

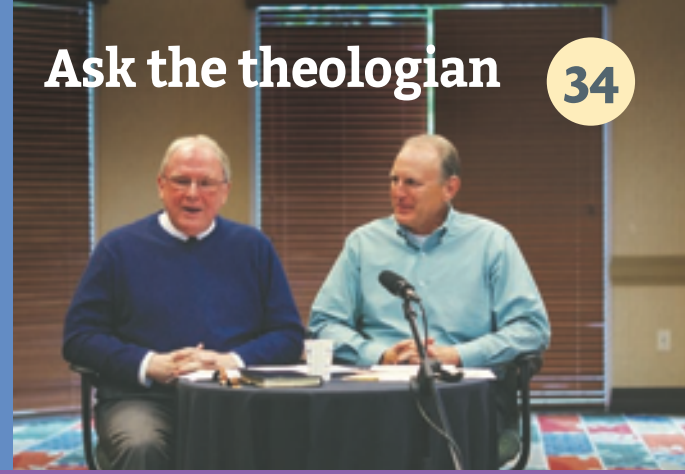


Baptists TODAY

NEWS JOURNAL

Ask the theologian

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'Church of the Nations'

Worship in various languages part of San Francisco church's continuing dream

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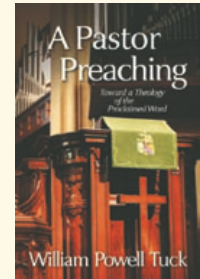
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Cover photo by John Pierce. Joy Yee is pastor of San Francisco's 19th Avenue Baptist Church that helps birth and hosts a variety of language congregations that often become autonomous but remain in fellowship under the "Church of the Nations" umbrella. **Page 4**

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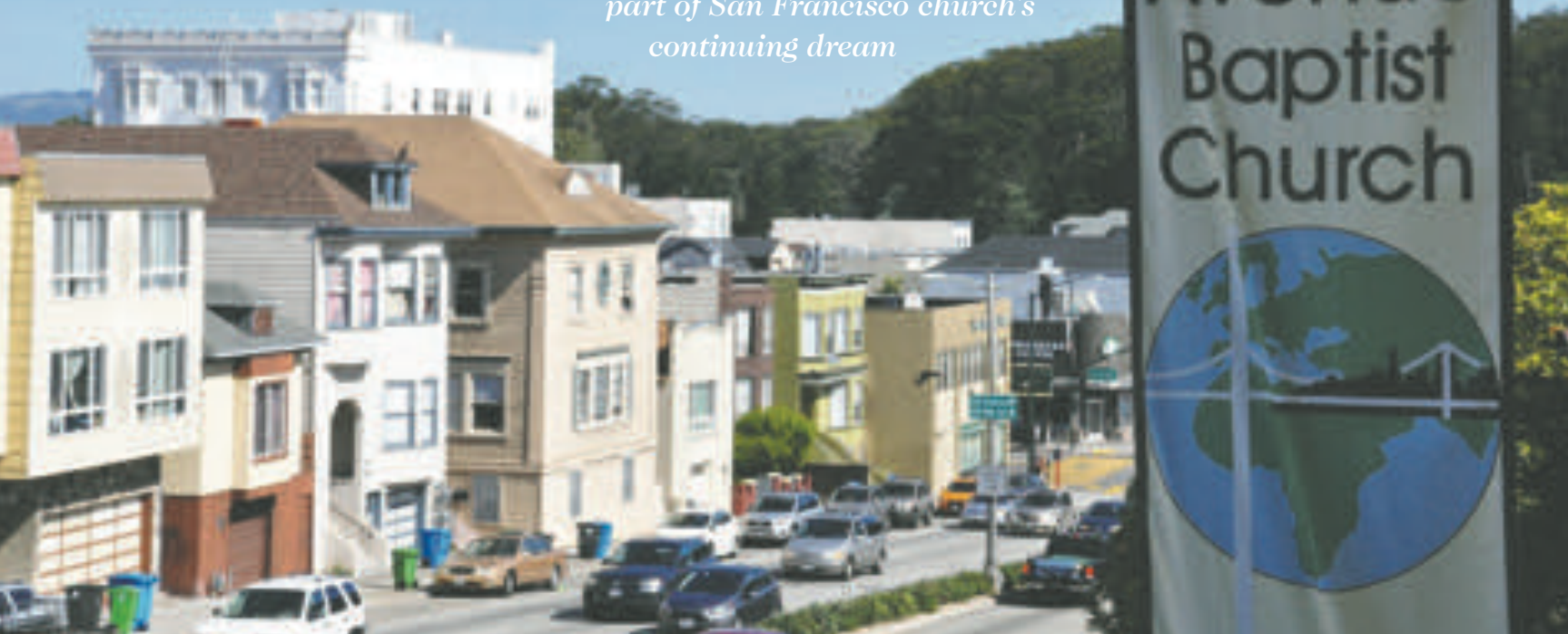
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Church of the Nations

*Worship in various languages
part of San Francisco church's
continuing dream*



SAN FRANCISCO — Some dreams unfold over time and weave their own courses. Such is the case with the “Church of the Nations” vision that started in the 1950s and continues to come to life along 19th Avenue in San Francisco’s Sunset District.

A diverse, English-speaking congregation forms 19th Avenue Baptist Church — which merged in 2005 with the primarily Chinese-American New Covenant Baptist Church. Joy Yee, who had served as pastor of New Covenant for five years prior to the merger, assumed pastoral leadership.

A “hodge-podge of buildings,” as Yee described them, houses the congregation’s worship, educational and ministry spaces. “Everything is a converted space.”

IN FELLOWSHIP

Chinese, Vietnamese and Mongolian congregations also meet in 19th Avenue Baptist Church facilities. A Japanese-speaking congregation now owns a nearby building, and a related Arabic congregation meets in South San Francisco.

This follows a model for helping to start various ethnic congregations and then affirming their growing independence while remaining in fellowship.

“That was the concept from the beginning,” said Yee.

While encouraging the independence of the ethnic congregations under the “Church of the Nations” banner, intentional efforts keep the congregations in fellowship. Three times a year — for worship on Palm Sunday and around Christmas, and a Labor Day picnic — the various congregations gather.

“All the churches in the 19th Avenue family get together for a multi-language service ... and then we have an international potluck meal,” said Yee, a San Francisco native and graduate of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary that earlier had a very close relationship with the church and where the Labor Day picnic has been held.

Rick Sample, who with his wife Lita serves in international ministries in the Bay Area through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said a new congregation has joined in the 19th Avenue celebrations.

“The Karen congregation that comes over from Oakland really treasures that time,” he said. “It makes them feel special.”

NO PRESTIGE

“19th Avenue [Baptist Church] is more known in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship than in San Francisco,” said Yee, a previous national CBF moderator.

Being a part of a prominent congregation

— or any congregation — is not a part of most people’s identity here, she said.

“There’s no prestige to going to church like in the Bible Belt,” added Sample.

As a pastor, Yee said she seeks the right balance in following up with those who visit the church without being intrusive.

“People seem to need this freedom to come in and worship and look around,” she explained. “... You have to gauge how much they want you to be involved in their stuff. It’s a dance.”

Finding connections that lead to deeper conversations can arise, Yee said, when someone talks about an experience that was meaningful to him or her.

“I might say, ‘I’ve had moments like that,’ and then explain what that experience meant to me.”

Yee said she’s learned that God speaks to people in different ways. As a pastor, she looks for “touch points” that allow for talking about spiritual matters in a nonthreatening or pushy way.

“Being pushy doesn’t work anyway,” she added with a smile.

LISTEN FIRST

“There’s a great deal of spirituality but people are weary of the church,” said Yee of many she meets in her community. “The challenge is to articulate what we believe.”



Joy Yee and Rick Sample say the Bay Area's wide diversity provides a unique opportunity for ministry amid the challenges.

Often she finds people open to conversations that are respectful and not too intrusive, she said.

"You listen to people's lives — and then tell them about our lives," she said. "They learn what we believe by default."

Sample added: "In general, there is an attitude that whatever your religion, it is fine — although many people are not religious. It is so different from the Bible Belt."

While ministry has some unique challenges in this context, Yee said it is wrong to assume that "everything out West is heathen."

"There are a lot of beautiful things here," she said. "... There are some profound things about faith that can be learned here."

Broad community concern for the environment and efforts to stop human trafficking, for example, can have faith communities following rather than leading, she said. "It's humbling."

LEADERSHIP

"That wasn't intentional," say Yee, with a smile, when it was noted that 19th Avenue Baptist Church has an all-female staff.

Jen Van Camp has served as youth pastor since 2006, moving from Atlanta after graduating from Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology. The Kentucky native lives in a house that is part of the 19th Avenue Baptist complex.

Mary Beth Johnson Deel came from Missouri to the Bay Area to attend seminary. She has been at the church since 1984 and serves as minister of music and worship.

Rachel Cockrell, a member since 1994 who

formerly worked as an accountant, is now the church's office administrator.

"But the (lay) leadership team is mixed gender," Yee added quickly.

STILL DREAMING

"It would be great to have this square combined and made into a facility that could house all of the family congregations," said Yee of the continuing dream of better connecting the acquired adjacent properties. "The problems are zoning and finances."

Architects in the congregation have explored what a newly-designed "Church of the Nations" complex might look like.

The late Francis DuBose, a missions and urban studies professor at Golden Gate Seminary and a 19th Avenue member, "kept the dream in front of the people," said Yee.

However, the balance she seeks is in continuing the unfolding of that dream while being attentive to the daily ministry opportunities that the fulfillment of that dream already provides.

"We are enjoying what we are," said Yee. "We love the people who come our way, and then they move out."

Such change is a reality she's learned to embrace as ministry opportunities come and go.

"San Francisco is very transient," she said. "We're kind of like a train stop."

And those who stop by — for whatever time — come from a wide variety of cultural and religious experiences, said Yee.

"The way you do ministry in the various cultures is so different."

CONNECTIONS

San Francisco pastor Joy Yee said she values connections to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, nationally and through the CBF West regional group.

"Our church needs CBF; we need the larger family," said Yee. "Otherwise, you can feel really isolated out here."

Missions, she said, connects her congregation.

Although CBF West covers a large geographical area that makes getting together challenging, the fellowship has shifted away from convention-type gatherings. Annual events over the past few years have included a spirituality retreat in San Francisco, a mission trip to the border town of Douglas, Ariz. (which drew a record 140 participants), and most recently a Montana event that focused on reaching Millennials.

Bruce Gourley of Bozeman, Mont., who serves as moderator for CBF West, believes Millennials can play an important role in ministry in the West.

"Millennials love different concepts," he said. "There is potential for Millennials to come out here and change what we think about church."

Yee agreed and suggested steps for making that happen.

"CBF West wants to get interns out here who feel a call — to consider ministering in the West," she said. "We could use those gifts and energies out here."

For more information on such opportunities, call CBF West coordinator Glen Foster at (520) 991-0948.

THE DRAW

Many people, often singles, come to the Bay Area for jobs, said Yee. But "it's a hard place to live economically," and they do come from everywhere.

"You can taste the world in your daily living," she said. "There are people here from all over the place."

Sample, who grew up in Michigan and moved to the Bay Area from Texas, said he's found "a great deal of respect and courtesy" in the ethnically-diverse region.

Yee said she is often asked, "What is the best thing about living in San Francisco?"

Her two-fold answer is: "The diversity and the beauty." **BT**

quotation remarks

“Our church has been convinced that it was the Lord’s will for us to sell the property so that we might minister more effectively.”

—Executive pastor Len Taylor, on the sale of the once-prominent Two Rivers Baptist Church facilities in Nashville to the local Catholic Diocese (ABP)

“Stated simply, the most common factor in declining churches is an inward focus. The ministries are only for the members. The budgetary funds are used almost exclusively to meet the needs of the members. The times of worship and worship styles are geared primarily for the members. Conflict takes place when members don’t get things their way. You get the picture.”

—Thom Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention, who has been studying congregations for 25 years (thomrainer.com)

“I am afraid that it is becoming increasingly harder to find the gospel in America. It is either wrapped so tightly in the flag as to be virtually invisible or relegated to a footnote to messages about ‘success in living,’ being nice and including everyone.”

—Roger E. Olson, Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology of Ethics at Baylor University’s Truett Seminary (patheos.com)

“Be humble. What you have today you may not have tomorrow.”

—Atlanta Braves Gold-Glove shortstop Andrelton Simmons when asked what advice he’d offer to high school players

“Grace will ultimately prevail. Only courage will determine whether its prevailing will occur in the stewardship of our time or a time yet to come.”

—R. Kirby Godsey, chancellor of Mercer University (Macon Telegraph)

“The children of prisoners are six times more likely to become incarcerated themselves. It was not uncommon for me to see a grandmother, mother and daughter in the same prison.”

—Lynn Litchfield, communications and development officer for the Chaplain Prison Ministry of Virginia (ABP/Herald)

“It shows that the Constitution upholds the rights of those who are in the minority.”

—Saleh Sbenaty, a college professor and longtime member of the Islamic Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., on the Supreme Court’s refusal to hear the case of opponents seeking to shut down mosque construction (RNS)

“There is a reason to remain vigilant about religious liberty, including something as simple as speaking out about the denial of such a right. A fundamental human freedom is at stake.”

—William McKenzie, editorial director of the George W. Bush Institute in Dallas, on China’s elusive religious liberty 25 year after the Tiananmen Square massacre (CNN)

“So much of what people take to be ‘Christianity’ is in fact an odd combination of things that really are in the Bible with things that are part of western culture from the last two or three hundred years. Figuring out which is which and how it all works is bound to be puzzling to some people if they’ve been firmly taught something else.”

—New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, author of *Surprised by Scripture: Engaging Contemporary Issues*, in an interview with Jonathan Merritt of Religion News Service

“Along the way I learned that life includes me, but is not just about me. We are all in this together. We need each other, and God made us this way. Volunteerism is one of the key fuels to keep community going.”

—Leslie Hollon, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio (San Antonio Woman)

“If I could go back in time and tell myself one important ministry truth on the day of my seminary graduation, that would be it: *You are incidental. But the work of God in this world is most certainly not.*”

—Amy Butler, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, who addressed the graduating class of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond (ABP)

“It was a surprise for me that it was put on a beer can by Holy City Brewing.”

—Paul Roof, fired as associate professor of sociology at Baptist-related Charleston Southern University after a picture of him taken at the 2013 Beard and Moustache National Championships appeared on cans of Chucktown Follicle Brown Ale (Daily Caller)

“We can no longer talk about schism as something that might happen in the future. Schism has already taken place in our connection.”

—Maxie Dunnam, retired president of Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, one of 80 United Methodist ministers citing “irreconcilable differences” in the denomination over same-sex marriage and other issues (RNS)

By John Pierce

Remembering Vincent Harding and lessons on how to disagree

Vincent Harding, who established a Mennonite ministry of justice and reconciliation in Atlanta in the 1960s, and wrote speeches for Martin Luther King Jr., and later a biography titled, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (1996, Orbis), died May 19.

News of his death brought sympathy for his family, a sobering reminder of how those in the forefront of the civil rights movement are moving on, and gratitude for spending an afternoon with this thoughtful, compassionate Christian two years ago.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Clarence Jordan (the New Testament scholar who believed what Jesus taught and put it into practice on a South Georgia farm) had a lot in common.

Both were deeply committed to justice and willing to accept the high risks of living out the hard parts of the Christian gospel. And both were Baptists.

While they held the same ideals and goals, they differed some on methodologies. And during the heated struggle for civil rights the two met quietly in Albany, Ga., to discuss those differences.

That's what Kirk Lyman-Barner of the



Fuller Center for Housing, who coordinated a 2012 symposium on Clarence Jordan's contributions, learned from Clarence's son, Lenny. However, he also discovered that this significant story had never been published — and that it was the historian/activist Harding who had brought his two friends together for that discussion.

To my delight, Kirk invited me to conduct an interview and publish that story. We, along with videographer Scott Umstattd, met Harding at the Atlanta University Center where he was doing research and giving first-hand accounts of the civil rights movement to current students.

With great insight, Harding told of that December 1961 meeting in the home of an Albany physician in which the two Baptist ministers and advocates for justice debated the

use of boycotts to bring social change.

King had found boycotts to be a good means by which to cripple economic systems and raise awareness of injustices. Jordan, on the other hand, had experienced the brunt of boycotts against Koinonia Farms by local businessmen who feared his embrace of racial equality.

Harding's recollection of the passionate discussion he observed that day could well serve as a timeless model for how to constructively wrangle with opposing opinions.

He described King and Jordan as being "full of grace" and noted: "Both had developed a really impressive capacity to listen."

While neither persuaded the other to his side, according to Harding, "they engaged each other with loving respect and clear disagreement."

Too often, sadly, the former doesn't accompany the latter. But it should.

Thank God for those who faithfully teach us — even after their earthly races have been won ... people like Martin Luther King Jr., Clarence Jordan and Vincent Harding. **BT**

[The article, "Loving respect, clear disagreement," from the May 2012 issue of *Baptists Today* is available at baptiststoday.org/back-issues. A video excerpt from the interview is posted at youtube.com/watch?v=yZYqQxNI2lo.]



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No surprise: Purging the Southern Baptist Convention didn't bring promised results

It should come as no surprise that purging the SBC of non-fundamentalists did not usher in the great wave of evangelistic growth promised by its leaders.

The “takeover of the SBC” — not forgotten by the older crowd, and never known by the younger — made its first push in 1979, just as the Convention was beginning an outreach emphasis called “Bold Mission Thrust.”

The mission was soon lost in the infighting, resulting in a “Bold Mission Bust.” And

despite the current SBC leadership's continued emphasis on hard-sell evangelism, baptisms have declined for the seventh straight year.

Churches don't die easily but can be born quickly, so the annual tally usually shows a few more churches than the previous year, but also fewer members — 570,000 less than in 2006, according to numbers released by the SBC in advance of this year's June gathering in Baltimore.

SBC leaders, as usual, decried widespread apathy and called for churches to put more emphasis on evangelism. A national task force of pastors was appointed to deal with the decline, which is especially prominent among

Millennials, according to the SBC's most recent Annual Church Profile.

Last year 60 percent of SBC churches baptized no teenagers, and 80 percent baptized either one or zero young adults 18-29. The only age category in which baptisms are growing is for preschoolers age 5 and under — which should raise questions of its own for a denomination that prides itself on “believer's baptism.”

Molly Worthen, a history professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, offered a helpful analysis in a recent article for *The Daily Beast*, noting that even the most fervent conservatism “cannot hold off the world-historical forces of secularization.”

