform their own lives and to make a difference in the world.

They spend religion time inside a bubble. It is a wonderful bubble in many ways. But the world is so much larger, and the needs of their lives and of other lives so much deeper, than Sunday worship. A young

father says he aches to talk with others about faith, but instead, people talk about church.

Rather than devote more years to addressing institutional issues, they need to move on to the deeper and more challenging issue of being a faith community in a troubled world. If all they do is rearrange the deck chairs one more time, they will die. And quite frankly, they will deserve it.

People are hungry for faith. They are hungry for conviction that isn't mean-spirited and triumphalist. They are hungry for healthy families, healthy workplaces, healthy neighborhoods. They know that the darkness is fighting them tooth and nail.

They need transformation of life — not just pleasant Sunday worship experiences — if they are to stand up to the darkness. **BT**

—Tom Ehrich is a writer, church consultant and Episcopal priest based in New York.



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“...We are just more egotistical than we once were.
We may be fairer and more compassionate, but we’re also more narcissistic.”

Unconventional conservative

Writer David Brooks on character, sin and unsettled questions

NEW YORK — *New York Times*

columnist David Brooks is the most unconventional of conservatives — the kind of traditionalist who has crossover appeal to liberals and progressives. They may not always agree with him, but nearly everyone wants to know his take on things.

Brooks’ new book, *The Road to Character*, traces human virtue throughout the centuries, and then profiles a handful of “heroes of renunciation” who he believes serve as models of character. The book has sparked conversation about Brooks’ views on morality, theology, and even his own Jewish faith.

Brooks talked about society’s obsession with selfies, whether we’re too self-absorbed and rumors about his own religious journey. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

RNS: You say that we’ve shifted from a culture of humility to a culture of “big me.” But was there ever really a culture of humility?

BROOKS: Human nature is biased in the direction of self-centeredness. But there are certainly times when some behavior is frowned upon and some behavior is rewarded.

There were times as late as the 1940s when putting a college sticker on the back of your car would have been frowned upon, when writing in a way that exposed all of your secrets would have been frowned upon, when even dressing in a way that exposes your body would have been frowned upon.

And we do studies that measure narcissism. Scores on this thing called “the narcissism test” have risen 30 percent in the last 20 years. So I think there is evidence that we are just more egotistical than we once were.



Author David Brooks at home, in Bethesda, Md. Photo courtesy of Random House.

We may be fairer and more compassionate, but we’re also more narcissistic.

RNS: You dub our current era as “the age of the selfie.” How has technology has affected character in society?

BROOKS: I’m not a technophobe, and I’ve looked at the research on whether Facebook and social media undermine friendship, and I think the evidence is that it doesn’t. It’s what you bring to Facebook that matters.

People who are good at friendships use Facebook to augment their friendships, and people who are lonely use Facebook to mask their loneliness. But it’s not Facebook; it’s what you’re bringing to it.

I do think social media challenges us in two ways: First, it creates this broadcasting culture where you create a fake version or avatar of yourself. And you post a highlight reel of yourself on Instagram and make yourself look happier and more glamorous than you really are.

And there’s a danger that people will mistake the avatar for their real selves or develop

an intense desire to get “likes” as you try to market your own personality.

Second, and this is certainly true of me, there is so much online that is mental candy. It just distracts you from reading books that are deeper and more spiritual. I’m a big believer that everybody should have one spiritual book going at all times, that you should have a book on your nightstand going at all times. And when you’re completely addicted to your phone, it can keep you from that.

RNS: What’s the spiritual book you’re reading right now?

BROOKS: It’s called the *Quest for a Moral Compass*. It’s quite a good history of moral philosophy.

I have that book and then I have a book called *How Dante Can Save Your Life* by Rod Dreher, which is about a guy who had a midlife crisis and used Dante to get out of it.

RNS: A lot of people argue that America is in moral decline. As you talk about these character shifts, some might say you’re lending credence to this idea that society is in moral decline. Thoughts?

BROOKS: I’m always suspicious of that. In the first place, if you look at how people behave, there’s a lot of data that suggests we’re not in moral decline: teenage pregnancy is down, abortion rates are down, domestic violence is down, crime is down. A lot of really bad behavior is down.

Culture shifts and in some eras they have one set of problems and in another era, they have a different set of problems. I’d say we’re getting fairer and less racist and less sexist.

So we’re improving in some ways and devolving in other ways. These sweeping statements that everything’s worse don’t seem to be squared with the facts. There’s always something to work on, but we’re not “slouching toward Gomorrah.”

RNS: You mentioned spirituality, and I want to ask about the speculation that maybe you've experienced some sort of conversion. How have your spiritual views changed, maybe as a result of this study of morality and virtue?

BROOKS: I don't talk about my faith in public, in part because some things are so delicate and private, and when you start turning it into part of a book tour, you oversimplify.

I'm a big believer in the value of privacy and reticence, so I open myself up for some personal revelation in this book but try not to go into any personal details because I believe our private lives are fragile.

I've read so much theology in the course of writing this book and my personal life in the last five years that my views have deepened but everything is sort of in flux. As I said on NPR, the shoots are too green; the grass is too fragile. I have a lot of questions, but I haven't settled.

RNS: You say that young people today often fail to comprehend the moral component of problems. Can you explain?

BROOKS: I draw on the sociology of Christian Smith at Notre Dame who did this work asking college students to talk about their moral dilemmas. He found the students weren't bad, but they just had no moral vocabulary.

So they didn't know how to frame moral issues and didn't even know how to think through them because they didn't have the words.

The problem happened in the 1940s and 50s when certain words slipped out of common usage. They were words like sin and soul and redemption and grace. And if you don't have those words, whether you're religious or not religious, it's hard to have a conversation about morality if you don't know what virtue is or what character means.

The big shift was the loss of the word sin. Now we use the word in the context of desserts, but it used to be something people acknowledged was a real category inside of themselves.

If you don't have sin, you don't have something to fight against.

RNS: How do you define sin?

BROOKS: The best definition I like is "disordered love," which is the Augustinian definition that we all love a lot of things and that some loves are higher than others. But that sometimes we get our loves out of order. If a friend tells you something and you blab it at a dinner party, you're putting your love of popularity above your love of friendship.

RNS: Speaking of Augustine, you chose him as one of your "heroes of renunciation." Why do you find him compelling?

BROOKS: I came to believe he's pretty much the most brilliant thinker I've ever come across — his depth of understanding of psychology and his poetry. He's emotionally rich — there's always tears coming down his face — and also intellectually brilliant.

The main thing I take from him is that he was someone who was very successful but found his soul was famished the higher up he got. He revealed the shallowness of worldly success.

Second, he helped introduce us to the idea of self, that there's an internal world in there. It's not clear that people before him understood that.

Third, he understood sinfulness and what it means. And finally, he lived a life that was touched by grace and he wrote about grace beautifully. He's almost a poet of the religious sensibility.

RNS: You also talk about Catholic activist Dorothy Day as a model of character. You're a conservative thinker and she held a lot of socialist ideals. So why Dorothy Day?

BROOKS: I think there is a realm beneath politics that matters. You can be politically progressive and be a good person or an awful person. Politics exists on the surface, but conduct is at a deeper realm. We shouldn't over-politicize life.

A lot of the characters in this book, if I met them in a political debate, I would disagree with them profoundly. But the way we live our lives is almost unrelated to the political philosophies we hold. I find it very easy to admire her even if I disagree with her.

"There is so much online that is mental candy. It just distracts you from reading books that are deeper and more spiritual."

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Inspired Creativity

By Melinda McNish

Dancing doctor, dirty diapers and deep dedication

God called me to be the director of the preschool department at my church — and I am so glad. In a few minutes, you may think I am saying that sarcastically, but I am totally serious.

I had left my kindergarten babies coloring a picture from today's story while I ran down the hall for something. When I came back, one of the boys looked up from his paper, nodded his head toward one of the girls, and exclaimed, "This girl can tap dance!"

Of course, I asked for a demonstration and praised her "tap dancing" skills profusely. She kind of reminded me of a marionette whose puppeteer was having a seizure, but it was impressive nonetheless.

Later, she explained the secret to her expert tap dancing: "If I have my shoes on, they are making me dance. But if I don't have my shoes on, it's just my body telling me to dance."

This was followed by a fit of barefooted tap dancing.

The morning's story was about the Boo-boo Man, a.k.a. the Good Samaritan. I guess the picture of the hurt man being helped by the Samaritan prompted one little angel to share, "I'm a doctor in real life. This summer I am going to Florida to swim with the dolphins."

Swimming with dolphins is a new requirement for doctors?

This child is quite the prodigy. Last Sunday she was quite adamant that she can speak 47 different languages.

After story time, I asked the children to draw pictures of themselves helping someone who needed help. (Which you might not be inclined to do if you look at him and say, "He's all bloody; I don't want to help him 'cause I might get bloody, too.")

Some of them wanted to write something on their papers to explain what they drew. And so we played the fun little game called "How Do You Spell ...?"

This is a game at which I excel, especially when I am being bombarded with different words from more than one kid at the same time. My top score today came from spelling "others," "care" and "seriously" all at the same time.



That was just Sunday school.

Before I made it upstairs to the worship service, I had to watch the 3- and 4-year-olds because their teacher had to take her grandson to his mom since he seemed sick. One of the kids had a sudden intense desire for Mommy, so I was wrapped in a slightly snotty, slobbery embrace for a while.

I passed her off to the 3- and 4-year-olds teacher and went upstairs to recruit more help. Back downstairs I went on a hunt to find some kind of air freshener to beat down the dirty diaper smell.

I retrieved the offending diaper from the trash and made a dumpster run in the rain. (Pretty sure no wild animals are going to be scavenging in that dumpster today.)

And then, when I went to get my Bible and purse from my Sunday school room to head upstairs for worship, I realized my kids had left without throwing away their trash from snack time. So I cleaned up the room and put away the markers.

Then I trudged up the stairs again. I do believe they get longer and steeper every Sunday.

Again, I say, I am so glad God called me to lead this ministry. In spite of the fact that sarcasm might truly be my spiritual gift, I am not kidding this time.

You see, after all this "stuff" that happened before I made it to "big church," God showed me why he lets me do what I do. During the invitation time, a little girl went forward and shared that she has given her heart to Jesus. Within the last few weeks, there have been about a half dozen other kids who have been baptized.

Know what they all have in common? They all came through this preschool department.

They have made crazy comments, asked impossible questions, and left snotty, slobbery shoulders and toxic-waste diapers in their wake. They ate their weight in Goldfish crackers and drank a river of apple juice.

And they have been loved and led by the most amazing preschool workers in the world. Best of all, they are headed for heaven!

This gives me the faith to keep on in this ministry, believing that one day my little tap dancer, the doctor who speaks 47 languages, the stinky kids, the slobbery kids, even "Dang It" Boy will follow in this journey of faith. See why I love being preschool director? **BT**

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Melinda McNish, a public school teacher in Ringgold, Ga., was my high school classmate. First written as a Facebook post, these reflections are published here with her permission.]



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Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Ezekiel 2:1-3:11

July 5, 2015

Eat My Words!

In 1972 the Allman Brothers Band released an album with the strange-sounding title *Eat a Peach*. The name was based on a quotation by bandleader Duane Allman. When asked by an interviewer what he was doing for the anti-war “revolution,” Allman downplayed the reality of a revolution but said: “Every time I’m in Georgia, I eat a peach for peace.”

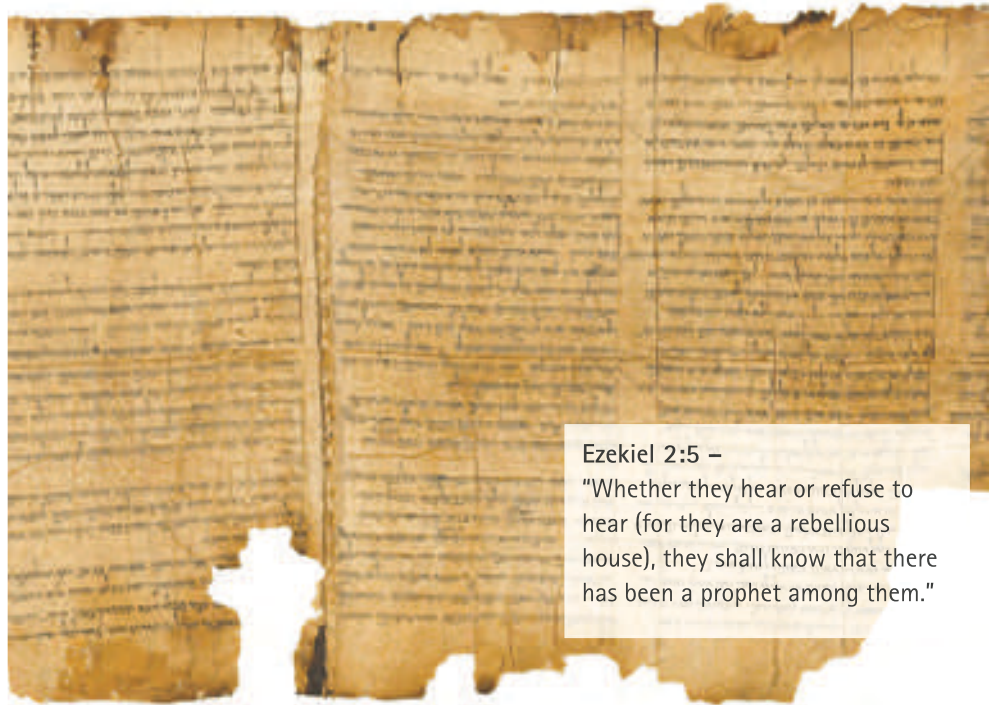
Allman, famous for his creative mastery of the slide guitar, died in a motorcycle accident three months before the album was released. His peach-eating campaign for peace was cut short, but his music lives on.

