

MAY-JUNE 2016

# NURTURING FAITH

Journal & Bible Studies

**'FELLOWSHIP  
TIME'**

*A Baptist movement  
turns 25*

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## FILMMAKING

### WITH FAITH

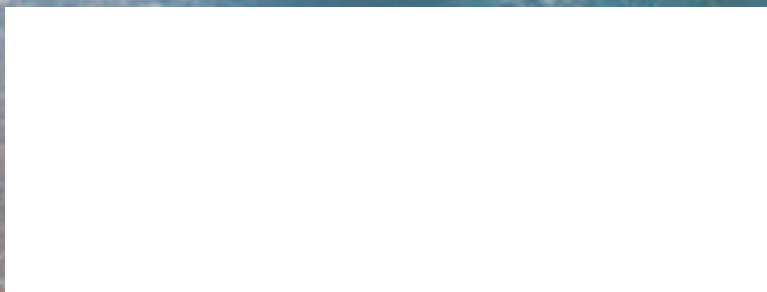
—beyond typical  
'Christian movies'

### POLITICIZED PRAYER

*National Day of Prayer's  
roots and fears*

**CNN's John  
Blake explores  
race, religion  
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**What really  
brings you  
contentment?**



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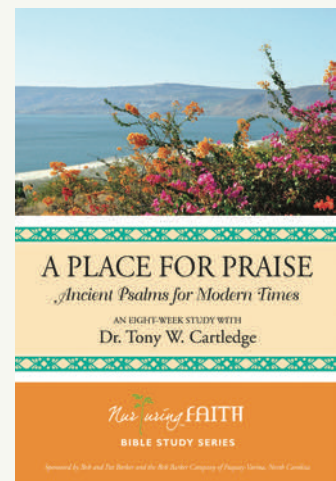
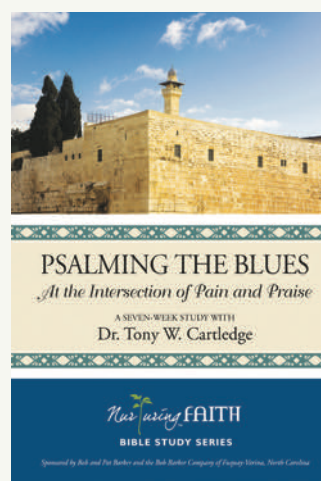
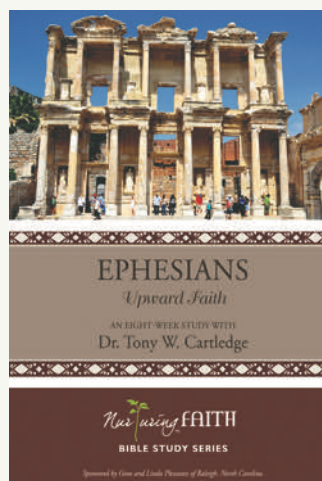
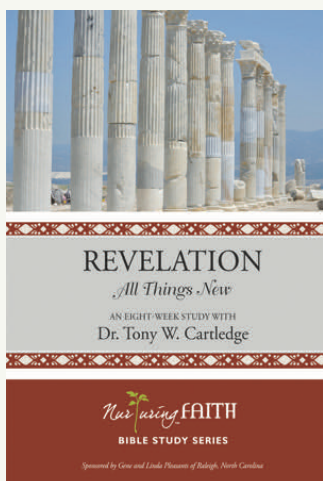


*Nurturing Faith Bible Studies by Tony Cartledge are scholarly, yet applicable, and conveniently placed in the center of this journal. Simply provide a copy of the journal to each class participant, and take advantage of the abundant online teaching materials at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net). These include video overviews for teacher preparation or to be shown in class.*

*See page 21 for more information.*

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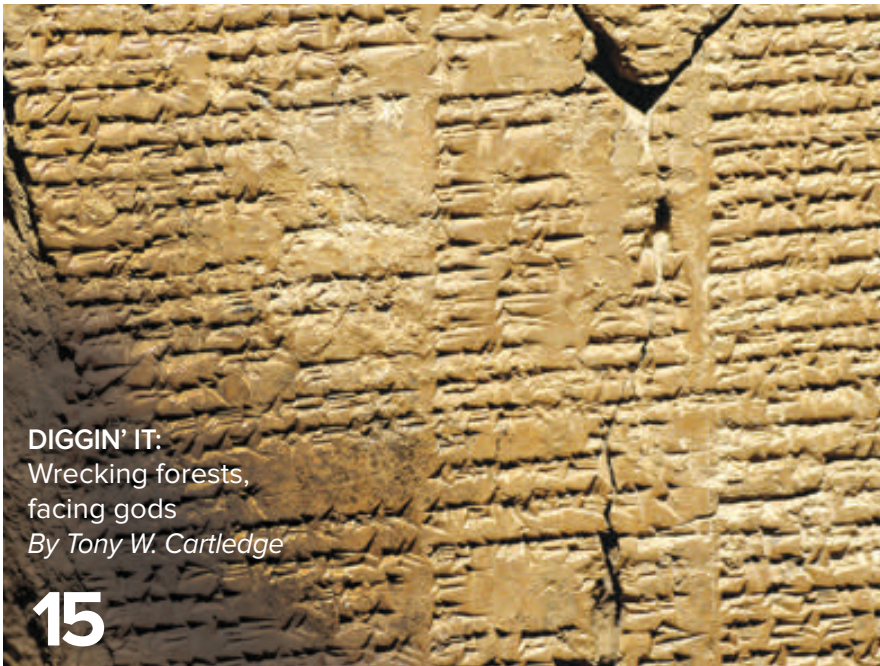


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STORY BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Photos from the movie *Shooting the Prodigal* courtesy of Belltower Pictures.

# Filmmaking *with* Faith

Not all movies made by Christians are typical “Christian movies.”

One is a 94-minute documentary that includes raw footage from the battlefield. It’s about life and death and ministry among brave, young soldiers who put it all on the line. And, most importantly, it is about their needs for personal engagement upon returning from battle.

The other is a full-length movie that uses comedy to shed light on the struggles of

churches to move beyond self-preservation and common assumptions about those who are different.

The “outside influence” feared the most, the film suggests with a good blend of honesty, humor and hope, just may be the expression of grace most needed.

While Hollywood has found a market for “Christian movies,” not all filmmaking by Christians fits the familiar stereotype. These two productions are prime examples.

## LAUGH AND LEARN

# Comedy leads to faith beyond cultural blind spots

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Are Christians judgmental hypocrites? “Some are and some aren’t.”

**T**hat’s what a young Jewish film major from New York City, who comes South to help a Baptist congregation make a movie, learns in the comedy *Shooting the Prodigal*.

And the Baptist church that ventures into filmmaking has some tough lessons to learn as well, mainly: Those we fear may be those who teach us best.

All the elements are there: from a pompous but insecure pastor struggling under the shadow of his late revered preacher-father to the church power-brokers who can’t see faith beyond the offering plate.

There is the cast of characters found in every small town, and the wonderful Southern talent for ignoring the sociological shifts that ensure tomorrow will not look like yesterday.

David Powers retired a couple of years ago as associate pastor for communication at First Baptist Church of Richmond, Va., and began setting up a nonprofit, faith-based film company called Belltower Pictures. *Shooting the Prodigal* is the company’s first feature film.

Powers, the writer and director, said the project began with the idea of doing a modern-day version of the Prodigal Son. But others were doing that, he discovered.

Someone suggested focusing the film instead on a church deciding to shoot a film about Jesus’ well-known parable and the lessons that might be learned in the process. That story developed in a way that lent itself to some very humorous yet insightful moments.

The film reveals the tendency of conservative Christian congregations to choose isolation over engagement with those they see as different — and as sinful.

The storyline brings together a diversity of people who otherwise would have never shared their lives so closely. In the process they learn lessons such as: The one who calls for conversion just may be the one most in need of it.

This is observed when the pastor’s college-aged daughter (“Emily”) tells “Bro. Bob” boldly: “You preach love and acceptance but don’t even know how to love someone who doesn’t agree with you.”

But her fatherless friend “Josh” admonishes: “He may not be perfect, but at least he’s here.”

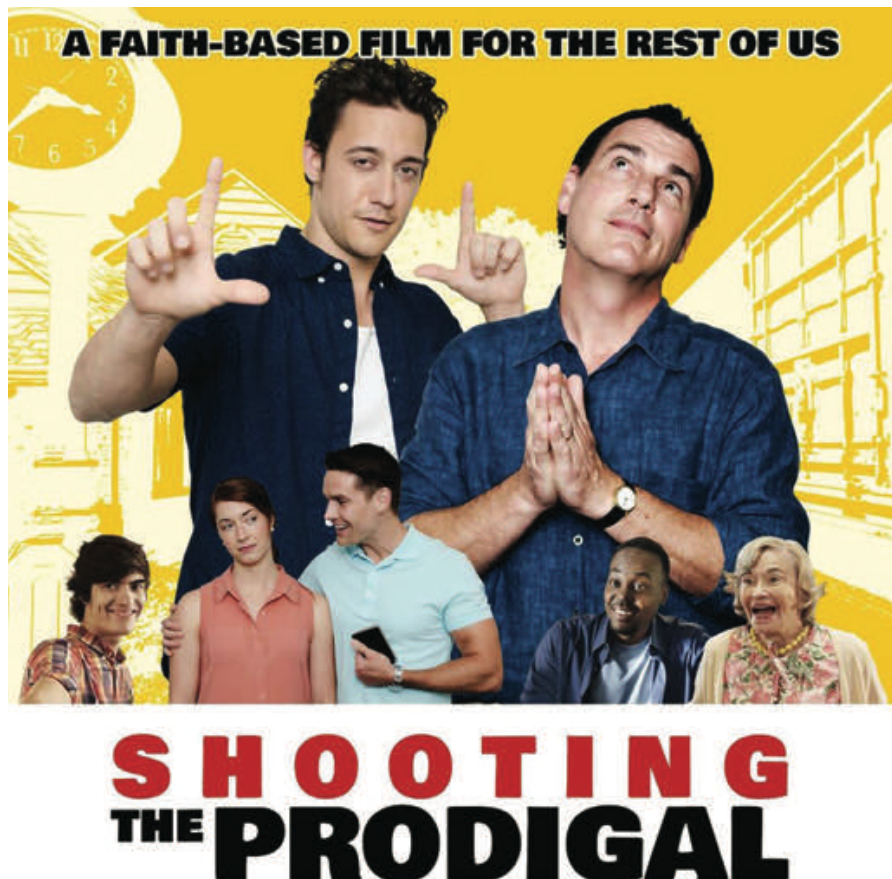
It is a comedy about finding fresh faith beyond cultural blind spots — and how humor can heal hypocrisy.

Often congregations and communities need a little upheaval such as this. As eccentric old “Fred,” with his ever-present pet goat “Gracie,” put it: “It’s the most life I’ve seen around here in 20 years.”

The film offers healthy, self-deprecating humor for Christians who might take themselves too seriously — along with a large dose of hope for those who want the church to fulfill its mission of love and grace.

A discussion guide will assist those wanting to explore the issues raised by the film in a way that tickles the funny bone while poking the soul. To see the trailer and learn more about the movie, visit [shootingtheprodigal.com](http://shootingtheprodigal.com). **NFJ**

*The film offers healthy, self-deprecating humor for Christians who might take themselves too seriously.*



# RELATIONSHIPS OVER RECOGNITION

## Film urges engagement with returning veterans

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

Capt. Justin Roberts went into combat without a gun — so the U.S. Army chaplain took a camera.

The resulting footage led to an award-winning documentary based on a Bible verse from the Gospel of John. While *No Greater Love* gives viewers an up-close, raw look at war, it has a larger purpose.

Roberts urges churches and other groups to give returning war veterans something more than gifts and recognition: community.

“People can empathize and connect with veterans in their community,” said Roberts.

With military veterans committing suicide at a rate of 22 per day, Roberts said churches have a vital ministry in understanding the challenges faced by those who return from battle and then creating meaningful relationships.

His end goal is clear: “How do we mobilize churches to meet those needs?”

Raised Southern Baptist in Texas (almost a redundancy), Roberts attended Dallas Theological Seminary and studied media arts.



In delivering death notices to families, he discovered that those who had lost a loved one to suicide responded differently from a battlefield loss. The grief was “more hollow” and with “more despair,” he said.

Roberts enlisted Lori Fong, who now teaches at Mercer University, to be co-producer due to both her film experience and volunteer work with veteran causes. Their interviews with numerous veterans and spouses added to the documentary.

Because injured soldiers are immediately transported, chaplains must be positioned near the front lines in battle. With permission from his commander, Roberts took along a camera since chaplains do not carry weapons.

Roberts deployed in 2010 with an infantry regiment of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to Kunar Province in eastern Afghanistan. He knew early on that he would go into military service, but a later calling led him into chaplaincy.

“I had to learn how to become a soldier and how to care for a battalion that was deeply wounded from war,” he said.

Two days into service he cared for a family whose soldier son had committed suicide. It would be the first of many sad opportunities, he said, as suicide is the number one killer of service members.

“This is not a government problem; this is an American problem,” said Roberts. “... Only communities can fill that role.”

And what better place to offer support, grace, love, mercy, acceptance, hope and help, he asked, than a Christian community?

While the Army provides training and services, Roberts said veterans need more to reduce the wave of suicides. “And relationships work,” he added.

The close relationships soldiers have

in times of conflict are often missing when their service ends, he noted. “You form the closest relationships you’ve ever had when you’re willing to die for each other.”

Ministry opportunities when deployed are significant as well, he said.

“You encounter the life questions in a much more dramatic, traumatic way,” he said. “It made me run to the cross even more.”

Roberts’ ministry extended beyond his personal understanding of faith, however.

“I cared for Wiccans, Vikings, Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians of all kinds,” he said. “I tell them: ‘I am your chaplain; I’m going to love you where you’re at.’”

Love, said Roberts, is the “best way to share my faith, for the greatest of these is love.”

Now out of the Army, Roberts still considers himself a chaplain and this documentary is a ministry tool. He wants churches to become more aware of the struggles of soldiers and

veterans who return home but don’t often feel at home.

But awareness is not enough, he said. Meaningful relationships are needed.

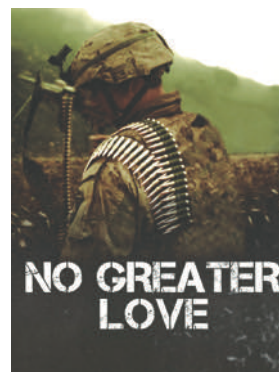
Meeting returning soldiers through veteran groups is a good way to become “intentionally relational,” he said.

However, inviting veterans to attend church is not enough, he added. They may not feel comfortable in such public gatherings.

“But they will go fishing or rock climbing,” he said.

So his main message to churches: “Don’t focus on the problem of suicide, but on the solution of love.”

To view the trailer and learn more about the documentary *No Greater Love*, visit [nglfilm.com](http://nglfilm.com). NFJ



# An Inside Job

## *What really brings contentment?*

By Martin Thielen

A successful, affluent, attractive woman with a picture-perfect family came to my office for a pastoral visit. Her name was Sarah.

A few minutes into the visit, Sarah began to cry her heart out. She told me that she had serious marital problems, major conflicts with her grown daughter, and overwhelming stress at work.

During the conversation I asked her, “What do you most want out of life?”