It's not just millennials who find fundamentalism unappealing these days. Many former church members have dropped out because they no longer feel at home there.

And the problem is not unique to conservatives. Moderate and progressive churches can't claim to fare better. We live in a world that is far less religious than it used to be, with growing generations of folk who see more negatives than positives in organized religion.

The downsides of that trend are obvious, but the picture isn't entirely bleak. When believers find themselves in the minority and others don't flock to church just because it's the popular or culturally accepted thing to do, perhaps those who remain will take more seriously the reasons for being church at all. **BT**

“The only age category in which baptisms are growing is for preschoolers age 5 and under — which should raise questions of its own for a denomination that prides itself on ‘believer's baptism.’”



Tony W. Cartledge

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By Naomi King Walker

Baptismal mishaps and memories

Some faith traditions embrace infant baptism. These are memorable occasions for everyone except the child, who is too young to remember anything, and only later knows of the event's significance through photos, stories and certificates.

For Baptists, however, baptisms are always memorable for each candidate as well as family and congregation. Baptists only immerse those who are old enough to have confessed Christ publicly.

Sometimes Baptist baptisms are memorable for all the wrong reasons.

My maternal grandmother's church believed that baptism should take place as soon as possible after one's public decision to follow Jesus. Unfortunately, she chose the middle of winter to walk the aisle.

Her North Carolina church had no baptistry, so they used the local river for baptisms. The pastor broke river ice the day he baptized my grandmother.

The rural Mississippi church my dad served as pastor when I made a public profession of faith had no baptistry either, but at least they had sense enough to wait until spring to baptize candidates.

When the weather was warm enough, the congregation gathered at a local creek for a Sunday afternoon baptismal service.

After checking the area for snakes and other critters, folks stood on the small bridge overlooking the creek banks where others had assembled near the line of baptismal candidates.

First, everyone sang gospel hymns accompanied by my mother on her accordion. Then the baptizing commenced.

When the service was done the youth swam, swinging out over deeper waters on a tire roped to a tree limb. Country baptisms were always fun events.

The day of my baptism I was 7 years old. There were several other candidates, so my dad put me at the front of the line, thinking that since I'd seen other baptisms, I would set an example of proper decorum for everyone. Wrong.

I didn't know how to swim yet and had never had my head entirely underwater. When he dipped me I got strangled and emerged sputtering and crying, generally disrupting the entire service.

Since then, I've seen many other baptismal ceremonies go wrong.

My current pastor once entered the sanctuary baptismal pool too early during the congregational singing, creating large shadow effects as he moved around behind the lighted stained glass window before it was rolled aside for baptism.

On another occasion he was late returning to the worship service after baptism because his waders had leaked, soaking his socks and pants leg.

Another of my pastors was nearly always wet when he returned to the service. Invariably, he rolled up the wrong sleeve of his dress shirt prior to immersing candidates.

On several occasions I've seen short children suddenly "disappear" from the congregation's view because someone forgot to put a stool or concrete block in the baptistry for them to stand on.

My dad once lost his balance during a baptism, nearly dropping an obese candidate.

Several times choir members in the loft have gotten splashed during baptisms. At one church a candidate accidentally sloshed the baptismal waters enough to create a tidal wave, thoroughly soaking the back two rows of the choir.

At another church the new baptismal robes were discovered — too late — to be extremely transparent when wet.

One winter we discovered during Sunday school that the water heater was broken. The candidate decided to go ahead with her baptism

anyway, since extended family had come for this special occasion.

The water was so frigid her teeth chattered as she proclaimed, "Jesus is Lord!"

In my former church the opposite happened. The baptism planned for the beginning of the service had to be postponed to the end (after the ushers added ice) because the water was practically boiling. The candidate would've been cooked like a lobster. When the heavy velvet curtains finally opened, a huge cloud of steam rolled out into the sanctuary.

Several years ago a video made the rounds on social media. In it the pastor was shown baptizing candidates, then reaching for a young boy who was next in line. Rather than taking the pastor's hand and stepping into the baptismal waters, the boy impishly did a cannonball instead. It took several minutes for the drenched pastor, shaking out his microphone and soggy Bible, to regain any composure.

Sometimes I think God does a belly laugh at some of the mishaps that occur as we try to have meaningful worship experiences together.


Despite our best planning, things often go awry as we Christians attempt to balance celebration and reverence, spontaneity and ritual in baptismal services and other spiritual events.

When things go wrong, it helps to remember that God only looks on the intents of our hearts. It is our sincere effort, not our perfection during worship, that is most important to our Creator.

After all, God does know we're only human. **BT**

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





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Pew survey finds U.S. Latinos shifting and drifting outside the Catholic Church

WASHINGTON — A new report on the “Shifting Religious Identity of Latinos” reads very much like a biography of Fernando Alcantar.

Like six in 10 Hispanic Catholics in the U.S., he was born in Mexico, where “you are Catholic as much as you are Mexican. You like jalapenos and worship the Virgin of Guadalupe,” he said.

But once he moved to California after high school, his faith journey diverged — and derailed. Today, Alcantar, 36 calls himself a humanist.

The Pew survey report released in May is subtitled: “Nearly One in Four Latinos Are Former Catholics.” And Alcantar is one of them.

Hispanics are still a pillar of American Catholicism — fully a third of the U.S. church today. And their share is climbing with the overall growth of the Hispanic population.

More than half (55 percent) of the nation’s estimated 19.6 million Hispanics identify as Catholic, according to Pew’s report, which uses “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably.

But that’s 12 percentage points below 2010, when 67 percent of Latinos surveyed said they were Catholic, the survey found.

“Everyone was surprised in some way by the findings, the first time the size of the decline in Hispanic Catholics has been measured in depth,” said Pew research associate Jessica Hamar Martínez.

“If both (immigration and shifting) trends continue, a day could come when a majority of Catholics in the United States will be Hispanic, even though the majority of Hispanics might no longer be Catholic,” the survey said.

According to the new survey:

- Nearly one in three Hispanics (32 percent) said they no longer belong to the major religious tradition in which they were raised (not including changes among Protestant denominations). Among foreign-born Hispanics, half switched faiths before arriving in the United States.
- 18 percent of Hispanics today claim no religious identity, up from 10 percent in 2010.



“I think people were expecting the growth in evangelicals among former Catholics but the rise of the unaffiliated was unexpected,” said senior researcher Cary Funk.

- 22 percent of Hispanics now say they are Protestant. This includes 16 percent who call themselves evangelical, up from 12 percent in 2010.
- The movement out of the Catholic Church is led by the young and middle-aged. Only 45 percent of Hispanics under age 30 are Catholic. And four in 10 (37 percent) of those young Catholics say they can imagine leaving the Catholic Church someday.
- Most (seven in 10) Hispanics who left the church for any new direction left before the age of 24.

That sounds familiar to Alcantar, of El Centro, Calif. He left Catholicism at 18 and Christianity altogether by the time he was 32. Two of his three siblings are agnostic; only one sister remains devoutly Catholic.

Among ex-Catholics who turned to another faith, Pew found many have turned to the enthusiastic worship of Pentecostal and charismatic or “renewalist” faiths that celebrate gifts of the Holy Spirit such as divine healing, receiving direct revelation from God and “a strong sense of God’s direct, often miraculous, role in everyday life.”

That rang true for Alcantar’s parents. His mother, Teresa Foucar, is now an evangelical Protestant, and his father became a deacon

with an Assemblies of God church.

Among ex-Catholics, most told Pew they either “drifted away” (55 percent) or they just stopped believing in the teachings of their childhood faith (52 percent). “There’s rarely, if ever, a single reason,” Funk said.

Pew drew a wide range of responses to an open question on why people moved. Only 9 percent said they switched because they married someone who practiced a different religion. Just 3 percent mentioned the clergy sex abuse scandal as a reason for switching.

Timothy Matovina, a University of Notre Dame theology professor who is familiar with the new survey, is skeptical that the out-the-door trend can be reversed, particularly for millennials.

“Among all young people, it’s a challenge to keep them in a religion,” said Matovina, executive director of the Institute for Latino Studies.

“Can we stem the tide among Hispanics? I doubt it. Can we stem the tide among non-Hispanics? I doubt it. It’s not only Catholics who are struggling. Everybody is struggling.”

Matovina observed that American children don’t grow up with deeply embedded cultural Catholicism. And even those who did — such as immigrants from Mexico, and Central and South America — need more than that to remain with the Catholic Church.

“They need a Catholicism of commitment, one based on a personal encounter with Jesus Christ that enlivens their faith and makes them stronger in this culture of religious choice

that is the United States,” Matovina said. “The real story is all the switching in a pluralistic culture. The hardest switch is the first one. But then you can do it again and again with less cultural dissonance.”

Alcantar’s path illustrates Matovina’s concern. He was initially drawn to evangelical Christianity for the strong sense of community and the beautiful promise of a personal relationship with Jesus, he recalled.

He graduated from a Pentecostal college, Azusa Pacific University, switched to a non-denominational evangelical church, then went to work leading youth groups for the United Methodist Church. He did international mission work with believers of many denominations, had a Mormon girlfriend and finally landed on a pile of questions.

“The emotional connection between me and Jesus and God was finally broken. I became angry at God for all the misery, poverty and discrimination I saw in the world. I finally allowed my doubts to come to the front burner,” said Alcantar.

Allan Figueroa Deck, a Jesuit theologian at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, said the findings are custom-made for Pope Francis’ mission to the church.

“Many groups reaching out to Catholics do have some level of success. But it’s not because people want to leave the church but that the church is not present to them,” he said. “Pope Francis’ reform is that the church must be totally focused on outreach. It has to go to the parks and the plazas and strip malls and be present in the workplace.”

The Pew Hispanic survey was conducted in English and Spanish between May 24 and July 28, 2013, with 5,103 Hispanic adults, ages 18 and older. The margin of error is plus or minus 2.1 percentage points overall.

Pew’s findings dovetail with another major study released in May, “The National Study of Catholic Parishes With Hispanic Ministry.” Hosffman Ospino, a professor of Hispanic ministry at Boston College, and researchers from Georgetown University’s Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate issued the study May 5.

It detailed signs of vibrancy, such as the high percentage of young Hispanic families. It also found signs of concern. The nation’s one-in-four Catholic parishes that are Hispanic “struggle with finance and personnel,” many with no special training in Hispanic ministry, Ospino said.

“One of our hopes is that if the Catholic Church invests more in family and youth, that these young people will stay,” he said. “Secularization is a major threat to our future.” **BT**

Fibbing on faithfulness

Poll shows Americans stretch the truth on attending church

By Cathy Lynn Grossman

Religion News Service

“I know what you did last Sunday,” claims the title of a new survey.

You skipped church. And then nearly one in seven of you fibbed about attending.

That’s according to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute released in May. The study, presented at the national meeting of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, was designed to measure the “social desirability bias in self-reported religious behavior.”

The survey finds that many Christians — and unbelievers, too — will exaggerate about attending worship in live phone interviews. However, when asked in an anonymous online questionnaire, people will answer more realistically.

On the phone, 36 percent of Americans report attending religious services weekly or more, while 30 percent say they seldom or never go.

But online, a smaller share (31 percent) of people surveyed said they attended church at least weekly, while a larger portion (43 percent) admitted they seldom or never go.

People who don’t attend worship — but say they did — may not mean to lie, said PRRI CEO Robert Jones.

People respond to phone surveys as they think “a good Christian” would or should answer, he said. “There’s an aspirational quality here,” he said. “People see themselves as the kind of person who would go.”

Once you remove the social pressure of speaking on the phone, “you see people willing to give answers that are probably closer to reality,” he said. “People feel less pressure to conform.”

Three groups were most likely to inflate attendance:

- White mainline Protestants: By phone, 29 percent say they don’t go to church. Online, that jumps to 45 percent.
- Catholics: On the phone, 15 percent. Online, 33 percent.
- Adults ages 18-29: On the phone, 31 percent. Online, 49 percent.

The PRRI study is an update of studies on inflated church attendance conducted in the

1990s. In those studies research teams surveyed Catholics and Protestants in Ashtabula County, Ohio, and compared self-reported attendance claims with actual headcounts in scores of churches.

The result: “Actual church attendance was about half the rate indicated by national public opinion polls.”

Since there’s no way to do headcounts of people not attending, PRRI found a contemporary technological approach — two different survey formats. Both surveys of American adults were conducted in 2013, with 2,002 people interviewed by cell and landline and a demographically comparable group of 2,317 who answered questions online.

People don’t even have to be religious to inflate claims of religiosity, PRRI found.

Those one in five Americans who are “nones” also may feel greater pressure to fib because “they are the farthest outside general social expectations,” said Jones.

On the phone, 73 percent of “nones” say they seldom or never attend, but 91 percent say so when interviewed online.

In the overall study, 19 percent of adults answering online said religion was not important to them; only 13 percent said so on the phone.

However, among the “nones,” the gap on the importance of religion was markedly wider — 49 percent on the phone, compared with 73 percent online. **BT**



Gallup: Stem cell research, other issues reach new highs of ‘moral acceptability’

By Kevin Eckstrom
Religion News Service

WASHINGTON — Americans are showing more tolerance for a range of behaviors, with sex between unmarried adults, medical research on stem cells from human embryos, and doctor-assisted suicide all showing record highs and increases in “moral acceptability” from last year.

The Gallup poll’s annual “moral acceptability” scale has been conducted since 2001 and charts shifting cultural attitudes on a number of hot-button social issues.

In the 2014 list released the end of May, Gallup researchers said 12 of the 19 categories reflected “levels of moral acceptance that are as high or higher than in the past.”

“Americans largely agree about the morality of several issues,” Gallup researchers said. “Most say birth control is acceptable but that extramarital affairs are wrong. However, other issues show clear, substantial divides. These differences are largely explained by party

identification, but previous research has shown that age also plays a factor.”

Three issues — sex between an unmarried man and woman, medical research on embryonic stem cells and doctor-assisted suicide — showed a slight increase in acceptability from 2013.

Gallup grouped the 19 issues into five categories, including:

- **Highly acceptable:** birth control (90 percent)
- **Largely acceptable:** divorce (69 percent); sex between an unmarried man and woman (66 percent); embryonic stem cell research (65 percent); gambling (62 percent); the death penalty (61 percent); buying and wearing clothing made of animal fur (58 percent); having a baby outside of marriage (58 percent); gay or lesbian relations (58 percent); medical testing on animals (57 percent)
- **Contentious:** Doctor-assisted suicide (52 percent); abortion (42 percent)
- **Largely unacceptable:** Cloning animals (34 percent); pornography (33 percent); sex between teenagers (30 percent)

- **Highly unacceptable:** Suicide (19 percent); polygamy (14 percent); cloning humans (13 percent); married men and women having an affair (7 percent)

Against a backdrop of sweeping legal victories in favor of same-sex marriage, the 58 percent of Americans who rated gay and lesbian relations as morally acceptable was mostly unchanged from last year’s rating of 59 percent.

Last year’s figure, however, represented a 19-point shift since 2001, the largest change for any issue on Gallup’s list, which it started at that time.

Other notable shifts over time include having a baby out of wedlock (up 13 points from 2002); sex between unmarried adults (up 13 points since 2001), and divorce (up 10 points from 2001).

The 2014 figures were based on 1,028 phone interviews with U.S. adults in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percentage points. **BT**

Survey: Most Americans say fighting global poverty is futile

By Cathy Lynn Grossman
Religion News Service

Despite progress in defeating extreme global poverty, most Americans see no end in sight, according to a survey sponsored by Compassion International.

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

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

Other groups — including less observant Christians and people of other faiths or no faith — showed notably less concern and a higher degree of skepticism in the survey conducted by Barna Research.

Todd, senior vice president for global advocacy, said the bleak numbers can be turned around if potential donors are better informed.

The survey offered a target date of 25 years for altering the lives of 1.4 billion people who need clean water, shelter, sufficient nutrition and basic health care such as antibiotics and vaccines.

“That is not a magic date, but if you ask people about fighting poverty without a time frame, they can’t assess it,” Todd said. “They give answers like ‘after the Second Coming.’ We know there has been incredible progress and the world has seen an incredible drop in poverty in one generation. But people don’t know this.”

Only 32 percent of all adults see an end to poverty in 25 years. The top five reasons they give for why this can’t be done:

- Poverty will always exist: 21 percent
- Not enough people care: 20 percent
- Lack of a collective global effort: 17 percent
- The enormity of the problem: 17 percent
- Corrupt governments: 14 percent

Fatalism dominates the answers:

- 59 percent “don’t trust the governments of poor nations.”
- 56 percent “don’t know what organizations to trust.”
- 55 percent “believe that money should be spent on needs at home.”

Again, Todd was not surprised. Few realize that scandalous failures — theft, profiteering, bungled delivery — are not the norm today, he said. “We have seen a steep rise in transparency, efficiency and democracy have led to improvements.”

The survey found that four in 10 people said they gave nothing in 2013 to combat global poverty; the median gift was just \$5 per month for all adults. However, it was more than double — \$13 per month — for practicing Christians (38 percent of all surveyed).

The survey of 1,052 U.S. adults, conducted online between Dec. 11 and 28, 2013, has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.4 percentage points. **BT**

Shotgun weddings give way to cohabitation in surprise pregnancies

By Sharon Jayson
USA Today

(RNS) — A carefully planned destination wedding finally brought Sheila and Jared Elliott to the altar after twists and turns that included the births of two daughters, the deaths of his parents, and buying a house and car for their growing family.

“Things don’t always go in order as planned,” says Sheila Elliott, 29, a banker. “We had talked about marriage before I got pregnant. We were already working in that direction when it happened.”

Although the couple from Prior Lake, Minn., weren’t living together when she got pregnant, they bought a house and moved in together a few months before their older daughter Lexi, now 3, arrived.

“At the time, everything was good, and we had a good relationship the way it was without getting married, and we kind of just waited until the time was right,” says Jared Elliott, 39, a machinist.

The Elliotts are among a growing number of couples whose reaction to a surprise pregnancy isn’t a fast track to wed. The “shotgun wedding” — a hurry-up union before a birth

— is rapidly becoming a relic of the past.

New studies by researchers at Cornell, Duke, Brown and Louisiana State universities, as well as the Census Bureau and National Center for Health Statistics, document the steep decline in such marriages and how socioeconomic, racial and ethnic differences affect relationships.

About two-thirds of couples who had a premarital pregnancy in the early 1960s got married in a rush. That share fell to just about a quarter by the early 1990s, research shows.