In the year 592 BCE, a man inclined to say and do even stranger things was commanded by God to eat a scroll as part of his campaign to call the exiled Israelites to a revolution of repentance. While we sometimes have to follow a foolish prediction by saying “I had to eat my words,” God instructed Ezekiel to “Eat *my* words” – God’s words. Those words led Ezekiel on a venture that had little success during his lifetime, but the words live on.

A troubling message (2:1-7)

Ezekiel was an unusual character and lived such an interesting life that many of his compatriots thought he was two thongs short of a sandal. 📖

Ezekiel was born into a family of priests and was serving in Jerusalem when the Babylonians overran the city in 597 BCE and deported many of the city’s leading citizens to Babylon, including



Ezekiel 2:5 –
“Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house), they shall know that there has been a prophet among them.”

Ezekiel. Long before Nebuchadnezzar’s army came back and destroyed the city in 587, Ezekiel was already living in a waterside community of high-class Hebrews near the Babylonian city of Nippur. (1:3). 📖

In the fifth year of the exile (1:2), Ezekiel was overwhelmed by a vision from God that changed his life. The heavens opened, he said, and he saw a spectacular vision in which a storm blew in from the north and God appeared to him as a fiery being on a seat made of sapphire beneath a crystal dome surrounded by great glowing wheels within wheels and flanked by exotic four-faced creatures that could fly.

When Ezekiel saw this overwhelming vision of God’s flying throne, it was like being caught up in the end of a rainbow, and he fell to his face in adoration. Soon, though, he heard a voice saying “O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you” (2:1). 📖

And then something happened that we often overlook: Ezekiel said, “... when he spoke to me, a spirit entered

into me and set me on my feet; and I heard him speaking to me” (2:3).

When God speaks, the Spirit is at work, getting us off of our face and onto our feet so we can not only hear God’s message, but also act on it, believing God has sent us. The statement “I am sending you” in both vv. 3 and 4 makes it emphatic that the prophet has received a divine commission. We may recall a letter Jeremiah had sent to the same hostages in Babylon in which he denounced smooth-talking prophets whom God had not sent (Jer. 29:9, 31).

Ezekiel’s commission included the odd assignment of preaching a hard message to “the house of Israel,” to people who were “impudent and stubborn” (2:4). 📖 God did not sugar-coat Ezekiel’s prospects, but prepared the prophet for disappointment by telling him to expect nothing but rejection. What?

Declaring God’s word to such a rebellious crowd might have seemed pointless. Why preach if no one would believe or respond? Whether they did or whether they didn’t, God told him,

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at least “they shall know that there has been a prophet among them” (2:5).

That might have been little comfort to Ezekiel, who had felt the sharp barbs of caustic words and the keen stares of accusing eyes. God encouraged him, however, insisting that though people as unpleasant as briars and thorns or as dangerous as scorpions might surround him, he should not be afraid (2:6). God charged him to “speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear” (2:7).

Perhaps you have known what it is like to speak to a stubborn child or teenager until you are blue in the face and it seems that all the words are bouncing right back, yet you feel compelled to speak words of caution or advice whether they are heard or not.

A strange meal (2:8-3:3)

In this section, Ezekiel undergoes something similar to an ordination or commissioning service. Today we often present a Bible to people being ordained to ministry. God presented Ezekiel with a scroll containing God’s words – and told him to *eat* it.

What? In his vision, Ezekiel saw a hand appear, and it was holding a scroll containing words written on both sides. And what was on the scroll? Ezekiel tells us that there were “words of lamentation and mourning and woe” (2:8-10).

The celestial voice told Ezekiel to eat the scroll, and then speak to the house of Israel (3:1). The metaphor is obvious: Through eating the scroll, Ezekiel would obediently accept and digest and assimilate the message from God until it became a part of him. A few verses later (3:10-11), he was told that God would continue to speak words that he should hear with his ears and adopt in his heart. God’s message was to get inside and become a part of him: Only then could he effectively proclaim God’s word to Israel. 📖

God’s spokespersons are called to preach even when there is no guarantee that people will listen. But when God’s word is inside you like a fire in your

bones, you have no choice but to speak. When a word from God is not inside, you have nothing to say.

Now, one would expect a scroll filled with lamentation and mourning and woe to have a bitter taste – or at least a salty one from all the tears – but Ezekiel said, “In my mouth it was as sweet as honey” (v. 3). Or more literally, “It was in my mouth like honey for sweetness.”

How could a bitter message taste so sweet? In part, Ezekiel’s response may reflect a sense of joy accompanying his full surrender to God’s call. But could it also be because the words, as harsh as they were, came from God and that if a message comes from God, it is never devoid of hope? Ezekiel’s initial preaching assignment was one of thoroughgoing mourning and woe, for Jerusalem was still five years from destruction and Israel had many years of exile ahead, and all of this the Hebrew writers understood to be punishment for the nation’s corporate sin. Where’s the sweetness in that?

A hard-headed people (3:4-11)

Israel’s rejection of God’s message would not be from a lack of understanding – vv. 5-6 stress that the people were not like Babylonians who didn’t respond because they spoke a different language. Rather, they would not listen to Ezekiel because they wouldn’t listen to God, and they wouldn’t listen to God because “all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart” (3:7). The problem was not one of language or understanding, but of attitude. It was a spiritual problem.

How could Ezekiel stand against such opposition? God promised to make Ezekiel just as stubborn in God’s favor as the people were in their refusal to hear (3:8). “Like the hardest stone, harder than flint, I have made your

forehead,” God said. Ezekiel had no need to fear: his head would be even harder than that of his opponents (3:9).

Ezekiel’s job was not to be successful, but to be faithful; to hear with his ears and accept in his heart all that God would say to him, and then declare the same to God’s people (3:10-11). Whether the people heard and responded was in their court.

Ezekiel was called to persevere in listening for God’s message and proclaiming it to the people by whatever means necessary – and he went to some extraordinary means – even if they wouldn’t listen to a word he said.

Should we dare to think that God still has something to say to us? Can the Spirit of God still lift believers to their feet and put them in a position to hear and understand a word from God?

And are our prospects for success as hopeless as Ezekiel’s? If we keep reading beyond ch. 3, we’ll discover that judgment predominates through most of Ezekiel’s book, but judgment wasn’t the end of the story. The latter chapters of Ezekiel’s prophecy contain remarkable promises of hope based on the pure grace and goodness of God. In ch. 36, for example, the prophet declared that God would remove their “heart of stone” and give them a “heart of flesh,” empowering them with God’s Spirit so they would be able to live by the covenant obligations as God’s people (vv. 24-28).

If this visionary scroll for Ezekiel to eat represents the full measure of God’s message to the prophet, perhaps we are to understand that the sweetness of God’s grace overpowered the harsh taste of judgment, even though Ezekiel did not yet see it.

I wonder if this story could be not only an account of Ezekiel’s initial call to prophecy, but also a reflective metaphor of his lifelong struggle to understand what God through the Spirit was saying to him. A part of the story involved lamentation and mourning and woe, but the taste of the scroll was like honey in his mouth. With God, judgment is never the last word. **BT**

Bible Study

Ephesians 1:3-14

with Tony W. Cartledge

July 12, 2015

An Amazing Inheritance

Have you ever inherited something? Getting through the legal complexities of actually obtaining an inheritance can be challenging for executors and beneficiaries alike, but when all is said and done, the estates left by others can become a real blessing to the deceased person's descendants, friends, or chosen charities.

Receiving an inheritance can be a blessing in the present, but also a tie to the past. With my two brothers, I own a third of a 17-acre property that my father has already put in our names. He inherited it from his mother, and she from my great-grandmother. It gives me joy to walk past the tumbledown house and barn built from timber milled on site, then to stroll through the pasture and into the piney woods behind a small pond. Knowing that it comes to me as a family inheritance makes it special.

Today's text speaks of an inheritance that comes, not from any earthly source, but from God.

In Christ we are blessed (vv. 3-6)

Eph. 1:3-14 is amazing in its grammatical complexity. In the Greek text, it is written as one sentence: one long, breathless, eye-popping call for Christian people to fill their lives with days of praise for all that God has done.

Fortunately, English translations tend to break it up into more digestible bits. 📖

Paul begins with a reminder of just how many ways God has blessed us, careful to point out that these blessings come through Jesus Christ. Throughout



Ephesians 1:7-8a –
“In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us.”

today's text, “in him” and “in Christ” will be key words. We have these blessings – blessings that have changed our lives and can change others through us – through the one we call Jesus, the Christ.

Paul rejoices that God has blessed us in Christ with “every spiritual blessing” (v. 3), and the first of these is that God has chosen us to be adopted as children through the work of Christ (vv. 4-6). Faith traditions that believe in predestination depend heavily on this text, interpreting it to suggest that God has chosen certain persons to be saved, even before the foundation of the world. 📖

The problem with a strong view of personal predestination is that it robs humankind of any kind of meaningful freedom while also undermining the missionary imperative of the gospel. That mission mandate is taught far more clearly than the few ambiguous references used to support a belief in predestination.

If God has already chosen every person who will be saved, then one

could argue that there is no point in spreading the gospel, because God will save whom God desires with no help from us. In the early part of the mid-19th century, Baptists engaged in a heated conflict between “Particular Baptists,” who believed that Christ died only for those particular “elect” persons, and “General Baptists,” who believed that Christ died for all. The missionary vs. anti-missionary controversy split many churches, sometimes resulting in side-by-side “Missionary” and “Primitive” (anti-missionary) Baptist churches. 📖

Some non-predestinarians deal with the troublesome text by affirming that God simply knows who will trust him even before they do it, but there is another way to read the text. The point Paul is making is not that God has foreordained Simon and Sally to be saved and adopted as God's children, while rejecting Mabel and Matthew. Remember that Paul is writing to the church – to a group of people who have chosen to follow Christ. God has

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in fact foreordained that every person who trusts in Christ can be saved, can become a part of the church, can experience all the blessings God wants his children to have.

God saves us not only as individuals, but also as a community of faith. Paul is not teaching that God's eternal plan has a roster of predestined believers, but that God's eternal providence has a place for every person who chooses to accept the gift of divine grace. Those who believe this cannot help but give praise to God.

In Christ we have redemption (vv. 7-10)

After Paul introduces his theme in vv. 3-6, he begins three of the remaining sections of this lengthy 12-verse sentence with the words "in him." Some translations substitute the word "Christ" for "him" as a means for clarifying that the pronoun always refers back to Christ.

In vv. 7-10, Paul affirms that in Christ we have redemption. We have forgiveness. We have access to an amazing grace that is beyond our comprehension. We are all guilty of sin, guilty of rebellion against God's way, guilty of living for self with little thought for others. At some point, most of us have been guilty of lying, cheating, lusting, and worse.

And yet Paul says, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (vv. 7-8a). We could never fully pay for our sins – if God had a prison for sinners we would all be inmates for the rest of our lives – but Christ has declared us forgiven. In some marvelous way far beyond our comprehension, we can experience redemption through his blood – the forgiveness of our sins.

The word Paul uses for "forgiveness" (*aphesis*) is the technical Greek term that refers to a legal pardon. It is a mystery to us that God would love us so and take pleasure in redeeming us – but no wonder that Paul would celebrate it.

In Christ we have an inheritance (vv. 11-12)

Paul goes on to make the remarkable claim that God not only loves us enough to save us and adopt us as children, but also that God has set aside a surprising inheritance for those who set their hope in Christ: that we "might live for the praise of his glory" (vv. 11-12).

Paul was born into a Jewish family. He would have grown up hearing or reading about the inheritance of the land that God had promised to Israel. In the gospel he had learned of an even greater inheritance, an eternal one, offered to those who trust in God. This inheritance doesn't come when someone else dies, in the normal order of events. The inheritance is ours even now, but we experience it in full when we die. 🇺🇸

Paul makes a point of saying that this is one reason God has planned such a glorious future for us: that we might be motivated to live in praise to God "so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory" (v. 12).

Paul believed that the first generation of Christian believers had a notable privilege and a special responsibility. Their lives of praise would set a pattern for others to follow as they called them to lives of faith. We are called to follow that same pattern and witness to others through our own grateful living.

If you've ever helped to put shingles on a house, you learned that every row of shingles is a guide for those that come after. The man who first instructed me in the art of roofing also cut a piece of scrap shingle to the proper length so I could check that each succeeding row was just the right distance above the one below: he called the handy guide a "preacher."

In a similar fashion, every generation of Christians provides a pattern for the next to follow, and sometimes

we need a good preacher to keep us straight. If we would lead those who come after us rightly, then we will lead them to offer praise to God, not just with their words, but with their actions.

We don't just praise God when we sing hymns on Sunday, but when we show love to a child on Monday, when we feed the hungry on Tuesday, when we listen to a hurting friend on Wednesday. We praise God when we visit the sick on Thursday, when we repair a toilet on Friday, even when we enjoy wholesome family recreation on Saturday. Because Jesus Christ has filled our hearts with amazing grace, we fill our lives with days of praise. 🇺🇸

In Christ we know the Holy Spirit (vv. 13-14)

All of this sounds good, but we know that there are days when we don't feel so full of praise and may question how real this eternal inheritance might be. Paul's response was to insist that God offers a taste of heaven on earth as we open our hearts and lives to the presence of the Holy Spirit that marks us like an indelible seal.

The Spirit is the "pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people," Paul said, "to the praise of his glory" (vv. 13-14).

Jesus no longer walks with us as he walked with Mary and Martha and Peter and John. Even in Paul's day, Jesus was no longer present in that physical way. But Paul believed Christ's promise to be present through the Spirit. Paul had experienced the touch of God's Spirit, and believed that the Spirit's touch today is the guarantee of God's embrace tomorrow.

The Spirit of Christ in our lives works not only as an internal guide to direct our living, but also as an outward mark of our redemption because of the change the Spirit works in our lives.