With tears rolling down her face, Sarah said, “I just want to be happy.” After she regained her composure, we sat in silence for a moment. I could sense a debate going on in her mind.

Finally, she decided to risk complete vulnerability. Sarah said: “I make a lot of money. I’m successful in my profession. And people tell me that I’m attractive. Yet I’m terribly unhappy. So I want to know: If money, success and beauty don’t make you happy, what does?”

Leading experts in the field have discovered that although it sounds counter-intuitive, Sarah is absolutely correct. Money, success and beauty don’t make people happy.

Extensive studies have proven that external circumstances such as career success, income, net worth, health, popularity, beautiful homes, education levels, IQ and personal appearance account for only 10 percent of a person’s happiness.

The other 90 percent of happiness is fairly evenly split between two factors: genetics, which we cannot control, and attitudes and behaviors, which we can.

Since external factors have such a small impact on happiness (and many are beyond



our control), and since we cannot change our genetics, if we want to increase our contentment level, then we need to focus on the factors we can influence.

Psychologists have discovered at least 10 factors under our control that lead to authentic happiness. What I find especially compelling is that all 10 of these traits are taught in the Bible.

I’m not suggesting that happiness is the ultimate goal of Christianity; it is not. But the quest for authentic contentment — which every heart longs for and every person seeks — leads us to significant Christian themes, including relationships, generosity, service, forgiveness, gratitude and faith.

The findings of happiness research (called “positive psychology”) not only agree with biblical teachings, but they also are confirmed by life experience. So when it comes to overall life contentment — science, experience and scripture all converge into complete agreement.

Here are 10 attitudes and behaviors that contribute to contentment. Contented people:

- know that external circumstances don’t determine happiness
- use trials as growth opportunities
- cultivate optimism
- focus on the present
- practice forgiveness
- practice generosity
- nurture relationships
- express gratitude
- care for their bodies
- care for their souls

Scripture, science and experience affirm that Sarah was right. Money, success, beauty and other external circumstances don’t make people happy and never will. Instead, contentment is an inside job. **NFJ**

—Martin Thielen is pastor of First United Methodist Church of Cookeville, Tenn., and the former editor of *Proclaim* magazine. He is the author of *Searching for Happiness: How Generosity, Faith, and Other Spiritual Habits Can Lead to a Full Life* (Westminster John Knox Press).



# Worth Repeating

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“As despairing or as cynical as some might be (sometimes understandably) over the church’s future, we have to remind ourselves that the church was Jesus’ idea, not ours.”

—Columnist Carey Nieuwhof of *ChristianWeek*

“Politics isn’t worth the risk of ruining Jesus’ reputation.”

—Editor Marv Knox of the *Baptist Standard*

“Election years can be volatile, unpredictable and filled with heated political rhetoric ... While I do not think pastors should be silent, I do think a pastor’s tone and message should be helpful, encouraging and non-partisan.”

—Barry Howard, pastor of First Baptist Church of Pensacola, Fla. (Baptist News Global)

“Corruption is a very easy sin for all of us who have some power, whether it be ecclesiastical, religious, economic, political ... because the devil makes us feel certain: ‘I can do it.’”

—Pope Francis (RNS)

“From our [American] Revolution to the abolition of slavery, from women’s rights to civil rights, men and women of faith have often helped move our nation closer to our founding ideals.”

—President Barack Obama in a commentary for Religion News Service

“Martin Luther King [Jr.] said we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters or we will perish together as fools. I think it was baseball that brought America together in one of its finest hours. Our sports heroes in general helped make this happen.”

—Former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young (MLB.com)

“The politicians and media have destroyed the idea of thoughtful debate. The church must be the voice that reclaims it and insists upon it.”

—Bill Wilson, director of the Center for Healthy Churches

“This may be the first generation of pastors in centuries to whom God has given the intimidating assignment of not only loving but changing the church... Some of the best service that pastors offer arises when we dare to prod, preach and pray a congregation toward the painful reality it has been avoiding.”

—Will Willimon of Duke Divinity School (*Christian Century*)

“Online aggression is not an isolated moral lapse, but a rampant infestation of sin... Christians should protest any trolling speech whenever it is used in person or online and stand on the side of civility and moderation.”

—Pastor Joe LaGuardia of Trinity Baptist Church in Conyers, Ga. (EthicsDaily.com)

“Interactions are more powerful than transactions and make people feel engaged.”

—Mark Wingfield, associate pastor of Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, on a lesson for churches learned from Disney (Baptist News Global)

“To our knowledge no one has called and canceled their cookie orders.”

—Bonnie Barczykowski of the Girl Scouts of Eastern Missouri chapter, after Archbishop Robert J. Carlson of St. Louis asked Catholics to scale back ties with the organization he said supports homosexual rights and other stances at odds with Catholic values (*New York Times*)

“The word ‘evangelical’ has become almost meaningless this year, and in many ways the word itself is at the moment subverting the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

—Russell Moore, president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention (*Washington Post*)

# Different kinds of differences

By John D. Pierce

There is wide agreement that Christians are to be different. But how that difference gets defined and demonstrated varies greatly.

The concept is rooted in being “in this world but not of this world” and other biblical references to separation.

Yet that call takes on different forms in different Christian traditions, such as physical withdrawal from worldly ways to dressing and behaving in patterns that go against societal trends. For some, being “contaminated by worldliness” is that which must be battled at all cost.

Even among those with less-extreme approaches to separation, there are discernable differences. In fact, it is striking how various American Christians — even those bearing the same denominational descriptors — understand the countercultural calling of Christ so differently.

Such differences are tied to various understandings of what is right and just — along with what one finds threatening.

To some, being a countercultural follower of Jesus means rejecting society’s self-serving ways that clash with the life and teachings of Christ — such as unbridled greed, dishonest achievement, advancement at the expense of others, prejudice, discrimination, choosing revenge over justice and mercy, violence as the response to violence, and religious arrogance.

Therefore, work is done to compassionately address the ways in which the weak, the abused and the suffering are systemically mistreated or ignored. Society’s dominant ways are countered by empowering and giving voice to those who lack influence and self-worth.

These Christians seek to live in contrast with the societal bent toward looking out for one’s own interest. Jesus is regarded as the

model and the message.

However, sociological shifts in American culture give rise to a significantly different understanding of the call to be different. This was expressed clearly in a seminary convocation address earlier this year that called for an “insurgency.”

“It will be to Christ’s glory that his church is understood to be so radically different than the world,” President Albert Mohler told students at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, according to Baptist Press.

This urgency for “building a different civilization” is the result of ministers losing their social capital in American society, he said. Mohler recalled a time when his Baptist seminary simply sought to “provide gentlemen ministers for a gentlemanly culture.”

The cultural revolution of more recent times has resulted in this “great displacement” for those committed to biblical authority, he surmised. He called for “building a different civilization.”

This concept of being countercultural strikes many Christians as odd. It is rooted in a romanticized notion that once-devout America has left its Christian commitments for worldly ways.

However, even the slightest fair reading of history reveals that it is simply impossible to point to a time when the way of Christ widely prevailed in this still-young nation.

From the violation of Native Americans to African slavery to Jim Crow laws to gender discrimination — and on and on — many who claimed to be followers of Christ engaged fully in such evil rather than choos-

ing the costly, countercultural marks of the Christian faith. And the few who did, often suffered mightily.

Through various sociological shifts, fundamentalist Christianity in particular has had an issue with timing when it comes to engaging culture. That is, it is consistently late to embrace basic issues of human equality — always using biblical fidelity as a defense.

Such countercultural insurgency is rooted deeply in fear: fearful recognition of the loss of cultural dominance in which particular religious beliefs and practices are imposed by a majority power bloc with little or no regard for minority freedom.

Today, such calls are driven by the fearful disappointment that a particular Christian definition of marriage is not being enforced as the only valid societal expression.

Such countercultural responses seem less radical, in the Jesus sense, and more defensive — trying to hold on to fleeting ways that retain power in a few and keep others in their rightful places of submission.

There is wide agreement among Christians that those called to follow Jesus are to be different from the world (culture) in which they live. But there are vast differences in what it means to be different.

To a large degree those differences are tied to what one fears: whether a loss of corporate power and feeling personally persecuted — or seeing injustice and equality going unaddressed by a me-first society.

So it is helpful to know — though surely confusing to those seeking to understand American Christianity — that Christian countercultural understandings and reactions often counter each other.

All of which raises, and complicates, another good question: Just how should Christians make a difference in the world? **NFJ**



# After the fire

Rural Southern Baptist  
church welcomes  
Catholic congregation



Pastor Buck Tidwell (left) of Tiny Town Baptist Church in Guthrie, Ky., shares a friendship with Fr. Frank Ruff, a retired priest who still leads worship for a Catholic congregation that is temporarily sharing worship space with the welcoming Baptists. Fr. Frank is well known for his ecumenical relationships, having spent decades relating closely to Southern Baptists.

**G**UTHRIE, Ky. — God’s providence can often be found where it seems least likely. Such is the case for the Catholic community in this small town in western Kentucky.

In February a fire engulfed Sts. Mary & James Catholic Church here. The blaze (an “electrical fire”) originated in the attic above the church hall and spread to the adjoining sanctuary. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but damage to the structures was total.

“That church had been there a long time, and it became part of the community,” said Buck Tidwell, pastor of nearby Tiny Town Baptist Church. “Even folks from other denominations felt like they had lost something.”

Guthrie sits on the edge of two worlds. It is in a county so rural that is common to see tractors in line at the bank drive-through. The smell of freshly spread manure often wafts up from the fields.

Yet, Guthrie is a few short miles from the sprawling retail landscape of Clarksville, Tenn. It is a town with modern influences but small enough that “everybody knows most everybody else,” as locals say. Hospitality is a way of life.

Five churches and two civic organizations offered space for the homeless Catholic community. The whole experience became an example of Christian collaboration following the fire.

“Protestant ministers and Amish people came running during the fire,” said one Catholic parishioner named Anita. “Before the roof collapsed, they rescued everything: the altar, baptismal font, piano and the big cross.”

“It was a sight to see a Baptist minister carrying out a statue of the Blessed mother!” she added.

At the mayor’s invitation, the Transportation Museum was the first stop for this itinerant community, where they celebrated Mass for several months. However, Deacon Heriberto Rodriguez, parish life coordinator, said: “We were forgetting our reverence in that space.”

So they moved to Tiny Town, a Southern Baptist congregation that had offered meeting space from the beginning. “Our

congregation was all for it,” said pastor Buck.

Thus began a warm relationship as the two distinct church communities shared the same space. Respect, representatives said, has been key. Great care is taken to reach out to each other, engage in fellowship, and just be good neighbors.

Weekend worship has become streamlined. The Catholic Hispanic community prepares for Saturday Vigil Mass by assembling a makeshift altar and protecting the Baptist community’s belongings.

“They really work on that,” shared Fr. Frank Ruff, retired pastor who still regularly leads Catholic worship on Sunday. “They strip the pews before Mass. The fact is that a 2-year-old is just hard on a book.”

The Catholic English-speaking community makes sure the space is cleaned and returned to its original setting after their Mass on Sunday morning. Then the Baptist community arrives for their own Sunday school and worship.

The arrangement is elegant and straightforward. However, when something appears effortless it is often a testament to the hard work that goes into it.

STORY AND PHOTO  
BY FRANK LESKO

“It teaches us how to work together,” explains pastor Buck. “We have to plan out everything.”

A Baptist church member, Sandy, who manages the sound system, said: “We have learned to keep a calendar. We just work it out. We feel good to be able to share.”

Sandy’s friend Mary Charles, a Catholic parishioner, agreed: “This congregation has just been wonderful to us. There are a few things I miss by not having our own space, but that is just part of it. We are open and gracious with each other.”

Pastor Buck said the Baptist congregation wants to make sure their Catholic guests feel at home. They invite them now to their own events.

Likewise, the Catholic community is always looking for ways to return the favor. So they treated the Baptists to a community celebration. Several Catholics attended the Baptist worship service while others decorated the fellowship hall and prepared food.

This growing relationship at Tiny Town Baptist Church has opened new doors between Christians here. Deacon Heriberto has been particularly impressed.

“I have never had an ecumenical experience like this before,” he said. “It is very significant.”

“We as a Catholic community work on our relationship with God very well, but sometimes we forget about doing things with our neighbors,” he added. “Now, we have a relationship. We have to remember the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor this way.”

Fr. Julio Barrera, a priest from nearby Hopkinsville, Ky., and a native of Mexico, leads the Hispanic community in worship in Guthrie.

“I think we can see the grace of God working here,” he said. “It speaks not only of the Baptists but of the whole community of Guthrie. They generously offered their church property in order for us to continue in our faith.”

One Catholic parishioner, Jim, marveled at such an ecumenical spirit.

“I grew up before Vatican II, and something like this could never happen back then,” he said, referring to the sweep-

ing Catholic Church reforms in the early 1960s. “I could not be a Boy Scout because the church that sponsored us was Methodist, and we were not allowed in the sanctuary. That is how far the Church has come.”

The partnership in Guthrie is the fruit of many years of good work. Pastors in this small town have worked together for years as part of a ministerial association. They sponsor joint services on Thanksgiving and Martin Luther King Jr. holidays, and minister to the community together in various ways.

Fr. Frank has been a lifelong advocate for positive relationships between Christian denominations. It is common for him to visit churches all over Todd County and build warm relationships with other pastors.

He is a friendly and familiar face in a part of the country where Catholics and other Christians often have a distant relationship, and where anti-Catholic sentiment can still flare up.

“Fr. Frank is the first Catholic priest I have ever sat down with and gotten to know,” said pastor Buck.

One wonders if the response in Guthrie might have been different without all these years of positive relationship building and warm regard.

“Churches need to work together instead of against each other,” says Buck. “It’s not about Catholic, Baptist or Methodist — the bottom line is we are God’s people.”

Deacon Heriberto said the community of Tiny Town Baptist Church is impressive. “Their faith is really strong and they treat people equally,” he said. “We are all Christians. We just express our faith differently.”

Pastor Buck offered similar sentiments:

“The Catholic members are God’s children, just like we are God’s children. I love them everyone. They welcome me in, wave at me and shake my hand constantly. We worship the same God; let’s do what we are supposed to do to grow his kingdom.”

It is not lost on these cooperative Christians that Jesus prayed “that all who believe may be one” (John 17:21). While others struggle with Christian unity, the experience in this rural town in western Kentucky speaks volumes about the importance of getting to know each other as people of faith.

“You have to show Christ through relationship,” said pastor Buck.

One Catholic parishioner, Roger, said he expressed his appreciation to some Baptist members for their hospitality. Their response, he said, was: “This is God’s church!”

That sentiment is easy to find at Tiny Town Baptist Church where it echoes like a mantra and is practiced as a way of life.

“This [experience] is bringing the whole community closer together,” said pastor Buck. “It has really been a blessing.”

This may be a tiny town, but it has a big heart. **NFJ**

—*Frank Lesko is director of Catholic-Evangelical Relations at Glenmary Home Missioners. The Catholic Diocese of Owensboro (Ky.) is planning to rebuild the church at a new site. It will combine with St. Susan Catholic Church in nearby Elkton to form St. Francis of Assisi parish. Parishioners will continue to use the previous site in Guthrie for outreach to persons in need and perhaps create a park there someday.*

The place to go between issues of the *Nurturing Faith Journal* is the all-new

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## RECOGNITION & REMEMBRANCE

*Editor's note: For a more timely delivery of information about people and places, along with breaking news, visit the expanded [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).*

### Legendary Texas pastor Buckner Fanning left mark

Buckner Fanning, who died Feb. 14 at age 89, served as pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, from 1957 to 2002. He was widely known through his evangelistic outreach and use of media to encourage Christian commitment.