The latest analyses by researchers from those federal agencies suggest a drop to single digits as more couples opt to live together rather than marry and don’t want a child to rush them into marriage.

Among new findings:

- 27 percent of women whose first premarital pregnancy was in the 1970s experienced a “shotgun marriage,” compared with just 7 percent for pregnancies since 2000.
- The percentage of unmarried pregnant women who marry within three years of conception has fallen by half since the 1970s, from 51 percent to 25 percent.
- The share of single pregnant women who cohabit by the time of the child’s birth rose from 8 percent in the 1970s to 28 percent today, while the share who married by the birth fell from 29 percent to 8 percent.

• 56 percent of all births involving unmarried couples during the 2000s were to men and women living together, representing just over 20 percent of all U.S. births.

Such changes are the result of a variety of influences, from family and friends to characters on TV or in the movies and how celebrities start families, suggests Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television & Popular Culture at Syracuse University in New York.

“A generation ago, having a child without being married was controversial,” he says. “Now the culture has proven there are lots of people out there raising children without being married.”

“When these things happen in mainstream popular culture, they send a signal to the society that this is normal,” Thompson said. “I’m talking less about celebrities because celebrities aren’t normal. But when it happens to characters on shows like *Friends* or *Ellen* or *How I Met Your Mother*, it sends the message this is now normal and something people do and an option you can decide upon. That is what I think popular culture’s biggest power is.”

Most births (59 percent) are still to married parents, said Jonathan Vespa, a demographer at the U.S. Census Bureau and lead author of a study that finds living together as a reaction to an unexpected pregnancy now surpasses shotgun marriages by 3-1. **BT**

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Pastoral reflections on beginning well

By Dennis W. Foust

In his book, *The Trouble with the Church: A Call for Renewal*, (1965, Harper & Row) German Protestant Theologian Helmut Thielicke tells this story:

A very well-to-do church councilman had invited me to tea in his very fine and tastefully furnished home. I expressed my regret that during the war even this gem of a house had not been spared by the bombs, leaving only a small portion of it standing (though this had now been beautifully restored). His reply was, "Don't talk about regret. Even in this loss I experienced the grace of God." And the first thing I thought was: 'How devout this man is, how humble he is — and what a superficial and sentimental way to have addressed him!' Then he went on to say: "God left me with just enough room so that I did not have to take in any refugees after the war." I shall not now expatiate upon the shock which this alternating hot and cold shower of statements produced in me. I confine myself simply to making this theological point: The man was really devout, he worshiped and prayed,

and he was really concerned with the social and ethical aspects of his business. But obviously it had never occurred to him that the housing shortage had anything to do with one's relationship to God and our neighbor. ... His spiritual house stood apart, separated from and unconnected with the rest of his life.

The purpose of this story is not for you to consider whether there is a gap between your "spiritual house" and the rest of your life.

Rather, I include this story to point out how some people can fail to see what is obvious to others.

For example, as congregations go through transitional times between pastors, some see and use these months to address issues that may be potential points of conflict, and others jump right into their search process for a new pastor without much reflection.

Some congregations are like the fellow in Thielicke's story: they are missing the obvious.

For 26 of the past 38 years, I have been blessed and privileged to serve as a senior minister. In my two most recent pastoral roles, I joined congregations after they completed a deliberate transition process.

Each employed a minister who was trained to serve a purposeful short-term role between ministers and was not a candidate for the permanent position. The church agreed to consider potentially sticky matters related to identity and vision during this short-term relationship.

This role of being intentional about the time between pastors emerged in the 1970s and begs the question, "How did we fail to see the importance of this time for so long, one that is now so obvious?"

A wise congregation is willing to ask and answer difficult questions. Further, it welcomes legitimate observations that require church members to take an honest look at their church's health and guide them to initiate necessary changes through open conversational processes.



This deliberate process allows a church to study itself regarding identity, vision, worship perspectives, staff and pastor profile strengths. All issues that can be addressed during the transition will enhance the start of the next minister and extend that person's tenure.

After the hard work is completed during the transition, the congregation is ready to move forward and receives the new minister with clarified identity and vision. If the congregation truly invests in the challenging conversations that are essential to spiraling forward, it will create a new culture passing through a season of prayerfulness and renewal.

Entering into these situations has enabled me to invest my first years of ministry in some touch-points that promote congregational health and vitality:

Culture — An open culture with clear boundaries of influence and positive energies

Fellowship — An intentionally relational community open to every person

Worship — A desire to deepen relationship with God for kingdom purposes

Discipleship — An expectation of spiritual maturity to become obedient servants of God

Ministry — An outward focus on living and sharing God's good news revealed in Jesus

Stewardship — An investment of resources in the kingdom of God through networks and partners

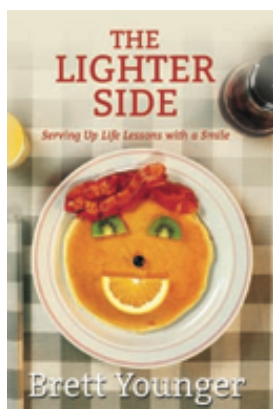
Leadership — A commitment to balance and nurture servant (missional) commitments

I am thankful these two congregations chose to be deliberate about using their time wisely, and I am thankful for the two ministers who led them. The next time your church finds itself in a transition, please invest in the health of your congregation and your next pastor by redeeming the transition time.

To me, it is obvious. I hope you can see the connection. **BT**

—Dennis W. Foust is completing his third year as senior minister of St. John's Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C.

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A review by Doug Dortch

Having something to say and saying it well

Regardless of how gifted pastors may be in the various areas of their pastoral ministry, they will ultimately be judged by their effectiveness in the pulpit. Preaching remains the number one expectation congregations have for their pastoral leaders, and pitiable is the clergyperson who fails to take that expectation seriously.

Granted, this expectation can be a burdensome one at times. Every preacher worth his salt understands what's at stake when he steps into the pulpit.

Regardless of how much a preacher works to convince herself that the hour of worship doesn't rise or fall on her performance, she knows that her inability to speak God's truth into the lives of God's people could indeed seriously hamper the hour — if not spoil it completely.

Therefore, the challenge preachers face is two-fold: to have something to say Sunday in and Sunday out, and to say it well.

Content and delivery are a double-edged sword that every preacher seeks to handle without hurting one's self — much less the congregation. Attending to one of these edges at the expense of the other only renders one's preaching substantive but dull or entertaining but empty, neither of which is a viable option.

Fortunately, William Powell Tuck has written two books in recent months that speak to ways preachers might manage this dilemma and show faithfulness to the Gospel in the process.

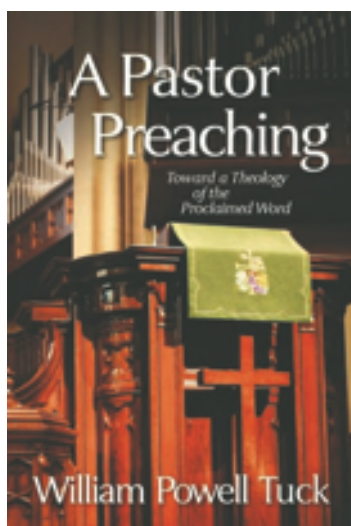
A Pastor Preaching (Nurturing Faith, 2012) and *Overcoming Sermon Block* (Energion Publications, 2014) draw upon Tuck's



vast experience as both a pastor and professor of homiletics and offer readers solid guidance on how to craft sermons that are theologically sound and effectively spoken.

In *A Pastor Preaching*, Tuck addresses the question of “what constitutes the content and background of authentic preaching,” (p. viii) which he defines as a form of proclamation that connects the revelation of God's Word to the felt needs of a gathered congregation.

Each section of the book deals with different aspects of how one makes such a connection, concluding with a series of chapters that point out the possibilities of contemporary literature and the arts as a source of great help in bridging divine revelation with human need.



Preachers who are serious about their craft and want others to think the same way about the place of preaching in the life of the church will surely appreciate the numerous citations of theologians in the book that reflect how deeply each valued the role of the pulpit. And for those who might want examples of how they might apply a particular section of the book to their own preaching ministry, Tuck offers sample sermons at the end of each

section that are as inspiring as they are illustrative.

In *Overcoming Sermon Block*, Tuck deals more with the “nuts and bolts” of the preacher's work and the persistent challenge every preacher faces to move beyond those barren periods that make preaching feel flat.

Tuck breaks down the preacher's task, from invention to delivery, and offers concrete suggestions on how one might maintain vitality in the face of a pastoral task that seems to come around every other day.

Though the book draws upon lectures

Tuck developed for the classes he taught as a homiletics professor, each chapter concludes with questions and reflections that give the book a more conversational tone. It is a “must read” for those who have just begun preaching and a welcome refresher for those who consider themselves preaching veterans.

The bibliography at the end of the book makes an excellent resource for the preacher who wishes to build his or her homiletics library.

We preach in an age where many speak of the decline of preaching, though those of us who preach each Sunday know better. We feel the weight of what's at stake each time we stand to speak on behalf of God — which when you think about it, is an audacious thing to do.

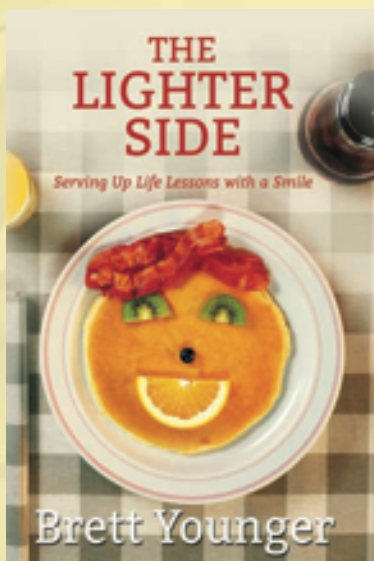
Bill Tuck understands both the weight and audacity, and offers these books as a way to help preachers minimize the frustrations and capture the joys of this holy calling. We would do well and surely preach better by taking his words to heart. **BT**

—Doug Dortch is senior minister of Mountain Brook Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala.

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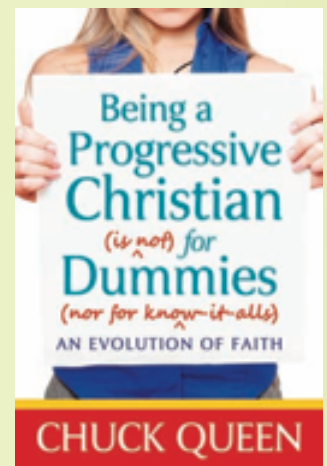
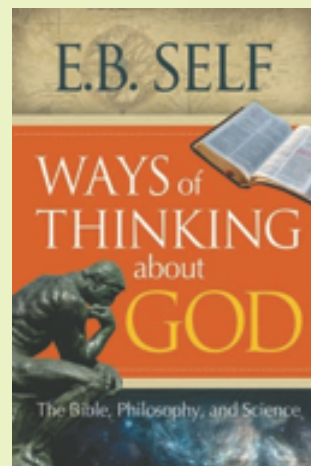
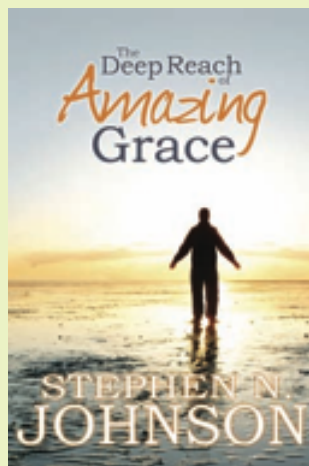
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Bible Study

Matthew 14:13-21

with Tony W. Cartledge

Aug. 3, 2014

A Picnic to Remember

Can you think of something you have done that everyone remembers? Hopefully it wasn't a public *faux pas* that became your most embarrassing moment. We would all like to be remembered — I suspect — not for our mistakes, but for the good things we have done, the love we have shown, the people we have touched.

In a setting where stories get told, you may notice that people often remember the same event in different ways, and some may insist they remember it correctly, even when shown evidence to the contrary.

We can be grateful for memories, and especially thankful that those who followed Jesus passed on their memories of his impressive miracles and inspirational teachings. Like us, those followers whose memories gave rise to the four gospels didn't all remember the same things, or recall the details in the same way.

Surprisingly, only one of Jesus' "mighty works" (not counting the resurrection) is recorded in all four gospels, and its story included a healthy dose of embarrassment for the disciples. We usually call it the "Feeding of the Five Thousand," and it's found in Matt. 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, and John 6:1-14.

The story's appearance in all four gospels tells us how significant the disciples considered this event to be. Broken bread and fish not only fed thousands of people, but also provided important lessons for those who would follow Jesus.



Matthew 14:16 –
"Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.'"

When needs become pressing (vv. 13-16)

Many charitable organizations, including a number of Baptist groups, have become very good at meeting physical needs on a large scale. Through disaster relief units that are trained and ready to serve, dedicated volunteers have prepared and served literally millions of meals in the wake of disasters caused by earthquakes and hurricanes, tornadoes and terrorists, famines and wars.

When people are hungry, these volunteers know what to do. They have trucks, equipment, and food supplies at the ready. Tell them that you need 5,000 meals by suppertime, and they won't blink an eye.

Tell a dozen bearded disciples who have neither training nor resources, and you'll get a different response.

Jesus and his disciples were already tired and in need of rest when this story begins. They had faced rejection in Nazareth (13:54-58) and had learned that Jesus' cousin John had been arrested and beheaded (14:1-12). Physically and emotionally drained, Jesus set out across the Sea of Galilee in search of a quiet

place along the shore, but the word soon got out. By the time Jesus landed, he was greeted by a mass of people with a multitude of needs. ↓

Jesus didn't have to look hard to see physical needs, emotional needs, and spiritual needs. He "was moved with compassion" for the people, Matthew said (14:14). ↓

For Jesus, compassion was not only something one feels, but also something one does, even when tired. Jesus patiently waded into the crowd for hours, teaching about the kingdom of God and healing many who were sick.

As the day grew long, with no refreshment stands or food trucks around, the people began to grow hungry. Wouldn't you? You know what the disciples did: they asked Jesus to call it a day and send everyone home for supper, but Jesus had other ideas. Maybe he wanted to show that the gospel has social as well as spiritual dimensions, or maybe he wanted a lot of people to witness an amazing act that they'd never forget.

Or maybe he just wanted to teach the disciples a lesson. "You give them

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something to eat,” he said.

Imagine the look on their faces! It would have been a lot like our own expression if someone put us in charge of feeding 5,000 hungry men – not counting women and children – and we had neither food to give them nor money to call a caterer.

It was a rather shocking demand, don’t you think? If we didn’t already know this story, how could we imagine it ever being done?

**When disciples become prepared
(vv. 17-19)**

Matthew has a tendency to tone down the implicit criticism of the disciples that is often found in Mark. Perhaps that is why he does not include their dumbfounded response (Mark 6:37) that even 200 denarii wouldn’t be enough to buy sufficient bread. That was more than half a year’s salary for someone earning an average wage. In John’s version, it was Phillip who did the math (John 6:7) and said that six months of wages would hardly get them a mouthful apiece.

But Jesus had given the job to them. How could they feed such a crowd? If we had only Matthew’s gospel, we’d assume the disciples themselves had some provisions, but not much: “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish” (v. 17).

Neither Matthew, Mark, nor Luke says anything about the small boy we know from the text in John, the boy Andrew found who was willing to share his meager lunch.

Five loaves and two fish really aren’t very much when the “loaves” are probably small circles of flatbread, and the fish are salt-dried sardines. U

Sometimes we might feel about as ill-equipped for other demands that come to hand, and we wonder how we can do what needs to be done. Jesus wanted the disciples to look beyond the normal human resources that came to mind. He wanted them to consider what could be done, not just on their own, but with God’s help.

The story reminds us that serving Christ faithfully involves the willingness

to obediently share what we have in assets or abilities, and to trust Jesus to make that enough.

Even so, Jesus’ disciples must have been muttering to themselves as Jesus instructed the crowd to find a seat on the green grass – a reminder that though they had sought “a deserted place,” it wasn’t a desert. U

All three synoptic gospels note that Jesus took the food in his hands and “looked up to heaven” before blessing and breaking the loaves (John says only that he gave thanks, John 6:11). This seems intended to remind readers as well as those present that Jesus was never wholly apart from the Father, and drew his power from the fullness of the Godhead. U

If you can imagine the disciples’ surprise when Jesus first told them it was their job to feed the multitude, consider how flabbergasted they must have been to discover that, no matter how many times they passed the baskets among the people, they always returned full.

The gospels are silent on the manner of the miracle, but it must have occurred at the “point of contact.” Otherwise, Jesus would have been inundated by a pile of fish and bread, or it would have been too much for the disciples to carry. When Jesus broke the paltry provisions into fragments and put some in each disciple’s basket, the disciples probably expected nothing more than to offer an appetizer to two or three people each, but the food was replenished as quickly as it was removed, and everyone ate their fill. U

How long did the disciples’ initial excitement over the miraculous multiplication last before their task turned into mere labor? If it was up to the 12 alone to serve the crowds, as the story implies, each would have been responsible for carrying food to 500 or more people. And they thought they were tired before!

The job wasn’t over when it was over, though. Whether by innate frugality or direct instruction, they returned

to collect the leftovers and finished the day with 12 baskets of bread and fish – one for each disciple, if we assume that only the Twelve were involved. Their weariness must have known no bounds, but witnessing such an act of grace and power must have been energizing, too.

We can’t overlook an important aspect of discipleship here: The work was done when Jesus looked to heaven, broke the food, and then gave it to the disciples for distribution to the hungry crowd.

To this day, that’s the way it works when we seek to live out the kingdom of God on earth. We receive the blessings of God that come through Christ, then share them with others. Whether God gives us material goods or spiritual wisdom, a love for children or joyful enthusiasm, we are called to share with a world that is hungry for more than bread and fish. U

**When needs become
opportunities for service
(vv. 20-21)**

Jesus’ miraculous multiplication of the bread and fish was a mighty witness to the multitude, but perhaps even more significant for the disciples. They learned from Jesus that deep compassion gives us energy to keep going, even when we’re feeling drained.

They also learned by experience that the most overwhelming situations are not without hope. As Christ’s followers trust in Jesus, offer to him their abilities, and obey his commands to love, marvelous things can be done – even in the face of obstacles that may seem insurmountable to us.

When all was done and the people finally went home, the presence of a full basket for each disciple suggests that Jesus’ power not only makes our service effective in helping others, but also provides for our own needs.