In Jesus Christ we have redemption from our sins. We have an inheritance in eternity. We have a present comforter and guide. We have, in short, all we need for a life filled with meaning and laced with praise. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

July 19, 2015

All Together Now

Have you ever been in a situation where you were a complete stranger, and you felt like you might as well have been a space alien?

I first had that experience in the summer of 1971, when I served in Indonesia as a summer missionary. I was considerably larger than most Indonesians, my skin was much lighter, and I often wore a solid red shirt with bell-bottom pants that had red, white, and blue stripes (remember, it was 1971). Everywhere I went, children would point and talk about me in their lovely musical language. I might as well have been from Beta Centauri.

I also remember feeling like an alien the first time I attended a Lutheran worship service. I didn't know when to stand, when to sit, when to kneel. I didn't know the responsive words to the short litanies that kept popping up. It was not a particularly comfortable experience.

Our text today is about what it feels like to be a stranger to the family of God, and about what God has done to bring an end to our alienation from him, and from each other. 🇺

Aliens, and not ... (vv. 11-13)

Though some scholars believe Ephesians was written by an admirer of Paul, the letter itself claims to have been written by the apostle during a time of imprisonment. He would have been writing as a Jewish Christian leader to a congregation composed mainly of Gentile Christians. That marked a startling shift in the ancient world. Jesus

Acts 2:19 –
"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God."



was born as a Jew, and later New Testament writers believed that his ministry filled the role of the longed-for Jewish Messiah. Many Jewish believers had a hard time accepting that God's care extended to Gentiles, too.

Paul had begun his career as a rabbi named Saul, so fervently Jewish that he persecuted fellow Jews who followed Jesus. After meeting Christ on the road to Damascus, however, he changed both his name and his attitude toward Gentiles. Paul recognized that the gospel of Christ was intended for all persons, and became a pioneer in the movement toward an inclusive church.

Paul was keenly aware that Gentile believers had formerly been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (v. 12). Before Christ's advent, Gentiles to whom Paul was writing may have been "God-fearers" who could stand in the outer courts of the temple compound and listen to the rabbis, but they were clearly not family.

As a result, Paul said, "You were

without hope and without God in the world."

Paul has drawn a dismal picture: strangers, aliens, without God and without hope. But the next four words change all of that: "But now in Christ." Something had changed. The door was open; the wall of division was gone. "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ" (v. 13). 🇺

Have you ever loved someone dearly, but for a while some problem came between you and led to a break in the relationship? You felt awkwardness, sadness, an uncomfortable queasiness in your stomach whenever you saw each other. You felt so far away. If you are lucky, one of you got up the nerve to apologize, or to say "I miss you, let's talk this out." And you did. You kissed and made up, or shook hands, and laughed together like old times. Two persons who were far away came near to each other again.

There was a time in our lives when all of us were far away from God. We mentally looked the other way. When

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Sunday came, we pretended it didn't matter. When we felt our inner, spiritual emptiness, we tried to fill it up with food or alcohol or some exciting experience. But for those of us who now belong to God's family, something has changed. We have been "brought near by the blood of Christ." The door is open, the wall is gone, our uneasy separation has been replaced by the warmth of Christ's embrace.

Family ties (vv. 14-18)

Paul wants us to understand an important corollary to this truth: Our drawing near to Christ impacts our other relationships. Living close to Christ draws us near to each other within the family of God.

Jesus has taken our old fences and walls and torn them down. Jesus colored outside all of the cultural and religious lines of his world, and he teaches us to do the same. Though we may come in different shades and color in different ways, we all belong in the same picture.

Paul declared that Christ "is our peace." Jesus didn't just show us how to have peace through keeping rules or avoiding conflict. Jesus *is* our peace: we know peace because we know Christ and live in relationship with him.

This is true for both Jews and Gentiles. Through the voluntary sacrifice of his own life in the flesh, Jesus "has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us" (v. 14). 🇺🇵 Paul was speaking primarily of barriers such as "the law with its commandments and ordinances" (v. 15a), which included rules designed to make the Jews distinct from other people. 🇺🇵 In Christ, God was creating "one new humanity in place of the two," working to "reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it" (vv. 15b-16). Through Christ, we are all related.

The word translated as "put to death" comes across more strongly in Greek, where it has an active compo-

nent and can be used to describe intentional murder. Even as Jesus was crucified on the cross, he purposefully wiped out ingrained human hostilities and prejudices so that he could make room for love and forgiveness and harmony in humanity.

That doesn't mean we don't still face division, prejudice, and even hostility. In our churches, we rarely struggle over differences between Jews and Gentiles, but we are aware of dividing lines based on race, age, income, marital status, education, cultural background, or other factors.

It is helpful to remember that God did not draw any of those lines, but through Jesus, God has erased them all. For those who believe, we might say, everybody is somebody's one body. That somebody is Jesus Christ. Together, we make up the one body of Christ, and we are called to love one another. 🇺🇵

We know it is easier to love people in the abstract than in the flesh. Most of us can resonate with the wag who said "I love humanity: it's people I can't stand!" But it is people who make up the church – people of all races, ethnicities, economic backgrounds, and political persuasions. In Christ we are no longer strangers, no longer aliens, no longer separated from God and therefore no longer estranged from each other.

In vv. 17-18 Paul returns to the subject of peace, which he introduced in v. 14. Christ proclaimed peace to all, he said. We have equal access to God and equal responsibility to live in peace, because we all come to God through the same Spirit.

A firm foundation (vv. 19-22)

Drawing on multiple metaphors, Paul closes the chapter by emphasizing the unity of believers. We are "no longer strangers or aliens," he wrote, but "citizens with the saints and also members

of the household of God" (v. 19).

In other words, we are not only fellow citizens of God's kingdom, but also brothers and sisters in God's family.

And what holds this new unity of former antagonists together? We're like a building, Paul said, that stands "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (v. 20a). By "apostles," Paul refers to the eyewitnesses of the gospel who had first proclaimed it. Without their witness, there would have been no church.

By "prophets," he may have in mind both the Old Testament prophets who spoke of a coming Messiah, but spoke primarily of the New Testament preachers who proclaimed the gospel of a resurrected and present Christ. Without their witness, the church could quickly fade.

Apostles and prophets may be at the foundation of the church, but "Christ Jesus himself" is the cornerstone, in whom "the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (v. 21).

It is Christ who holds the building together, a structure that is still growing to become the "holy temple in the Lord" that God intended. The locus of our worship is not in a physical building, no matter how magnificent, but in the fellowship of a unified people bound together by their common relationship with God in Christ.

The purpose of this spiritual building is to be "a dwelling place for God" (v. 22). Paul had used a similar metaphor in 1 Cor. 3:16, when he wrote "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" The presence of the Holy Spirit is the mark of the true church, the animating force that binds all believers into a unified worshiping community.

Today there are many who think of faith as a completely private thing, often claiming to be "spiritual but not religious." Paul would have had little patience for the notion of a solo faith. True spirituality, he believed, was found in the community of believers. That is where we worship – and grow – together. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Ephesians 3:14-21

July 26, 2015

It's All Beyond Me

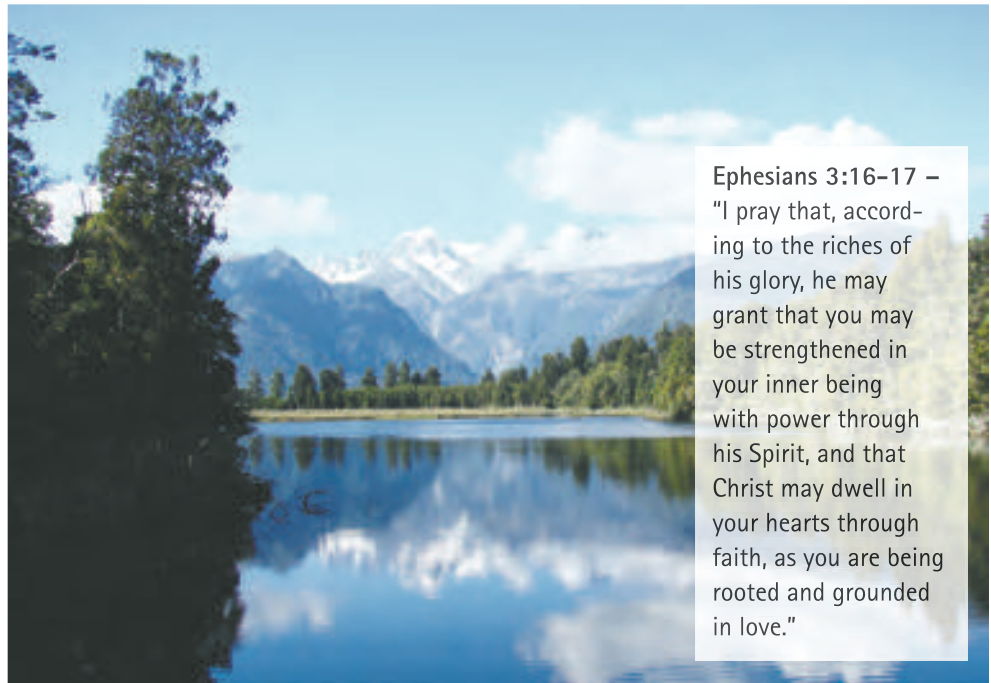
Is there anyone who doesn't like sunsets? As a much younger minister, while doing resort ministry at a nearby lake, I once paddled a small inflatable raft away from shore so I could lie back and watch the sun set over the open water. For more than an hour I watched as the small yellow globe sank steadily lower while appearing ever larger.

Amplified and colored by increasing layers of atmosphere, the sun went through every rainbow shade between yellow and red, from gold to orange to flaming pink. When the gigantic orb finally appeared to sink beneath the waves, it was almost blood red, and I was so lost in wonder at the sight that it took me a while to realize I was in the middle of a large lake in a leaky raft, and it was dark.

Wonder can do that to you. As I get older, I'm more likely to catch the sunrise, and never fail to be enraptured as the first pink glow of dawn turns into a celestial melon playing peek-a-boo with the clouds, and ultimately into a white-hot fireball the eyes can no longer bear.

Being overcome with wonder brings the opportunity to feel most human, most vulnerable, most in tune with the power and the love of God. We can find such wonder in the miracle of birth, in the infectious giggles of children, or in the undeserved love of a spouse or a friend. We live in a world filled with so many wonders that we could all sing, with Louis Armstrong, "What a wonderful world."

Today's text includes a prayer (vv. 14-19) that consists of one long,



Ephesians 3:16-17 – "I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

compound sentence, followed by a doxology (vv. 20-21). As Paul prays for his friends, he is lost in wonder; not at the marvels of nature, but at the amazing grace and the powerful presence and the all-encompassing love of God. The object of his prayer is that we might come to experience that same sense of open-faced wonder for ourselves.

God's amazing grace (vv. 14-15)

In writing to the Ephesians, Paul had much to say about grace, including the familiar assertion of 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast." He went on to stress the inclusive nature of God's grace to Jews and Gentiles alike (2:11-21).

In today's text he continues that thought, marveling at the wonder of God's breath-taking benison: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name" (vv. 14-15).[↓]

The Greek text includes an intentional wordplay that is obscured in English: The word for "father" is *patera* – the root of English words such as "pa," "patriarch," and "patrimony." The word for "family" is *patria* – those who are related to the father. Paul bows before the *patera* from whom all *patria* are derived.

Theologians sometimes speak of grace that is in the background, and grace that is in the foreground. "Background grace" is all around us. Food and shelter, daylilies and dogwoods, the freshness of the air after rain are constant graces though we may not think of them as such or thank God for them.

There is also grace that is more in the foreground, like the love of a spouse who knows us inside and out and sticks with us anyway. The exuberant hug of a child is foreground grace, as is the concern of a friend when you have a need.

But beyond background grace and foreground grace is the love of a God who knows us and yet forgives us, who wants us to be part of an eternal family. It is amazing grace.

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



God's powerful presence (vv. 16-17)

The grace of which Paul speaks is manifest through the presence of God's Spirit in our lives. Thus Paul prayed that God might grant his readers "inner strength through the power of the Spirit" (v. 16).

We live in a world that craves power. Wars waged in the name of religion are often really about sectarian groups seeking power. Special interest groups are constantly seeking political power. We long for greater income because money empowers us to do as we like without being dependent on others.

The power Paul is talking about is different. It is not the power to control others or even to influence people. It is the power of assurance, the power of confidence, the power of mature personhood. The source of this power, Paul believed, was the indwelling presence of Christ, expressed through the Holy Spirit.

Asking that the Spirit dwell in our inner being is the same thing as asking that Christ dwell in our hearts, as Paul goes on to say in v. 17, while noting that the presence of God roots and grounds us in love. 🇺🇸

Sadly, we've become all too familiar with prosperity preachers who completely distort the promise of God's power in our lives. "Name it and claim it," they say. "Believe and achieve! Confess and possess!" Some go so far as to claim that Christians have the authority to command God to do for us what we seek. 🇺🇸 Such teaching is not good news, but bad theology.

What Paul wants us to have through the Holy Spirit is not the kind of power that allows us to make demands of God. Rather, it is the kind of power that grows from a relationship in which we realize that we are *not* God, but we also recognize the incredible truth that God loves us enough to dwell among us and bless us and guide us through the darkness of this world.

The key to experiencing the power of God's Spirit at work in us is to recog-

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nize that it is *God* who grants to us the power of eternal life and internal wholeness. If we have influence on other people, let it be because they admire and respect the inner peace we have and the outer love we show as children of God.

God's inclusive love (vv. 18-19)

Paul has prayed that we might experience the wonder of God's amazing grace and powerful presence. Now, he goes on to ask that we might "have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge," so we "may be filled with all the fullness of God" (vv. 18-19).

This sounds like a logical impossibility. Paul wants us to know something that he admits is beyond our knowing. Though he knew that none of us can fully comprehend the extent of God's love, he also knew we have the capacity to grow in our understanding.