### Posey Belcher Jr. remembered for caring pastoral presence

Beloved South Carolina minister Posey Belcher died Jan. 22 at age 83 in Rock Hill. He served extended pastorates at the First Baptist Churches of Barnwell and Walterboro, S.C. Upon his retirement in 1994, he was presented with the state's highest civilian honor, the Order of the Palmetto.



### Baptist lay leader named president of Presbyterian-related college

Kathy Brittain Richardson, who holds several leadership roles in the First Baptist Church of



Rome, Ga., and is provost at Berry College, will assume the presidency of Westminster College in New Wilmington, Penn., on July 1. She will be the first female president of the school founded in 1852 in affiliation with the Presbyterian Church (USA). She also serves on the Board of Directors for Nurturing Faith.

### Bill Shiell assumes presidency of Northern Seminary

An American Baptist-related seminary near Chicago got a new president on March 1. William D. Shiell left the pastorate of First Baptist Church of Tallahassee, Fla., to become president of Northern Seminary in Lombard, Ill. He succeeded Alistar Brown to become the 11<sup>th</sup> president of the seminary founded in 1913.



### Rachel Held Evans, two others, named to advisory council

Popular Christian author and blogger Rachel Held Evans was appointed to the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, according to the White House press secretary. Also appointed were Traci



D. Blackmon, acting executive minister of justice and witness ministries for the United Church of Christ, and Adam Hamilton, founding pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kan.

### Travis Collins called to Huntsville pastorate

First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala., has called Travis M. Collins as pastor. He had served the church as interim pastor. Collins will continue working with Fresh Expressions that helps create communities for persons not involved in church.



### Lord Jonathan Sacks wins Templeton Prize

Britain's former chief rabbi (1991-2013) and interfaith leader Lord Jonathan Sacks has won the Templeton Prize for 2016. The John Templeton Foundation will formally present the \$1.5 million award at a May 26 ceremony in London. Sacks was praised for his advocacy of religious institutions rejecting extremism and violence, a subject he addressed in his 2015 book, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*.



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**Pastor:** Third Baptist Church, located in downtown Owensboro, Ky., is seeking a full-time pastor. We are aligned with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention, and have a well-established membership and growing youth and children's programs. Third Baptist prefers a pastoral candidate with at least a Master of Divinity degree. Candidates should be able to effectively relate to a diverse congregation. Send cover letter with résumé by June 15 to [pastorsearch.tbc@gmail.com](mailto:pastorsearch.tbc@gmail.com) or P.O. Box 6033, Owensboro KY 42302.

**Minister of Music and Education:** Spruce Pine First Baptist Church, Spruce Pine, N.C., is prayerfully seeking a full-time minister of music and education. This person must be a born-again child of God, demonstrate Christian character, be called to lead music ministry, and provide testimony of personal faith. Responsibilities include teaching and directing a full music program, including worship services with a blend of traditional and contemporary music. A degree in music and education from a Baptist seminary is desired. Please submit résumés to First Baptist Church, 125 Tappan St., Spruce Pine, NC 28777 or to [doctorrock1@yahoo.com](mailto:doctorrock1@yahoo.com).

**Minister of Music:** First Baptist church, Goldsboro, N.C., affiliated with CBF and CBF of North Carolina, is seeking a full-time minister of music. We desire a person who is a committed Christian, and committed to excellence in music ministry and to leading others to use their gifts in honoring God. The individual would lead various types and ages of choirs, plan worship and work with staff. Interested persons should send résumés to [margaret@fbcgold.com](mailto:margaret@fbcgold.com).

## HONORARY AND MEMORIAL GIFTS

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## BEING CHURCH IN CHANGING TIMES

A column provided in collaboration with the Center for Healthy Churches ([chchurches.org](http://chchurches.org))

# Patience and persistence: Life in ‘between’

By Grace Powell Freeman

Between. Have you ever thought about what that word means? *In the space separating*, such as between Chicago and New York; or possibly *linking, connecting*, as in air service between cities.

**A**s I am in this between time, I feel both of these conditions: being in a space between, but also feeling a linking of two times of my life.

A job I had loved for many years ended and I am now in the between space, looking for my next place of ministry. This between space can be unnerving and a bit scary, but the scriptures (and some great, supportive friends) have helped keep me grounded.

It was a comforting time when, within a couple of days, I received emails from two friends who offered devotionals that made them think of me and my between time. They helped me navigate these uncertain waters.

The devotions spoke to me in very different ways.

“Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord” (Ps. 27:14). Yes, this scripture from the first devotion was certainly speaking to me.

Life has a mind of its own, with changes we did not want or plan. We can

react with resistance and anger, or be strong and wait ... waiting and asking:

Is God speaking to me? Is God trying to tell me that I have to be strong and take heart, and *wai?* But what am I waiting on, and how long will it take?

The word patience kept coming to my mind as I pondered this devotion.

The second devotion started with these words: “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.’” (Gen. 12:1).

The author of the devotion wrote: “Faith hears God’s call and trusts that even though we don’t know where our faith journey will end, God will show us the new place for us. But we have to be willing to get up and go.”

But where am I going, and how will I know when I am going? I must believe that God will show me when I am willing to follow the leading that is before me. As I read this devotion, the word persistence came to mind.

So, as I go through this time of praying, searching, talking and praying some more, I

know that God is with me. God is putting in my life supportive people, fulfilling events, and moments to be still and quiet.

Each day of the “between” is different and filled with new lessons. Some of these days will be patience days; others will be persistence days.

There was a person walking in the very dark night and all she had was a small light. She held the light high and realized she could not see very far in front of her.

But as she walked, she realized the light cast a glow bright enough to see the next few steps. She had to trust that the light would be sufficient for the faraway steps too, but only when she got to them.

As I walk through these days of between, I know that the light will be bright enough to see the next step, though maybe not the next 100 steps yet. The light comes in unexpected ways: the love of a spouse; beautiful devotions sent from dear friends; an unexpected call on a résumé follow-up; the quiet moments to rest, breath and listen.

Persistence and patience continue to be the words that guide my steps as I hold my lantern high, hoping and praying that I’m going in ways that are pleasing to God. **NFJ**

—Grace Powell Freeman formerly served as director of Global Missions operations with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.



*But where am I going, and how will I know when I am going?*

*I must believe that God will show me when I am willing to follow the leading that is before me.*

# Wrecking forests, facing gods

By Tony W. Cartledge

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Contributing writer Tony Cartledge begins a new series on recent archaeological discoveries and their significance. His blogs addressing archaeology and a wide range of topics may be found at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).*

Climatologists tell us that last year was the hottest on record, further evidence that global warming is not some figment of a liberal's imagination, but a reality we all must live with.

**A** geological history of periodic ice ages, shifting continents, and seas that advance or retreat point to natural changes in the climate over millions of years, but mounds of evidence sufficient to convince all but the most hard-shell skeptics point to rapid change in recent years, due mainly to human activity.

Foremost among those activities are the burning of fossil fuels, which loads the atmosphere with millions of tons of carbon, and rampant deforestation, which robs the earth of trees and other vegetation that remove carbon dioxide and release fresh oxygen into the air.

It turns out that humans have known for thousands of years that careless deforestation is not a good thing.

While unprincipled looting of archaeological sites is also a blemish on our record as a race, the relatively lawlessness of Iraq has led to a rash of finds reaching the market, including a large fragment of a tablet containing part of the famed Gilgamesh epic.

The story of Gilgamesh has been pieced together from more than 200 tablet fragments that go back to the third millennium BCE, cover hundreds of years, and exist in different versions. It tells the story



Image from Sulaymaniyah Museum/Wikimedia

of a famed king of Uruk who was said to be part god and part man.

Gilgamesh's strength led to cruelty toward his people, and he was rivaled only by the wild man Enkidu, sent by the gods to challenge him. The two tangled in an epic battle before reaching a draw and becoming inseparable companions on a variety of adventures.

They went too far when they killed the "bull of heaven," however, and the gods decreed that Enkidu must die. Mourning over the corpse of his friend, Gilgamesh came to face his own mortality, and much of the remaining epic relates to his search for the key to immortality and his ultimate efforts to come to grips with human limitations.

Andrew George, a specialist in ancient Mesopotamian studies in the University of London's School of African and Oriental Studies, and who translated the Epic of Gilgamesh for Penguin Classics, joined other scholars in deciphering the recently discovered text.

He reports in the online journal *Aeon* that it offers a clearer picture of what happened when Gilgamesh and his friend

Enkidu chose to invade the forbidding (and forbidden) Cedar Forest, kill the giant Humbaba who guarded it for the gods, and plunder its timber.

According to the newly discovered tablet, after the pair successfully killed the guardian and ravaged the forest, Enkidu said to Gilgamesh: "We have reduced the forest to a wasteland; how shall we answer our gods at home?"

George notes, "The pillaging of nature was not without shame, even then."

We know now, of course, that the consequences go far beyond shame: they degrade not only our spirits but also the earth itself.

The Hebrews knew this, too. The creation story in Genesis 1 declares that God told humans to "subdue the earth" and have dominion over the living things that inhabited it, but that was never a license to ravage its resources and leave it desolate.

The whole point is that humans were to be responsible caretakers of the earth, which was more than capable of providing all of their needs.

Enkidu worried about facing his gods... How will we answer to ours? **NFJ**



# POLITICIZED PRAYER

*National Day of Prayer has roots in false history, anti-communist fears*

BY BRUCE GOURLEY

A fear surpassing all otherworldly horrors gripped the American nation in September 1949. The Soviet Union had just detonated its first atomic bomb, and suddenly planet Earth was imperiled with the prospect of annihilation.

In Los Angeles, Southern Baptist evangelist Billy Graham held his first large, multi-denominational crusade mere weeks after the Soviet atomic test. The crusade was the first carried by newspapers throughout America.

Throwing history to the wind, Graham gave voice to a mythological narrative, declaring that “Western culture and its fruits had its foundations in the Bible, the Word of God, and in the revivals of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.”

In reality, Western culture began in ancient Greece. Within modern Western culture, America’s founding documents were shaped by Enlightenment principles rather than religious revivals.

Bearing witness to the falseness of Graham’s claims, colonial Baptists — demanding religious liberty for all and church-state separation — played a pivotal role in shaping the formation of America as a secular nation.

Graham continued: “Communism, on the other hand, has decided against God, against Christ, against the Bible, and against all religion. Communism is not only an economic interpretation of life; communism is a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God.”



Focus on the Family founder James Dobson (right) is joined by congressional leaders including now-Indiana Gov. Mike Pence (left) for a 2009 observance of the National Day of Prayer on Capitol Hill. The National Prayer Committee and Task Force, founded in 1972, moved to the headquarters of Focus on the Family in 1989. Shirley Dobson, wife of the Focus founder, has chaired the task force since 1991. Photo by John D. Pierce.

With these words Graham pronounced godless communism as the enemy of Christian America.

An ardent ally of the anti-communist crusader Wisconsin U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy, Graham in 1951 charged that some 1,100 “social-sounding organizations ... are Communist or Communist-oriented in this country. They control the minds of a great segment of the people.”

When McCarthy insisted that the U.S. Constitution be suspended in order to root out alleged communist sympathizers, Graham took to his Sunday *Hour of Decision* broadcast in support of the senator. And when the Senate ultimately condemned the witch-hunting McCarthy for denigrating the First Amendment, Graham called the Senate action disgraceful.

In the midst of the anti-communist, constitutional crisis, Billy Graham in early 1952 led a charge to scrub from history the

nation’s secular roots by having Congress declare America a Christian nation. He began with what to some may have seemed an innocent-enough vision, pronouncing at a Washington rally:

“What a thrilling, glorious thing it would be to see the leaders of our country today kneeling before Almighty God in prayer. What a thrill would sweep this country. What renewed hope and courage would grip the Americans at this hour of peril.”

Graham and other advocates falsely claimed that America’s founders had prayed during the Constitutional Convention, that America was founded as a Christian nation, and that presidential proclamations of national days of prayer were common during the nation’s pre-Civil War years.

Fearful of godless communism, legislators quickly pushed history aside and embraced Graham’s mythological narrative. On April 17, 1952, President Harry S. Truman, a Baptist, signed a bill proclaiming an annual National Day of Prayer.

Public Law 82-324 read: “Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President shall set aside and proclaim a suitable day each year, other than Sunday, as a National Day of Prayer, on which the people of the United States may turn to God in prayer and meditation at churches, in groups, and as individuals.”

The resolution echoed a number of statements from an earlier would-be nation: the Confederate States of America.

Confederate officials often designated official national days of prayer, proclaiming God an unequivocal ally of a nation fighting a godless enemy (the abolitionist North), while ignoring the evils of white supremacy, black subjugation and racial terrorism embedded in law, culture, society and religious institutions.

Often with the blessing of white Christians, racial apartheid and terrorism yet remained in much of 1950s America. Further abetting the historical analogy, many of the nation's leaders of the 1950s cast the Civil Rights Movement as communist, reminiscent of slave owners masking their own evilness by dismissing African slaves as dumb, inhuman brutes.

The first National Day of Prayer proclamation took place on June 17, 1952. Although supporters of the legislation pointed to an 1863 proclamation by Abraham Lincoln, the two statements were quite different.

On March 30, 1863, Lincoln signed a one-time act "Appointing a Day of National Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer." Lamenting that America had forgotten God due to many years of slave-labor-financed "peace and prosperity," Lincoln asked Americans "to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness" and "restoration of our now divided and suffering country."

Rather than criticizing the excesses of national prosperity, confessing national sins and asking for forgiveness, Truman in 1952 embraced prosperity as a sign of Christian faithfulness, affirming God's "constant watchfulness over us in every hour of national prosperity and national peril" and imploring "divine support" for the "security" to "steadfastly" pursue the triumphant course of the godly American empire.

Having emasculated history, communist-fearing U.S. legislators quickly set about tearing into the "wall of separation" between church and state as envisioned by early Baptists and enacted by the nation's founders.

In 1954 Congress and President Eisenhower rejected the secular nature of the 1892 Pledge of Allegiance, written by Baptist minister Francis Bellamy, by adding the words "under God" to the pledge.

The following year Congress and Eisenhower added the words "In God We Trust" to currency, and in 1956 established the phrase as the national motto.

During this time some legislators attempted to add an amendment to the Constitution declaring America a Christian nation. A proposed Constitutional

amendment read in part, "This nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Savior and Ruler of nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God." Congress never acted upon the amendment.

The proliferation of white, Protestant civil religious legislation in the 1950s opened a sustained campaign against church-state separation that yet continues.

In 1972 white Protestant evangelical leaders established the National Prayer Committee and Task Force to promote the National Day of Prayer and the mythological narrative of America's Christian founding. Congress in 1988 established a particular day for the National Day of Prayer: the first Thursday in May.

In 1989 the Task Force's offices moved to Focus on the Family's headquarters. Shirley Dobson, wife of Focus' founder, James Dobson, became chair of the organization.