The purpose of Christ’s miraculous lesson was not just inspirational; it was motivational. What physical and spiritual needs do we see in the world about us? What gifts can we offer toward meeting those needs? And what are we doing with that basket in our hands? **BT**

Bible Study

Romans 10:5-15

with Tony W. Cartledge

Aug. 10, 2014

No Distinction

Some texts are harder than others. That's the way it is with Bible study. For the rest of this month, we'll be considering four tricky texts from Romans and asking what they could possibly have to do with our lives.

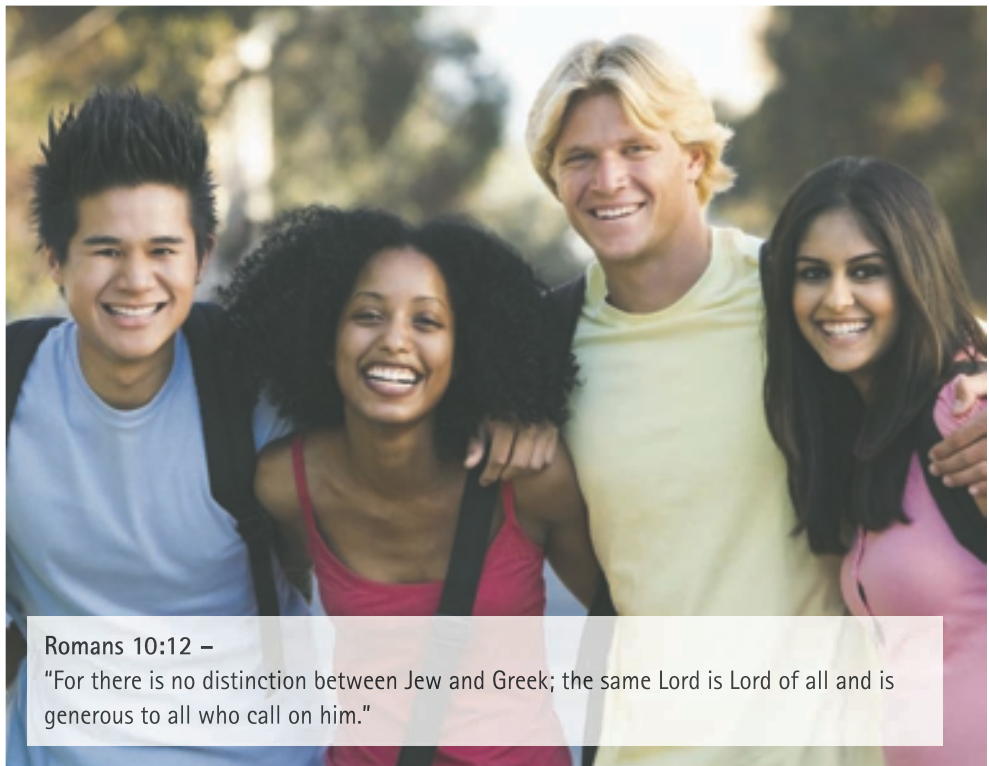
The first one concerns the subject of salvation, or being in a right relationship with God. Who is eligible for it, and how might one obtain it? For those of us who know what it is like to feel lost and apart from God, that sounds like important stuff.

But do we know what Paul means when he talks about salvation? It's far more than just getting our ticket punched for the heaven-bound glory train. Paul's message centers on having a right relationship with God that affects our daily lives as well as the potential for eternal life.

The righteousness of the law (v. 5)

To understand Paul's argument in vv. 5-13, we need to look back at vv. 1-4, where he repeats an argument from the previous chapter relative to the place of the Jews in God's ongoing plan. This is a major issue for Paul, and it pervades his letter from chs. 9-11.

Paul had been born and raised as a Jew, then trained as an expert in the law and thus a leader among Jews. He knew first century Judaism from the inside out, and was once such a stalwart defender of the faith – as understood by the Pharisee party – that he considered Jews who followed Jesus to



Romans 10:12 –

"For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him."

be dangerous heretics, and persecuted them.

But meeting Christ on the Damascus road had changed Paul's life, and it changed Paul's perspective on the law. He came to believe that God had given the law, not as a means for obtaining salvation, but as a life-guide for those who had already been granted the gift of a covenantal relationship with God.

The Jews, in Paul's mind, had failed to understand this. Unwilling to accept God's free gift of relationship to be guided by the law, they believed that one must first obey the law in order to have a right relationship with God.

Rather than seeing the law as a means for engendering faith and trust in the God who had already chosen them, they saw it as a means for earning God's favor through religious activity. As Paul Achtemeier puts it, "They were so religious that they did not want to settle for something God could give them. They wanted to be religious enough so that they could become partners with God in

the matter of their salvation" (*Romans, Interpretation* [John Knox, 1985], 167).

Paul had come to believe that Christ was the "end" or "goal" of the law. The word *telos* can carry the sense of either finality or fulfillment – or both. To help his readers understand the difference, Paul contrasts the righteousness that comes through the law (v. 5) and righteousness that comes through faith (vv. 6-13).

Quoting Moses, Paul illustrates "righteousness that comes through the law" with a quotation from Lev. 18:5: "the person who does these things will live by them." If you put your trust in the law, you have to live by the law.

Putting one's trust in the law creates at least two problems. First, the very effort to keep the law becomes a type of idolatry. The idea that one can earn his or her way into a right relationship with God is in effect a rejection of God's grace.

The second problem is that no one is able to perfectly keep the law: "The whole problem with the law is that if

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one depends on fulfilling the law as the basis for one's relationship with God, that is the only basis that relationship will have" (Achte-meier, 168).

Christians may also find it hard to trust that God's grace is sufficient. Our traditions, our churches, our parents, or our peers may lead us to believe that we must follow a list of do's and don'ts if we're to be fully accepted by God. If we're trusting in our own behavior, however, we're not fully trusting in Christ.

The righteousness of faith (vv. 6-13)

To present the approach of faith over law, Paul creates a literary character named Righteousness by Faith, and gives her the power of speech throughout vv. 6-13: "But the righteousness that comes by faith says ..." 📖

Speaking as "Righteousness by Faith," Paul cites phrases from Deut. 9:4 ("Do not say in your heart") and 30:12b ("Who will ascend into heaven?"), replacing the question "Who will cross over the sea?" from Deut. 30:13 with an allusion from Ps. 107:26, which says "they ascend into the heavens and descend into the abyss."

In the Deuteronomic context, Moses was arguing that the Israelites did not have to go in search of the law. It was neither in heaven nor across the sea, but as near to them as their own hearts. Thus, they did not need to send anyone on a quest to ascend to heaven or cross the sea; they needed to accept the law that was already in their midst. 📖

Paul mixed and matched the texts in order to contrast the vertical distance between the highest heaven and the deepest depths, in part because he has adapted the questions to refer to Christ rather than the law. We can see this in the interpretive comments he adds, denoted by parentheses in the text:

"Who will ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down), or Who will descend into the abyss? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)" (vv. 6b-7). 📖 Paul continues adding commentary with v. 8, taken from Deut. 30:14, where

Moses insisted that "the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart" – and Paul adds: "(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim)."

By this method, Paul takes an Old Testament text about the nearness of the law, and reinterprets it with reference to the nearness of Christ, whose presence needs not be sought in heaven or in Sheol, but acknowledged as present and available to those who put their trust in God.

We don't have to go looking for Jesus in heaven, as if we could get there, or in the world of the dead, as if we could go there and come back. The righteousness that reconciles us to God is as near as the life and teaching and death and resurrection and spiritual presence of Jesus Christ.

As Moses had spoken of God's word being "in your mouth and in your heart," Righteousness by Faith declares that "one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved" (v. 10). Paul goes on to adapt the promise of Isa. 28:16 to insist that "anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame" (v. 11). Isaiah's prophecy spoke of a tested and precious cornerstone that God would lay in Zion, which Paul interpreted as a prophecy of Christ.

The reference to both heart and mouth leads Paul to declare that a saving relationship with God is available to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (v. 13) – yet another Old Testament quotation, this time from Joel 2:32.

Paul's reference to "believing in your heart" and "confessing with your mouth" is not really a two-step process, as it is sometimes presented, but two sides of the same coin. Those who truly trust Christ inwardly will want to express their faith outwardly. In our postmodern, cocooning society, it is

common for people to think of faith as a purely personal thing that is no one else's business. We often hear the phrase "I'm spiritual, but not religious." In contrast, Paul expected those who believe inwardly to express their faith outwardly and identify with the believing community. 📖

The sharing life (vv. 14-15)

Paul wanted his readers to remember that the world is filled with people – Jews and Gentiles alike – who need to hear the good news of salvation through faith. In vv. 14-15 he presents an effective string of rhetorical questions that could refer back to the Jews who have rejected Jesus, or forward to those who have yet to hear.

How can anyone call on somebody they don't believe in? How can they believe if they haven't heard about them? How can they hear if no one brings them the message? How can someone preach the good news unless they are sent?

Still speaking as "Righteousness by Faith," Paul concludes with quotes from Isa. 57:2 and Nah. 1:15 – few things are more beautiful than the feet of people who run to bring good news.

No matter how attractive the preacher's feet, however, faith is not automatic. As those who proclaim need to be responsible witnesses, those who hear must be responsible listeners. "Faith comes from what is heard," Paul said, "and what is heard comes through the word of Christ" (v. 17). It is possible to hear with the ears but not listen with the heart. When our hearts are dulled by a spirit of self-sufficiency – whether it's a belief that we can be reconciled to God through obeying the law or just being a "good person" – we can become spiritually hard of hearing.

While Paul's primary concern is the response of those who hear, his words also remind believers of our need to be good witnesses, proclaiming the good news through both word and deed. The question still lingers: "How can they believe in one of whom they have not heard?" **BT**

Youth

August 3 — August 31, 2014

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



of the Bible lessons by Tony Cartledge.

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

Dinner Is Served

Matthew 14:13-21

I love holidays. Being with family is great. Seeing the faces of others as they open gifts is awesome. But I really love the food that goes with holidays! At holidays there is food everywhere; you munch all day on your favorite snacks before you even get to the main course of a meal. After you eat, a full belly can even bring on the urge to take a nap.

Our passage from Matthew 14 revolves around people gathered and food, but the excitement comes because of a different reason.

Jesus and the disciples need rest and recuperation, so they head off across the Sea of Galilee hoping to find a quiet place. Instead of finding a quiet shore, though, they are met by a massive group of people.

Jesus doesn't order the boat to be turned around, but is rather "moved with compassion" as he senses the needs of the people.

The disciples know that the people are hungry and quickly realize how much food they don't have and how much money it will take to feed all of them. But Jesus insists that "you give them something to eat."

In Matthew's telling of the story we don't know that the loaves and fish that are brought to Jesus come from a little boy, but because this story is told in all four gospels, we know where the food originates. Still, the disciples likely feel worried with only this little amount of food. As the food is distributed and then re-gathered, it becomes apparent that Jesus has multiplied the food that was originally offered so that all would be fed.

AUGUST 3

Think About It:

The boy who brought his food to Jesus blessed an entire crowd because of his gift. What gifts do you have that you can use to serve Christ?

Make a Choice:

Every day we see needs that we can do something about. Sometimes this means giving up something we want in order to give something to another person. How can you choose to serve others instead of yourself?

Pray:

Remind me, oh God, that you can do unexpected and wonderful things with even my smallest gifts.

Ticket Punched

Romans 10:5-15

It might be getting your team jersey or learning the right handshake. It might even be knowing the correct sequence of buttons to push as a video game begins. These are just some of the ways that people "get their tickets punched" to be part of a special group or club.

In today's scripture, the Jews are trying to do something special to earn their salvation: they are being overly religious. Paul addresses this over-religiosity in Romans 10, urging the faithful not to rely on the law but to trust Jesus.

Paul believes it is better to trust in God rather than the law. The goal of the

law is to shape a relationship with God, not to gain salvation by living by the law. Paul reminds the Israelites that Moses had even told them not to search for the law because it was "in their hearts" and they needed to accept the law that was in their midst.

Of course, Paul wants the Israelites to realize that the law has been in their midst in the person of Jesus and is still with them in the Holy Spirit.

This saving grace in Jesus Christ is available to all people; all one has to do is call out the name of the Lord. Through this calling out, others can hear the good news of the gospel of Jesus with their ears and their heart.

AUGUST 10

Think About It:

Claiming to live for Christ is more than just "fire insurance." Living for Christ means putting him in the center of your life. What do you do that shows others you live for Christ?

Make a Choice:

Salvation is about making a choice, but not just one choice. You will choose again and again to trust Christ or yourself. Where is your trust?

Pray:

Dear God, help me better listen for your guidance and help me trust in the loving, humble ways of Jesus.

God's Chosen People

Romans 11:1-32

There have long been groups that claim to be God's chosen or special people. They fight over this title and the land. In Romans 11, Paul calls out the people of Israel and explains what God plans to do with them.

Jesus was the Messiah that had been hoped for and promised. Paul recognized this and also recognized that the Jews had rejected Jesus. But from personal experience, Paul doesn't believe God rejected the

Jews because of this. If God had rejected the Jews, God wouldn't have tracked Paul down on the road to Damascus.

Paul also points to the encounter that Elijah had with God and how God had "reserved" some of the people as God's people. In both of these instances, it is God who continues to claim the "outsiders" even when others had given up on them.

Paul also points out that because the Jews rejected Jesus, there was a completely new group of people who would claim God as their own: the Gentiles.

Think About It:

Do you think God still choose outsiders to do God's work? Why or why not?

Make a Choice:

How will you choose to treat others so that they will know God has chosen them?

Pray:

Dear God, help me to see all people as your chosen children.

Transformers

Romans 12:1-8

Transformers have become popular again. A series of summer blockbusters tells the story of beings that seem normal, but can transform into something that has special powers. In Romans 12, Paul reveals that we each have the ability to be transformed by Christ and blessed with gifts that can continue to create the Kingdom of God.

We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices — sacrifices that aren't over and

done with after one time, but are living and are able to be transformed and cause transformation in others. By continually offering ourselves as a sacrifice, we worship God by living in a way that points not to ourselves but to God.

Paul also reminds us not to give in to what the world would have us to be, but to transform into something that God has created us to be. When we live this way, we function as a body — each with unique gifts and talents, and no one better than the other.

Think About It:

Of the spiritual gifts that are listed in this text, which do you believe you possess?

Make a Choice:

How will you choose to transform the world for Christ instead of allowing the world to change you?

Pray:

Help me to be transformed by your presence so that I may use my gifts to bring you glory.

Job Description

Romans 12:9-21

Have you ever wanted a clear list of things that Christians should do? Would this make your life easier as a follower of Christ?

At the end of Romans 12, Paul provides a bit of a job description to each of us who claim to be a Christ follower.

After reading Paul's job description of how to live for Christ, it would be easy to close your Bible and walk away thinking "There is no way I could ever do all of

that." It is one of those passages you wish you could forget, because you know that it will challenge every part of who you are.

It is not surprising that Paul begins with love. This is not a passing love, but a real and genuine love. If we know what we are to love, we also know we should avoid evil and hold onto the good.

We are to do these things, not in passing, but with zeal. Even in those relationships that are hard, and where there is hate, we are to overcome bad feelings with love.

Think About It:

Among the series of traits listed in Romans 12, which ones do you find the hardest to live out in today's culture?

Make a Choice:

Which of these traits will you choose to practice this week?

Pray:

God, help me to develop those traits that are pleasing to you.

Bible Study

Romans 11:1-32

with Tony W. Cartledge

Aug. 17, 2014

What about Israel?

Perhaps you have heard the epigram, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” Usually attributed to William Norman Ewer, a British journalist who favored socialism and spied for the Soviet Union during the 1920s, the anti-Semitic barb drew several ripostes, including this one from American businessman Cecil Browne: “But not so odd as those who choose a Jewish God, yet spurn the Jews.”

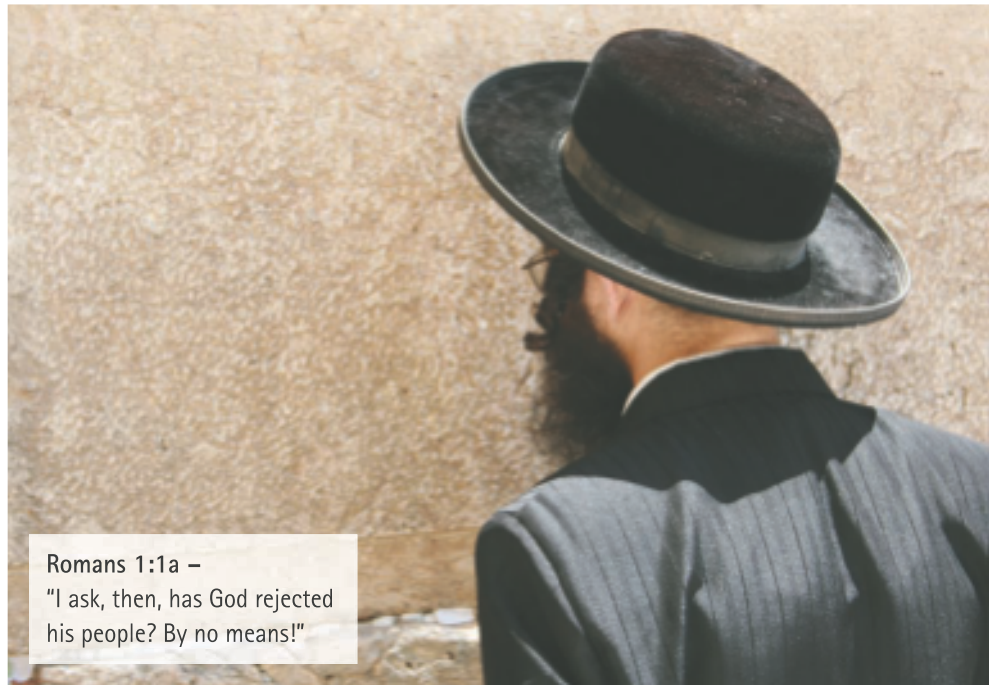
Jews have experienced prejudice, persecution, and hostilities through much of their existence, with the Holocaust being only the most horrific in a long string of atrocities. All too often, the people who carried out the pogroms called themselves Christian and claimed to be doing the will of God.

Such animus has its roots in human weakness and suspicion, not in the Bible. Still, from the beginning, those who followed Jesus have sought to understand how the Jews – known in the Old Testament as God’s chosen people – fit into God’s ongoing plan.

Paul – who was born and trained as a Jew *par excellence* – struggled with the issue, and much of Romans 9-11 is given to explaining his position on the past, present, and future relationship of God and the Jews.