Take note that Paul does not pray for God to love us, because God already loves us more than we can know and has demonstrated such in Christ. We don't have to pray for God to remove any barriers between God and humankind. That's already done.

What remains to be finished is our understanding of what it means to join with God in showing grace to all, even as we fall with Paul in prostrate worship before the God whose love draws us into an ever-new relationship.

That is our calling, but as long as we hold on to our old grudges, our ingrained prejudices, our labels and lines and divisions, estrangement remains. As we are able to understand better how deep and wide God's love is – as we draw closer to Christ and learn what it is to accept and to give uncondi-

tional and inclusive love – our worship of God will likewise grow deeper and more meaningful.

God's incredible abundance (vv. 20-21)

Paul closes his prayer with a joyful doxology that continues stretching the limits of our comprehension: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (vv. 20-21). 🇺🇸

Paul's prayer to this point has already gone beyond what seems possible. Is he whistling in the wind if he thinks God can really dwell in us and empower us and teach us to understand divine love? But Paul believed there is no end to what God can do.

The closing clause of this sentence stretches the Greek language to the breaking point. Paul stacks up double-compound superlative adverbs, as if to demonstrate that language has no capacity to explain God's love. He asks God, as the King James translation puts it, to do "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think." 🇺🇸 🇺🇸

God can do more than we can even dream of. If you find it hard to imagine that, then you get the point. We cannot imagine the depth of God's love, the wideness of God's mercy, the fullness of God's generosity, or the reach of God's power.

If we could just begin to grasp the greatness of God – if we could incorporate into our lives just a smidgeon of God's grace, a touch of God's love, a small fraction of God's power – then we would be transformed. Together, we would all be lost in wonder at the marvels of God's mercy and love, because we would see it written on our own faces and arms and hearts.

If that should happen, we would become like magnets to others who also seek the person and the power of God. That would truly be cause for praise, and we could conclude as Paul did in v. 21: "Amen!" 🇺🇸 BT

In the Know

Courtney Allen is pastor of Grace Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., coming from First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga., where she was minister of community ministry and missions.

Kent Berghuis is pastor of First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, coming from First Baptist Church of Lansdale, Penn.

George Bullard was elected to an additional five-year term as general secretary of the North American Baptist Fellowship, a regional group of the Baptist World Alliance. He has held the post since 2009. Bullard is president of The Columbia Partnership, a ministry organization based in Columbia, S.C.

Diana Garland is stepping down as inaugural dean of the Baylor School of Social Work. She came to the university in 1997. After a sabbatical, she will return to the faculty in 2016.

James N. Griffith of Newnan, Ga., died May 7. He was executive director emeritus of the Georgia Baptist Convention. A journalist before entering ministry, he was pastor of Beech Haven Baptist Church in Athens, Ga., before leading the state convention.

Greg Pope is pastor of First Baptist Church of Jasper, Ga. He previously served North Broad Baptist Church in Rome, Ga., Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., and Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky.

The Center for Healthy Churches and Belmont University have announced a partnership that will place the organization's home office on the university's Nashville campus. CHC will collaborate with the university's Moench Center for Church Leadership, the H. Franklin Paschall Chair of Biblical Studies and Preaching, and the Center for Executive Education.

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Interim Pastor: First Baptist Church of Whiteville, N.C., is prayerfully seeking an interim pastor. Optimally, this person will lead meaningful Sunday worship and Wednesday night services and fulfill other defined pastoral duties on a part- to full-time basis. First Baptist is a mission-minded, traditional congregation with servant leadership and affiliated with CBF. Candidates should be committed to Christ and have spiritual depth, strong communication skills and a seminary degree from an accredited seminary or divinity school. For more information, call (910) 840-9875 or send letters of inquiry with résumés to Interim Pastor Selection Committee Chair, 412 N. Madison St., Whiteville, NC 28472.

Senior Pastor: The historic First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, seeks a senior pastor. First Austin is a diverse, inclusive and welcoming community of faith seeking a spiritual leader who prioritizes creative preaching with theological depth. The senior pastor will help maintain our focus on the gospel's call to pursue justice and will provide administrative leadership to an energetic congregation and staff engaged in a broad range of missions and programs. Our new leader will provide pastoral support and will be lovingly supported as we walk through the joys and sorrows of our life together. For more information, see fbcaustin.org.

Senior Pastor: Kirkwood Baptist Church (KBC), founded in 1870 in St. Louis County, Mo., is seeking a senior pastor. KBC has been a leader in moderate Baptist life since 1990 and has been actively affiliated with the national CBF and CBF Heartland since their founding. We worship in a warm, traditional/liturgical style. Christian education is based on biblical authority and a respect for open inquiry with the goal of understanding and applying the radical claims of the gospel to all areas of life. KBC has a long commitment to cooperative and hands-on missions. The senior pastor we seek will possess strong preaching skills, be involved in moderate Baptist life, be committed to Baptist distinctives, and have the desire and ability to lead the congregation spiritually and administratively. Interested candidates are encouraged to visit our website, kirkwoodbaptist.org, to get to know us better. Send résumés to Pastor Search Committee, Kirkwood Baptist Church, 211 N. Woodlawn Ave., Kirkwood, MO 63122, or to pastorsearch@kirkwoodbaptist.org.

Senior Pastor: The First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C. (fbca.net) is accepting résumés for a senior pastor. Founded in 1829, FBCA has a large, active congregation centered on Jesus Christ and committed to his purpose. We celebrate the historic Baptist principles of

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freedom, friendship and faith. FBCA is affiliated with CBF on both the state and national levels. At FBCA we use a collaborative ministry model. We seek a pastor leader to continue the strong, vibrant ministries currently underway, while helping us discover a vision of God's path into our future. We reside in the beautiful mountains of Western North Carolina, known as one of the finest areas to live in the nation. After your prayerful consideration, we would welcome your expression of interest in becoming part of our ongoing community of faith. You may submit your résumé or written inquiry to Cliff Christian, Chair of the Pastor Search Committee, at 7 Woodbury Rd., Asheville, NC 28804.

Student Minister: First Baptist Church, Aiken, S.C., (fbcaiken.org) is seeking a full-time associate minister in student ministries. Located in the heart of the historic downtown area, our congregation is moderate, traditional and ecumenical with a rich heritage in worship, mission and nurture. As a member of our pastoral staff team, our student minister will have responsibility for all middle school, high school and college-age group ministries. Seminary training and transferrable ministry experience are expected. Send résumé with references to Randy R. Duckett, Search Committee Chair, P.O. Box 3157, Aiken, SC 29802.

Minister with Children and Families: First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., is a caring and compassionate church that, like Jesus, accepts everyone and is committed to serving our neighbors, community and world. We are currently seeking an individual to fill the full-time position of minister with children and families. The ideal candidate will be a seminary graduate; will have experience in local church ministry, a primary calling to work with children and their families, and an awareness of and sensitivity to stages of development in children; will express creativity in ministry; will emphasize developing and deepening spiritual formation in children and their families; and will be able to affirm our church's mission, vision and values. Interested persons should send a résumé and cover letter to Minister with Children Search Committee, First Baptist Church, 5 Oak St., Asheville, NC 28801 or to tbratton@fbca.net.

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My atheist friend's point

An atheist was upset with me. I had written a response in the local newspaper to an article about the growing number of people with no religious affiliation who consider themselves spiritual.

I gently suggested that spirituality without God is empty, and that what many people who claim to be spiritual without going to church really want is to be spiritual without taking any responsibility.

I implied that some people use their lack of faith in the church as an excuse not to give money to the needy or work for social justice. I argued that true spirituality leads people to feed the hungry, listen to the lonely and join with others who are doing the same.

What I wrote made perfect sense to me, but a self-described “hard-core atheist” in Colorado sent an email informing me that I am “painfully ignorant.” I have grown accustomed to a certain level of ignorance, but “painfully ignorant” sounds overly negative. He helpfully pointed out that those who attend church can be just as greedy, cheap and unfeeling as those who do not. This is not news to a Baptist minister. He wrote that he hoped my next sermon would better reflect the truth.

One of the disadvantages of emailing preachers is that it is easier for us to send a sermon than a thoughtful response. So I attached a sermon on why it makes sense to believe in God — and the debate was on.

My atheist friend responded with a lengthy rebuttal he would give if offered the opportunity to speak at my church — an offer that was not forthcoming.

We ended up in a lengthy exchange of opinions on heaven, hell, prayer, faith-healing, easy answers, difficult questions, astronomy, awe, skepticism, curiosity, the death penalty, black holes, quantum gravity, warped space-time, 15 billion years of evolution, Carl Sagan, Jerry Falwell, which one of us had the worse experience in Sunday school, subservient wives

and wives who are not subservient at all.

As you would guess, neither one of us has changed the other's mind. My atheist pen pal wanted verifiable proof — “no evidence, no belief” is how he put it. Ultimately, I had to admit that what I hold is impossible to prove. I believe that once in a while I see a glimmer of light that is the promise that one day the darkness will be overcome by the coming of the light. It is not much to go on.

My atheist friend is right that the world is dark with ignorance, hatred and death. We know that children will starve, terrorists will strike and racists will attack the innocent. Hard workers will lose their jobs, sick people will die, and drunk drivers will commit murder. Preschoolers will be abused, women will be molested, and senior citizens will be mistreated. Wealthy people will find it hard to give, lonely people will not find the friends they need, and lost people will not find their way home.

If it is not dark for us this minute, we should be grateful even as we recognize it will be dark again. The day always turns into night. When life seems hard we need to remember that no matter how dark it gets, there is a flickering light that tickles the retina just enough to give us hope.

The light shines on, into and through us. Some of the places we go are shadowy. Some of the people we know have not seen any light in

a long time.

We are the lights in our homes, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and church. God's light illumines everything we do — the way we treat our employees, serve our employer and speak to one another.

We are candles that keep others from cursing the darkness, candles on birthday cakes that celebrate life, flashlights that make emergencies less terrifying, searchlights looking for those who have lost their way, lighthouses leading sinking ships to shore, and traffic lights pointing out when to go and when to stop.

Do you remember singing, “This little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine”? Who can forget “hide it under a bushel, no”?

Like most children's church songs with motions, it was fun to sing. Our greatest joy comes in shining our little light. Light is the joy of a doctor giving sight to the blind, a lawyer protecting someone who is innocent and a follower of Christ shining light where there was only darkness. Joy comes in being what we are meant to be, doing what we are meant to do and shining as we are meant to shine.

We find it hard to explain, and we cannot prove it. But if we look carefully, we may see a flicker of hope even in the darkest night. **BT**

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

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By Kathy Gunderman

Big deal: I went to church

This past Sunday I went to church. “What’s the big deal with that?” you may ask. For a person with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), going any place where people congregate can be daunting, if not impossible.

Church has always been a place where I found peace and guidance. I love old hymns such as “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Softly and Tenderly.” Most of my social encounters as a child involved church.

During my career in the federal government I lived all over the country. I always found a church. When the chips are down, the church is there for you and you for the church.

When deployed to Afghanistan I attended church services at my forward operating base in Kapisa Province, led by a chaplain who would come once a month. Not many people attended, but “where two or three are gathered ... [God is] there in their midst.”

After moving to the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, a group of us would take an embassy van to Camp Eggers, a NATO facility, for Sunday night services led by the U.S. military. After one service, when another woman and I were waiting for our ride, there was rapid gunfire to our left.

We got into the van but were stopped at a checkpoint by guards in full tactical gear and on high alert. One opened the door and screamed at our Afghan driver, “You’re not going anywhere! We’re on bulldog! We’re on lockdown!”

Not a novice to such situations, I settled back to wait for whatever was going on to be

resolved. The woman with me had never been exposed to this level of alert and got out of the vehicle demanding we be allowed to go to the embassy. I explained that we needed to be calm and let the military personnel do their job.

Eventually we were allowed to go to the embassy through another checkpoint where a bomb-sniffing dog checked our van for explosives and then a last checkpoint where we went through a much more thorough check than usual.

An Afghan employee who had worked at the CIA annex, adjacent to the embassy, had shot a civilian contractor and a gunfight had ensued until he was shot and killed, hence the gunfire I had heard. Even going to church in Afghanistan can be fraught with danger.

Returning home to Maine, I found that integrating back into “normal” life was not so easy. Being in a crowd could bring on debilitating panic attacks, and it was difficult for me to sit with my back to a door.

I went with my daughter to church. Shaking inside, I sat in the seat farthest from the door, hoping that out of my peripheral vision I could see if an armed person came in. People would think I was insane if they knew I was having these thoughts in this beautiful, peaceful church.

Finally, feeling I could not breathe, I left the service to sit with my daughter who was



teaching in the children’s church. That was more than two years ago, and I have not been able to attend church until recently.

I was happily enjoying my morning when I felt the need to attend. I quickly got dressed and starting looking up times for churches close to my home. My plan was to sneak in inconspicuously, get the closest I could to the back, then slip out after the service.

Pulling into the parking lot, I noticed the church didn’t have a front door. The red double doors in the back appeared to be locked. So I continued around the building until a side door opened and a man stuck his head out.

“Where is the way in?” I asked. He said the red double doors “just stick.”

I was late entering and everyone turned to look at me. I slunk to the nearest pew, totally embarrassed.

I wanted to leave but was immobilized by my discomfort. We sang several songs that made me feel a little better, but the sermon rubbed me the wrong way.

“Just leave,” I kept telling myself, looking uneasily over my shoulder. Instead I turned to the book of Matthew and began to read the words of Jesus. His teachings on love and acceptance calmed me enough to make it through the rest of the service.

While I don’t think I’ll go back to that particular church, I will try again. It had been a stressful situation, arriving late and having the focus turned solely on me. But I felt triumphant in the sense that I toughed it out.