With Dobson's prodding, President George W. Bush formally celebrated the annual event in the White House. The theocratic-leaning, evangelical Christian organization penned many annual proclamations read verbatim by President Bush, governors and other public officials.

Since 1952 the threat of communism has faded, replaced now by evangelical fear and loathing of Islam. In addition, many evangelicals remain opposed to equal rights for all Americans.

The nation's capitol and many states today formally observe annual national

days of prayer, while by some accounts an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 simultaneous events take place, including prayer breakfasts, public school flag rallies and local church events.

A U.S. District Court ruled in 2010 that the 1952 federal legislation enabling a National Day of Prayer is unconstitutional. The ruling noted that any group of citizens may voluntarily pray on any given day, but that federal declarations creating official days of prayer are constitutionally invalid. Nonetheless, the federal legislation remains in place.

Although President Barack Obama revised the annual proclamation to highlight diverse faiths and champion equal religious liberty for all, the National Day of Prayer remains primarily a rallying point for evangelicals.

Countless prayers implore God to ensure the election of politicians who will grant more privileges to evangelical Christians, while discriminating against the LGBT community, Muslims, immigrants and persons of no faith.

Many knowledgeable Christians, however, will pray on May 5 not because of an official government proclamation or from a Christian nationalist agenda, but rather from commitment to a gospel of inclusiveness and equality that supersedes human fears, religious dogma and the misguided politics of privilege.

Such a non-sectarian agenda honors America's historical ideals and points the way to a better future. NFJ



# Pentecost and plurality

By John R. Franke

**F**ifty days after Easter Sunday the Christian church celebrates Pentecost (May 15 this year). In the book of Acts, Pentecost is the occasion of the powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles as promised by Jesus.

Because of the importance of this event in the narrative of the early Christian community, it became a prominent feast day in the liturgical calendar. The significance of Pentecost is such that it is still generally commemorated even in traditions that do not follow the liturgical calendar or the Christian year. After all, it is often regarded as the “birthday” of the church, the beginning of a distinct community of persons committed to following the way of Jesus.

Pentecost has become nearly synonymous with the coming of the Spirit in the Christian tradition. Considerable attention has been focused on the power of the Spirit in the lives of individual believers and particular churches.

Less attention has been paid to the effects of the Spirit on the shape of the church as a whole. This aspect of the Pentecost narrative can be summed up in one word: plurality.

According to Acts, the last words of Jesus to his followers included a promise that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Through this power they would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NRSV).

Acts 2:1-12 records the fulfillment of this promise when a strong wind filled the house where followers of Jesus were staying. According to the narrative, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. A crowd consisting of people “from every nation under heaven”

heard them speaking in the native languages of all those gathered (vv. 5-6). They were understandably “amazed and perplexed” by this occurrence and wondered among themselves as to its meaning (v. 12).

Inquiry into the meaning of this story has continued through the centuries, as Christians have wrestled with the significance of this manifestation of Pentecostal plurality.

A most significant feature for the shape of the Christian community is the way in which it decenters gospel proclamation and the practice of theology from any particular cultural linguistic form. In other words, no single language or culture is to be viewed as the prime or inseparable conduit of the Spirit’s message.

This principle has been significant for the development of a Christian approach to mission. Christians have sought to make the Bible available to people in different cultures by translating it into their languages rather than insisting that new followers learn the biblical languages. This Pentecostal pattern makes the languages and cultures that *receive* the gospel normative for witness, worship and theological reflection in that setting rather than those from which gospel proclamation originated. Christianity takes root in a society without the presumption of cultural displacement and rejection.

One implication of this approach to mission is the resulting plurality of theological perspectives and conclusions. These emerge as diverse linguistic and cultural

communities wrestle with the meaning of scripture in the face of pressure from new and changing historical events and social conditions.

This theological plurality makes some people uneasy and has led to attempts at developing a single, universal account of Christian faith that all must affirm if they are truly among the faithful. Such a response to Christian plurality may be well intentioned, but it is ultimately wrongheaded and actually stands in opposition to the work of the Spirit displayed at Pentecost.

Scripture bears witness to this plurality through the inclusion of four Gospels. The distinct perspectives of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John on the life and ministry of Jesus alert us to the pluriform character of the gospel. They remind us that Christian faith can never be reduced to a “one size fits all” sort of theology.

The pages of scripture bear witness to this plurality in the earliest Christian communities. The work of the Spirit at Pentecost suggests that we should expect even greater plurality than that which is contained in the pages of scripture as the witness of the church to the gospel is expanded to all the peoples of the earth.

This means that biblical and orthodox faith is inherently and irreducibly pluralist in character. The diversity of Christian faith is not a problem to be overcome. It is instead a basic part of the divine design and constitutes the very blessing of God for the church and the world. This is the message of Pentecost. **NFJ**

—John R. Franke is theologian in residence at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, Ind., and general coordinator for the Gospel and Our Culture Network.



# The Kiiti Effect

By Colleen Walker Burroughs

**N**dunge Kiiti and I have been friends since the seventh grade. We lived in the same dorm at The Rift Valley Academy, a boarding school for missionary children and others from the region. A brilliant student and a gifted Kenyan athlete, she was consistently kind to me.

Ndunge is now a college professor with a doctorate in international medicine from Cornell University. I met up with her in Atlanta in 2004 over a spread of Ethiopian food.

I was about to lead an experienced medical team to Africa at the height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Thousands of people were dying, leaving behind millions of orphaned children.

I sought Ndunge's advice on how to best prepare for the trip. Her response surprised me: "Why do you even ask me what you should do? Even if I tell you, you will not do it."

I convinced her to tell me anyway. Reluctantly she said, "Save the ticket; send the money."

Wait a minute? Did she seriously just tell me not to bring medical help to one of the worst crises the century had seen? It had never occurred to me that she would suggest I not go at all.

Ndunge was well aware that families like mine have been traveling to countries like hers for centuries. Like a teenager who gently tries to end a relationship without breaking the other person's heart, I believe she was gently naming something my Western ears were not ready to hear: Do not go.

In the 1970s, Southern Baptists, through Bold Mission Thrust, sought to reach 125 nations for Christ by the year 2000. The *Baptist Standard* reported that during that time volunteerism skyrocketed by 2,430 percent.

What was the exit plan? Did we ever consider one?

Dr. Kiiti told me about remote villages in specific corners of the world that have grown accustomed to help from the outside world. Constant aid from foreigners and volunteers has, in some places, engendered a mentality where people sit and wait for help to come instead of seeking their own solutions.

Conversely, giant churches or mission-sending agencies often get stuck in a cycle of doing missions the same way, year after year. Left unchecked, this can become a dysfunctional relationship fostering cycles of dependencies instead of systems of empowerment.

When do countries become "Christian enough" to not need our field personnel or volunteer groups? Even better, when do we put the United States back on the list of places that need a refresher course on the saving grace of Jesus?

Here are a few other questions our team considered as we began rethinking the ways in which we offer mission involvement opportunities to young people:

- Is "make disciples" the only criteria for mission involvement? Can offering mercy and kindness be a valid starting and ending place? (We decided yes.)
- When we give a cup of clean water in Jesus' name on the other side of the globe, does our hand have to be holding the cup? (We decided no.)
- How do we help the next generation rethink missions?



- What are the criteria for determining the efficacy, practicality or measurable impact of our students' work both locally and globally? And is the work we are doing a part of an existing system with sustainable goals?
- Who is this work about?
- What is the future of long-term work in an area?
- Is volunteerism the right approach? If it is not, then what is left?

Long-term engagement still plays a critical role around the globe, though the logistics of that is a constantly moving, expensive target. Recently, a mission worker told me that after 20 years in one place she feels as though she has just gotten past the figurative front door and finally feels invited into people's real lives. We need her there.

Volunteers can't create relationships like that in a few days, especially in really tough places where Christians are few and far between. We need to support her financially and pray for her.

Technology brings us closer to our global neighbors and opens international ministry partnerships in ways not imagined in the 1970s. Technology empowers those who speak the local language and are highly motivated to find solutions to their particular pandemic.

Reimagining our way of offering Christ's love in a broken world should be an evolving conversation for all of us. A good place to start is by having an honest conversation with the people on the other end of that plane ride we might never take. **NFJ**

—Colleen Walker Burroughs is vice president of Passport, Inc., a national student ministry based in Birmingham, Ala., and founder of Watering Malawi

# Praying the blues

By Brett Younger

*While there are many songs on joy, there are only a few listed under sorrow. If there is a heading for tribulation, there are only a few songs there. Our hymnals need a blues section.*

Do you remember Ray Charles' "Hard Times"?

*My mother told me,  
fore she passed away  
Said son when I'm gone  
don't forget to pray  
'Cause there'll be hard times,  
hard times, oh yeah  
Who knows better than I?*

We do not have nearly enough Ray Charles songs in our hymnals.

Who hasn't felt like singing this line from W.C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues"?

*If I'm feelin' tomorrow like I feel today  
I'll pack my trunk and make my getaway.*

Everyone has felt the urge to pack their trunk.

In our lowest moments, we understand Charlie Daniels' "Can't You See":

*I'm gonna climb a mountain,  
the highest mountain,  
I'm gonna jump off,  
and nobody's gonna know  
I'm gonna find me a hole in the wall,  
I'm gonna crawl inside and die.*

We want to get away. We want to crawl inside a hole in the wall. When we come to church feeling broken, we ought to be able to sing the blues.

If the book of Psalms had a topical index, the largest heading would be the blues. In 52 of the 150 psalms, worshippers cry out to God and pray for deliverance.

These psalms should be read with a wailing harmonica. When we are hurting, we need to pray the blues.

A Sunday school teacher got in late on Saturday night and is not prepared, so she hopes the prayer concerns will take awhile: "What prayer concerns do you have?"

The class responds as they do each Sunday:

"My cousin is having an operation on his left pinky finger. I know it doesn't sound like much, but he says it really hurts."

"My chiropractor is having some back trouble."

"Be in prayer for my daughter. She's trying to find the right school for my granddaughter — who is a genius. Getting into the right preschool is so important."

"My husband just received a big promotion. It's a lot more money, but it's also a great deal of responsibility for such a young man, so pray for us."

"We won't be at church next Sunday because my son is in a big karate competition. We're praying that he gets his yellow belt."

In the middle of news masquerading as prayer concerns, someone says something that doesn't fit.

"Six months ago I took painkillers after my surgery. I haven't been able to stop taking them. I don't want to stop, but I need to pray to stop."

The room becomes quiet. No one is sure how to respond.



A woman who seldom speaks says, "My husband died five years ago and people don't talk to me about him anymore. I've started to forget things about him that I used to know, and it makes me cry. You're not supposed to be crying five years after someone dies."

The woman seated next to her says, "Thank you for saying what you're really praying for and not just what sounds like a normal prayer request. I'm always praying for my sick friends, my family and my problems. That can't be enough. Shouldn't we pray about the problems in the world?"

The teacher is taken aback at her class becoming an episode of *Desperate Prayer Lives*. She asks a question that is not in her notes: "What should we be praying about?"

"We need to pray for the earth. We're not leaving it in good shape for our grandchildren."

"We need to pray for Christians around the world. The church is too timid."

"We need to pray for people who are lonely. It's hard to be by yourself."

"We need to pray about hunger. When I hear the statistics — 25,000 a day dying — I don't want to believe it's true, because then I'd have to do something."

"I've stopped praying about wars. I can't keep straight who's killing who, but I should keep praying about it."

We are not used to praying about the pain that fills the world. Though it may be more than we can imagine, it is not more than we can pray about. **NJF**

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

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# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 1, 2016

John 14:18-29

## At Home with God

**D**o you like saying goodbye? Some goodbyes are easy – we’ve all had visits that lasted well beyond their expiration date, when it was a relief to say goodbye and get back to life as usual.

On the other hand, leaving loved ones for an extended period can be painful as well as poignant. Leaving town is one thing, but sooner or later, we all must leave this world. Saying goodbye as death approaches can be the hardest farewell of all. Such goodbyes are easier when the dying have a faith that reaches beyond death. If we can encourage others to remember us fondly but get on with their lives, our final farewell will also be a blessing.

That is precisely what we find in today’s text. John 14 is part of an extended farewell discourse in which Jesus had a heart-to-heart talk with his closest followers. Things were about to change. Jesus’ earthly life would soon come to an end, and his friends would have to learn to get along without him. 📖

### Going and coming (vv. 18-22)

John 14 begins with a comforting exchange frequently recalled at funeral or memorial services: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my

John 14:27—

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also” (vv. 1-3).

Thomas asked how the disciples could know the way to that home (v. 5), and Philip asked Jesus to “show us the Father” (v. 8). Jesus responded with assurance that those who knew him would know the way home as well as the Father (vv. 9-11). He encouraged the disciples to live in love and trust that God would send to them “another Advocate,” the “Spirit of truth,” to assure them of God’s continued presence with them (vv. 15-17).

Jesus knew that it would be hard for the disciples to carry on after his departure. They would need to know that he, though absent in body, would remain present in spirit. “I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus told them. “I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you will also live” (vv. 18-19).

It was not unusual, in the first century, for disciples left without their masters to be called “orphans,” but there was also a sense of family about Jesus and his disciples, whom he sometimes addressed as “little children” (13:33). 📖 This made their

parting all the more distressing.

Jesus’ promise that “I am coming to you” (NRSV) – or “I will come to you” (NET, NIV11, KJV) – may refer primarily to his post-Easter appearances to the disciples, but also carries implications of the coming of the Holy Spirit, and even to his second coming at the end of the age. Jesus seemed to have the post-resurrection interactions in mind when he said: “the world will no longer see me, but you will see me.” Jesus’ resurrection would demonstrate his oneness with the Father, and the disciples’ love for one another would demonstrate their oneness with him (vv. 20-21).

Jesus’ somewhat ambiguous promise prompted another question from yet another disciple. The “other” Judas (not Iscariot) appears to have remained focused on the hope that Jesus would act as a Messiah who would defeat the Romans and restore Israel as a sovereign nation. Such a Messiah would necessarily be a public figure. Thus, Judas asked why Jesus would reveal himself to his followers, but not to the world (v. 22). 📖

### Being at home (vv. 23-24)

Judas seems to have hoped that Jesus would yet perform some massive messianic miracle, and failed to understand that Jesus considered the love of his disciples to be the primary sign of his continued work in the world. For this reason, perhaps, Jesus did not answer Judas’s question directly, but focused again on the centrality of love. Jesus would not be revealed to the world through impressive signs,

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but through the love of his followers.

Such love might be a miracle in itself, for the disciples' internal disputes and strivings for supremacy were well known (Mark 10:35-45, for example), and there's little doubt that Jesus' broader constituency could also be conflicted. But, his followers would not be left to their own devices in learning to love each other unselfishly. Jesus went on to say: "my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them" (v. 23).

Note the contrasting imagery: in vv. 1-4, Jesus spoke of going to the Father's house to prepare a place for his followers, that they might ultimately come to be at home with him. In v. 23, Jesus insisted that he and the Father would come to disciples and be at home in their lives on earth. John underscores the connection by using the same word, *monē*, to indicate both the dwelling place Jesus prepares in v. 2 and the home he and the Father will make with the believer in v. 23. In this life as well as the life to come, he seems to be saying, Jesus' followers can be assured that they will always be "at home" with God.

Jesus makes the same point negatively in v. 24: those who do not truly love Jesus do not follow his command to love, and thus do not make space for God to be at home with them.