Has God rejected the Jews? (vv. 1-10)

Paul had come to believe that Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of all the Jews had hoped for, the promised Messiah who would deliver them from their enemies and usher in a new age. Yet,



Romans 1:1a –
“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means!”

with few exceptions, Paul observed that the Jews had rejected Christ. Would this defeat God’s purpose for Israel? Would God turn against the very people God had chosen from all the nations to be the mediator of God’s grace to the world?

So Paul asked, “Did God reject his people?” And immediately he answered: “By no means!”

Paul was fully committed to Christ, but not ready to turn against his heritage or his people. He defends his belief that God had not given up on the Jews by citing two examples, beginning with himself.

“I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin,” Paul said (v. 1). His readers would have known Paul’s history as a Jewish zealot who had persecuted Christians (Acts 22:3-5, Gal. 1:14) – and yet God had called him out on the road to Damascus. Jesus appeared in a blinding vision that left Paul sightless for three days and led to his conversion (Acts 9).

If God had given up on the Jews, Paul reasoned, he would have been rejected with the rest of them. If God

did not still have a plan for the people that God “foreknew,” there would have been no need for God to call Paul.

Paul’s experience, then, led him to believe that God’s grace was fully available to the Jews, and his knowledge of the scriptures reminded him that this was not the first time God had preserved a faithful remnant even when the majority of Hebrews had gone after other gods and sought their salvation elsewhere.

Thus, he points to the story of how Elijah complained that Israel’s rejection and Jezebel’s persecution had left him as the only Israelite still holding on to faith. God, however, revealed to Elijah that there remained 7,000 who had not gone over to Baal (vv. 2-4). If God had preserved a remnant in the past, Paul reasoned, “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (v. 5).

Paul sees the initiative as lying wholly with God, who had “reserved for myself” the remnant in Elijah’s day, and who continued to preserve a remnant through divine grace, not human works (v. 6).

For Paul, if some were “elect” to receive grace, then the others must have

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



been “hardened” so that they would be spiritually blind and thus reject God’s way (v. 7). To support this, he quotes loosely from Deut. 29:4 and Isa. 29:10, conflating the texts to argue that God made the people spiritually near-sighted and hard of hearing (v. 8). Surprisingly, Paul then adds an imprecation from Ps. 69:22-23, crediting to David a wish that his personal enemies would become blind and fall into their own trap. The reference to eyes becoming dim or dark ties the three texts together. 📖

A modern teacher of biblical studies or homiletics would warn his or her students against loosely mixing and matching texts to support a position, but Paul followed the rabbinic traditions of his day, which had no compunction against fusing phrases from disparate texts in order to make a point.

Can rejection lead to salvation? (vv. 11-24)

And where is Paul’s argument leading? He reinterprets the mishmash of texts to support his belief that the Jews had stumbled in darkness, but not of their own doing. They did not “stumble in order to fall,” he said, but God had engineered their rejection in order to bring salvation to the Gentiles, with the result that the Jews would then become jealous of how God had blessed the Gentiles and thus turn back to God (vv. 11-12).

Confused yet? We may find Paul’s argument to be circular or unconvincing on logical grounds, but it is based on his firm belief that God controls all things, that God had not given up on the Jews, and that ultimately God wants all to be saved. 📖

Though writing to Gentiles as “an apostle to the Gentiles,” Paul insisted that his ministry also served “to make my own people jealous,” so that they might come to faith (vv. 13-14). If God’s choice of Israel and later hardening of their hearts could bring Gentiles to God, Paul thought, their future acceptance would be cause for even greater rejoicing (v. 15).

Paul believed that God had called Israel to be holy – set apart for God’s

purposes – and that same call had been extended to the Gentiles: “if the root is holy, then the branches are also holy” (v. 16).

The reference to root and branch leads Paul into an extended metaphor in which he compares the people of God to an olive tree. When some of the original branches (the people of Israel) turned away from God, they were broken off, making room for “wild olive branches” (the Gentiles) to be grafted onto the tree in their place (v. 17). This did not give Gentile believers any reason to boast, however, as if they inherited their place by an intrinsic right or superior performance. Some of the Jews had been cut off due to unbelief, while the Gentiles had been grafted in because of their belief, but such belief was possible only because of God’s grace.

One cannot presume upon God’s grace, which is free but never cheap. The Gentile believer-branches had their place on the tree because of God’s enduring kindness, but were also subject to being removed if they turned away (vv. 18-22).

Ultimately, Paul saw a day when the “natural branches” would be grafted back in to their rightful place, with both Jews and Gentiles finding life and producing fruit as part of a single tree (vv. 23-24). 📖

Can all Israel be saved? (11:25-32)

Paul had not given up on the Jews. He believed that Israel’s rejection of God was a necessary prelude to the salvation of the Gentiles, and that the redemption of the Gentiles would then lead to a new reconciliation between God and the Jews.

This argument may seem a bit strange to us, and indeed, Paul calls it a “mystery,” this notion that God intentionally hardened the hearts of Israel in order to open the door of faith to Gentiles (v. 26). 📖

Ultimately, Paul believed, all Israel would be saved. As is his custom, Paul cites scripture to support his view. We might expect him to quote something like 1 Sam. 12:22, “For the LORD will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased the LORD to make you a people for himself.”

Instead, Paul loosely quotes Isa. 59:20-21a, with allusions to Isa. 27:9 and Jer. 31:33-34, asserting that God’s ultimate intention was to restore all Israel. 📖

God’s plan for the Jews was a mystery, Paul said: Who would have imagined that God would cause the Jews to turn away in order to bring about the salvation of Gentiles, who would then bring Jews back to faith? In writing to the Romans, Paul sought to explain the mystery of how God could harden the very people God wanted to save, in order to save not only them, but also the rest of the world.

Disobedient Gentiles can come to Christ only because disobedient Jews brought about God’s mercy, Paul argues. If that can be true, how much more would God also extend mercy to them? In a sense, the only thing any of us contribute to our redemption is the stumbling disobedience that makes it necessary (vv. 30-32).

Paul’s ultimate desire is that all – not just all Israel, but *all* – will be saved. 📖

Surely it seems mysterious to us that God would use disobedience in order to bring about obedience, or employ disbelief to engender faith, but Paul insists that this is the case. Recognizing what a stupendous thought this is, Paul shifts to hymnic praise of the rich wisdom, unsearchable judgments, and inscrutable ways of God, who cannot be understood, but only praised (vv. 33-36).

We may be glad that judgment is in God’s hands rather than ours. May we also harbor the hope that all will respond to God’s amazing, mysterious grace. **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Romans 12:1-8

Aug. 24, 2014

Everyone Is Gifted

How long has it been since you went out of your way to be kind to someone who wasn't related to you by kinship or friendship? Can you name the last time you exercised your God-given talents to help someone in need or to make the world a better place?

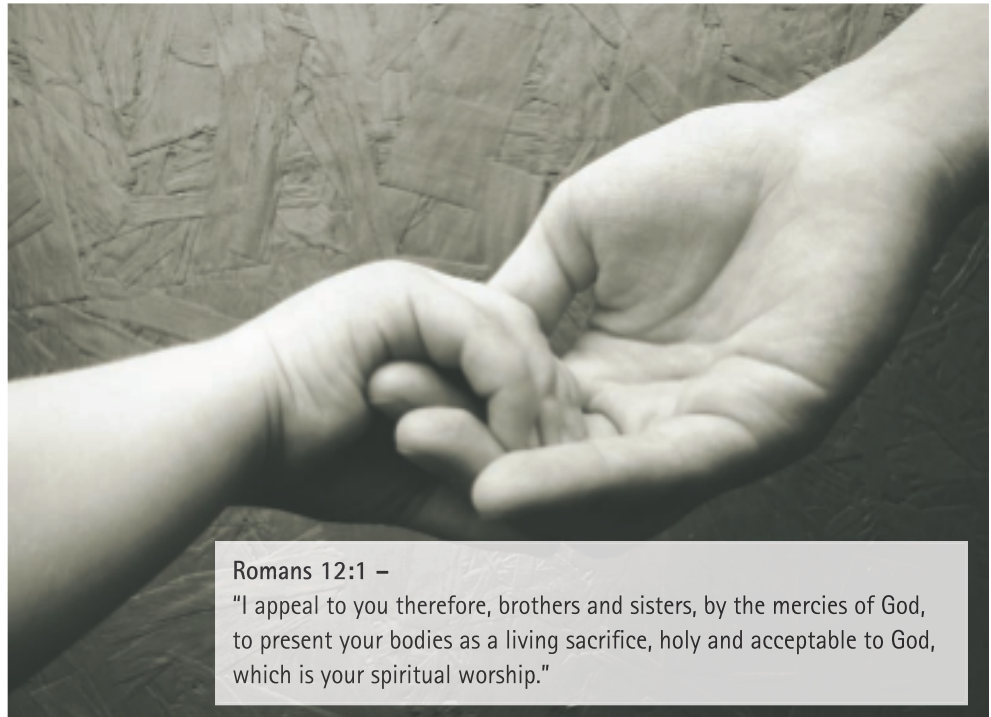
Coming to know Christ is a transforming experience, and those who follow Jesus are called to be salt and light in the world: a transforming influence in society. We may think the things we do are only drops in a sea of what needs doing, but every drop makes a difference. God's Spirit equips believers to transform their world through abilities or attitudes that we call "spiritual gifts."

Do you feel "gifted"?

A transformed life (vv. 1-2)

The subject of spiritual gifts was important to the Apostle Paul, for he addressed it in his letters to the churches in Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus. In Romans 12:1-8, his discussion of spiritual gifts marks a shift in emphasis from weighty theological arguments in the first 11 chapters to personal relationships and church matters in the final section. Paul's first concern was that Christians serve God by serving others.

Paul's appeal is based on "the mercies of God," the primary motivation for our worshipful response. The word for mercy is plural, a reminder that God's deep grace has been manifest in many acts of mercy toward us. God's mercy



Romans 12:1 –

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

to us inspires our service to others. ⬇

Paul urges his readers "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (NRSV). The word translated as "worship," like its Hebrew counterpart, can also mean "service." The translation "spiritual" renders a word (*logikos*) that normally means "rational." Thus, the KJV's familiar rendering as "reasonable service" seems a better option. ⬇

And how do we serve? Early Hebrews worshiped God through offering sacrifices, but offering personal service and worship as an alternate to sacrifice goes back as far as the Psalms (see 40:6-8; 51:15-17). As Christ's life, death, and resurrection opened the doorway of grace, it is only reasonable that we should offer a sacrificial life to him. ⬇

A popular philosophy in Rome considered the human body to be evil, but Paul affirmed the goodness and value of our bodies as a "living sacrifice" to God.

How else could we serve, if not with our bodies? Could we prepare

food or build houses for the poor without our hands? Could we offer a hug to the lonely without our arms? Could we share God's love or proclaim good news to others without having our bodies involved in the process? Paul wrote from the Hebrew perspective that our spirits, minds, and bodies are part of a whole.

In v. 2, Paul makes another connection: We present our bodies to God because we have first undergone a change in our minds. If we remain conformed to our culture, we'll stick to a self-focused path, but if we are mentally transformed to become like Christ, it becomes our nature to serve. Paul uses the word *metamorphousthe*, from which we get "metamorphosis," a word that describes a radical change, as from a caterpillar to a butterfly. In this way, Paul said, we learn to follow God's will by doing "what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Neuroscientists tell us that, as children, our brains must learn how to think in productive ways. Chemical patterns that support certain ways of thinking

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become “hard-wired” into our brains as we develop, not all of them positive. If we want to generate positive changes in our behavior or outlook, we must begin by changing the way we think. 📌

A transformed mind (vv. 3-5)

Paul continues his thoughts on thinking in v. 3, where he encourages believers to avoid arrogance and evaluate themselves “with sober judgment.” To live and serve rightly, we must understand what we can and cannot do, without either conceit or false modesty. No spiritual gift makes us superior to other believers, and no gift is too small to be used. Those who practice “sober judgment” do not covet other people’s abilities, but recognize and accept their own abilities as gifts from God, and then put them to use.

All believers are needed by the church, which Paul often referred to as the body of Christ (Eph. 3:6, 5:23; Phil. 3:21; Col. 1:18, 24, 3:15). In 1 Cor. 12:12-27, as here, Paul compares the church to a human body in which hands, feet, and other parts are equally necessary. If writing today, Paul might have described a complicated machine like an automobile or computer that has many parts and relies on all of them to function properly, even though some are internal and never seen.

Paul’s admonition does not call us to downplay our abilities, but to own and identify the gifts and abilities with which God has endowed us – including the sense of humanity that binds us to others and makes us capable of serving them. 📌

Differing gifts (vv. 6-8)

Paul understood that the church in Rome consisted of diverse people, not only in their ethnic or religious backgrounds, but also in their personalities, interests, and abilities. All were capable of service, though not all in the same way. Each person’s giftedness could make particular contributions to the good of the whole.

The apostle describes seven of

these gifts in vv. 6-8. His list is not exhaustive, and some of the gifts he mentions are quite generic, but all of them are important to the functioning of a healthy congregation. 📌

Paul first mentions the gift of “prophecy,” or “inspired preaching.” Prophecy might occasionally involve the future, but is mainly about telling the present by communicating the gospel within our current context. An effective sermon that brings together human needs, God’s care, and how the two can meet would be a good example of prophecy, which Paul says should be “in proportion to faith” (see “The Hardest Question” online for more on what this means).

“Ministry” translates *diakonía*, the word used to describe the proto-deacons of Acts 6 who were put in charge of distributing food to the poor. “Ministry” is not limited to the hungry, of course. Whether we volunteer in a soup kitchen, assist with disaster relief, help clean up the fellowship hall, labor on a committee, or spend time listening to someone in grief, we are serving others through the gift of ministry.

The gift of “teaching” is self-explanatory, and we are grateful for effective instructors. Teaching is broader than the formal setting of a Sunday school class or home Bible study, however. We all have opportunities to teach by example – a thought that should lead us to ask what kind of lessons we are offering to our children, friends, or co-workers. The ability to teach is to be exercised with discernment, so the lessons we teach will be appropriate.

“Exhortation,” next on the list, might better be translated as “encouragement.” Do you know anyone who constantly encourages you? What a gift that is. Some people who may never preach a sermon or teach a class can support those who are in more public roles as they compliment good work and inspire them

to persevere. Whatever our roles, we all face emotionally trying days. Phone calls, e-mails, or thoughtful cards can be just what we need to keep going. Encouragement is the gift that keeps on giving.

Did you ever think of “generosity” as a gift? Paul did. Two people, whether rich or poor, may have comparable resources, but one may clutch every cent while the other shares freely, thinking of how much they can give rather than how much they have left. A generous heart, Paul believed, is a spiritual gift, and those who give should do so sincerely: the word translated as “generosity” in the NRSV means “simplicity.” We don’t give by careful calculation of the tax advantages, or in order to make a show, but simply and sincerely, because we see a need that we can help meet.

Paul recognized the importance of “leadership.” The word he used could describe one who directs or presides over an organization or group, so we might naturally think of pastors, but laypeople can lead as well as professional ministers. Leadership is not as complicated as expensive seminar leaders might want us to believe. Whenever we exert a positive influence or help facilitate something that needs to be done, we are exhibiting the spiritual gift of leadership. Paul says we should do this with “diligence” (NRSV). The underlying word speaks of doing something with zeal or exertion. A good leader doesn’t just sit back, but makes things happen.

The last gift Paul mentions is “compassion,” which could also be translated as “kindness” or “acts of mercy.” Compassionate people should demonstrate their gift with a cheerful spirit, Paul says. As Joseph A. Fitzmeyer has noted, “The spirit in which the acts are done is as important as the acts themselves” (*Romans*, The Anchor Bible vol. 33 [Doubleday, 1992, 649]).

Every gift Paul mentioned serves to make the world a better place through sharing the love of Christ in word, deed, or both. What are you doing with *your* gifts? 📌 BT

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Aug. 31, 2014

A Labor of Love

Has it ever struck you as strange that we celebrate “Labor Day” by taking the day off and *not* laboring? The name would suggest a day devoted to work.

Labor Day is one of those landmark dates that helps us organize our calendar. Labor Day means “back to school” for many children. Labor Day means “the last blast of summer” to those who enjoy camping or long weekends in the mountains or at the beach. For some folks, Labor Day will mean just more labor. For believers, every day is an opportunity to work in God’s behalf.

Real love requires labor (vv. 9-13)

In Rom. 12:1-8, Paul calls for Christian believers to be transformed from secular citizens to servants of God. In the remainder of the chapter (vv. 9-21), Paul offers a job description showing what that transformed life looks like. If Paul’s instructions were formatted as an itemized list, it would include 30 bullets. For Paul, faith in Christ is our primary vocation, the basis for all else that we do.

You know what it is to see a real labor of love: an immaculate lawn or flower garden, a carefully restored automobile or antique, a detailed painting or quilt. Hobbyists devote hours upon hours to such projects because they love the labor and can envision the finished product.

Christian living is a total labor of love. Jesus summed up his own teaching in the straightforward command to love one another as he had loved

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



Romans 12:11 –
“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

us. When Paul became a Christian, he accepted that command and taught it to others (Rom. 13:9, Gal. 5:14) – but he was rarely satisfied to leave it at that. As typical job descriptions begin with a summary statement followed by specific expectations, Paul offers detailed expectations for Christian workers.

Paul begins with love, as we might expect, and this is the first time in Romans he uses the word *agapē* with reference to Christians as well as to God’s selfless love.

The first phrase of v. 9 contains no verb: Paul begins with the noun for love, then adds the adjective “unhypocritical,” as if he is saying: “Love: for real!” Translators usually supply a verb to get “Let your love be genuine.”

The God-inspired love Paul is talking about leads us to “hate what is evil” and “hold fast to what is good” (v. 9). This is evident in our behavior. If the love and devotion others see in us is not genuine, our witness may do more harm than good.

With v. 10, Paul shifts from *agapē*

to *philadelphia*: Godly love will express itself in brotherly love. Here Paul appears to be speaking of the church community when he says “outdo one another in showing honor.” We honor others through personal encouragement and care, including the support of church programs that benefit all through our participation and financial support. Alternate translations are “showing eagerness in honoring one another” (NET) or more literally, “leading the way in honoring one another.”

The participles continue in v. 11, which could be translated as “not lagging in zeal, being fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.” NRSV translates with imperative statements: “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

Have you ever been around someone who seemed aglow with the Spirit, eager to serve God and others? Their enthusiasm for helping others and their willingness to go the extra mile makes them delightful companions who encourage us to render more avid service, too.