Nothing bad happened. No one came in and shot up the church. I survived, just as I survived going to church in Afghanistan in spite of real danger.

PTSD robs you of simple pleasures such as attending church or fairs or concerts or movies — any place where there are many people. I had made a tiny baby step toward claiming my freedom to enjoy all those things again.

Likely, I’ll never feel completely safe in a crowd. But I can see a future where I can sing “I’ll Fly Away” without actually flying away. **BT**

—Kathy Gunderman lives in northern Maine and blogs at whitehairedwisdom.com.



Coaching for ministers is tool for growth

By Charlie Fuller

Recently, *Forbes* magazine ranked the most demanding leadership roles. The role of minister came in at number five, ahead of corporate CEOs and politicians.

A minister might be administering a budget, preaching a worship service, counseling a congregant, visiting someone in a hospital, working up a budget, negotiating a personnel issue along with any number of other diverse things — maybe all on the same day!

In addition, the people who place the most demands on a minister are the very people with whom that minister should share the deepest community. These are only a couple of the reasons ministers have a challenging life.

What if there was a way to help ministers better negotiate their journeys? A tool that would help them become more effective leaders? To find more focus and clarity in their roles? To be better listeners? To lead more confidently? To better manage conflict? To more effectively understand their ministry contexts?

The good news is that there is such a tool. It's called coaching.

According to the International Coach Federation, coaching is "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, which is particularly important in today's uncertain and complex environment. Coaches honor the client as the expert in his or her life and work and believe every client is creative, resourceful and whole....This process helps clients dramatically improve their outlook on work and life, while improving their leadership skills and unlocking their potential."

During the fall of 2014, I implemented a research project as a part of my Doctor of Ministry studies at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. Coaching has been a part of ministerial life for several years, yet this was the first research study to assess the specific benefits of coaching for ministers and determine if the benefits claimed above hold true for ministers.

Ten coaches who coach ministers and 20 ministers who had gone through coaching participated. These ministers were both male

and female. Some were senior pastors, and others filled different ministerial roles. Some were young, and some had been in ministry for many years. They overwhelmingly found coaching to be most helpful to their work as ministers.

The ministers and the coaches found coaching to be particularly helpful in gaining clarity and focus.

One minister said, "I have found coaching to be quite valuable as a safe outlet to help process the demands of ministry. From time to time my coach would help me gain a new perspective that was previously unavailable to me.

Also, I noticed that I tend to leave my coaching sessions with renewed focus and energy."

One of the coaches described the following benefits of coaching: "Clarity of calling and purpose. This leads to clarity about how to use their time and gifts in ministry and more effective time and resource management. [Coaching provides] understanding and space to process relational issues with staff and other church members..."

Coaching was found to provide specific help to ministerial leadership.

One minister reported: "I have a better understanding of who I am and how I function as a leader. I know what my triggers are for anxiety and how to see through them to what is really happening. I am better at identifying how things are not 'about me' but are merely



happening around me."

Another reported: "I believe coaching has helped me function better as a leader in a variety of contexts. Also, as the coaching relationship has continued and I've developed as a minister and a leader, the coaching conversations have changed over time. They used to be about time management and my search for the best 'tool' to manage my time and organizational life. But over time, the conversations and coaching calls have been more about leadership in difficult moments, maintaining faithfulness to a call and not a place, and the recognition that I am capable of leadership in ways I haven't yet dreamed of."

One minister gave the following testimony to the power of coaching: "Without coaching I would no longer be in ministry. I doubt very much that I would even call myself a person of faith. With the help of my coach I have been able to see myself more clearly: my strengths and weaknesses; prioritize new skill acquisition as I've grown professionally; see different perspectives for better strategic leadership; know when I need help; have the courage to take hard and risky steps in my leadership."

The quotes above are only a small sample of the specific benefits of coaching for ministers. For further information, visit chchurches.org, or discoveryourtruecourse.com or transformingsolutions.org. **BT**

—Charlie Fuller is minister for congregational life at Second Baptist Church of Little Rock, Ark.

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Unburied treasure

Caswell rich in history, beauty and spiritual commitments

The sun glistens off the historic Oak Island lighthouse during an early morning walk on Caswell's quiet beach.

OAK ISLAND, N.C. — They come from near and far, Baptists and not, because there's nothing else like the coastal treasure known as Caswell.

Officially, it's the North Carolina Baptist Assembly. Staff members' shirts bear the logo "Fort Caswell." But for generations of campers, staffers and volunteers who have fallen in love with the place, it's just "Caswell" — and going there feels like coming home.

Changing missions

Caswell sits on more than 250 acres of prime property at the eastern end of Oak Island, where North Carolina's cutaway coastline begins its westward swing. Sandwiched between a mile of scenic beachfront to the south and a wildlife-filled marine estuary on the north is a Baptist bastion as filled with military history as with people who seek a closer walk with God.

Long before the coastline was commercially developed or the towering lighthouse was built, the mosquito-ridden tip of Oak Island was recognized for its strategic location at the mouth of the broad Cape Fear River, home to a major port in Wilmington and navigable all the way to Fayetteville. In 1825 the U.S. Congress approved funds for the construction of a fort to protect the valuable waterway.

The only access to Oak Island was by sea. The remote location and a scarcity of both labor and materials hampered construction of the pentagonal structure of brick and stone, which was not completed until 1838. It was named for Richard Caswell, a veteran of the Revolutionary War who had served in the Continental Congress and was elected as North Carolina's first governor after the Declaration of Independence.

The fort was commandeered by Confederate forces in 1861 and withstood Union efforts to regain control until January 1865, when the fall of nearby Fort Fisher prompted Confederates to abandon all surrounding forts and batteries, spike the guns, and blow up as much ammunition as possible. The considerable munitions in Fort Caswell's

magazines included more than 100,000 pounds of black powder, and the resulting explosion was so massive that residents in Wilmington could see the fireball and feel the ground shake from 30 miles away.

The ruined fort entered caretaker status until 1896, when several additional earthen and concrete batteries were built and armed over the course of a decade, serving during the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the early years of the 20th century. New construction included a hospital, headquarters, officers' housing, and a protective sea wall extending for more than a mile around the eastern tip of the island.

During World War I, Fort Caswell served as a training base for thousands of fresh troops preparing for the European front. Soldiers lived in a tent city before a dozen two-story cantonment barracks were constructed, largely of pre-fabricated materials, just inside the gate. The parade ground was a busy place.

After the war, the batteries were disarmed and the fort once again fell idle. A bridge and road across Oak Island were built in 1928, and in 1937 the fort was sold to private developers who sought to turn it into a health resort.

The hospital was repurposed as a luxury hotel (now called Lantana), and two sunken concrete gun emplacements atop Battery Caswell (connected to the old masonry fort) were walled off to form swimming pools boasting hot mineral-rich water from an artesian well that had been drilled during the expansion phase leading up to the war.

During World War II, Fort Caswell was again turned to a military purpose, repurchased (for \$75,000) by the Navy for use as a submarine tracking station, communications center, and as a supply/repair base for small craft used in patrolling the area. Many wounded servicemen were brought to Caswell for staging before being shipped to inland hospitals.

A hundred tons of metal were donated to the war cause, much of it almost certainly from the old fortifications and batteries. Additions included the buildings currently known as Long Bay, Boys' Barracks and Girls' Barracks.

Following the war, the property was again decommissioned, declared surplus, and put up for sale. North Carolina Congressman Charles B. Deane, who also served as the Baptist State Convention's recording secretary, envisioned a more peaceful purpose for the fort. He led a small contingent of Baptist leaders to Washington D.C. to discuss a purchase: Fort Caswell was about to receive a new mission.

Changing lives

Late in 1949 the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC) purchased Caswell's 248.8 acres "plus any accretions thereunto" for a total of \$86,000. Richard K. Redwine, who had previously led "Camp Seaside," a small Baptist camp at Carolina Beach, became the first director.

Redwine and a small staff went to work: Navy gray and Army olive barracks were painted white, and in 1950 the "Seashore Retreat" began hosting summer camps for Baptist youth and children, utilizing a summer staff of college students.

Fred Smith followed Redwine as director in 1957, and the campus was remodeled and expanded in various ways. Officers' quarters became cottages for housing while other buildings were converted to classrooms.

The 1,000-seat Hatch Auditorium was built with funds from the estate of Episcopalian Rachel E. Hatch, who believed that "Baptists have their finger on the pulse of humanity and seek to touch the needs of the people."

Road improvements led to the commercial development of Oak Island during the 1960s, increasing Caswell's visibility and value. Programs continued to grow after Tom McKay took the reigns in 1977, but in 1984 an unsolicited \$5 million offer from developers put the future of Caswell in question.

Some denominational leaders wanted to sell the property, but a study found that North Carolina Baptists not only wanted to keep the assembly but also to upgrade it, leading to a \$1.75 million capital campaign designed to expand the facilities and add a year-round conference center so Caswell could serve in every season.

In 1985 Rick Holbrook, then dean of admissions and enrollment planning at Gardner-Webb University, was hired to become the new director. Holbrook, a pastor's son who had come to Caswell as a child and had worked eight years as a summer staffer, faced a daunting task: Hurricane Diana had just inflicted heavy damage on the facilities, and the new projects loomed.

As the BSCNC's Tom Womble headed up efforts to raise the needed funds, Holbrook oversaw campus renovations including the relocation of Bald Head, Atlantic, and Sea Oats cottages to make room for the construction of the three-story Smith Conference Center, Redwine cottage, and a classroom building (now named for long-time supporter Dewey Hobbs) located behind Hatch Auditorium. With the dedicated assistance of contractor Wayne Honeycutt, North Carolina Baptist Men, and a host of volunteers, construction

and many upgrades were accomplished by 1989.

In the years since, Holbrook has overseen an ongoing renovation of facilities to provide more comfortable and efficient accommodations while adding a variety of appealing programs.

Countless Baptists from North Carolina and surrounding states can point to youth weeks or other events at Caswell as the genesis for life-changing encounters with Christ. Up to 1,100 youth at a time crowd into the assembly during busy summer weeks of camp with a spiritual or missions focus, as more than 70 summer staffers learn what it means to serve.

Few leave untouched by either the thematic programs or the austere beauty of the setting.

Changing times

As times have changed and BSCNC funding has declined, Holbrook and his staff have sought new ways to generate needed revenue while simultaneously offering creative ministry opportunities.

Recognizing that the natural environment of Caswell's location at the nexus of ocean, river, and marsh offered a rare educational opportunity, Holbrook hired environmentalist Jenny Fuller to build a program focusing on environmental stewardship.

In five years, the program has grown to include two full-time employees plus an intern. The Cape Fear building was renovated as an exhibit-filled educational center, offering a rich new resource for campers and church groups.



Live oak trees line the walkway past former officers' quarters that now provide lodging for church groups that make regular spiritual pilgrimages to the North Carolina coast.

School teachers who learn of the program through science fairs and other means bring students to Caswell on field trips for an educational dose of the coast, providing needed income for the assembly and introducing new cohorts of young people to Caswell.

When the BSCNC stopped planning regular events for senior adults, Caswell took them on and expanded the ministry. Now a dozen or more themed retreats, including a December "Christmas By the Sea," attract hundreds of retired and semi-retired adults each year.

In 2012 Caswell gained its first major addition since the 1980s with the construction of Sandpiper Cottage, which can house more than 100 persons in two mirrored halves. Two more large cottages are planned.

In late 2013 Fort Caswell was added to the National Register of Historic Sites, recognizing its historic significance.

Caswell's appeal grows from more than its coastal charm, however. Many staff members have been on board long enough to serve multiple generations of campers.

Pat Blackmon, a longtime fixture in reservations, said people sometimes ask when she plans to retire. "Why retire," she replied, "when you're working in paradise?"

"People often congratulate me for the fine staff we have here, but I can't take any credit for it," Holbrook said. "I've been very fortunate that the right people came along at the right time."

Caswell's nimble staff has long been bolstered by volunteer labor from men and women who come back year after year to assist with various maintenance or renovation projects. Coastal weather can be hard on buildings.

"Once you start painting something," Holbrook said, "you never stop."

While some Baptists may have felt alienated from the BSCNC due to changes in its direction, Holbrook wants all to know they are still welcome at Caswell. The BSCNC gets first dibs on the popular summer weeks, but Caswell's facilities remain available for church groups or other events year round.

"We don't draw any lines," Holbrook said.

The assembly's wide variety of resources and talented staff make many types of events possible. On a recent weekend, Caswell hosted a choir group from St. Stephens Methodist Church in Charlotte, N.C., a group of volunteers from First Baptist in Elkin, N.C., who came to do pool maintenance and painting, a parent-child retreat from First Baptist in Raleigh, an assortment of women's retreat

groups, and an advanced science class from East Wake High School in Zebulon, N.C. — all while serving the local community as the starting and ending point for the annual Oak Island Run, which attracted more than 1,400 runners or walkers for half-marathon, 10K and 5K events.

Holbrook recalled another weekend when guests included Eastern Orthodox, Korean, Chinese and Hispanic events, among others. Methodist and Roman Catholic groups are also frequent visitors.

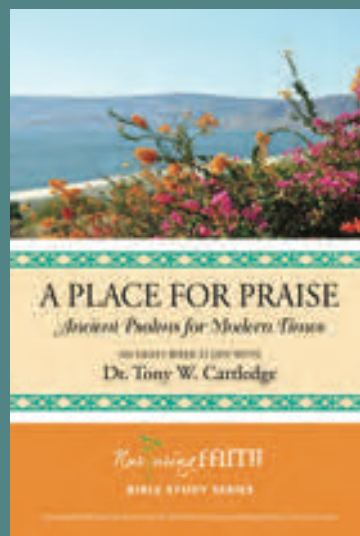
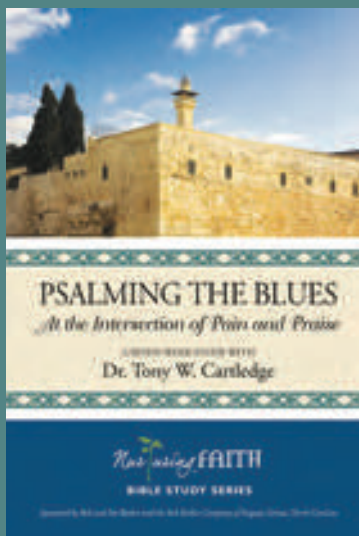
In a typical year, Caswell also plans a February women's retreat that may soon expand to a second weekend, and North Carolina WMU holds an annual gathering for Hispanic women.