Do you have a sense of God's presence being "at home" with you? When our lives are devoted to worldly pursuits, we may feel fulfilled, but we are at odds with God. When life goes awry, the emptiness that follows can be devastating. Those who have come to love Jesus and follow his teaching to love others need not fear such hollowness. Both the friendships we make and the indwelling presence of Christ ensure that we are never alone.

### Learning from the Spirit (vv. 25-29)

As Jesus' followers would not be orphaned, neither would they be left without instruction or continued revelation. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you," Jesus said, "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (vv. 25-26). This echoes an earlier promise: in vv. 16-17 Jesus had said "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you."†

"Advocate" (NRSV, NIV11, NET) translates the Greek word *paraklētos*, which can also carry the sense of "Counselor" (NIV, HCSB), "Comforter" (KJV), or "Helper" (NAS95). Jesus probably had all of those aspects in mind, including the role of "Teacher" or "Reminder," and Greek readers would have appreciated the multivalent nature of the term. Because of this, it might be better to use the transliteration "Paraclete" (as in the New Jerusalem Bible) rather than attempting a more restrictive translation.

Some writers argue that the Paraclete would be limited to reminders and interpretations of Jesus' teachings, but Jesus' phrase "will teach you everything" leaves open the possibility of continued revelation or guidance in specific circumstances.†

Whenever individuals, committees, or congregations pray for divine direction in dealing with contemporary issues or needed decisions, we acknowledge a belief that the Spirit may offer new insights for our day

that speak to issues that were not addressed in scripture. Some of the church's sharpest conflicts have arisen over issues such as slavery, women's equality, gender identity, or scientific findings that were not fully understood or appreciated in the biblical world. There are times when we need to go beyond a literal reading of culturally limited scriptures and ask God to teach us how best to live and to love in our own day.

Jesus' identification of the Paraclete as the Holy Spirit (v. 23) or "the Spirit of truth" (v. 16) has clear Trinitarian implications. Jesus says in v. 23 that he and the Father would dwell in the believer, and adds in v. 26 that the Holy Spirit would be sent to remind and teach Jesus' followers. None of the New Testament writings develop a full-fledged view of the Trinity, but texts like this provided the basis of the doctrine later developed by the church.

We need not worry about Jesus' mixture of images. In v. 23 he says that both he and the Father will come to believers and make their home with them. Yet in vv. 16 and 26 Jesus says the Father will send the Paraclete in his name to be with believers, teaching and reminding them. Why would this be necessary if the Father and the Son are already "at home" with believers?

The apparent redundancy should not trouble us: Jesus' intent was not to explain the metaphysics of divine-human relationships, but to use varying images to communicate the same truth conveyed by the name Immanuel: God is with us. Jesus' departure from the disciples did not leave either them or us orphaned, for in some fashion beyond our understanding, God remains present with us.

We are not alone. **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 8, 2016

John 17:20-26

## Make Them One

Farewells can be sacred: there is something holy about parting from people we love and entrusting them to God's care during our time apart. Did you know this is how the word "goodbye" originated? It's a contraction, shortened by long and casual use, of a parting blessing. "God be with ye," over many years, became "goodbye."

English speakers are not the only ones. The Spanish farewell *adios* and the French *adieu* both literally mean "to God," and are shortened forms of a longer parting, "I commend you to God."

Of course, the root meaning of a word and the sense we assign it can be two different things. Few people think of "goodbye" or "*adios*" as a blessing, so our use of it in those cases doesn't amount to a prayer. Often, however, friends or family do part with a conscious wish for God's blessing or with the assurance that "I'll be praying for you."

That is precisely what is happening in today's text, on the deepest level imaginable. John's gospel does not speak of Jesus praying in the garden of Gethsemane, but rather inserts a lengthy farewell discourse between Jesus and the remaining disciples after Judas departed from what we have

John 17:21—

"As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

come to call "the last supper." The first part of the discourse focuses on words of comfort and instruction (13:31-16:33) in which Jesus speaks to his disciples. The final part is a prayer (17:1-26), in which Jesus speaks to God, interceding for his followers. As such, it is commonly known as Jesus' "high priestly prayer," and it serves as the theological climax of John's gospel.

### A prayer for unity (vv. 20-21)

We find comfort in knowing that friends and family are praying for us. How does it feel to know that Jesus also prayed for us? John 17 insists that Jesus prayed earnestly for believers like us who were not yet born and had not yet come to have faith.

As John portrays the scene, after a lengthy conversation with his remaining disciples, Jesus shifted his attention to prayer, knowing that the disciples would overhear his plea (as can we). Jesus began by praying for himself (vv. 1-5), interceded for those who were gathered around him that night (vv. 6-19), and concluded with a prayer for all believers who would come to know him (vv. 20-26). That is where we pick up today's text. It is Jesus' prayer for you and for me.

"I ask not only on behalf of these," Jesus prayed, "but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through

their word" (v. 20). This does not limit Jesus' request to the first generation of believers who would respond to the witness of the disciples, but to all future believers who would be drawn to the love of Jesus by the lives of his followers.

And what was Jesus' request? "... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (v. 21a). This does not suggest that we become part of the godhead, sharing a common essence with the Father and Son in the manner of the Trinity. Rather, Jesus asks that the community of faith reflect the unity of the divine: as God and Jesus are one with each other, so believers should share a common spirit and purpose, loving God and each other as Christ had loved them.

The unity Christ prayed for does not exist in our own strength, but in fellowship with God. Believers do not take on divinity, but we do have a relational connection to God: like branches on a vine, we abide in God and God abides in us (cf. 15:1-11). Jesus prayed that we might experience this mutual bond as God intended.

And what was God's intention? That the oneness we share would lead us to live in such unity "so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (v. 21b). This is how Jesus envisioned others coming to faith: not because we have preached in a crusade or passed out propositional tracts or frightened people with the prospect of hell, but because they see the love of God at work in us and toward them. There is no stronger witness than the godlike love we show to one another and toward the world – and there is no

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greater detriment to the gospel than one who claims Christ but breathes hostility. ▾

### A mission of unity (vv. 22-23)

Jesus' prayer for unity in vv. 20-21 finds further elaboration in vv. 22-23. The substance of his prayer is the same as for those first followers in the upper room. He prayed that we might be one: one in Christ and one with each other.

"The glory that you have given me I have given them," Jesus said, "so that they may be one, as we are one" (v. 22). What does that mean? What glory, given by God, could Jesus pass on to us? We typically think of "glory" in terms of fame and adulation, wide renown won through impressive achievements. The Greek word is *doxa*: when we sing the doxology, we offer words of praise to God's glory.

The request harks back to the opening verses, when Jesus prayed that God would glorify him through the "hour" in which the incarnation reached its fulfillment (vv. 1-5). Gail O'Day argues that "glory," in this context, points primarily to "the full revelation of God made known in Jesus," as "God's glory marks the beginning and the end of the incarnation (1:14; 13:31-32; 17:1, 25), and v. 22 makes clear that it will also mark the life of the faith community" (from "John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995], 795: see "The Hardest Question" online for further ideas).

In other words, the astonished awe that people might feel toward Jesus as a result his selfless incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension could likewise be directed to believers who truly live in unity with God and demonstrate the same self-sacrificing love toward others.

Thus, the glory of Christ comes

through unity with Christ and the Father: "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (v. 23). The oneness we have with God in Christ is reflected in a way that communicates God's love to the world and draws others to Christ. ▾

### A future in unity (vv. 24-26)

As Jesus' prayer draws to a close, he looks beyond the earthly mission of believers to the eschatological hope of a future in which the faithful live without the distractions of the world, in the full presence of God.

Showing intimacy, Jesus twice addresses God as "Father." Previously, he had employed the language of asking, but now he shifts to saying what he wants:

"Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (v. 24).

This request recalls not only the early part of the prayer, in which Jesus spoke of "the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (v. 5), but also the Prologue of John's gospel, which speaks of Christ as the pre-existent Word. Jesus' prayer reminds us that the Word came into the world through the love of God, and the world's "first full taste of that love comes in Jesus' hour" (O'Day, 796).

Jesus' closing address to God as "Righteous Father" points to God's rightful judgment that had deemed the world unrighteous and in need of salvation. Through Jesus, the disciples had learned to comprehend what is truly right.

The final two verses not only

conclude the prayer, but as C. K. Barrett has noted, "they summarize, and were no doubt intended to summarize, the substance of the gospel" (*The Gospel According to St. John*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Westminster John Knox Press, 1978], 514). The unrighteous world did not know the Father, but God sent Jesus – who does know the Father – so that all might come to know God through his incarnation in all of its fullness: birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension.

As Jesus had manifested knowledge of God throughout his incarnation, he would continue to make God known (v. 26), presumably through the ministry of the Paraclete, described in 16:13 as "the Spirit of truth" who would guide and teach believers what they need to know about God. ▾

How comforting it is to hear Jesus praying for the day when we will be with him and witness his ultimate glory. Until that day, Jesus pledged to continue making the love of God known. We cannot always see Jesus. We cannot always feel him, but we can know, as we make our way through this life, that we are not alone. Only Jesus could say goodbye and yet remain present.

There may be days when we don't sense the presence of Jesus walking beside us, but we can be sure that he is never too far away to hear our prayer. We may not see as much of the path ahead as we would like, but there is always enough light for another step, and always the assurance that at the end of the path we will see Jesus no longer in mystery, but in glory. We may sometimes feel alone on this earthly pilgrimage, but we can believe that Jesus is still at work as he promised, revealing the love of God to us and working through us to show the love of God to others. NfJ

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 15, 2016

John 14:8-17

## Someone's Coming

“If in my name you ask me for anything,” Jesus said, “I will do it” (v. 14).

*What?*

Could that possibly be true? Did Jesus offer his followers a blank check for anything they wanted? Was it like an upgrade on finding a genie in a lamp, with unlimited wishes?

A quick surface reading might suggest that Jesus' promise was akin to winning a billion dollar lottery, but there has to be more to the story, right?

Right.

Context is everything, and these words of Jesus come from a particular setting that governs our understanding of the promise. The context, first of all, is the Gospel of John, an account of Jesus' life that differs significantly from what we find in the more similar gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John's gospel was written later than the others. It has a distinct literary style and a decidedly more theological bent, focusing on the central theme of Christ as the incarnate Word of God, one with the Father, who makes access to God available in a radically new way.

### Jesus and the Father (vv. 8-11)

John describes a lengthy farewell conversation between Jesus and his

**John 14:12—**

“Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.”

disciples. In the final hours before his arrest, Jesus emphasized the significance of his having been sent by the Father – while also being one with the Father – to initiate a new way of relating to God. Today's text follows immediately on what some describe as the pinnacle of John's theology: Jesus' insistence that “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (vv. 6-7).

It was Philip, John says, who didn't yet get the point, and who asked for a clearer picture: “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied” (v. 8). Jesus' reproachful response reflects both patience and exasperation: “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (v. 9).

What Philip and the others didn't get is that Jesus himself was the ultimate self-revelation of God, the closest any human could come to seeing God. And so he asked: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” (v. 10a).

Jesus' identity was so enmeshed with the Father that the works Jesus did were also works of the Father (v. 10b). He had done what he could do to reveal God's presence through both word and

works: now it was up to the disciples to believe: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe because of the works themselves” (v. 11).

John's gospel makes much of various “signs” that demonstrated Jesus' divinity and called for belief. It concludes with a word to readers that “these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Jesus wanted his followers to believe on the basis of his word alone. Failing that, he called them to believe in response to the works they had seen. Even Jewish observers, according to Nicodemus, had recognized that “no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God” (3:2).

It's no surprise that Jesus' critics rejected his claim, but the disciples seemed to have had just as much trouble believing it. This, however, is the central thrust of the Fourth Gospel's message: that Jesus, through his life and works, death and resurrection, revealed the love of God to humankind as plainly as it could be done.

This opened the door to a new way of relating to God: as Jesus could speak of a mutual indwelling relationship with the Father, so his followers could speak of being in Jesus and Jesus being in them. Later in this same conversation, Jesus insisted that he would not leave the disciples as orphans, but would come to them. “On that day,” he said, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (v. 20).

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### Jesus and his disciples (vv. 12-14)

To think of Christ dwelling in us is astonishing: what Jesus went on to say in vv. 12-14 could be even harder to grasp. After challenging his followers to believe in him – in part because of the works he had done – Jesus solemnly declared: “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father” (v. 12).

Does this mean believers will have power to work even greater miracles than Jesus, and whenever they like? The next two verses, on the surface, seem to suggest that: “I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it” (vv. 13-14).

But, we don’t see widespread miracles among Jesus’ followers. Does that mean we’re lacking in belief, as some would contend, or lacking in our understanding of what Jesus meant? When Jesus spoke of “the works that I do,” it seems clear that he had more than miracles in mind: his primary work was to reveal the depths of the Father’s love, and it was about to culminate in Jesus’ “hour,” the climactic events of crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

When Jesus spoke of the works his disciples were to do in vv. 12-14, he did so in the future tense: they would do these works after his time on earth was finished and he had returned to the Father. While on earth, in the midst of his ministry, Jesus could reveal God’s power through miraculous signs and speak of dying and rising again, but his hearers could easily remain skeptical. Once Jesus had finished his course, however – after he had been crucified and buried,

after he had risen from the dead and revealed himself to many, after he had ascended to the Father – then the disciples would have the full story to tell. Empowered by the Spirit, their works could be greater than those of Jesus because they could declare the complete story of God’s saving revelation in Christ. Through their witness, far more people would come to follow Christ than Jesus had been able to win over during his time on earth (see “The Hardest Question” online for more).

But what of vv. 13-14 and the apparent promise that Jesus would do whatever the disciples asked of him? We note first that in both verses, Jesus qualified such requests by the condition that they should be asked “in my name.” Asking in Jesus’ name is to ask what Jesus would ask. It rules out any selfish request, any desire to build one’s own reputation as a miracle-worker, or any petition outside of what God desires. To ask in Jesus’ name is to ask in accordance with Jesus’ will – and what Jesus wants is revealed in the next few verses.

### Jesus and the Spirit (vv. 15-17)

Those who follow Jesus – those who Jesus said would do even greater works than he – are those who truly love Jesus and demonstrate their love by keeping his commandments (v. 15). Earlier, Jesus had summarized his teaching in a “new commandment,” namely, “that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (13:34).

Showing love for Jesus involves more than singing praise songs or humming “Oh, How I Love Jesus” or wearing a cross around our necks. We show our love for Jesus by loving the people Jesus loves, even when it is

hard, even when we *don’t* get everything we pray for.

We are not alone in our efforts, however. Jesus promised his disciples that he would send “another Advocate, to be with you forever” (v. 16). The word Jesus used (transliterated as “Paraclete”) could also be translated as “counselor,” “helper,” “encourager,” or “comforter.” Jesus had been a Paraclete to the disciples as he had taught and exhorted and counseled them during his earthly ministry. After his departure, he said, he would send *another* Paraclete, identified in v. 17 as “the Spirit of truth.”

Earlier in the conversation, Jesus had identified himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (v. 6). After Jesus had completed his mission on earth, the Spirit would continue his revelatory work, keeping the truth of Jesus present through the lives of believers. “The world” had rejected Jesus and would also reject the Spirit, but believers would know the Spirit “because he abides with you, and he will be in you” (v. 17).