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The instructions continue in v. 12: Paul urges believers to rejoice in hope and persevere in suffering, never giving up on their prayers. The trouble is, many people *do* give up on loving, giving, serving, or praying. They lose heart when hard times come, and withdraw from community rather than seeking the encouragement it can offer.

Sometimes we give up due to a faulty theology combined with selfish motives. Whether consciously or not, we may expect faithful service to bring us tangible rewards or put us in such good standing with God that we will be divinely protected.

Others believe that God will grant any request if we pray long enough. When rewards don't come – or tragedy *does* come – it's tempting to give up, but God has never promised temporal rewards or special protection.

Jesus told his disciples to expect hard times. If Paul had not anticipated that his readers would face suffering or persecution, he wouldn't have urged them to persevere in the midst of it. 📌

Understanding how hard life can be, believers motivated by love will contribute to the needs of others and seek ways to show hospitality to others (v. 13). 📌 Paul's consistent use of present participles, which indicate continuing action, suggests that people motivated by love will never get through loving and serving and praying and giving, because those things are at the heart of our life, and without them we would not be who we have become with God's help. We have learned to find our joy of life and our fulfillment in purpose through letting our life be a channel of blessing to others.

Relationships take work (vv. 14-21)

While vv. 9-13 seem primarily focused on the Christian community, vv. 14-21 look beyond the church to the broader society, including people who don't like us, who make our lives miserable, or who we might consider to be beneath our station.

As the hallmark of life in the

believing community is love that brings unity, the believer's life in the world should be marked by love that fosters peace. 📌 Such love calls us to "rejoice with those who rejoice" and to "mourn with those who mourn" (v. 15). It's not unusual to feel the need to reach out to those who are suffering, but just as important to congratulate and encourage others in their happy times.

Believers do not limit their love or outreach to people who are like themselves – a prime reason that many churches are struggling. We are to avoid pride or conceit and "be willing to associate with people of low position," Paul says (v. 16). Our society may not be as stratified as that of first century Rome, where slaves and indentured servants shared the streets with plebians and patricians, but we may still be quite class conscious, separated by economic, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Using an unconventional phrase, Paul says we should "think the same toward one another." The translation "live in harmony" (NRSV, NIV, NET) obscures the sense of equality and mutual esteem that Paul wants to foster. "Be of the same mind toward one another" (KJV, NAS95) comes closer to Paul's intent. We are not to think ourselves better than others, but be willing to associate with people of low station, or to share in menial labor ("give yourselves to lowly tasks" is an alternate translation).

Showing love is more difficult when relating to people who act toward us in unloving ways. Reflecting Jesus' teaching (Matt. 5:44-47 and Luke 6:27-28), Paul insists that believers should "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (v. 14). It is tempting to repay evil with evil, but followers of Jesus should "be careful to do what is right" (v. 17), to answer evil with good.

It is a very natural thing for us to

want to hurt those who hurt us, but Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and Paul insists that we do the same. Vengeance belongs to God, not to us. Our responsibility – to the extent that it lies in our power – is to live in peace with all people (v. 18).

Hostility is *never* a Christian characteristic. In addition to being unchristian, hostile attitudes are unhealthy. Doctors know that hostile people have higher blood pressure and greater risk of heart disease. Replacing hostility with humility not only provides a positive witness to others, but is also a smart and healthy thing to do.

Our response to those who hurt us should not be limited to the refusal to engage in hitting back or verbal retaliation or posting passive aggressive comments on Facebook. Paul says we should take the initiative in showing kindness to our enemies, not allowing wrong to prevail, but overcoming evil with good (vv. 19-21).

Paul adds an interesting comment to this theme. In actively caring for enemies, he says, "you will heap burning coals on their heads" (v. 20).

While a surface reading of this verse sounds more like retaliation than kindness, the meaning must be a positive one. Perhaps Paul is suggesting that acts of kindness will cause enemies to feel the heat of shame, or the warmth of God's love – either of which might urge them toward repentance. (For more on this, see "The Hardest Question" online.)

However we interpret this verse, it must suggest the idea of overcoming evil with good. That instruction frames the entire job description, which begins with the instruction to avoid evil and do good (v. 9), and concludes with the charge to overcome evil with good (v. 21).

That is our job, our first work as believers. As we commit ourselves to showing genuine love to others, to overcoming evil by doing good, we may just discover a level of fulfillment and joy we never knew before.

Here is our job description. Let's get to work! **BT**

Classifieds

Senior Pastor: The Memorial Baptist Church (TMBC), Greenville, N.C., seeks a full-time senior pastor with strong leadership skills and successful pastoral experience. Founded in 1827 as the Greenville Baptist Church, the name was changed later to The Memorial Baptist Church to memorialize the formation of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina in this church in 1830. Affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Southern Baptist Convention, CBFNC, BSCNC and the South Roanoke Baptist Association, TMBC is mission-focused and moderate, ordains men and women, and both men and women hold leadership positions. The congregation of approximately 600 members holds traditional and contemporary worship services. An advanced divinity degree from an accredited institution is required. An earned doctorate is preferred. Candidates should submit a cover letter and résumé with references to tmbc-search@suddenlink.net or to Larry Dendy, 4171 Park Ave., Ayden, NC 28513-7104.

Pastor: First Baptist Church in Corbin, Ky., affiliated with CBF and Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, is seeking a full-time pastor. FBC is a traditional, progressive church with a community focus. The church has a proud 118-year history in Corbin and is ecumenical in its approach in reaching the communities of southeastern Kentucky. Located in downtown Corbin, the church is within minutes of I-75. The congregation of approximately 400 members welcomes diversity and inclusiveness while celebrating many gifts among its members for service and ministry. Interested candidates should submit résumés to the Pastor Search Committee at fbcr_resumes@yahoo.com.

In the Know

Amy Butler is pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, coming from Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.

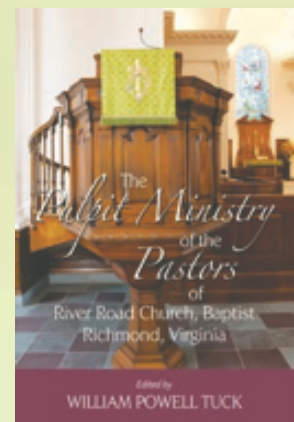
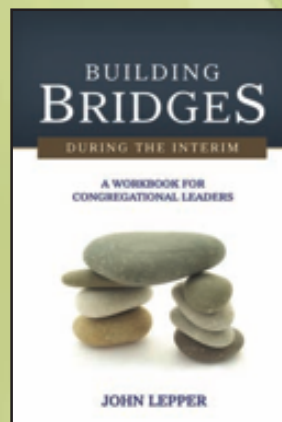
Jim Dant is pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C. He previously served Highland Hills Baptist Church in Macon, Ga.

Bruce Minett, a Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE) with more than 28 years of ministry experience, is director of development for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Since 2002, he had served as executive associate pastor at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Carrollton, Ga.

John Lepper retired June 30 as coordinator for the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, a position he held for 16 years. Earlier he served with the Kentucky Baptist Convention and as a pastor. He is the author of *Building Bridges During the Interim: A Workbook for Congregational Leaders* (2012, Nurturing Faith). **BT**

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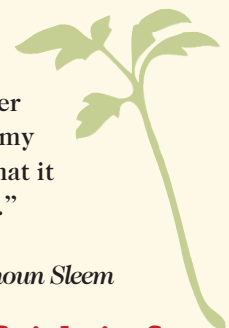
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“When I was a child selling postcards to tourists, I never thought I would write a book. Being raised in the Gypsy culture was like a movie with sweet parts mixed with painful times. In my childlike thinking, I had no idea how that drama would continue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

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

—From the memoirs of *Anoun Sleem*

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The ‘real housewives’ of the Old Testament

The promo for the new reality series begins, “Compared to this cast, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, *Beverly Hills*, and *Atlanta* might as well live in Mayberry.”

Eve: Being the only woman in the world seems simple, but this forbidden fruit has no choice but to keep falling into the same clueless arms. The playful temptress avoids some complications — no mother-in-law, no old flames, no other woman wearing her dress to a party. Then a serpent shows up, an epic fling, and Eve ends up rivaling Snow White as a cautionary tale against eating apples.

Sarah: This vivacious vixen is such a hottie that her shabby, self-serving husband tries to pass her off as his gorgeous sister for fear that someone will take him out. The brazen beauty is desperate to have children. Sarah gets so upset, she comes up with a reckless plan.

Hagar: When Sarah suggests that her husband sleep with the Egyptian maid, the ill-advised strategy leads to disaster for the underemployed beauty. Hagar has a baby boy and the nerve to smile about it. The two women go Nancy Kerrigan and Tonya Harding. Even if the boss’ wife says it is OK to sleep with the boss, it is not.

Rebekah: Sarah’s son Isaac spots the high-spirited Rebekah and has his pick-up line ready. “Please offer your jar that I may drink.” She responds like a saucy minx. “Drink and I will water your camels.” Ooh la la. She runs off with a stranger to start a family, but her twin sons make Cain and Abel look like Bert and Ernie. This manipulative mother deceives her aged husband and betrays her firstborn with unwashed gym clothes and homemade rabbit stew.

Rachel: Don’t hate her because she is beautiful. This sassy, flirty Angelina Jolie entices Jacob just by watering her sheep. In a moment of macho bravado he lifts the heavy stone well-cover, steals a kiss, and cries. If he had known



what was in store for him, Jacob would have cried first. His slimy father-in-law tricks him into working 14 years for a dowry.

Leah: Rachel’s dad *forgets* to tell Jacob that he has to marry the sister with the good personality. On the morning after the wedding, Jacob tells her he wishes her little sister had come on the honeymoon. Leah cavorts with mandrakes (plants that promise fertility and are shaped so as to cause middle school boys to giggle) and gets even by having the most children (six sons and a daughter, not the easiest way to win).

Tamar: This cheeky siren is known for her skill in the art of seduction. When her first two husbands die and her ex-father-in-law will not order his third son to marry her, Tamar thinks outside the box. She dresses as a prostitute, covers her face, seduces her father-in-law, and steals his signet ring. Several months later when it’s obvious that this single lady is pregnant, Judah orders Tamar to be burned. As they prepare to light the briquettes, she reveals Judah’s conniving ways.

Rahab: This serious career woman also has a rich social life. She lives in a tavern frequented by men untroubled by scruples. The *femme*

fatale betrays her country to help a couple of spies who know their way around the red-light district. Freewheeling Rahab tells the police she just kissed the strangers good-bye and, if they hurry, they can probably still catch them.

Ruth: After her first husband dies, this hopeless romantic begins a new chapter in her life by catching the eye of a wealthy farmer. Boaz is long in the tooth, and interethnic marriages are tough. So, he is amazed when the impish enchantress “comes softly and uncovers his feet and lays herself down.”

Jezebel: Parents who name their daughter Jezebel are asking for trouble. The Phoenician princess walks all over her puny husband Ahab, king of Israel. Even when this dangerous woman loses a contest with a prophet, she does so in spectacular fireworks fashion. When Ahab wants a vineyard, ruthless Jezebel arranges for the owner’s demise. The queen ends up being thrown from a palace balcony and eaten by dogs.

...

You might think that compared to these stars, the rest of the cast would be dull, but you would be wrong:

High-spirited **Jael** hammers a tent peg through a foreign general’s skull.

Deborah, determined to have it all on her own terms, becomes a judge in a court in which women cannot be witnesses.

Delilah, relentless in pursuing what she wants, uses her feminine wiles to destroy a hunk.

Esther wins the Miss Persia contest and surrounds herself with palace intrigue.

Gomer marries Hosea even though she is Kim Kardashian tying the knot with T.D. Jakes.

...

The resilient women of the Old Testament left behind amazing legacies. In a culture that treated women like property, these females refused to be kept down. Not much is more real than that. **BT**

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

Baptist theology

If theology is thinking about God, then every Baptist has a theology. This article is the first in a series of six articles about Baptist academic theology found in books and articles written since 1950 by pastor-theologians and lay theologians as well as by professors of theology.

BRIDGE THEOLOGIES

Across the centuries the principal conversation partner for Christian theology has been philosophy. That continues to be true for many academic theologians today, but sometimes theologians engage in dialogue with other disciplines. During our era three of those disciplines were science, other religions and literature.

Science

In building bridges between theology and science, practicing scientists naturally possess special authority. At least three scientists who are or have been Baptists have made important contributions to this field.

Charles Townes received the Nobel Prize for work that led to lasers. Sir John Houghton is co-chair of the scientific assessment working group of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that received a Nobel Prize for its work. He is the author of *The Search for God: Can Science Help?*

Francis Collins is a convert from agnosticism who during his years as a Baptist directed the largest scientific research project in history: the Human Genome Project. Now the Director of the National Institutes of Health, he has written a book about science and theology titled *The Language of God*.

Eric Rust, an English Baptist, taught at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the mid-20th century when Karl Barth's influence was discouraging theologians from exploring relationships between theology and science. Eric Rust rowed against that current and wrote repeatedly and wisely about science and theology.

Other religions

Harvey Cox wrote about the relationship between Christianity and other religions in his 1988 book *Many Mansions*. Charles

Kimball is an expert on Islam who once had the extraordinary experience of being asked by the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran to talk to him about Jesus.

Mark Heim has written three books about other religions. In the third, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends*, he makes the fascinating suggestion that the claims of the world religions about salvation may all be true because, even though they seem to be mutually exclusive, the religions understand salvation very differently. Buddhists may be right that the Eightfold Noble Path leads to Nirvana, and Christians may also be right that redemption leads to everlasting communion with the Holy Trinity.

Literature

Baptists such as Paul Fiddes, John Killinger and Ralph Wood have made contributions to the study of relationships between theology and literature.

ADVOCACY THEOLOGIES

Theologians sometimes advocate for particular causes. For example, J. Deotis Roberts advocated for black theology in his 1971 book *Liberation and Reconciliation*, and Will D. Campbell did the same in his 1972 book *Race and the Renewal of the Church*.

Jann Aldredge-Clanton advocated for feminist theology in her 1991 book *In Whose Image? God and Gender*. Miguel A. de la Torre advocated for Hispanic moral theology in his 2010 book *Latinola Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*.

THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINES

Academic theology embraces several distinct disciplines including biblical, historical, philosophical, moral and pastoral theology as well as systematic theology.

Biblical theology

In some circles, biblical theology is purely descriptive — simply displaying what is in the Bible. For Baptists the situation is more complicated. Because Baptists are so serious about having the Bible as their Holy Book, a description of the Bible's theological content is *ipso*

facto a prescription that they believe it.

A good example of this is the work of Frank Stagg. His book *New Testament Theology* is the product of careful biblical scholarship wedded to the author's passionate concern about social and personal morality. It is an account of New Testament teachings, but it is also a call to live in the way of Jesus.

Stagg also advocated for particular causes. His concern for racial justice is evident in his groundbreaking commentary on Acts in which he argued persuasively that the principal barriers the church had to surmount in its struggle for an unhindered gospel were racial rather than geographical. He and his wife Evelyn wrote a book titled *Woman in the World of Jesus* advocating for a change in women's role in the church and society.

Historical theology

Baptists have excelled at the academic discipline of church history, especially at interpreting their own history and theology. Two outstanding examples are the "Makers of the Modern Theological Mind" series and the "Studies in Baptist History and Thought" series.

Baptist systematic theologians usually make use of historical theology in their work. During the past six decades this was done in a very detailed and authoritative way by James Leo Garrett in his two-volume work, *Systematic Theology*.

Philosophical theology

Although many Baptists have been interested in philosophy of religion, only a few have written philosophical theologies.

Langdon Gilkey probably has been the most influential Baptist doing philosophical theology. His books include *Naming the Whirlwind* and *Message and Existence*.

Another Baptist philosophical theologian is Kenneth Cauthen, whose major work is titled *Systematic Theology: A Protestant Perspective*.

Moral theology

In the period we are considering, Baptists who have written at length about moral theology and social ethics include Henlee Barnette,

T.B. Maston, Anna Robbins, R.E.O. White, Glen Stassen, David Gushee and Dallas Willard. There are many others.

Some Baptists who have been influential in public life have written about moral issues. Three who have had enormous influence are Al Gore on the moral issues involved in global warming, Jimmy Carter on human rights, and Martin Luther King Jr. on civil rights and the war in Viet Nam.

In terms of influence on public policy, King may have been the most influential Baptist theologian of the 20th century.

A milestone in Baptist ethics was reached with the publication in 2003 of David Gushee and Glen Stassen's 500-page *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*. They use Jesus' teaching, especially the Sermon on the Mount, as their principal criterion for making ethical judgments.

This has been done in monographs written by other Baptists such as Tony Campolo (*Red Letter Christians*), but, so far as I'm aware, this is the first time it has been done in a comprehensive textbook of Christian ethics.

Pastoral theology

In the discipline of pastoral theology also, Baptists have done important work. Even today, 15 years after his death, Wayne Oates remains a towering figure in this field. Oates coined the word "workaholic," which seems fitting: he wrote 57 books.

The lines between these five kinds of theology sometimes get blurred. For example, some books dealing with suffering and faith are simultaneously biblical, historical, moral, philosophical and pastoral. This is evident in three fine books on this subject written by Warren McWilliams: *The Suffering of God*, *When You Walk through the Fire* and *Where Is the God of Justice?*

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Systematic theology is theology written in an orderly manner to commend traditional and/or original theological ideas to readers. From now on I will use the word "theology" to refer to systematic theology.

Theology books tend to be of three kinds: introductions, textbooks and monographs.

Introductions

By mediating between church members and the sometimes inaccessible writings of academic theologians, introductions to Christian

theology contribute meaningfully to the lives of Christians who desire to understand their faith better. Out of many such books written by Baptists in the past six decades I will mention just two.

In the U.S., most Baptist academic theologians teach in Baptist schools. Dallas Roark is an exception in that he was teaching at Kansas State Teachers College (now Emporia State University) when he wrote *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Thought*.

Because Roark was in a state school it is not surprising that, in addition to chapters on the usual theological topics, he began with two chapters whose titles are: "Why Believe in God?" and "Why Christianity of All Religions?" In his book Roark made an important theological proposal, namely, that the diverse biblical accounts of the meaning of Jesus' atoning work can all be expressed in terms of the new covenant.

Bruce Milne, a Scot, wrote a winsome introduction titled *Know the Truth*. This book is unusual because British Baptists, unlike Baptists in the U.S., do not often write introductions to theology. Milne has taught theology in London and served as a pastor in Vancouver.