Planning meetings or retreats for deacons, church staff, choirs and other groups are common. Caswell will soon offer discounted rates to harried ministers who could benefit from some quiet time at the coast.

After 65 years as a Baptist assembly, Caswell has become part of the spiritual DNA for generations of campers and staffers. For many others, the coastal outpost remains an undiscovered treasure, just waiting to be found. **BT**

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By John Pierce

“**A**lmighty and gracious God, You desire that Your people worship You in the beauty of holiness,” read church archivist Mary Etta Sanders from a litany of dedication.

Members of First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga., assembled on the front lawn following Sunday morning worship, responded: “Let the beauty of the bell’s chiming remind us that You are making us beautiful in Jesus Christ.”

This is no ordinary bell. It has a history.

And now it has a fresh face and a new place of prominence — as a chiming reminder of perseverance of faith.

Cast in West Troy, N.Y., in 1858, the bell was a gift to the Northwest Georgia church from local Baptist leader Archibald Fitzgerald. Weighing 1,000 pounds, the bronze bell — beautiful in appearance and sound — was well received.

Steeple of three earlier sanctuaries housed the historic bell. But its existence was threatened — like most anything of usable material — when Union troops marched toward Dalton en route to Atlanta.

Alert church members sent the treasured

bell southward to Macon, Ga., for safekeeping. The First Baptist Church of Christ there placed it in the belfry for several years — before returning it to the Dalton congregation in 1872 when a new sanctuary was built after the war.

Last year, the Dalton congregation that dates back to 1847 sent the historic bell to Cincinnati for restoration. And on Sunday, May 3, a most beautiful spring day, the bell was dedicated in its new place of honor.

Its melodious sound rang again and again throughout the brief dedication ceremony — and for many years to come it will be a chiming reminder of faith that endures and hope beyond any one moment in time. **BT**

To go or not

By Tony W. Cartledge

LifeWay Research published a recent survey of public opinion indicating that a majority of people think church attendance is acceptable (88 percent), even admirable (65 percent), but they also see it going downhill: 55 percent said they believe the church in America is declining, and 42 percent think it is dying.

Not all are so gloomy: 51 percent say the church is stable and 38 percent think it is thriving, while 36 percent perceive it to be growing. That was a surprise.

Bill Wilson of the Center for Healthy Churches, in a Baptist News Global column, cited the Top 10 excuses people give for not attending church: athletic events, diminished commitment, exhaustion, holidays, illness, children, parents, travel, vacations and work.

There’s no question that church attendance has fallen from its lofty perch 50-60 years ago. Those were the days when we faithfully filled out the six-point record system on our offering envelopes each week, indicating we were present (20 percent), on time (10 percent), had studied our Sunday school lesson (30 percent), brought our

Bibles (10 percent) and an offering (10 percent), and planned to stay for worship (20 percent).

I was proud to have my own box of envelopes and always strived for 100 percent. Despite the occasional illness and rare vacation, I managed to earn a six-year bar on the perfect attendance pin I wore faithfully.

There were no soccer leagues in my hometown, and no one would have dared to plan a Little League or any other sort of game during the sacred hour of worship. If you were a Christian believer and an upright citizen, you went to church on Sunday morning, or people considered you suspect.

Culture has changed. Blue laws for businesses and a polite deference to church by organizers for children’s sports have gone by the wayside. Sunday is fully secularized.

Some people still attend church faithfully because they’ve always done it and believe it’s the proper thing to do. Others have either fallen out of the habit or never developed the custom.

To get people into church these days, worship leaders feel compelled to offer something more exciting or meaningful than the option of staying in bed, playing golf, watching news programs on TV or going out for a leisurely brunch.

There must be a silver lining in this conundrum. We can at least argue that those

who do attend church regularly are quite intentional about it, attending with purpose rather than succumbing to the peer pressure of a more religious yesteryear. Or we can argue that the church is healthiest when it’s a minority, so it won’t be tempted to grasp power or become too complacent.

That still feels like an excuse, however — a way to make ourselves feel better in the light of declining attendance.

I believe the church will survive, though it will be less predominant in future years. Many factors play into the mix, but the churches that have the best chance of thriving, I think, are those that have the most effective preaching.

That puts a lot of pressure on preachers. But, as William Self wrote in the summer 2013 issue of the *Review and Expositor*, “We who preach must believe in what we do and do it more effectively. Effective preaching of the gospel and teaching of the Bible are essential if a church is to reach people.”

He boldly added: “In most cases, people have not rejected the gospel; I believe they rarely hear the gospel. With the juvenilization of American Christianity and the trivialization of the pulpit, we have created an anemic church.”

Those words are a bit like large vitamin capsules: they may be hard to swallow, but are good for us. **BT**

Historians say Southern Baptist women paved way in improving race relations

Baptist women were decades ahead of the male leaders of their denomination in improving race relations among Baptists in the 20th century, a group of historians said during a spring meeting in Nashville, Tenn.

While much of the history of Southern Baptist race relations is recorded in statements and proclamations by male denominational leaders, a panel on Southern Baptist women and race between 1930 and 1970 said Southern Baptist women had been developing friendships and cooperation with African-American women through relationships created by Woman's Missionary Union.

"I would argue that the strongest promotion of racial justice within this period came from Southern Baptist women," Melody Maxwell, assistant professor of Christian studies at Howard Payne University, said in a breakout session during the Baptist History and Heritage Society meeting.

Themed "Seeking Justice: Baptists, Nashville and Civil Rights," the event was hosted by American Baptist College and First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill in Nashville.

Laine Scales, professor of higher education and assistant dean at Baylor University, said personal friendships between black and white Baptist women date back to 1901, when the Women's Convention, the women's auxiliary connected to the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., invited Woman's Missionary Union Corresponding Secretary Annie Armstrong to address the convention in Cincinnati.

At the meeting the two groups established



Nannie Helen Burroughs



Annie Armstrong

a jointly funded project to support the work of two African-American missionaries in the American South.

The two groups held a joint meeting in 1904, the first desegregated gathering of Baptist women in the South. The joint-funding projects continued, leading to a long line of friendships between WMU leaders and Nannie Helen Burroughs, Armstrong's counterpart in the Women's Convention.

Nicholas Pruitt, a Ph.D. student in history at Baylor, said Burroughs adopted a "third position" between the self-help educational stance of Booker T. Washington and civil rights activism of W.E.B. DuBois.

Scales said teaching at the Women's Convention training school involved both Bible study and instruction in how to keep a clean and orderly home, to equip them for paid domestic work in white households.

Maxwell said the WMU magazine *Royal Service* stopped short of promoting direct involvement in the civil rights movement, but as early as 1946 identified race as "the most acute world problem of today."

Articles called for improved attitudes concerning racial prejudice, opposed the Ku Klux Klan and issued proclamations including "in the heart of God, black is as beautiful as white."

By the 1960s, *Royal Service* described a "new urgency in these days" for racial equality and urged readers to oppose all forms of

prejudice and racial injustice. Maxwell said one reason race was at the forefront of WMU's concern was that the race crisis in the United States had become a hindrance to foreign missions.

"Many WMU leaders believed the future of missions was at stake in the debate over racial equality," Maxwell said. "So if missions is important, we better have some compassion toward African Americans in order to not look like fools around the world."

On many occasions, Maxwell said, *Royal Service* quoted SBC leaders with alarming statements such as foreign mission efforts were "gravely imperiled by the racial problem in our country."

"They explained, as you might understand, that people in other countries were pretty reluctant to accept the gospel from Southern Baptist missionaries when they saw all these headlines about the inequality occurring in the South and viewed Southern Baptists in that context," she said. "Many refused to listen to Southern Baptist missionaries, while others became angry, and effectively threatened our entire missionary program."

While not overtly supporting the Civil Rights Movement, Maxwell said WMU publications promoted "contextually progressive ideas" that reached thousands of Southern Baptist women and "instilled a gradual understanding of changing race relations." **BT**



Melody Maxwell



Laine Scales

Out of the shadows

Liberation theology's founder basks in a belated rehabilitation

NEW YORK — Just saying the words “liberation theology” around Catholics used to be enough to start a schism-level fight, or at least raise a red flag in Rome. The theological movement that focused on the poor emerged out of the church’s social justice ferment in the 1960s, but it was always viewed by conservatives as an irredeemably Marxist version of the gospel.

Worse, they said it was a tool of Soviet communists who were using the Roman Catholic Church to foment revolution in Latin America and beyond, and at the very height of the Cold War.

The 1978 election of John Paul II, a Polish pope from behind the Iron Curtain who knew the Soviet menace all too well, followed by the election of Ronald Reagan as U.S. president in 1980, marked a turning point in the battle.

Reagan and John Paul helped spell doom for the Soviet empire, and the pontiff waged a decades-long campaign inside the church — helped by his doctrinal chief, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who would later become Pope Benedict XVI — to quash liberation theology and silence its most ardent supporters.

Today, however, it’s a wholly different story — and to listen to Gustavo Gutierrez, the Dominican priest from Peru who is known as the father of liberation theology, one might wonder what all the fuss was about.

“Liberation theology, from the first line of the book until the last line, is against Marxism,” Gutierrez said May 6 at an event in his honor at Fordham University’s Manhattan campus. The book he referred to was his landmark 1971 work, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*.

For Karl Marx, Christianity was “oppression,” he said. But the 85-year-old Gutierrez said his life’s work is committed to the view that “Christianity is liberation.”

Who could argue with that? Certainly not Pope Francis, who has put poverty, and the poor, at the top of his agenda for the church. He’s brushed off the “Marxist” and “communist” labels, even saying in 2013, “I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don’t feel offended.”

But in emphasizing the “preferential option



Left to right, Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras; German theologian, Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, head of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; and the Rev. Gustavo Gutierrez, during a news conference to unveil Mueller’s book on Feb. 25, 2014 in Rome. Religion News Service photo by David Gibson.

for the poor,” the pope has helped to bring liberation theology in from the cold.

The Vatican’s semiofficial newspaper, *L’Osservatore Romano*, has written that with Francis’ election, liberation theology can no longer “remain in the shadows to which it has been relegated for some years.” Francis has an ally in his own doctrinal czar — a German theologian, Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, who was appointed by Pope Emeritus Benedict.

Before he became a senior churchman, Mueller spent every summer for 15 years in Peru, teaching theology in the poorest regions and becoming good friends with Gutierrez — and something of a convert to liberation theology. Last year Gutierrez spoke at a Vatican launch of Mueller’s book, *Poor for the Poor: The Mission of the Church*.

That’s a long way from the days when the Vatican office Mueller heads was investigating and censoring liberation theologians (Gutierrez himself was never disciplined). More recently, Gutierrez was a featured speaker at an official Vatican press conference launching a major meeting of the Vatican’s charity arm, Caritas Internationalis.

It’s a remarkable turn of events for Gutierrez, a diminutive man who walks with a cane, gestures energetically with his hands and speaks halting English. He is in a sense the Yoda

of Catholicism: a small but sage presence who has known vituperation and exile, and who is now able to see his life’s work vindicated.

At an animated, 90-minute discussion before a packed lecture hall, Gutierrez recalled an American evangelical Protestant who came asked Gutierrez what liberation theology’s position was on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“My friend,” he responded, “do you think liberation theology is a political party and I am its general secretary?”

That drew laughs, but there are still some, especially on the Catholic Church’s right flank, who believe that liberation theology was a communist plot and that people like Gutierrez are promoting a threat that has outlived the Soviet Union and the KGB.

When asked about such claims, Gutierrez seemed exasperated and simply pointed at his head and spun his finger to indicate how crazy he considered such views.

Gutierrez actually seems more worried that critics often accuse the pope of being a Marxist and are anxious about Francis’ desire to have “a poor church for the poor” — a mantra that could come straight from Gutierrez and his views on what lies at the heart of Jesus’ message.

“We cannot think that he is alone in his fight to go back to the Gospels,” Gutierrez said. “It must also be our fight.” **BT**

‘Careful thinking, reflective action’

Nurturing Faith Experience to explore coastal beauty, theology’s impact on congregations

John R. Franke is an Oxford-educated theologian and the author of several books including *Manifold Witness: The Plurality of Truth*. Known for his contributions to the Emerging Church movement, he insists that theology belongs in the church, not just academia.

“Theology is often viewed by many in the church as an academic discipline rather than something that is inherently practical and ministerial in focus,” said Franke.

Book lists from academic publishers might cause some to think that theology is not that important for congregations, he said. But that conclusion would be mistaken.

“From my perspective the primary purpose of theology is to equip the church to live into their missional calling to be the people of God in the place where they live,” he said. “This is a complex task that requires careful thinking and reflective action.”

Franke will lead practical discussions on how emerging theologies impact congregational life during the Nurturing Faith Experience: Coastal Georgia, set for Sept. 28-Oct. 2.

“Theology shapes the life and outlook of a community and directs their sense of calling in the world, the activities in which they participate, and the way in which they relate to others,” he said. “A community that doesn’t think theologically is a community that has nothing to say to the world.”

Good questions and thoughtful responses are important in shaping congregational identity and ministry, he said.

“Theology helps the church bear witness to the gospel by responding to questions such as: What do we have to say to the world? How should we say it? How do we live into and out of our message of hope and good news? How do we need to change in light of our message?