On Pentecost Sunday, we remember the gospel challenge to follow Jesus by living as he lived, loving others unselfishly and trusting in the presence of his Spirit to lead us in the right way. We may often feel lost in this world, separated from others and useless as instruments of the kingdom. But we are never so lost that Jesus cannot find us, never so far away that he cannot hear us when we call, never so incompetent that God cannot show saving love to others through us.

The promises of Jesus and the presence of the Paraclete remind us that we are valued and useful participants in God’s ongoing kingdom because we know Jesus – and more importantly, Jesus knows us. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 22, 2016

John 16:12-15

## Trinitarian Roots


Few things are harder to comprehend than the concept of the Trinity, but it remains so central to most Christian thought that the lectionary calendar devotes a special Sunday each year as a reminder of the doctrine that our concept of one God incorporates three persons in mutual relationship.

The church has employed many complex words to describe the Trinity, and has debated through the centuries just how we should envision one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not as simple as saying that one person can be a parent, a child, and a spouse at the same time: we could go on to apply descriptors such as employee, friend, or fitness addict, but still be talking about one person playing multiple roles.

The Trinity does not speak of one God perceived in three ways, but of three persons who share the same divine essence. The Bible neither uses the word “Trinity” nor contains a clearly developed doctrine of it, but the scriptures do speak of God in multiple ways and in close proximity. Matthew 28:19 cites Jesus as commanding the disciples to make disciples and baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The author of

John 16:12a—


“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth ...”

1 Peter wrote of those “who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:1). The Apostle Paul spoke to the Galatians about God, Christ Jesus, and the Spirit within a few verses (Gal. 3:11-14) – as does the author of our text for today. 

### The Spirit (vv. 12-13)

Still, we cannot expect the biblical writers’ language to always line up with doctrinal wording not fully developed until centuries later. While the Fourth Gospel speaks of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it often does so in a way that differs from the classic Trinitarian doctrine that evolved in the church. John’s teaching seems to assume that all three persons of the Trinity were present and active from the beginning, but not necessarily on the same plane: both the Son and the Spirit appear to be subordinate to the Father and sent by the Father, rather than acting on their own initiative. Jesus spoke of having been sent by the Father (3:16-17), and promised that the Spirit of truth, or Paraclete, would be sent by the Father in his name (14:26, 15:26).


Of course, John did not write this passage as a discourse on the Trinity, but as part of a lengthy farewell discourse attributed to Jesus following the last supper (chs. 14-17). In a

variety of ways, Jesus explained to the disciples that he must depart, but they should not be distressed because he would send the Spirit to encourage, empower, and continue teaching them. 

The disciples had no way of comprehending what life would be like after Jesus’ departure, when they would be called to lead the new movement despite opposition from “the world.” Thus, Jesus could say “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (v. 12).

A parent would not sit down with a six-year-old and explain what he or she should watch out for as a teenager: the child could not begin to understand the upcoming stresses of puberty, peer pressure, and emerging self-identity. Nor would one advise an adolescent on marital, financial, or career issues he or she would not face for a decade or more.

Neither would it have been helpful for Jesus to speak of matters relative to the establishment of the first church communities, the need for structure, or strategies for dealing with those who opposed their efforts: those things were still beyond them.

But the disciples would not be left alone when those issues did arise, for Jesus and the Father would send the Spirit to encourage, comfort, and continue to instruct them. “When the Spirit of truth comes,” Jesus said, “he will guide you into all the truth” (v. 13a). As new issues arose, the Spirit would prompt them in helpful ways, reminding them of what Jesus had already taught, or revealing new insights. 

The Spirit’s role should not be

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thought of as separate from that of the Father and the Son, however: “he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (v. 13b). Earlier, Jesus had described his own teaching as being what he had heard from God: “My teaching is not mine but his who sent me” (7:16, see also 8:26, 40 and 12:49-50).

As Jesus’ teaching derived from the Father, so the Spirit would speak only what he would hear from the Father. While this may conjure up images of the Spirit listening to the Father and then passing the message on to humans, the point is that the disciples would not be left alone: God’s care and guidance would continue, as the Spirit would declare “the things that are to come.”

The verb used here is not typically used in prophetic contexts, so we are not to think of the Spirit’s role as predicting the future. Rather, as new issues and contexts and challenges arose – the things Jesus said the disciples could not yet bear – the Spirit would be present to proclaim or interpret Jesus’ teachings in the changing circumstances of their lives and missions.

This is one of the reasons we expect pastors to be persons who take their spiritual lives seriously. We want them to be open to hearing and receiving a fresh word from God, and courageous enough to share that word with the congregation through prophetic preaching.

The voices of such preachers and other Spirit-led believers contributed to the demise of slavery as an acceptable institution in civilized society. More recently, Christian proclaimers and others touched by the Spirit have contributed to the ongoing recognition that all persons should enjoy equal rights and opportunities without

respect to gender or ethnicity. 


Can you think of areas in your life in which old prejudices or attitudes have been changed through the promptings of the Spirit as you interacted with other persons? Are there areas in which the Spirit is still working on you?

### The Son (v. 14)

John’s gospel begins with a declaration that Jesus, as the *Logos* or Word, was no recent creation, but pre-existent: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (1:1-2). “All things came into being through him,” John wrote, including life, for “in him was life and the life was the light of all people” (1:3-4).

Yet, John also speaks of the Son as learning from the Father and being glorified by the Father. What Jesus had learned from the Father, he passed on to his disciples. In word and action, Jesus reflected the presence, character, and glory of God. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” John wrote, “and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14).

“No one has ever seen God,” the author continued. “It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known” (1:18). As Christ had revealed the glory of God, so the Spirit would declare the glory of Christ: “He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (v. 14).

In John’s gospel, the concept of Jesus’ glory is closely related to the “hour” of his passion, the crucifixion and resurrection. A little earlier, looking toward his last hours, Jesus had said “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (12:23). 

The experience of living through the blinding grief and eye-opening joy of Jesus’ death and resurrection would leave the disciples puzzled and perturbed, both longing to understand and lacking the ability. They could not yet “bear” it (v. 12). As they pondered those things, the Spirit would glorify Jesus “because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” The Spirit would help them to understand that the supreme manifestation of God was Jesus himself, and that both would remain present with them through the Spirit.

### The Father (v. 15)

Jesus’ promise that the Spirit would “take what is mine and declare it to you” leads into his further claim that “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (v. 15).

While John appears to speak of Jesus as serving the Father, he is not less than the Father. The Father has no attributes or powers that the Son does not share: “All that the Father has is mine.” Thus, as the Spirit would “take what is mine and declare it to you,” the disciples would receive no limited revelation, but the full force of the Father’s love and glory as revealed in Christ.

Herein is the power of Trinitarian teaching for the life of the believer and the unity of the church. We are not to divide ourselves into parties that focus on the justice of the father, the love of the Son, or the gifts of the Spirit. God, though revealed in three persons, is One. At no point do we relate only to the Father, the Son, or the Spirit: all work together for the single purpose of calling all people to experience and to share the love of God for the sake of the world. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

May 29, 2016

## Galatians 1:1-12 *You Did What?*

**H**ave you ever received – or written – a letter of reprimand or an email message designed to call someone to account? Such messages typically skip the pleasantries and get right down to business, laying out the recipient’s perceived shortcomings or failures in ways that may or may not be overly tactful. Correspondence like this can be painful, but sometimes it is necessary.

That’s precisely what we find in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. We don’t know exactly which churches Paul had in mind, or in which part of the province of Galatia they were located, but we do know what their problem was: they had forsaken the gospel of grace and fallen for an aberrant doctrine that depended on works. ↓

### A loaded address (vv. 1-5)

Letters of the ancient world typically began with identity of the sender, as in the “inside address” or stationery heading of a modern business letter, followed by the naming of the intended recipients. A variety of pleasantries or greetings would begin the missive before the author moved on to the actual occasion of the letter.

In all of his letters except one, Paul’s greeting included a prayer of

### Galatians 1:6—

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel ...”

thanksgiving for his readers. That one exception is the letter to the Galatians, where Paul found little to be thankful for and much to concern him.

In short, when Paul wrote this letter, he was mad as fire. He had worked among the Galatians, seen them come to faith in Christ, and taught them good doctrine – only to learn that they had since fallen under the sway of rival preachers who believed one could not be fully Christian without also becoming Jewish.

This idea was an ongoing issue as pioneer Christians worked out how to do and be the church. The earliest Christians were Jews, as was Jesus. Some early church leaders were so entrenched in their ethnic faith that they expected Gentile converts to convert to Judaism as well as Christianity. In time, the conflict led to a special meeting where Paul and Barnabas debated church leaders in Jerusalem, insisting that salvation was by faith alone: Gentiles were under no obligation to keep the Jewish law. (See “The Hardest Question” online for more.)

When Paul heard that unnamed “Judaizers” had hijacked his Galatian flock and persuaded them to adopt the Jewish law, he took the affront personally. The Galatians’ willingness to follow contradictory teachers showed that they no longer respected his authority in doctrinal matters.

Thus, even before naming or greeting his addressees, Paul began by defending himself: “Paul, an apostle – sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead ...” (v. 1).

Paul called himself an apostle because he believed his vision of the resurrected Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9) put him on the same footing as those who had followed Jesus during his time on earth. Likewise, he considered his calling to preach as deriving from God the Father through Jesus Christ, rather than any human officials. ↓

Before he said the first word of address, Paul wanted to emphasize – with the implicit endorsement of “all the members of God’s family who are with me” (v. 2a) – that his authority came directly from God. As such, it should not only be respected, but given precedence over the teaching of persons who taught a divergent doctrine.

Paul usually began his letters with a reference to towns or individuals, and typically addressed his audience as “the saints in ... .” He saw no saints there, however, addressing his message only “To the churches of Galatia” (v. 2b). This suggests that the false doctrine had become prevalent throughout the area.

While Paul offered no prayer of thanksgiving for the Galatians, he did wish them grace and peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Instead of leaving it at that, however, he added a commentary relative to the gospel his readers seem to have questioned. Thus he qualified “the Lord Jesus Christ” as the one “who

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gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever” (vv. 3-5).<sup>U</sup>

Paul believed the Galatians had abandoned the gospel of freedom through Christ, so he prefaced all other comments with the bedrock belief that Jesus “gave himself for our sins to set us free” – meaning that no further works or rituals should be necessary.

### An astonished apostle (vv. 6-9)

Nor did Paul see the need for further pleasantries, as he launched immediately into a strongly worded reprimand and appeal for change: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel,” he said (v. 6).

A pastor that brash might not last long today, but Paul did not hesitate to criticize those who had turned away from the message of God (“The one who called you”) and the good news of grace offered through Christ.

God’s offer of salvation is the heart of the true gospel, so Paul immediately explained his reference to a “different gospel” by insisting that there is no other real gospel. There may be false pretenders, such as a legalistic gospel propounded by Paul’s opponents, the Gnostic gospel that was soon to appear, or the modern distortion we know as the prosperity gospel – but they are not the *true* gospel. Those who teach twisted doctrine, Paul said, “are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ” (v. 7).

Paul would get more specific about their particular perversion later: some were teaching that Christ’s grace was not enough and that believers must also follow the Jewish law (5:4). For the moment, Paul’s focus was on the

danger of teaching any false doctrine, and he did so in the strongest language imaginable.

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!” (v. 9). If that were not enough, Paul repeated the forceful sentiment in v. 10: if anyone teaches another gospel, “let that one be accursed!”

Can you sense the apostle’s anger and feel the heat rising from his pen? The word translated as “accursed” is the Greek *anathema*. Classically, the term could describe an offering that is devoted or consecrated to the gods and thus set aside from normal use. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it was used to describe plunder put under the *herem* ban during a “Holy War” in which God was thought to be fighting for Israel and all enemy property was to be destroyed as an offering to God rather than taken as booty by the Israelites.

Paul took up this idea of something destined for destruction when he called for anyone who perverted the gospel to be accursed, *anathema*, condemned to destruction under God’s judgment.

One could argue that Paul was overreaching by daring to presume what God’s judgment would be, but his flagrant language demonstrated how furious he was to learn that members of the Judaizing party had come behind him and stolen his sheep, leading them to desert the gospel of grace for a system of works.

### A divine revelation (vv. 10-12)

Having vented his vexation, Paul returned to the task of establishing his authority as a teacher who could be trusted. He insisted that he did not seek human approval, but God’s alone:

this may imply that the false evangelists had claimed official endorsement by the church leaders in Jerusalem, including recognized apostles such as James, John, and Peter. Paul cared little for their opinion, as he indicated later in 2:1-10: his concern was to please God, not any human authority (v. 10).

On the other hand, Paul’s denial that he had sought human approval may have been in response to a charge from the late-coming legalists that Paul had abbreviated the gospel in favor of a more popular message, emphasizing free grace at the expense of keeping the law in hopes of winning people over.<sup>U</sup>

Paul insisted he would not compromise the integrity of the gospel in return for popularity. His bold claim to having it right was based on a visionary encounter with Christ: he had not learned about Jesus or God’s plan of salvation from conversations or seminars led by church leaders, apostles, or any other person. The gospel he proclaimed was “not of human origin,” Paul said: “I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through the revelation of Jesus Christ” (vv. 11-12).

The law-free gospel of salvation by grace came directly from Jesus, Paul said. Whether he had in mind his initial vision of Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-9) or later visionary experiences such as those described in Acts 9:10-12 and 16:9 and 1 Cor. 12:1-10, Paul had no doubt that he had encountered Christ personally, and that his understanding of the gospel came directly from God through Christ. As such, he had no patience with humans who would add to or subtract from God’s offer of saving grace.

Should we? **NFJ**

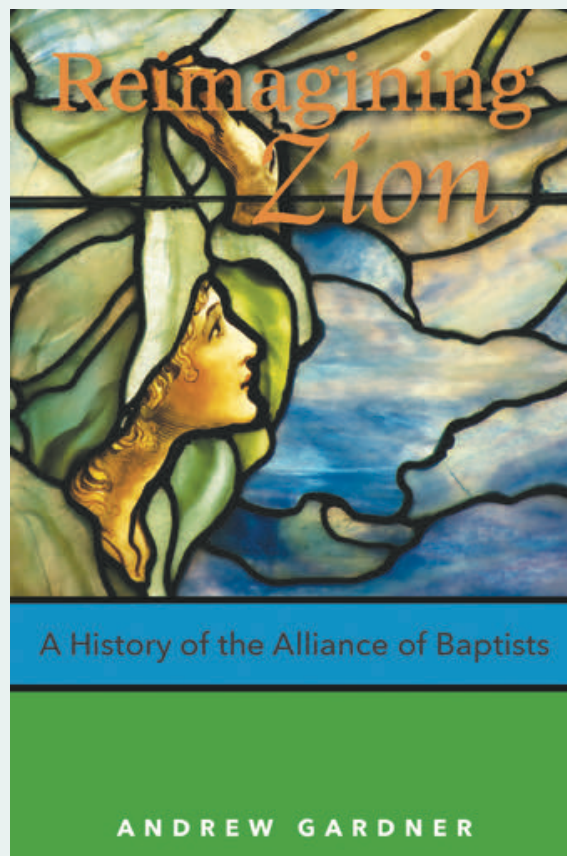


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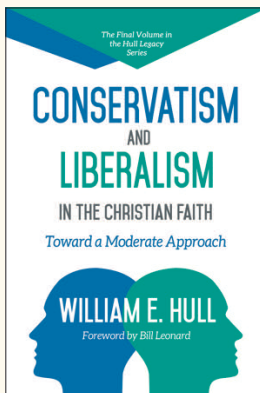
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Publication of this book and guide made possible by the generosity of David Hull, Susan Hull Walker and the Hull Legacy Series Committee of Mountain Brook Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 5, 2016

## Galatians 1:11-24

### *Saul's Call Makes Paul*

**H**ave you ever known anyone who started out on one career track, but ended up on another?

I left college as a high school science teacher but soon became a pastor for 26 years before editing a state Baptist paper for while, then settling in as a divinity school professor and curriculum writer. Many students who are preparing for ministry come to us from the army, from public school teaching, from social work, even from banking and law.