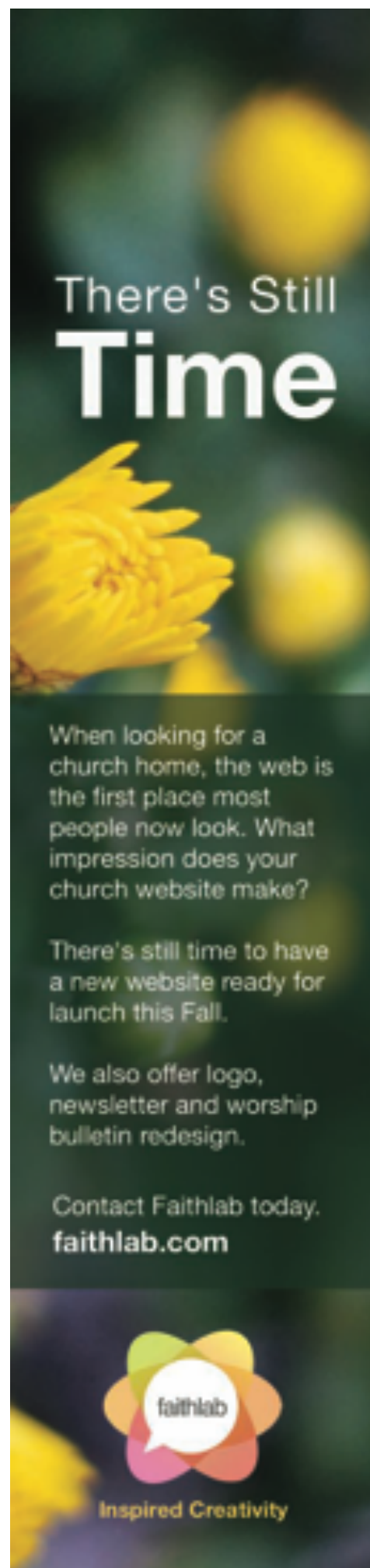
His book is gently Reformed and contains a strong apologetic component. Apparently he is a well-wisher but a bystander of the charismatic movement.

Baptists have created a sub-category of introductions to theology, namely, surveys of distinctive Baptist beliefs such as freedom of conscience. In his book *More Than Just a Name*, R. Stanton Norman lists about 25 such books written in the past six decades. A splendid example is *We Baptists* published by the Baptist World Alliance.

Books such as these help to provide a sense of identity for Baptists. On the other hand, some readers may mistakenly assume that the distinctively Baptist beliefs are more important than the beliefs that Baptists hold in common with all Christians, which isn't the case. Faith in Jesus Christ is more important than faith in baptism by immersion.

Next month we'll begin with theology textbooks. **BT**

—Fisher Humphreys is professor of divinity, emeritus, of Samford University in Birmingham, Ala. This series is a revision of part of a longer article titled "Baptist Theology since 1950" published in *Baptist History and Heritage* (Fall 2013) and used by permission.




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Ask the Theologian: Part 2

STONE MOUNTAIN, Ga. — At the April meeting of the Board of Directors of *Baptists Today*, editor John Pierce posed questions to theologian Fisher Humphreys during a session titled “Ask the theologian.”

The wide-ranging questions were submitted by those who serve on the board with Humphreys. His responses appear here in print (as the second entry in a series) as well as in full on video at baptisttoday.org.

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

When we read about the judgment in Matt. 25:31-46, it seems that the Lord will judge us based on our works, such as feeding, welcoming, clothing and visiting. People are divided into eternal reward and eternal punishment based on what they had done. How do we square that with a passage like Eph. 2:8-10 which tells us that our salvation is “by grace through faith ... not the result of works”? Justice and grace are important themes of these passages, but how do we live with the tension of both of them related to our salvation?

FH: Across the centuries human beings have made many different kinds of responses to their gods. They sing, they worship, they build temples, they obey the gods’ commands, and so on.

My favorite example is Pythagoras, the Greek thinker who originated the theorem about triangles. He taught that the gods want us to abstain from eating white beans.

Modern evangelists like Billy Graham place great emphasis on the response we should make to God, our decision for Christ. The earliest Christians did not do that. They emphasized what God had done in Christ rather than our responses to God’s work.

They were flexible about our response. At various times they called it repentance, faith, confession and baptism. I think it’s wise for us to retain some of the flexibility of the earliest Christians.

Two of the writers of the New Testament,

John and Paul, did settle on one particular response as the fundamental response to God. It was the response of faith. We often overlook how highly original this was.

The New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann wrote: “In Christianity, for the first time, ‘faith’ became the prevailing term for man’s relation to the divine; in Christianity, but not before it, ‘faith’ came to be understood as the attitude which through and through governs the life of the religious man.”

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus’ teaching doesn’t include much emphasis on faith. Presumably such an emphasis would not have been an effective way for Jesus to carry out his work. His work was directed primarily to Israel. Believing in God was not a problem for Jesus’ contemporaries; they already did that.

Their problem was that many of them misunderstood their responsibilities as God’s covenant people. Jesus’s work was to help them understand those responsibilities. He was doing that in his teaching about the final judgment.

I think it is unlikely that in that teaching Jesus intended to be dismissive of faith. I expect it is more likely that he intended to be critical of faith that does not produce works.

In summary, we all begin with faith, with trust in God to be our God and to show us mercy. And we all believe in good works because we know that faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:17).

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

How do you understand judgment, punishment/discipline both in this world and the next? How do you think about it in connection with those who are agnostic or atheists?



FH: It’s natural for us to think of God’s judgment as terrifying. The covenant people in the biblical era did, too, but they also had another understanding of judgment. They knew that in our world judgment is always happening.

Someone is always judging, making discriminations, ordering the way things are. And they knew that those who are doing the judging are doing it badly, unjustly. So they looked forward to a time when God would judge the world.

They knew that God’s judgments will be just, and God will order the world the way it is supposed to be. An example of this positive side of God’s judgment is Isaiah’s famous vision of the peaceable kingdom (Isa. 11:4).

Judgment is just when it rewards those who are good and punishes those who are bad. But judgment is about more than retribution. It is also about protecting the powerless, reforming the wrong-doers, healing the covenant community, and setting the world right. Judgment is a morally serious idea.

The stories of Israel in the Old Testament follow a pattern: God makes a covenant with the people / the people break the covenant / God punishes the people / the people repent / God makes a covenant with the people.

In this pattern, the last word is never punishment; the last word is God’s covenant. Today we say the same thing: punishment should be restorative as well as retributive.

In Romans 7 Paul writes that sin is not just something we do that is wrong. It is an evil force that enslaves us, and it is destructive

“Judgment is about more than retribution. It is also about protecting the powerless, reforming the wrong-doers, healing the covenant community, and setting the world right.”

“When you hear someone say, ‘No one can believe that today,’ you are hearing someone who isn’t paying attention to our world.”

of our lives. It is because God loves us that God opposes the sin that is destroying us.

An English theologian, P. T. Forsyth, said that only if God cares enough to condemn our sin does God care enough to save us.

The question is: In the life to come, does divine judgment on sin continue to be restorative?

Before I try to respond, I want to point out that in our increasingly secular society, anyone who affirms the life to come is already a person of faith.

There are several views about what happens in the life to come.

One is that everyone will be saved; there is no punishment in the afterlife. This is universalism.

Another is that some will be saved and others punished eternally in the afterlife. This is the traditional view.

A third view is that in the afterlife many will be saved and others will be punished, but only temporarily. Following their punishment, they may be saved (this is the purgatorial view of punishment) — or they may cease to exist (this is annihilationism).

All of these proposals seem unsatisfactory to me because they all seem to over-reach, to involve speculation about a state of affairs, the afterlife, which none of us has yet experienced. So I feel it’s best to say, “We don’t choose any of these.”

But there are some things that we can say and that we should say, I think.

One is that God is going to do what is right. God is not vindictive. God is not filled with hatred and rage toward people. God will do what is right.

Another is that God takes our lives seriously and we should too. What we do here and now has an effect on us then and there.

Another is that from the beginning God’s purpose has never wavered. God is creating a community of persons who freely choose to love God with all their hearts and to love their neighbors as themselves. I believe that God will continue to pursue that purpose until it is carried to completion.

It would be over-reaching to claim to know that everyone will be saved, but surely we may hope that will happen. We may hope that the

Old Testament pattern of covenant / sin / punishment / repentance / covenant will continue to be repeated until everyone is in the covenant.

I have three friends who are atheists. I try to take their concerns seriously and to respond to them as well as I can.

I think that for some of them their unbelief is not morally culpable. I think they are conscientiously trying to know the truth, and I feel sure God respects that conscientiousness.

I do hope they will arrive at a tipping point where the light dawns and they see the glory of God revealed in the face of Jesus. In the meantime, we keep on talking.

QUESTION from Roger Paynter, pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas:

In an age of “spiritual but not religious,” there are many folks in my community who genuinely feel a connection to God but have no place for Jesus other than a good role model. What is the importance of Jesus to the modern-day seeker?

FH: Jesus is probably the most famous person who ever lived. John Lennon said the Beatles were more famous than Jesus, and maybe for a while they were, but I expect Jesus has the title again now.

And Jesus is one of the most respected people in the world. For many Buddhists, Jesus was a bodhisattva. For Muslims he was a great prophet of God. For many Hindus such as Gandhi, Jesus was a great religious teacher. For enlightenment thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, he was a great moral thinker.

I think we should welcome these positive attitudes toward Jesus. They don’t say everything about him, but they are true as far as they go.

We should remember that we also don’t say all that needs to be said about Jesus. Whatever any of us is able to say about Jesus in a positive way can serve as a foundation on which to build a fuller understanding.

There is an ancient argument that runs like this: Because Jesus claimed to be God’s Son, either he was God or he was not a good man. It’s a popular argument, and it’s well-intentioned, but I think it’s false.

There are other possibilities. Jesus may have been a good man who made a mistake in thinking he was the Son of God, or he may have been a good man who never thought that himself but his followers thought it about him after his death. I wouldn’t use that argument.

Of course, we Christians believe that Jesus was more than a good man and a teacher of morality and religion. We believe he was uniquely related to God.

In Paul’s words, he was declared to be the Son of God with power by the resurrection (Rom. 1:4). In John’s words, he was the Word of God Incarnate and the only-begotten Son of God. In the words of the Nicene Creed, he was true God and true man. We believe that it was because he was uniquely related to God that he was able to save the world.

The question is, “Can modern people accept all this?” The answer is: “Of course they can.”

Hundreds of millions of them do. There are about 7,160,000,000 people in the world. About 2,375,000,000 of these are Christians. Even if 200 million or 300 million of the Christians have a deficient understanding of Jesus, more than 2 billion are committed to the traditional understandings of Jesus.

When you hear someone say “No one can believe that today,” you are hearing someone who isn’t paying attention to our world.

Of course, what Walter Lippmann called “the acids of modernity” are continuing to do their corrosive work in the lives of many of these people. We need to take this seriously, but we don’t need to worry.

Jesus is still drawing people to himself. What we need to do is to love people and to tell them the good news. The gospel is still the power of God unto salvation. **BT**

—Fisher Humphreys of Birmingham, Ala., has written several books on theology including *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, *The Way We Were: How Southern Baptist Theology Has Changed and What It Means To Us All*, *Fundamentalism (with Philip Wise)* and *God So Loved the World: Traditional Baptists and Calvinism (with Paul Robertson)*.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is part of an occasional series sponsored by an endowment gift from the William H. Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society to help carry on the former society's mission to advance understanding of historic Baptist principles.

Deconstructing, reconstructing soul freedom

Walter Shurden's 1993 book, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*, articulated Baptist identity in terms of Bible freedom, soul freedom, church freedom and religious freedom.

While many individuals within moderate and progressive Baptist life can generally agree on these principles, it seems that "soul freedom" may perhaps be the most fragile of our "Baptist distinctives." This fragility arises from the numerous historical expressions of this distinctive.

Shurden conveys this elusive characteristic of Baptist identity, but he collapses a number of historical perspectives on this distinctive into a singular "soul freedom." Unlike the other freedoms verbalized in this work, "soul freedom" has historically been communicated in a number of different yet related ways revolving around the ideas of "thought," "truth," "experience" and "*imago Dei*."

Similar to a rubber band, these articulations stretch — and speak to our shared humanity and how we as humans relate to God.

The earliest articulations of this relationship between the individual and God appear in some of the confessions written by early 17th-century Baptists Thomas Helwys and John Smyth.

Helwys and Smyth used the term "conscience" to convey how the individual related to God. The use of conscience specifically addressed this divine/human relationship in the context of an overarching civil government.

According to the 1612 confession, *Propositions and Conclusions Concerning True Religion*, "the magistrate is not by virtue of his office to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force or compel men to this or that form of religion, or doctrine."

It is important to recognize that

conscience was understood on an intellectual level. The freedom of conscience was differentiated from the freedom of the will, which served as the "ability to choose the good, and eschew the evil, or to choose the evil, and refuse the good."

Freedom of conscience operated in the province of thought, which related to action and praxis, but remained separate. In this way, freedom of conscience was inherently individualistic as it related to the thought of individuals.

Despite this individualistic nature, conscience did remain a source of justification for actions of the will — either individualistic or communal. This understanding of conscience is directly related to individual thought and belief.

In the early 20th century, E.Y. Mullins articulated this relationship between the individual and God through the term "soul competency." In his 1908 *The Axioms of Religion*, Mullins explained the distinctive as "Man has a capacity for God, and God can communicate with man."

Writing in response to more hierarchical understandings of Christianity — specifically Roman Catholicism — Mullins believed that humanity was competent to relate to the divine, and the divine to humanity without the necessity of some type of intermediary.

This understanding of soul competency was also contextualized within the height of modernism. Because of modernist influences, soul competency was completely linked to an objective understanding of "truth."

According to Mullins, every advance within society speaks to soul competency. He contended, "Every significant movement of our day is one form or another of that high purpose of man to make his way back to God."

From this perspective, anything related to the idea of "truth" becomes integrally related to Mullins' understanding of soul competency.

Concurrently arising with Mullins' understanding of soul competency was Walter Rauschenbusch's emphasis on "personal experience."

Within the Protestant liberal tradition of Fredrick Schleiermacher, "experience" rather than "truth" became the important factor in how the individual related to the divine. The idea of experience stood against the mental religious requirements of memorization and recitation.

For Rauschenbusch, "when the mental exercise of memoriter recitation is made the test for admission to the Church and its sacrament, personal experience is supplanted by something totally different and inferior."

Experience existed outside of the realm of mental and cerebral religious understanding. Christians, and specifically Baptists, did not fit neatly into a definition of beliefs and doctrines because faith was something experienced on a personal level.

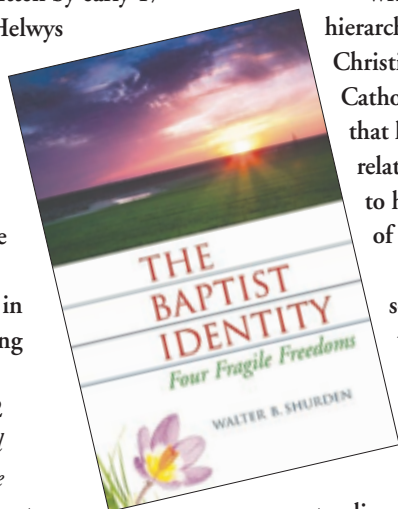
Because experience, something inherently subjective, served as the criteria for evaluating an individual's relationship with the divine, Rauschenbusch explained that the community had the responsibility to hear and verify individual experience. He suggested the community may ask about one's conversion, calling, encounters of the divine, or even doctrinal beliefs in order to confirm a personal experience.

The community probes and helps the individual to refine and articulate his or her personal experience through Socratic experimentation. In so doing, individuals "enrich and broaden" their own faiths through listening to the experiences of others. For Rauschenbusch, "experience" became the distinct characterization of how the individual relates to God.

Finally, soul freedom has become the more modern articulation of this Baptist distinctive regarding the way humanity relates to God. Baptist religious liberty advocate James Dunn has become the figurehead for this expression. (See Aaron Weaver's *James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom*).



Andrew Gardner



Dunn articulates soul freedom through an understanding of *Imago Dei*. In this way, individuals relate to God because individuals are created in the image of God.

Critics have suggested that Dunn's understanding of soul freedom is inherently individualistic. But this is a drastic misinterpretation of Dunn's articulation of soul freedom.

For him, "The overriding fact about [humanity] is our oneness." Humankind must be seen as a singular entity in which all individuals are a part.

In this sense, soul freedom shatters any notion of individualism through emphasizing the birth of humanity from a central and singular deity. Individuals have the ability to relate to God because they see both themselves and others as created in the image of God.

Universal human rights become the natural outgrowth of this concept of soul freedom that envelops the oneness of God and created beings. Soul freedom allows the individual to relate to God, because the individual looks like God.

Each of these articulations of this complex Baptist distinctive is different and yet similar

from one another.

These articulations revolving around "Thought," "Truth," "Experience" and "*Imago Dei*," are different explanations for how humanity is able to relate to the divine. Each, however, points to something that is believed to be inherently part of what it means to be human.

Humanity is capable of thinking and making decisions related to belief. Humanity is capable of discerning truth. Humanity can experience the divine. Humanity is created in the image of God.

These are not articulations of something that is foreign to our persons. Instead, part of our humanity means that we can relate to the divine at the least cerebrally.

Critics of this particular approach to freedom have misinterpreted this distinctive as something that is affective in nature. Soul freedom is not inherently an affective distinctive. It is an ontological distinctive with affective implications.

It is about being and not necessarily doing. This distinction explains what it means to be human. To be human means to have the

capacity to think about the divine, to grasp concepts of truth and to experience God.

Even despite the reality of sin, to be human means to be created in the image of God.

The fragility of this freedom is complicated by many questions. Negotiating these questions is important, but they generally misunderstand that "soul freedom" and other articulations of this distinctive are about human nature.

Questions regarding shared communal belief and practice are important. Questions raised by attempting to understand what it means to have freedom *in Christ* are important. But even before we get to these questions, we have soul freedom.

We have soul freedom because we are creations of a divine creator, and not only this but we are creations made in the image of this divine creator. **BT**

—Andrew Gardner, a native of Yorktown, Va., and a graduate of The College of William and Mary, is a student at Wake Forest School of Divinity.