John R. Franke

How ought we to respond to our neighbors and enemies?”

These “are, at root, theological questions and it takes work to develop a coherent and informed response,” said Franke. “Communities that think through these questions together will find that they can develop a clear sense of purpose in their lives together.”

EMERGING THEOLOGY

In the age of social media, tradition and authoritative leadership have less influence, said Franke. People are more inclined to think for themselves.

“One of the defining features of emerging theology is an unprecedented openness to a variety of ideas and a belief that no one has a corner on the truth,” he explained. “This openness can be liberating but also confusing.”

Emerging theologies, he said, place high value on friendship and relationship — something of little importance in traditional theological development.

“For many emerging theologians ... the primary concern is proper relationship and this is where truth resides,” he said. “They would base this claim on the primacy of Jesus Christ as the truth and suggest, without denying that technical philosophical discussions about truth and epistemology have their place, simply that

ultimate truth is a person, Jesus Christ.”

“Knowing truth and participating in truth depend on being properly related to this one person who *is* truth,” he added. Echoing Paul, “... we might put it this way, a person can develop a beautiful doctrinal system but if they have not love, they are just spouting empty words. The relationality of truth is an important element of emerging theology, and the implications of this are vast.”

Theology, however, is not for a select few, Franke insists.

“Those who profess faith in Jesus and follow his way in the world have committed themselves to a profoundly theological path,” he said. “As soon as we take a stand on the various issues that we are faced with in the world and in the church, we are expressing theological beliefs and commitments. This is inescapable for Christians. So every believer is a theologian. The question becomes, what sort of theologian will we be?”

Many people practice a kind of Christianity that is more like “folk” religion, he said. They hold to beliefs and practices handed down over the years that are accepted uncritically. While this is indeed a form of theology, Franke said the question must be asked: “Is it good theology?”

Developing critically reflective theology in communities of faith is important, he insists.

“Theology is not the province of a learned few who tell the rest of us what to believe,” he said. “Everyone in the Christian community has a stake in the doing of theology and a responsibility to add their voice to the conversation.”

Franke, who served as a congregational theologian in Allentown, Penn., will guide such explorations during the Nurturing Faith Experience on Jekyll Island in the early fall.

“I hope that all of us who participate will come away feeling that we have been refreshed by our time together through the enjoyment of God’s creation, sharing conversation about interesting and important questions, and having a break from our usual routines,” he said.

EXPLORATIONS

Native Georgian Bruce Gourley has spent many years exploring the least developed parts of the state's coast and photographing its stunning beauty. His knowledge of both photography and remote, scenic locations will enhance the Nurturing Faith Experience: Coastal Georgia, Sept. 28- Oct. 2.

"Cumberland Island National Seashore, one of the wildest places on the Eastern Seaboard, is home to the largest wilderness area in a national seashore along the East Coast, one of the largest maritime forests in the U.S., and one of the longest undeveloped beaches on the Atlantic," he said. "Henry 'Lighthouse Harry' Lee, revolutionary war hero and father of Robert E. Lee, was buried on the island, and the Carnegie family built mansions there."

The group will travel by ferry to the unique island to explore the forest, marsh and beach, and walk among the ruins of the historic structures, while encountering wild horses and other wildlife.

Jekyll Island, where housing and gatherings will occur, is also rich in history and features one of the longer stretches of undeveloped beaches on the East Coast. There will be

opportunities to see and photograph striking Driftwood Beach, one of the most amazing beaches along the Atlantic, and a tucked-away lake where hundreds of migrating birds pause in the fall.

Good food — including nightly dinners at local seafood restaurants — and optional afternoon activities — bike rides, recreation, historical tours — will enhance the time together as well.

"Jekyll Island abounds in history, and our tour will include 18th-century ruins, the landing site of the last documented ship to bring a cargo of slaves from Africa to the United States, and the remaining 'cottages' from the The Jekyll Island Club, the most exclusive club in the world from the late 19th into the early 20th century," said historian Gourley.

"J.P. Morgan, William Rockefeller, Joseph Pulitzer, Cornelius Vanderbilt and Frank H. Goodyear were all members of the club," he added. "Some one-sixth of the world's wealth was represented by members of the Jekyll Island Club."

Nurturing Faith Experiences, previously held in Israel/West Bank and in Montana, are designed to provide unique, well-planned, relaxing, informative and inspiring experiences with a highly personal touch. **BT**

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John Pierce

Registration fee of \$950 includes four nights housing on Jekyll Island, meals, programming and personalized tours. To reserve space, send \$200 deposit to P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 or register online at baptiststoday.org

NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE: CIVIL WAR @ 150

CHATTANOOGA, TENN.

OCT. 22-23

With Bruce Gourley,
Bobby Lovett, John Pierce

This two-day experience offers a closer look at Baptist involvement in and reaction to the Civil War — as well how the war's legacy continues to impact American society a century and a half later. The setting, rich in Civil War history, will enhance the learning experience.

Nurturing
FAITH
EXPERIENCES

Sponsored by: Baptists Today, Baptist History & Heritage Society, First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, Tenn., Tennessee CBF

THURSDAY, OCT. 22

First Baptist Church
401 Gateway Ave.
Chattanooga, Tenn.

5:30 p.m. — Registration and Reception
6:00 p.m. — Dinner / Presentations /
Panel Discussions

- "Who Is on the Lord's Side? How Baptists North and South, White and Black, Claimed Divine Favor"
—Bruce T. Gourley, Ph.D., Executive Director, Baptist History & Heritage Society
- "Legacy and Loss: How the Civil War Still Impacts American Society"
—Bobby Lovett, Ph.D., Retired Senior Professor, Tennessee State University
- Dialogue — Facilitated by John D. Pierce, Executive Editor, *Baptists Today*

- Fellowship/Book Signings

FRIDAY, OCT. 23

TOUR OF CIVIL WAR SITES

Chickamauga & Chattanooga National Military Park is the oldest and largest Civil War park. Historians will share perspectives on the war during visits to Lookout Mountain and the Chickamauga Battlefield.

REGISTRATION

Conference fee of \$45 per person includes all programming, dinner and tours. Pay by check to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31210 or by credit card online at baptiststoday.org. Deadline to register is Oct. 12. (After that date, call 478-301-5655 to check on availability.)

HOUSING

Rooms at the discounted rate of \$139 (plus tax and parking) are available at the Courtyard by Marriott, 200 Chestnut St., in downtown Chattanooga. To reserve a single king or double queen room at this price, call 423-755-0871 (ask for *Baptists Today* group) by Sept. 10.

Editor's note: Historian Bruce Gourley begins a new series on the religious faith of U.S. presidents. He is online editor and contributing writer for Baptists Today and executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society. His latest book, In Their Own Words, a compilation of articles in the recent series on Baptists and the American Civil War, will be available soon from Nurturing Faith.

Religion and the American Presidents

George Washington (1789-1797)

In 1732 George Washington, the great-great-grandson of an Anglican minister, Lawrence Washington, was born in Westmoreland County, Va. The elder Washington lived in the early days of the Anglican Church's establishment as the state church of the South.

George, however, entered a world in which the established church struggled to remain relevant. Contrasted with the religious hierarchy and forced faith of state churches, winds of spiritual equality in the form of the revivals of the Great Awakening were driving many Anglicans into the dissenting Baptist and Presbyterian folds. Washington's mother, remaining an Anglican but embracing personal spirituality, may have been impacted by the revivals.

Washington's own religious life and beliefs remain somewhat murky, allowing all manner of interpretations by modern-day historians and would-be-historians who collectively position the first president as a deist, an ardent evangelical Christian, or somewhere in between. Professional historians tend to posit Washington as a deist or irregular Anglican, while evangelical Christians advocating for the myth of America's founding as a Christian nation typically cherry pick evidence in an effort to force Washington into a definitive evangelical Christian mold.

An informed understanding of George Washington's religiosity must take into account both his writings and the larger American religious context of his day.

As mandated by law, Washington was baptized as an infant into the Anglican Church. He may have attended church regularly as a child and youth, his mother's faith likely influential during his earliest years. Well established is the fact that the future president became an Anglican lay leader — or vestryman — of his church, the Pohick Church, in 1762.

The circumstances of his selection as a lay leader, however, are ambiguous. By this time Washington was a national hero, a status



earned by the bravery and military skill he demonstrated during the earlier years of the French and Indian War (1754-1763) in which colonial militia and British soldiers thwarted France's attempts to exercise control over much of the continent.

Was Colonel Washington selected as an Anglican lay leader because he was a national hero, or due to his religious faith?

Washington's diaries, which he frequently referred to as "Where & How my Time is Spent," offer intriguing clues regarding his public religiosity. Prior to 1760, Washington's diary entries are few. From 1760 through 1767 the entries are more regular yet far from daily, while in 1768 he began keeping daily records.

An analysis of the daily records (1768 onward but not including the Revolutionary War years, during which time there are no entries) indicates that Washington was not much of a churchman. In 1768 he attended church 15 times, while in subsequent years

the number steadily decreased to between one and three times annually in the 1780s. Rather than attending church, Washington spent most Sundays visiting with friends or driving in the country.

General Washington's service during the American Revolution, however, included his alleged private baptism at Valley Forge by Baptist evangelist and chaplain John Gano. The story emerged after the war and was recounted neither by Gano nor Washington, but by the evangelist's daughter who claimed that her father told her of the event. The account, however, is devoid of historical evidence and is largely dismissed by historians, Baptist and otherwise. Apocryphal also is a post-war tale of Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge.

On the other hand, Washington's election as the first American president evoked a temporary change in his Sunday routines. Washington attended church more often, although not weekly. Befitting his position as the leader of a diverse nation and indicating his sympathy with persons of minority faiths, his irregular presidential church-going habits included Catholic services and (on at least one occasion) a Quaker meeting. In the three post-presidential years up until his death Washington again largely avoided church, attending services precisely six times.

Tellingly, never once in the entirety of his diaries did Washington indicate whether he agreed or disagreed with the contents of the sermons he sat through. In addition, he did not participate in Holy Communion, leaving church services early in order to avoid the ceremony, a practice for which he was rebuked, at least on one occasion, by a church official.

In 1789 Washington as president, and in light of his prior role in the writing and passage of the United States Constitution (upon which his signature was the first), assured Baptists of Virginia that he would guard freedom of conscience and religious liberty,

ideals that Baptists throughout the new nation insisted should be enacted into law.

In response to a letter written by the “Committee of the United Baptist Churches in Virginia,” Washington replied:

... If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution framed in the convention where I had the honor to preside might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it; and if I could now conceive that the General Government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution. — For you doubtless remember I have often expressed my sentiments that every man conducting himself as a good citizen, and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience.

While I recollect with satisfaction that the religious society of which you are members have been throughout America, uniformly and almost unanimously, the firm friends to civil liberty, and the persevering promoters of our glorious revolution, I cannot hesitate to believe that they will be faithful supporters of a free yet efficient General Government. Under this pleasing expectation I rejoice to assure them that they may rely upon my best wishes and endeavors to advance their prosperity....

In other correspondence President Washington also assured Presbyterians, Catholics and Jews of his support for freedom of conscience and religious liberty for all persons. It came as no surprise to keen observers of the day that Washington approved of the 1791 enactment of the First Amendment guaranteeing religious liberty for all and church-state separation (and of which Baptists were the foremost religious advocates).

In sum, Washington’s relatively few church appearances during most of his adult life, refusal to participate in communion,

commitment to freedom of conscience, religious liberty for all and church-state separation, along with writings devoid of religious opinion lead modern-day historians to largely characterize Washington’s faith as a private matter. Taken together, Washington’s public religious stoicism and private religious reticence reflected the times: Few Americans attended church with any regularity in the 1780s and 1790s, with estimates typically ranging from 5-7 percent.

So what, exactly, did Washington believe in terms of religious faith? Within his voluminous writings (including but not limited to his diaries) that date from the 1740s until his death, “Jesus” is mentioned only once, the lone reference in a public document pertaining to a political matter.

God, on the other hand, is vaguely referenced on numerous occasions by Washington, whose terminology for the deity typically took the form of “Providence” or “Creator.” Such language was typical of deists, who viewed the divine as isolated from the affairs of humans. In at least one matter — that of the creation of the United States — Washington did indicate a belief of the divine working in the affairs of humanity.

Belief is one matter, faith in action another. Of the latter Washington evidenced both strengths and shortcomings of 18th-century American religion. In private he was charitable to poor whites, while quite publicly he, like most other wealthy Virginians, Christian or otherwise, held many black humans in bondage.

During his final days Washington maintained constancy in terms of religious beliefs. Upon his deathbed the former president rejected overtures from ministers and did not request prayers on his behalf. On the other hand, out of moral conviction he took, through his will, a step forward of which few others of his socioeconomic stature dared even consider: the manumission or freeing, upon the death of his wife Martha, of as many of the slaves of his Mount Vernon estate as Virginia law would allow, as well as exemplary stipulations for the care taking of sick and elderly slaves.

Complexities of belief, action and morality aside, Washington’s death marked a milestone for the new nation. Following his passing, the war hero and first president’s legacy of freedom and liberty was evoked favorably, fondly and with deep gratitude from many pulpits.

Reaching to reconcile Washington’s many contributions to the nation with a larger narrative of religious faith and God’s providence,

some pastoral discourses strained to revision Washington as a model Christian, contrary to the evidence and despite earlier widespread sentiment among clergymen that Washington was a deist.

Thus began periodic and uneven attempts to appropriate Washington’s religiosity — or lack thereof — in the American mind. In the 1820s and 1830s, in the midst of the Second Great Awakening during which church attendance soared, some Protestants — Baptists notably excepted — lamented the secular nature of America’s founding and government.

As an early Christian nationalist movement in America arose and attempted to force the government to privilege Christianity over other religions, Washington (among other founders) became the target of some conservative Christians who openly criticized the late first president’s lack of religious faith.