Changing careers in midstream is not that unusual, especially when the element of God's call is involved – but have you known anyone who not only switched horses in the middle of the stream, but also chose a mount going in the opposite direction?

Imagine a hedge fund manager who gives up a hefty income to run a soup kitchen. Picture a gang leader who forswears violence to start an urban gardening program to help inner city youth get along. Visualize an immigration agent known for his hard line on deporting undocumented aliens – until he has a change of heart and begins advocating in their behalf.

None of those career reversals could match the one we read about in today's text: the Apostle Paul had made a brief but splashy career leading

#### Galatians 1:11—

“For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin ...”

the Pharisaic charge against Christians – until he became one. In short order, he became the early church's best-known evangelist and church planter.

How did that happen?

#### A bold claim (vv. 11-12)

It happened, Paul said, because he received a “revelation” directly from Jesus. Paul was writing to churches in Galatia that had grown out of his preaching ministry. They had trusted the gospel message of salvation through faith in Christ and had apparently gotten off to a good start (5:7).

After Paul moved on, however, rival evangelists who believed that Christians must also follow Jewish law moved in. Their influence must have been persuasive, for Paul wrote to express shock that the Galatians were “so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ” and turning to “another gospel” that Paul insisted was no gospel at all (vv. 6-7).

The proponents of adding legalistic requirements had probably claimed authority from apostolic leaders in Jerusalem, where the church was composed almost entirely of Jewish Christians. Paul, however, contended that the gospel he preached was of divine origin and not subject to second-guessing by humans who wanted to add to it (v. 11). Salvation was by grace, not by works.

Paul would never have cited James, Peter, or any other human as the basis of his authority. “For I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (v. 12). The basis of Paul's knowledge about “the gospel of Christ” was not human, but divine.

#### An unusual background (vv. 13-17)

To underscore his claims, Paul reminded the Galatians of his background. He had not only grown up as a Jew named Saul, but also was so zealous in the faith that he could say “I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors” (v. 14).

In his former life, Paul could have worn a cape emblazoned with a big “J” to identify himself as “SuperJew.” No one had been more appreciative of the Jewish heritage (see also Phil. 3:4-6). Indeed, Paul had been so zealous that he had actively persecuted “the church of God” because he considered Jesus' followers to be a dangerous threat to the Judaism (v. 13).

But something happened to Saul: God called him to a new and different kind of ministry. In Acts, Luke described it as a blinding vision from heaven in which Jesus spoke directly to Saul. In Galatians, Paul described it as something like a prophetic call, saying that “God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles ...” (vv. 15-16).

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Paul's account brings to mind earlier Hebrew prophets through whom God promised to reach all nations. Isaiah spoke of how God had "formed me in the womb to be his servant" and commissioned him to preach not only to Israel, but also to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:5-6). Likewise, Jeremiah claimed that God had called him, saying "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jer. 1:5).

Paul's assertion that God had "set me apart before I was born and called me through is grace," revealing Christ "so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles" clearly echoes the call of the earlier prophets. Thus, while we typically speak of Paul's "conversion" on the Damascus road, Paul saw it as a fuller revelation of God and a prophetic call to proclaim the gospel of Christ among the Gentiles – to all nations.


God's prophetic call did not require human affirmation: indeed, Old Testament prophets typically stood outside the religious establishment. The newly called Paul would certainly not have sought approval from the Jewish authorities, and insisted that he did not seek endorsement from the early church leaders, either.

"I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me," Paul said, "but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus" (vv. 16b-17).

This seems at odds with Luke's account in Acts, which offers a more telescoped view of Paul's early ministry. After coming to know Jesus, Paul began to preach in the synagogues

of Damascus, Luke said, with such power and persuasion that the Jewish authorities plotted to kill him and put a watch on the gates. Friends helped him escape by lowering him over the city wall in a basket (Acts 9:19-25).

Luke then describes a trip to Jerusalem in which Paul attempted to join the other disciples, who were skeptical until Barnabas intervened and convinced them that Paul was sincere. Paul then preached in Jerusalem until his life was threatened there, leading him to head north to his home country (Acts 9:26-30).

Paul says that he first went south into Arabia, then back to Damascus before his first trip to Jerusalem. Luke's account does not necessarily contradict Paul's claim, but does seem to follow a different tradition. 

#### An eclectic beginning (vv. 18-24)

Paul stressed his independence from the original disciples, contending that he did not go to Jerusalem until three years after his evangelistic call. Even that visit was quite informal, Paul said, as he spent 15 days with Cephas (Peter) and "did not see any other apostle except James the Lord's brother" (vv. 18-20). Jesus' brother James had not been a follower during Jesus' earthly life, but following the resurrection he became a principal leader of the church in Jerusalem.

Paul's point is that he did not seek approval from the Jerusalem disciples, or even additional information to clarify his understanding of the gospel: he had received that directly from God. After his short visit with Peter, Paul said, he had gone back north "into the regions of Syria and Cilicia," so removed from Jerusalem and its environs that "I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ" (vv. 21-22).

Even so, Paul said, those churches

had heard of his ministry and how the former enemy of the faith had become its strongest advocate, "and they glorified God because of me" (vv. 23-24).

Another 14 years passed before he returned to Jerusalem, Paul said (2:1), again emphasizing that his doctrinal authority did not arise from the leaders of the Jewish church in Jerusalem, but from Jesus Christ alone.

We don't know what the false teachers who had led the Galatians astray may have said about Paul or their claim that his version of the gospel was inadequate, but he was adamant: salvation is by faith in God's grace alone. Adding the ritual trappings of Judaism did not make the believers more Christian, but less, for it led them away from the heart of their faith and into the arena of works.

Can you think of ways in which some modern believers may have fallen into the same legalistic trap as the Galatians?

Through the years, some have taught that Christianity required not only faith, but also regular church attendance and abstinence from a litany of perceived sins ranging from dancing to listening to rock music to drinking wine. Churches have sometimes removed offending members from their rolls.

Regular worship and involvement in a community of faith are certainly to be valued, as they can strengthen a believer's faith. Behavior that honors God is always worthy of praise, though Christians may sometimes disagree about what constitutes dishonorable behavior. Paul was never shy about criticizing factionalism, immorality, pride, and class-consciousness within the church. Still, he would argue that both faithful worship and positive behaviors are marks of Christ-followers, not requirements to be achieved before grace can be received. **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 12, 2016

Galatians 2:15-21

## *Do You Feel 'Justified'?*

Imagine this: A new health food company called Healthy Futures announces an introductory promotion: it will give \$100,000 to every registered citizen in your town who applies in the next 24 hours. Soon, you and your neighbors are dreaming about what to do with the unexpected windfall.

A week later, all who sign up receive a letter explaining that to receive the offer, recipients must join the company's "Healthy Futures Fitness Club" and follow all club rules. Members must exercise for 60 minutes every day, drink only water, and consume only vegetables, grains, or Healthy Futures nutritional supplements.

Secondly, recipients can't actually spend the money, which will be automatically deposited in the "Healthy Futures Investment Society" for a minimum of 20 years, with any returns retained by the company.

Finally, to reduce temptation toward unhealthy behavior, members must cut ties with relatives or other friends who are not also members of the Healthy Futures Club.

How would you respond to such an offer? What appeared to be free money might cost more than you are willing to pay.

This was not unlike the situation Paul faced when writing to the churches


### Galatians 2:20—

"... and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

of Galatia. He had proclaimed the free gospel of God's love and grace among them. Many had accepted the good news with joy and were growing in faith. Soon after, however, other preachers came along and claimed that Paul had not told the whole story. They agreed that the grace of God was freely offered, but said those who accepted it must also adopt the practices of first-century Judaism – including circumcision for men, dietary restrictions, and remaining apart from those who didn't live by the same rules.


We can understand why the Galatians were confused – and why Paul was livid. But, we may face similar questions. How does one proclaim a free gospel that will change lives without prescribing the ways in which the change must come? How do we balance law and grace?

### Law and grace (vv. 15-18)

Paul's letter shows that even some of the most prominent leaders of the early church were subject to being confused. They had always lived by the law, and found it hard to rely on grace alone. Even the Apostle Peter was wishy-washy about it, a situation that Paul bemoaned in Gal. 2:11-14. 


Peter knew better: Acts 10 records how he had received a revelation that God had made not only all foods

acceptable, but also all people. He had witnessed the Holy Spirit coming upon Gentile believers in the home of Cornelius, and had declared: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35).

While visiting the church in Antioch, Peter ate and drank and had fellowship with Gentile believers – but when a group of legalists from Jerusalem showed up and criticized him, Peter withdrew and wouldn't eat with the Gentile Christians (vv. 11-14). 

Peter was his senior in faith, but Paul had no qualms about calling him on the carpet for his failure to uphold the truth of the gospel – that one's relationship with God is based on grace and not law.

That is not to say that Paul had no care for how Christians behaved. He believed that accepting the gospel would change a person's life, including his or her behavior. Still, he saw change as the natural result of gratitude and love for Christ, not as a prerequisite.

The legalists who had led the Galatians astray may have quoted Peter or other church leaders as their authority for insisting that Gentile Christians must observe Jewish law. Paul insisted that he himself had reminded Peter that, though they were Jews by birth and not "Gentile sinners," they also had been justified by faith in Christ, not by keeping the law (vv. 15-16). 

Several key words and phrases call for closer examination. Paul spoke often of being justified by faith in Christ rather than works of the law. The words "just," "justify," and

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justified” are different forms of a root word that also appears in English translations as “righteous” or “righteousness.” It refers to being in a right relationship with God. In one sense this means we stand forgiven before God, but it also suggests that we are on a path that leads us closer to God and thus more just or righteous in our living.

By “the works of the law,” Paul means observance of the laws of Judaism. We should understand that ethnic Hebrews did not observe the law in order to become Jews: they were born into Judaism and believed God had chosen the Hebrews to live in a covenant relationship. Within the covenant, keeping the law was a way of maintaining favor with God and seeking forgiveness if they fell short.

Thus, the legalists who had distorted the gospel in Galatia probably did not claim that one must follow the law in order to become Christian, but that as new people of God they should follow the same rules that the Jews believed would honor God.


Paul insisted that believers are justified or made right with God “through faith in Christ,” a phrase that could also be translated “through the faithfulness of Christ.”

While vv. 17-18 may seem convoluted, Paul’s overall point is clear. When he speaks of seeking to be justified in Christ but being found a sinner, he is referring to Christian legalists who regarded those who didn’t keep the Jewish law as sinners. If trusting Christ’s grace made you a “sinner,” Paul asked, would Christ be “a servant of sin” by promoting it? Paul’s answer is an emphatic negative (v. 17). 

Paul had given up, or “torn down,” his former reliance on the law by trusting in Christ. If he should return to depending on the law or “build it up again,” that would make him a

transgressor (a real sinner), for he would be turning away from the sufficiency of faith in Christ (v. 18).

### A better way (vv. 19-21)

Paul insisted that choosing Christ over the law is the better way. “I died to the law,” he said, “so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (vv. 10-20a). As Christ died in the flesh to demonstrate God’s acceptance of all who repent, those who trust in Christ put to death their feeble attempts to please God on their own, and choose to accept God’s acceptance. 

When we understand that Jesus loves us despite our sin and we experience his grace even though we don’t deserve it – when we know the overwhelming joy of being forgiven and cleansed of sin – our lives will no longer be the same.

Having experienced the love of Christ, we learn to love others as Jesus loves. Having known God’s forgiveness, we are more likely to forgive. Having tasted what it is like to feel clean and right with God, we will naturally work to live a better life and to behave in such a way that we bring joy to God.

Paul expressed it this way: “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (v. 20b). Those who trust in Christ no longer focus on ritual behaviors to earn God’s favor, but show to others the same love we have received from God. If ritual works could have made us right with God, Paul said, there would have been no point in Christ dying (v. 21), and he could not imagine that.

Paul’s language, with statements such as “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me,” may

seem extreme, but gaining Christ does not mean losing ourselves altogether. Paul never stopped being himself: his Type A personality and penchant for zealotry was not extinguished, but redirected. Our calling to become like Christ allows freedom to express the love of Christ through the unique qualities that make us who we are.

Think about it. Would God create us all in wondrous diversity, and then say “If you want to become a Christian, you must let me flatten you out and stamp you with my cookie cutter”? There is work to be done that only we can do. There are people to be loved that no one can love like we do. There are people in need of the good news who will respond to us better than anyone else.

Our new life in Christ is a life of freedom. Paul had no patience with anyone who sought to deny Christian liberty by introducing a list of other requirements for being good with God, and he accused them of preaching a false gospel – a gospel that was no gospel at all, because it was bad news and not good news.

Today it is not uncommon to hear religious leaders imply that to be a truly faithful Christian, one must not only trust Christ, but also believe the scriptures are inerrant, support Christian prayer in public schools, keep women in subordinate roles, or support a particular political agenda.

If Paul were here today, he would remind us that adding anything to the gospel of grace creates a false gospel. In his own day, Paul stood up to the most famous leaders of the church and defended the gospel of grace. In our time, should we not call out those who add human requirements to God’s grace as preaching heresy and not gospel? “For if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.” **NFJ**

# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 19, 2016

## Galatians 3:19-29

### *No More Lines – Really?*

Laws can be good: society would be chaotic without them. Some laws, however, have questionable usefulness.

Did you know that in Mississippi, using vulgar language in front of two or more people could land you in jail for up to 30 days?

In North Carolina, some organizations are banned from holding bingo games that last more than five hours.

A Texas statute prohibits any religious test for public office – except for atheists: all candidates must acknowledge the existence of a “Supreme Being.”

Since 1969, “Virginia is for lovers” has been a popular marketing slogan – but lovers who aren’t married to each other can be charged with a Class 4 Misdemeanor in the state, subject to a \$250 fine. 📌

In the book of Galatians, Paul had a lot to say about the Jewish law. He didn’t consider the law to be strange or unfitting, for he had lived by it for most of his life. He did, however, appear to believe that Christ’s work had introduced a revolutionary means of relating to God that rendered the Jewish laws – especially as expanded by the rabbis – no longer applicable.

Many Jewish people who had trusted Christ continued to follow the

#### Galatians 3:28—

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

dietary restrictions and other rules associated with their ethnic heritage, and Paul did not criticize that. When some traveling evangelists told the Gentile Christians in Galatia that they should add Jewish law to their faith in Christ, however, Paul had a different reaction: he was furious.

Paul had been trained as an expert in the law, which had dominated Jewish life for centuries, and which was puzzling the Galatians. In today’s text, Paul sought to explain the proper purpose and function of the law, even as he argued that its day had largely passed. 📌

#### The law as a guide (3:19-22)

Earlier in chapter 3, Paul had marshaled multiple arguments against requiring Gentile believers to follow Jewish law. He had first asked the Galatians to trust their experience: the Holy Spirit had come upon them without benefit of the law, so why should they turn from life in the Spirit to the burden of the law (vv. 1-5)?