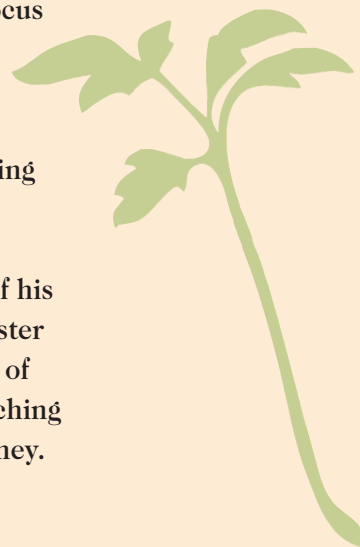
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BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Although June's victory in the Battle of Cold Harbor offered a brief reprise, the ill fortunes of the Confederacy are now in a free fall. The tenuous nature of the South is such that the Confederacy offers to negotiate for peace in Canada. Negotiations do take place, but Confederate officials refuse Lincoln's conditions of restoring the Union and abolishing black slavery.

Meanwhile, Confederate Gen. Jubal Early, trying to relieve pressure on the Confederate capital of Richmond, attempts an unsuccessful invasion of Washington, D.C. In Georgia, Confederate forces, having for more than two months been pressed ever further southward toward Atlanta, are defeated on July 22 in the Battle of Atlanta near Decatur. The city does not fall at this time, but it now seems inevitable that Atlanta will be captured by Union forces.

At the same time, the Battle of Petersburg continues as Union forces attempt to cut Richmond's supply lines. The battle is so spread out that some soldiers do not know how the fighting is going. Thomas Cheney of the First New Hampshire Voluntary Light Battery and a member of the First Free Baptist Church, Manchester, N.H., writes his brother, revealing how little he knows:

... up around the City of Petersburg there is almost continual firing, and Occasionally it is very heavy, what it is for or what is being done there I have to get from the Papers the same as you do.

As the Confederacy reels from setback following setback, Lincoln and the United States are growing increasingly confident that victory is inevitable. Amid growing optimism the U.S. repeals the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that mandated the return of escaped slaves to their masters and had remained in effect for slaves of Union loyalists in the Border States.

Most white Baptists of the South, however, still refuse to acknowledge the wrongfulness of black slavery. Focusing on spirituality rather than social justice, Texas Baptists celebrate the ecumenical work of one of their own, army missionary W.A. Mason, as reported in one newspaper:



150 YEARS AGO

July 1864

Elder Mason has also organized the "Christian Association of Waterhouse's Brigade," composed of the members of the different denominations, who, laying aside all sectarian prejudices, have convened at the altar to worship God, and do all they can for the promotion of the much neglected cause of Christ. Committees are appointed from the different regiments, whose duties are to visit the sick and procure every possible comfort for them...

South Carolina Baptists also celebrate the successes, and acknowledge the challenges, of Baptist army missions:

We have found that the more our brethren have gone among these men, the more they are anxious to preach to them the saving truths of the Gospel. They find among them the same classes we have at home — the young and the old, the learned and the unlearned, the good and the bad. Here are the same hard-hearted, careless, godless sinners, who care neither for God nor regard man, who profane His holy name, who violate His Sabbaths, who despise His laws, and who count even the blood of Christ an unholy thing, and trample His grace

and offers of mercy under their feet. And the number of these is not small. Let those who think that our armies are all, or nearly all, converted to God, go among them in their regiments, or along our public highway, and they will soon be convinced that, notwithstanding so much has been done, there remains yet much, very much more, to be done.

Southern white piousness aside, the thousands of former slaves who are Baptists and are now wearing the Union blue know that spirituality and the gospel cannot be detached from human freedom. In Virginia and Georgia and beyond they fight for freedom for all blacks, enjoying the support of most white Baptists of the North. At the same time, freed persons of Baptist faith on the home front enjoy and celebrate freedom of worship in a revival atmosphere, their congregations growing and prospering in Union-controlled areas of the South.

The Fourth of July serves as a snapshot of racial and regional Baptist moods this month. While free black Baptists join Baptists of the North at large in enthusiastic celebration of the holiday, most of their white Baptist counterparts in the South have little enthusiasm for observing the anniversary of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, a document that long ago declared "all men are created equal." **BT**

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

Untethered

Nearing 90, Carter's post-presidential legacy continues to build

WASHINGTON — There was Jimmy Carter the president, Jimmy Carter the Habitat home builder and now what you might call Jimmy Carter 3.0: international advocate for women's rights.

As he nears 90 and the twilight of his public career, scholars are taking yet another look at Carter, a Baptist Sunday school teacher who continues to find ways to use his four years in the Oval Office as a springboard for his faith-fueled passions.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner is now more free to pursue his global crusade than he ever was as president, says Randall Balmer, author of the new biography, *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter*.

"Religion always functions best at the margins of society and not in the councils of power, and I think Jimmy Carter's career illustrates that beautifully," said Balmer, chair of Dartmouth College's religion department and a noted scholar of American evangelicals.

"He doesn't have to worry about getting the approval from Congress on an initiative in Africa on river blindness. He's not tethered by political considerations any longer."

Perhaps it's the age of Obama that has prompted a reassessment in some quarters of the ex-president with the wide toothy grin, when progressive Democrats like Carter and Lyndon Johnson are cast in a softer, more sympathetic light. Or maybe it's growing nostalgia for a distant era when politics seemed more decent, less dysfunctional. Or maybe it's because Carter just won't slow down, drawing praise for his humanitarian work even from his critics.

Though unsuccessful in securing ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment as president, Carter has emerged as an advocate against the abuse of women across the world. From the chair next to late-night talk show host David Letterman to the halls of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, he can discuss the intricacies of female genital mutilation and the high rates of sexual abuse of women at universities and in the military.

"I have become convinced that the most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the deprivation and abuse of women and girls, largely caused by a false interpretation of carefully selected religious texts and a growing tolerance of violence and warfare," Carter wrote in his new book, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power*.

Carter, of course, is no stranger to religious controversies. He famously broke ties with the Southern Baptist Convention after it called for women to submit to their husbands



Former President Jimmy Carter during a book signing at the *Washington Post* for his new book, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power* RNS photo by Adelle M. Banks.

and not be pastors. Men who feel they are superior to women, he said, can find a Bible verse "here or there" that might legitimize their belief.

But he prefers to focus on the example of Jesus.

"It would be a fruitless search to look through the Scriptures and find one single instance where Jesus did not treat women either equal or superior to men," he said at a recent forum at *The Washington Post*.

Historian Bill Leonard compared Carter's faith-based commitment to human rights to Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership on civil rights.

"There's this strong head and heart in him," Leonard, professor of church history at

Wake Forest Divinity School, said of Carter. "He's very realistic. He's very direct about what he thinks should be done, but underneath that is what I would call this Baptist progressivism."

Timothy George, dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School, was sorry to see Carter leave the SBC and thought his emphasis on the differing views on women was "out of proportion." But George, one of the more conservative Baptists who agreed to meet with Carter before he left the SBC, respects the former president for his attempts to bring Baptists together and his efforts to eradicate overlooked tropical diseases such as Guinea worm.

"He's done so many wonderful things in his humanitarian role, which grows out of his faith," George said of the projects promoted through the Atlanta-based Carter Center.

Carter also has not given up on his belief that Baptists can bridge racial and theological divides for the common good. Working with the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other Baptist groups, this summer he is highlighting "covenants of action," the next stage of the New Baptist Covenant he began almost a decade ago.

So far, there are five pilot interracial projects of Baptists from local congregations from Georgia to Texas working on issues such as predatory lending and literacy.

The people who share Sundays with him at his home church in Plains, Ga., say none of Carter's current work strays from the faith he has long embraced.

"What he teaches on Sunday he lives seven days a week," said Jan Williams, a member of Maranatha Baptist Church, which attracts hundreds of visitors when the former president is in town — and just dozens when he's not.

Jeremy Shoulta, Carter's new pastor at Maranatha, likewise sees Carter's faith in Jesus' teachings in the scope of his post-presidential life.

"I don't see someone who has sort of a compartmentalized faith, where sometimes you see it here and then you look and, well, it's not there," the pastor said. **BT**

NURTURING FAITH EXPERIENCE

MONTANA

AUGUST 18-23, 2014



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

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

COST

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

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

LODGING

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

REMINDER

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

To secure a spot, please send the \$1,200 registration fee to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318 marked as “NF Montana.”

MONDAY — AUGUST 18

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

TUESDAY — AUGUST 19

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

WEDNESDAY — AUGUST 20

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

THURSDAY — AUGUST 21

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

FRIDAY — AUGUST 22

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

SATURDAY — AUGUST 23

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



QUESTIONS? Email editor@baptiststoday.org

Revising the offering envelope

By John Pierce

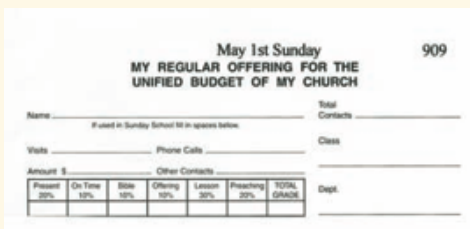
How is faithfulness defined or measured? Can one's commitments be counted? If so, which ones?

Some churchgoers of a particular generation or two remember the six-point offering envelopes that called one into account for certain actions considered to be evidence of faithfulness.

After placing one's tithe and/or offering in a rectangular envelope, a good church member would check the little boxes printed on the front as an indication of faithfulness.

With variations, the envelope would include some combination of (mostly) these:

- Present
- On Time
- Bible Brought
- Bible Read Daily
- Offering
- Lesson Studied
- Preaching (or Worship Attendance)
- Contacts



Therefore, Christian faithfulness was marked by presence, punctuality, bringing a daily-read Bible and money to church, studying the Sunday school lesson (likely while polishing shoes on Saturday night during *The Lawrence Welk Show*), and not slipping out before the sermon to attend a family reunion or to get an early start on a Sunday drive.

Some envelopes even graded faithfulness — with lesson preparation counting 30 percent and giving an offering at 10 percent. (What were they thinking?)

Most envelopes asked about the “Contacts” one had made during the previous week — with varied specificity. Visits, letters and phone calls might be listed separately and then added together as “Total Contacts” on behalf of the church and the Kingdom.

All of these are good things, though not

an exhaustive (though maybe exhausting) expression of weekly Christian faithfulness. But perhaps some other “points” should have been added, such as:

- Loved my neighbor (who's a \$\$\$%^&#**)
- Treated people fairly this week regardless of race and social status
- Late to church because I stopped to help a stranded mother and child
- Paid the utility bills for my neighbor who lost his job
- Took a vacation day to build a wheelchair ramp
- Tutored some challenged kids after school
- Stood up to my co-worker's racist rants
- Gave my work bonus to disaster relief

The list could go on and on — as does the call to Christian faithfulness.

Accountability is good. However, care must be taken against narrowing the measurements of faithfulness so much that the most challenging aspects of following Jesus are missed.

In fact, Jesus called for a two-point system: Love God with all of your being and your neighbor as yourself. **BT**

Sacred space

By Tony W. Cartledge

A recent visit to Duke Chapel reminded me of how some places take on the nature of the sacred.

There's just something about them. With their high, vaulted ceilings, formal sanctuaries such as Duke Chapel and any number of cathedrals I've visited are designed to generate a sense of personal smallness that helps one feel a bit of awe and wonder that is enhanced by the glow of stained glass windows and the pattern of shadows on the floor.

Pulpits in such places tend to be elevated and topped by an elaborate sounding board designed to help

project the speaker's voice in the days before microphones.

The sounding board at Duke Chapel is in the shape of a tall spire, pointing upward, as if to remind the speaker that his or her words are being heard by God as well as the congregation.

Like many similar chapels, the one at Duke includes a couple of wooden mice, as a reminder that God hears any prayer, even one whispered so softly that only a mouse could hear it.

The nice thing about sacred spaces — whether in a majestic cathedral, a rural church, or a beautiful outdoor setting — is that you don't even have to whisper a prayer. When struck by God's presence, your soul does it for you. **BT**



Jewish Americans ask: What does it mean to be ‘pro-Israel’?

WASHINGTON — Who speaks for the American Jewish community? On most any topic, there is no single answer. But on Israel, the U.S. government has come to rely on one group: the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. But today that group, charged with presenting a united front, looks anything but unified.

Created at the request of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who wanted to hear a single Jewish-American voice on the newly founded Jewish state, the conference includes the heads of some 50 Jewish denominations, philanthropies and political organizations.

This spring, the conference rejected, by a 22-17 vote, the membership bid of J Street, a growing pro-Israel group, but one that is more dovish than the conference as a whole.

In response, the head of the congregational arm of the Reform movement, representing more American Jews than any other, threatened to pull out of the conference because it “no longer serves its vital purpose of providing a collective voice for the entire American Jewish pro-Israel community.”

The J Street dispute plays out against a backdrop of long-standing resentment among some more liberal Jews over the outsized influence of the smaller Orthodox movement, especially in Israel, where Orthodox Jews control the religious establishment.

There, only Orthodox rabbis may preside over Jewish marriages and conversions; only recently were a few non-Orthodox rabbis added to the state payroll. The J Street debate seemed to underscore for more left-leaning and less traditionally minded Jews that their fight for respect in Israel must also, at times, be fought at home.

Theodore Sasson of Brandeis University’s

Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies said “it’s unclear whether the Conference of Presidents can reconstitute itself and provide an umbrella for the full range of perspectives embraced by American Jews.”

“If it can’t,” he continued, “it means that the organized Jewish community will devolve into rival factions and lose its capacity to express a united viewpoint.” But those who opposed admitting J Street warn against blowing the vote and its aftermath out of proportion.

“I don’t believe this was a crisis for American Jewry,” said Rabbi Leonard Matanky, head of the Rabbinical Council of America, a leading Orthodox group. “This was a case where people with strongly held feelings wanted a vote to go one way but did not succeed. For them to call into question an entire organization is unfair.”

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, said the conference must grow more inclusive or risk losing Reform Jews, and that he’s hopeful that an agreement can be reached.

Reform Jews, according to the Pew Research Center, account for more than a third of the 5.4 million adult Jews in the U.S. —

1.9 million people.

There are places within the Jewish community where Jacobs says he sees “an intolerance and a narrowness and at times even an arrogance that there is one authentic way for Jewish practice to be expressed, or for love of Israel to be expressed, or for one’s theology to be expressed.”

“That’s never been the hallmark of our people,” Jacobs said.

That tension between more liberal and more traditional Jews is now focused on the J Street membership application. Founded in 2008 as an alternative to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, which has dominated pro-Israel lobbying, J Street bills itself as devoted to the Jewish homeland, but not supportive of every Israeli government policy.

While J Street did not garner the necessary two-thirds vote of conference members to gain admission, Jacobs and others said the rules unfairly allow right-leaning groups, representing a minority of American Jews, to predominate.

He noted that all the member organizations of the Reform and Conservative movements, “which encompass the overwhelming majority of American Jews,” had voted to add J Street. They were joined by, among others, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the Anti-Defamation League and the left-leaning Americans for Peace Now and Ameinu, or “our people” in Hebrew.

Like Jacobs, several presidents said that while they don’t agree with J Street on every issue, it deserves a seat at the table because it supports Israel and meets all membership criteria.

But Matanky, of the Orthodox RCA, said that even without J Street, the conference reflects a wide spectrum of Jewish opinion and practice. “It’s probably the most diverse, the most representative Jewish organization that exists in America today,” he said. **BT**



Christian leaders say Middle East Christians must not be forgotten

WASHINGTON — Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox leaders joined forces recently to call for an end to the silence over persecuted Christian communities in Egypt, Iraq and Syria.

“What we are seeing here is ecumenical cleansing,” said Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, who called the region “the unsafest place in the world for Christians.”

“It’s an ecumenical cleansing that is forcing people who are Christians, by whatever label, out of countries where their roots are from the beginning.”

Anderson and others were joined on Capitol Hill in May by the co-chairs of the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, Reps. Frank Wolf, R-Va., and Anna Eshoo, D-Calif., who have pushed for the appointment of a special envoy focused on Middle East religious minorities.

More than 180 clergy, seminary professors, authors and activists have signed a “pledge of solidarity and call to action” that advocates for the special envoy in addition to a regional review of U.S. foreign aid to ensure recipients uphold

principles of pluralism and religious freedom. They also seek assurance that religious minorities receive access to U.S. refugee assistance.

“The current trajectory, marked by political violence and, in the cases of Iraq and Syria, full-blown war, risks a Middle East largely emptied of the millennia-old presence of Christians,” reads the statement, citing cases of executed Christians, demolished churches, kidnapped clergy and forced conversions.

Wolf said he hopes the clergy involvement will help call greater attention to the plight of Christians and other religious minorities who are facing an “existential crisis which threatens their very survival.”

Andrew White, a chaplain at St. George’s Anglican Church in Baghdad, said the people he sees at a church-related clinic wonder if Christians in the West have forgotten them. He said the number of Christians in Iraq has dropped from a high of 1.5 million to about 200,000.

Members of his congregation are leaving, and he has personally been shot at and kidnapped and rebuilt his church after a bombing. “So many have gone. All the time they leave

and, I confess, I cry because my loved ones are leaving,” he said. “I used to say, ‘I’m not leaving you. Don’t you leave me.’ I can’t say that anymore because I know if my loved ones stay, they might be killed. I know that if my loved ones remain, the chance of them surviving is very little.”

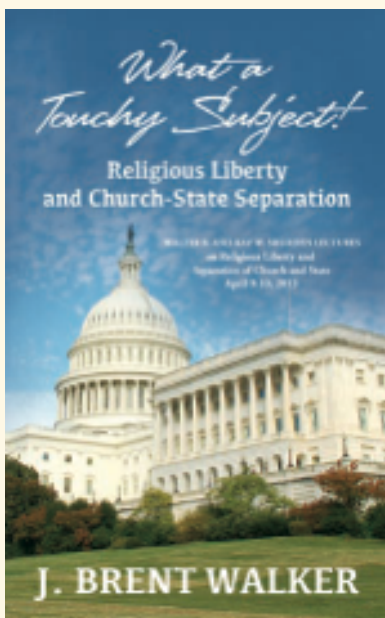
Washington Cardinal Donald Wuerl said that if people wonder how atrocities like this violence and persecution can be occurring, it is because others are silent.

“If history has any lesson to teach us about silence, it’s not a good one,” he said, urging both the churches and lawmakers to take action to protect the religious freedom of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East.

Archbishop Oshagan Choloyan of the Armenian Apostolic Church of America said that while there has been humanitarian aid from the West, there has not been enough attention to the growing discrimination and hardship facing Mideast Christians.

“It is not an exaggeration to state that today Christians in the Middle East are experiencing one of the darkest days since the persecutions during the early years of Christianity,” he said. **BT**

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