Near the end of the 19th century an alleged prayer book penned by Washington surfaced (later determined to be a fake), leading to a renewed narrative of a religiously pious Washington. Now, some two centuries later, many evangelical Christian leaders tout fake biographies of Washington as a devout, evangelical Christian, often invoking the long-discredited prayer book as part of a mythological narrative.

Despite the popularity of revisionist and wishful Washingtonian history within much of contemporary American Christendom, the actual historical record portrays a public and private George Washington who kept religion, and God, at arm’s length. He clearly was not an evangelical Christian and, when speaking of the deity, did so in language typical of deism. Yet he was a friend of religion, siding with Baptists and other dissenting minorities in the securing of freedom of conscience, religious liberty for all and church-state separation.

George Washington, in short, was far less a religious man than he was a man of republican virtue. Duty, sacrifice, and honorable and equitable service on behalf of countrymen were his guiding stars, qualities befitting a new nation birthed from a revolution principled upon the ideals of freedom and equality.

Finally, in the manumission, upon his death of as many of his slaves as legally allowed, America’s first president demonstrated the possibility of the realization of the nation’s freedom ideals in the evidencing of a strong, if belated, sense of the basic humanity of all persons. In so doing, George Washington in the end embodied a distinct and prophetic Christian religiosity that transcended theological orthodoxy and personal piety. **BT**

More than applause

Portrayals of Bonhoeffer, Jordan call for new commitments to justice

Hearing Dietrich Bonhoeffer is different from reading his impressive works. Thanks to actor-minister Al Staggs, who has brought the Christian martyr to life on stage more than a thousand times, such is possible.

His portrayal of the Lutheran pastor and theologian has been highly praised. He possesses a letter from the late Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer's friend and biographer, commending Staggs for his "astonishing fullness of Dietrich, the personality and the message."

BEYOND PERFORMANCE

Bonhoeffer, a German minister who opposed Hitler's regime and the church's complicity, was executed by hanging in Flossenbürg concentration camp on April 8, 1945. At age 39, he was not widely known at the time.

However, his extensive writings and clear example of Christian sacrifice, along with the attention others have given to his remarkable but brief life, have led to Bonhoeffer's posthumous popularity as a theologian and martyr.

"His theology was validated by the laying down of his life," said Staggs, a few hours before once again putting on a prison uniform and the signature round-lens glasses that help him transform into Bonhoeffer.

By taking his audience into the prison cell where Bonhoeffer expresses moral outrage against the Nazi treatment of Jews and wrestles with his own understanding of a loving God in the midst of evil, he often strikes a chord with his listeners.

"In general, American Christianity is pretty thin in its theology," said Staggs. "It is not a success gospel; it is how true you are to the gospel of Jesus."

Applause is appreciated. But Staggs' greatest satisfaction comes from knowing that a deeper understanding of — and, he hopes, a commitment to — social justice results from Bonhoeffer continuing to speak.

Staggs recalled a young woman telling him that his portrayal of Bonhoeffer in a college chapel service had caused her to engage in social justice.

"When someone says, 'I was moved' or 'I was touched,' I understand as a performer



Baptist minister-actor Al Staggs has performed his one-man show "A View from the Underside: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" more than 1,000 times. Information on his ministry is available at peacewithjustice.com.

that I've incorporated my convictions," he said. "It is more than a performance if I can get the message across."

COMEDIC START

There is some comic relief — such as Bonhoeffer's conversation with an imaginary cockroach that is treated as a welcomed guest in his cell — in Staggs' otherwise very serious performance titled "A View from the Underside: The Legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer." Staggs is no stranger to comedy.

For decades he has performed at varied events doing impersonations of famous persons including Presidents Reagan, Bush, Carter, Clinton, and the younger Bush as well as numerous celebrities. His "Laughter for Life" program, he said (in his own voice), focuses on the spiritual, emotional and physical benefits of humor.

"I grew up doing comedy in high school and college," said the Arkansas native who lives in New Mexico. "I've never stopped doing it."

However, Staggs also never stopped following his ministry calling. He credits longtime Baptist religious liberty advocate James Dunn — "who preached my ordination sermon in 1966" — with "seeing the connection between following Jesus and making a difference in the public arena."

Staggs left the pastorate at the end of

1993 — after 22 years in full-time congregational ministry — to devote more time to his traveling ministry of performance.

ON THE FARM

Often Staggs takes on the persona of another gone-but-still-influential advocate for social justice — a fellow Baptist. Clarence Jordan founded an interracial farming community in Southwest Georgia in the 1940s and translated portions of the Greek New Testament (known as *The Cotton Patch Gospels*) into the local language and setting.

Rather than the stark German accent of Bonhoeffer, Staggs voices the slow, warm southern drawl of this New Testament scholar and lover of the soil who challenged the racism that had a stranglehold on his own homeland.

"The ability to take on a new character becomes a vehicle for communicating a message," said Staggs. Yet it comes with a challenge as well, he added, "to think as they might have thought."

Thorough research is the basis of character development — but inspiration comes when the messages of the past have relevance for today.

"There's some tweaking that goes on with the characters," he said. "I see new things: ethical challenges of today."

Christian social justice advocates such as Bonhoeffer and Jordan still have something that modern Christians need to hear, Staggs is convinced.

"All of these people I perform were radical people in their time," he said. "Radical in the sense of being not conformed to this world."

That remains the challenge for Christians today, he added: to avoid simply conforming to the accepted norms of society — and, rather, to follow Jesus.

Staggs did his first performance — as Bonhoeffer — on May 1, 1988, while pastor of First Baptist Church of Portales, N.M., thinking it to be a better way of reaching the college community than a typical revival service. Since then he's performed widely in churches, synagogues and other venues across the U.S. and in Europe.

"I didn't realize it would take on a life of its own." **BT**

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LOOKING AHEAD

Based on selected texts from the Revised Common Lectionary, these themes and lessons provide a broader and deeper study of the biblical revelation.

Spiritual Matters, Old Testament Style

June 7–July 5

June 7 – Genesis 3:1-19

“The Inevitable Apple”

Can we really put the blame on Adam and Eve?

June 14 – Ezekiel 17:1-24

“Cedar Mountain High”

Could fallen humanity really climb a holy mountain?

June 21 – Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

“Gratitude Squared”

Being lost and found calls for a special kind of thanks.

June 28 – Lamentations 3:22-33

“Goodness – and Grief”

Troubled people need a God who won't give up.

July 5 – Ezekiel 2:1-3:11

“Eat My Words!”

God's command puts a sweet twist on a common saying.

Mind-Stretching Matters

July 12–July 26

July 12 – Ephesians 1:1-14

“An Amazing Inheritance”

Paul leaks a mysterious secret, and it boggles the mind.

July 19 – Ephesians 2:1-22

“A Sacred Trio”

Grace, faith and reconciliation: what's not to like?

July 26 – Ephesians 3:14-21

“It's All Beyond Me”

God's riches are above understanding — but not beyond imagining.

The Trouble with Kings

Aug. 2–Aug. 23

Aug. 2 – 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

“You're the Man!”

Nathan sets a trap for a royal miscreant, and bags his prey.

Aug. 9 – 2 Samuel 18:1-33

“Paying the Price”

Sin happens, trouble follows, and no one is immune.

Aug. 16 – 1 Kings 2:1-3:15

“Redeeming a Shaky Start”

Solomon's prayer for wisdom was badly needed.

Aug. 23 – 1 Kings 8:1-61

“Prayers for Now and Later”

A dedication prayer designed for people who weren't there

Serious Church

Aug. 30–Sept. 27

Aug. 30 – James 1:17-27

“Real Religion”

“Religion” doesn't sound so unsavory when it's done right.

Sept. 6 – James 2:1-26

“True Faith”

Faith understands that mercy triumphs over judgment.

Sept. 13 – James 3:1-12

“Pure Speech”

James unleashes a tongue-lashing about tongue-taming.

Sept. 20 – James 3:13-4:10

“Highborn Wisdom”

Wise believers understand that selfishness is a dead end.

Sept. 27 – James 5:13-20

“Fervent Prayer”

The true power of prayer goes deeper than the surface.

Following Jesus on Highway 10

Oct. 4–Oct. 25

Oct. 4 – Mark 10:1-16

“Hard Words and a Soft Heart”

Jesus speaks about marriage, adultery and children.

Oct. 11 – Mark 10:17-31

“Of Treasures and Troubles”

Wealth and discipleship can make for a difficult combination.

Oct. 18 – Mark 10:32-45

“First and Last”

When cherished notions are turned upside down and inside out

Oct. 25 – Mark 10:46-52

“What Do We Really Want?”

Jesus' question to a blind man sparks helpful introspection.

A Time for Gratitude

Nov. 1–Nov. 22

Nov. 1 – Ruth 1:1-2:23

“You're All I Have”

The book of Ruth is really about Naomi, who should be grateful.

Nov. 8 – Ruth 3:1-4:21

“An Odd Road to a Happy Ending”

Naomi's scheme was risky, but Ruth made it work.

Nov. 15 – 1 Samuel 1:1-28

“Transformational Tears”

A painful prayer, a baby boy, a promise kept

Nov. 22 – 2 Samuel 23:1-7

“Thanks for the Promises”

Not really David's last words, but maybe the last happy ones

SEASON OF ADVENT

Hope Waits

Nov. 29–Dec. 20

Nov. 29 – 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

“A Time for Anticipation”

A reunion with friends is a foretaste of future things.

Dec. 6 – Luke 1:68-79

“A Time for Praise”

When a mute man speaks, it's good to listen.

Dec. 13 – Zephaniah 3:14-20

“A Time for Joy”

Patience pays: long waits do come to an end.

Dec. 20 – Micah 5:2-5a

“A Time for Peace”

Big things can come from small towns.

SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Dec. 27 – 1 Samuel 2:18-26

“A Time for Growth”

Good growth can happen, even in bad company.

Can religion and politics mix – for good, not evil?

NEW YORK — Religion and politics are assumed to be a dangerous brew, volatile to the point of murderous. But can this potion be used for advancing peace rather than instigating war?

That's the argument explored in a provocative debate at Fordham University. The goal, said moderator Eliza Griswold, was to go beyond the easy optimism that says "religion really has nothing to do with the problems of the world right now."

"It's a safe thing to say in political, journalistic and academic circles," said Griswold, author of the 2010 book *The Tenth Parallel: Dispatches from the Fault Line Between Christianity and Islam*. "And it's not true."

R. Scott Appleby, dean of the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame, didn't mince words: "Religious communities, including most religious leaders, are not peacebuilders and indeed have little awareness that they are called to peacebuilding, and what it might take to become a peacebuilder," he said.

Appleby argued that religion in practice isn't really about building peace, but rather "trying to build and maintain a flock" and



Shaun Casey of the State Department (left), journalist Robin Wright, Notre Dame's R. Scott Appleby and author Eliza Griswold (right) discuss the promises and perils of combatting religious extremism in a panel at Fordham University in New York. RNS photo courtesy Leo Sorel / Fordham University.

"protecting one's own religious community, even if that means exaggerating and amplifying discord with neighboring communities."

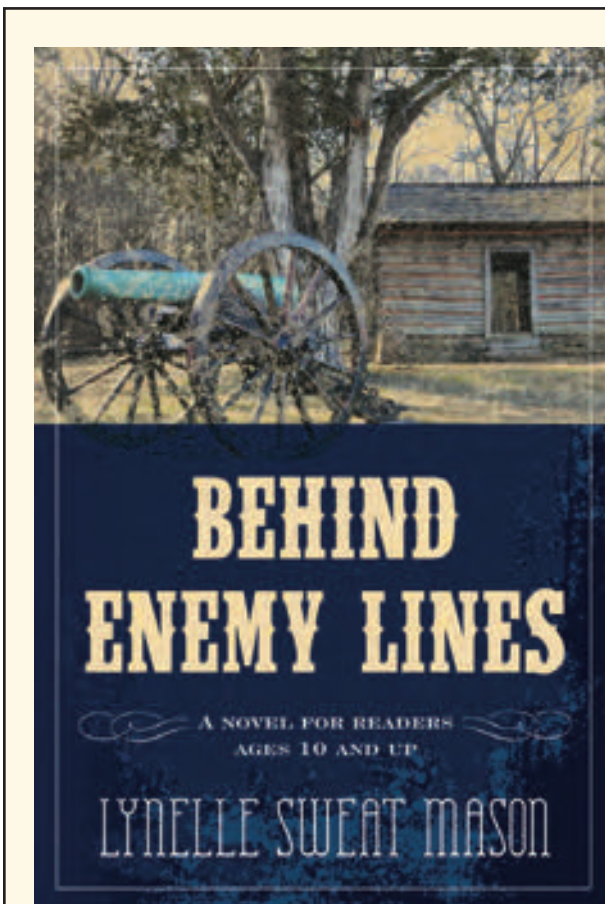
Appleby also asserted that interreligious dialogues and ceremonies are little more than "the parlor games of those not sufficiently serious about religious peacebuilding, which begins with and should be focused upon intra-religious reform and intra-communal mobilization for peace."

Religious leaders have little real influence, he argued, and governmental programs tend to focus on the abstract intellectual or wonky policy aspects of religion rather than what happens on the ground.

Shaun Casey, special adviser on religious

issues at the U.S. State Department, said American diplomats need to be reflexively thinking about how "lived religion" works in the context of each country and region, not how it exists in academia or in a seminary. His office is "trying to inject religion into the DNA of the State Department," Casey said. "If we are successful, our office will disappear."

By way of rebuttal, veteran journalist and foreign policy analyst Robin Wright argued that her decades of covering upheavals in the Middle East and elsewhere had convinced her that in fact religious leaders are often remarkable peacebuilders. She mentioned Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, for example, as well as St. John Paul II and the Dalai Lama. **BT**



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