The legalists in Galatia had probably talked much about God’s covenant with Abraham in making their case, emphasizing God’s command that Abraham should walk in obedience and begin practicing circumcision (Genesis 17). Paul also appealed to Abraham, but argued that God had promised to bless all peoples

through Abraham long before the law was given (vv. 6-14). As a person’s last will and testament could not be changed, Paul said, the addition of the law had not negated the earlier promise that the Gentiles would be blessed through Abraham’s seed, which Paul interpreted in a singular sense as a prophetic reference to Jesus (vv. 15-18). 📌

“Why then the law?” Paul asked. What was its purpose? Paul saw the law as having a provisional function “until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made” (v. 19a). In his mind, the life and work of Jesus, “the offspring ... to whom the promise had been made,” had rendered the law obsolete. Thus, there was no reason why the new believers should be required to take it on.

Paul’s claim that the law “was added because of transgressions” suggests that the first function of the law was to define the proper limits of human behavior. In a later letter to the Romans, he argued that sin was in the world before the law, but not transgressions. In other words, people could have acted sinfully before the law was given, but only after the law laid down a standard of proper conduct could they knowingly transgress it (Rom. 3:19-22, 4:15, 5:13-14).

Paul’s language is difficult to translate and interpret, but clearly seems intended to downplay the status of the law, which he described as “ordained by angels through a mediator.” This implied that the law did not come directly from God, but from angels, through the mediation of Moses (vv. 19b-20).

The law was not opposed to

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God's promises, Paul insisted, but limited in what it could accomplish. It could guide one's living, but not bring one to live in a state of rightness with God (v. 21).

"But the scripture has imprisoned all things under the power of sin," Paul said. Paul's use of the singular word "scripture" suggests that he had a particular text in mind. He was probably referring to Deut. 27:26, which he had previously cited in v. 10: "Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them." In other words, those who fell short in observing the law were condemned.

Paul's picture of the law as locking up the world in a prison of sin is not an appealing image, but he was not saying that God created sin or forced humans to live in it. Rather, the law made it clear what sin was, "so that what was promised through faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe" (v. 23).

The law, then, had a provisional and preparatory function: to name sin for what it is and to set the stage for Christ, who alone could bring our sinful lives into a right relationship with God.

### The law as a custodian (3:23-26)

Paul compared the function of the law to two situations familiar to Greeks: a schoolboy guided by his *paidagōgos* (3:23-28), and a young heir under the authority of a guardian (3:29-4:7).

Boys from well-to-do Greek families were assigned a servant who served as a *paidagōgos*, from which we get the word "pedagogue." The word is often translated as "tutor," but the *paidagōgos* was a minder rather than a teacher. He accompanied the boy to and from school, presided over study time, and generally controlled

his activities prior to adulthood. The *paidagōgos* had authority to discipline the young man within limits and to teach him proper morals and decorum. He was a constant and demanding companion whose purpose was to be helpful, but whose presence could be stifling.

So it was with the law, Paul suggested. It was given to provide both moral guidance and discipline, taught the people of Israel how they should live, and prescribed consequences for violation of those standards. The law's purpose was positive, but its pervasiveness could be oppressive.

In its function as a custodian, the law accomplished its purpose. "But now that the faith has come," Paul said, "we are no longer under a *paidagōgos*" (v. 25). Paul emphatically said "the faith," as in v. 23, even though most translations do not include "the." The article served an emphatic purpose, meaning "this faith," that is, "the faith that is in Christ Jesus."

Paul was not suggesting that persons could not trust God in faith before Christ came—after all, his whole argument was based on Abraham's faith leading to his righteous standing with God (Gen. 15:6). What he was saying is that, since the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ, it had become evermore evident that this faith—the faithfulness of Christ and the believer's faith in Christ—was the only sufficient and effective way of becoming right with God. For many centuries the Hebrews had considered themselves to be the only true people of God, but now, Paul said, "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (v. 26).

### The law as a relic (3:27-29)

This thought led Paul to pen some of the most powerful and liberat-

ing words in the New Testament. Through Christ, we do not relate to God as slaves of the law, but as the very children of God—all of us:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (vv. 27-29).

For Paul's day, this was an incredibly radical statement. Jews and Gentiles, men and women, free persons and slaves could all relate to God on the same level, all "one in Christ Jesus." Trusting God through faith, as Abraham did, makes all believers "Abraham's offspring," regardless of their genealogy.

A traditional Jewish prayer going back to the Talmud invited each man to offer thanks every morning that God had not made him a woman, a Gentile, or a slave. It is likely that legalistic infiltrators in the Galatian church had exploited some of those same sentiments, but Paul insisted that all such distinctions are void in our relationship with God.

In the marketplace, we may still be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, black or white, native or immigrant, man or woman. In the church, however, we are all together the children of God—free children who are no longer under the constant restraints of the law, but heirs to all the promises of God.

To suggest another metaphor: we may be a bag of mixed nuts, but we are all nuts. We may look different and taste different. We may come from different places. We may be easy to shell or hard to crack—but through Jesus Christ every believer can claim to be Abraham's offspring, all from the same tree, the tree of faith. **NFJ**



# Bible Study *with Tony W. Cartledge*

June 26, 2016


Galatians 5:1-25

## What Will Prevail?

Freedom is a wonderful gift. Americans, particularly, revel in a raft of liberties that many people in the world do not enjoy. Yet, learning to exercise freedom responsibly can be a challenge.

Wise parents don't let their children run wild, but provide structure that limits their freedom when they are young, granting greater liberty in decision making as the children grow. When young adults leave home for college or move out on their own and discover near-unlimited freedom, they may struggle to adjust to a life in which they are responsible for finding the balance between liberty and limits.

### Freedom from legalism (vv. 1-12)

Young believers in the region of Galatia (now in eastern Turkey) struggled with a similar issue. Most of them had come from a pagan background, worshipping the various gods of Greek and Rome, or no gods at all. Paul and others had brought the gospel of Christ to them, good news of salvation through faith that led to abundant life in this world and the hope of eternal life hereafter. 


The new believers accepted the gospel and “ran well,” according to

### Galatians 5:13—


“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Paul, until someone “cut them off” and hindered their pursuit of the truth (v. 6) by persuading them that they must also keep the Jewish law. This prompted a fiery letter in which Paul bemoaned the Galatians’ fascination with legalism and called them back to faith. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul declared. “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (v. 1).

The Galatian believers, some of whom had previously lived with few limits, had struggled to understand how they could be both free and faithful to God. Thus, when a more legalistic band of evangelists came behind Paul and promoted the time-honored structures of Judaism as an addendum to faith, many found it to be an attractive solution – not realizing that in adopting the law, they had surrendered grace.

A story in Loren Easley’s book, *The Star Thrower*, relates how he once captured a sparrow hawk for a research project, but didn’t have the heart to take it from its mate and keep it captive. He released the bird so it could fly free and be what it was created to be.  Paul wrote as if the Galatians had been lured into a cage, bound by the law. He sought to set them free to be what Christ had called them and redeemed them to be.

Paul minced no words in warning his readers of the danger of legalism (vv. 2-12). Not only was circumcision useless, he said, but choosing to follow the law required one to keep the whole law, and was tantamount to turning one’s back on Christ. In words that are clear, even if troubling to “once-saved-always-saved Baptists,” Paul said “You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace” (v. 4).

Paul’s strong words reveal how firmly he believed that putting one’s faith in Christ and putting one’s faith in works were mutually exclusive. It’s easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that the gospel of grace is too good to be true, striving to earn our salvation, or to behave well enough to keep it. But God doesn’t love us because we’re good or because we profess acceptable creeds. God has given us minds for thinking and hearts for loving and hands for helping – and the freedom to use them as an expression of our love for Christ. That is what we are here for. 

### Freedom from libertinism (vv. 13-21)

Of course, Paul knew that there is also an opposite temptation. For every person who thinks Christianity is all about keeping laws and staying in the lines and using all the right words, there is another who thinks that liberty means license. So, Paul warned believers not to “use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become

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slaves to one another” (v. 13). The only “law” Christians need to guide their behavior is love, something even law-abiding Jews should know. “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment,” Paul said: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 14, quoting Lev. 19:18b).

Believers are called to “live by the Spirit,” Paul insisted (v. 16), rather than living to gratify selfish desires: “what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh” (v. 17).<sup>U</sup> Those who are led by the Spirit will naturally follow a path of love and thus “are not subject to the law” (v. 18). Freedom, then, is a paradox – Christians are most free when they are most bonded to God and to each other.

Following selfish desires, on the other hand, would lead to any number of vices. Paul’s list in vv. 19-21a included behaviors related to sex (“fornication, impurity, licentiousness”), to twisted ways of worship (“idolatry, sorcery”), and to hurtful means of relating to others (“enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these”).<sup>U</sup>

Such behaviors are not characteristic of people who expect to “inherit the kingdom of God,” Paul said (v. 21b): they are not the nature of a Christian. For a Christian to try expressing freedom through gossip or drunkenness or spiteful behavior is like a hawk trying to fly under water. The hawk is free to fly in the great sky that is made to be his home. Fish were not made for dry land, pigs were not made to fly, and Christian people were not made to lead selfish and querulous lives.

### Free to be what we’re made to be (vv. 22-26)

Spirit-led Christians don’t bear the rotten fruit of human selfishness, but the life-changing fruits of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (vv. 22-23).<sup>U</sup> Note that while Paul described negative behaviors as “works of the flesh,” he does not label the positive qualities as “works of the Spirit.”<sup>U</sup> The love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control of which he speaks are not works done in order to please God, but the natural outgrowth or expression of God’s Spirit dwelling within.

Some commentators have noticed that Paul’s list includes qualities of the mind (love, joy, peace), actions toward other persons (patience, kindness, generosity), and guiding principles of conduct (faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). It is more likely that Paul simply put love – which he has stressed earlier in the chapter – in first place on the list, believing that the other qualities grow out of it. Self-control, put in the final position, would have also carried a stronger emphasis.

The word “love” translates *agapē*, which in the New Testament is often used to describe Christ-like, unselfish caring for others. Joy was highly prized in the Greek world, so much that then, as now, it was used as a personal name (the English name Kara derives from it). While the Greeks associated joy with happiness or a pleasant life, Paul gives it the added dimensions of righteousness and hope. Peace, in this context, probably reflects the Hebrew sense of *shalom*, which suggests not just quietness of mind, but all things whole and good.

The word for “patience” could also carry the sense of steadfastness or endurance, while “kindness” uniformly

refers to showing care for others. Generosity is more commonly translated as “goodness” and is a near-synonym to kindness. “Faithfulness” renders the noun normally translated as “faith,” but in this context it takes an adjectival sense of describing one who is faithful. Gentleness translates a word the Greeks often used to suggest a “mild” personality, but it could also carry the sense of consideration for others, as it does here.

The term “self-control,” appearing in the final position, is probably an intentional contrast to “drunkenness” and “carousing,” the final elements of the earlier list of vices. Those who are led by the Spirit maintain a sufficient self-discipline to avoid uncontrolled behavior.

There is no law against these qualities, Paul noted. All of them build healthy relationships that make the church, the community, and the world a better place. As a bonus, our lives are better, too. Who wouldn’t want to be known for a joyous, loving, and patient life that both experiences and fosters peace, expressing generous kindness to others? Who wouldn’t want to have “faithful, gentle-spirited, and self-disciplined” on their résumé?

Such a life comes from belonging to Christ, having “crucified the flesh,” and being led by the Spirit (vv. 24-25).<sup>U</sup> In this way, we are free to be what God has made us to be – free to be “slaves to each other” by loving one another as Jesus loved us. Such freedom may seem paradoxical, but Christians are most free when they are most bonded to God and to each other.

We cannot find that kind of life while in bondage to the world’s misguided freedom fantasies, but when we surrender ourselves to the Spirit of Christ, we become free to be all that God made us to be. Who could ask for anything more? **NFJ**



Daniel Vestal (left) and Walter Shurden address a press conference announcing the formation of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Atlanta in 1991. Vestal, then a pastor, would become CBF's second executive coordinator following the retirement of Cecil Sherman in 1996. Shurden, a church historian at Mercer University, helped write the Fellowship's founding document. Current executive coordinator is Suzii Paynter. Photo by Fred S. Prouser.

# FELLOWSHIP TIME

## *Evolving generational engagement marks Baptist group's brief history*

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**W**hat is not a denomination but kind of acts like one? What has Baptist as its middle name but plays well with others?

What began 25 years ago not from a strategic plan but out of a protest meeting? What denomination-defying group owns no buildings, schools or publishing houses but plays a strategic role in educating scores of ministers, training lay leadership and producing wide-ranging resources for Christian growth?

The answer is the ever-evolving Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) — a network of Baptist congregations and

individuals with a bent toward collaboration around issues of mission, education and justice.

### **BEGINNINGS**

Helen Moore-Montgomery of McKinney, Texas, was in Atlanta for the formative gatherings in the early '90s — though admitting, “I had little hope.” She was weary from “the infighting, the bullying, friendships being disrupted, bearing the grief and pain of loss” that had marked the Southern Baptist Convention struggles.

She wondered if those called to lay ministry might have a voice.

“I found comfort in the counsel of my

mentors John and Eula Mae Baugh,” she said of the Texas Baptist lay leaders who stood boldly against the rise of fundamentalism in the SBC.

So she jumped into the early process of forming a governing counsel and committees — and found a home.

“We moved beyond the territorial bickering and learned to work together to honor our name: Cooperative,” she said. “The Fellowship was inclusive in its planning; clergy and laity served together.”

Catherine Allen of Birmingham, Ala., a former leader of Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary to the SBC, recalls the formative years as well.

“I can never forget the thrill and

expectation of the meetings in Atlanta in '90 and '91, leading up to the official founding of CBF," she said. "It was a great uniting of dynamic friends committed to missions and change. There were risks and costs, but people courageously moved ahead."

Lay leader Judy Battles, a member of First Baptist Church of Arlington, Texas, was there too — helping with logistics at the informal gathering in August 1990 and the May 1991 assembly at which the Fellowship was officially formed.

"I knew CBF from day one," she said. "I had been involved with Baptist life and understood what was happening."

She recalled the fears, scars and sadness present. But she also remembers "the call for 'free and faithful Baptists' to live and go forward."

"In those early days, people had as many expectations of what this entity ought to look like as there were individuals visualizing," said Battles. "Almost every decision required discussion and often revision — even with the organizational name choice!"

## 'A NEW WAY'

Despite some distrust rooted in earlier Baptist infighting, Battles said the Fellowship was built on a foundation of inclusion.

"Inclusivity meant first and foremost that no one would be more important than another," she said. "There must be balance in gender, geographic representation, clergy/laity, titles."

She recalled asking the hotel to arrange a meeting room with tables forming a hollow square — so there would be no head table or front row. But getting past the past was the biggest challenge, said Battles.

"Did we want to be responsive rather than just reactionary?"

She described "a mix of excitement about birthing something new but also concern for how and what to do and who would do it."

"While people came from different places and backgrounds, CBF was birthed

with huge passion, time and energy by busy people who cared and prayed and sought God's guidance and felt it was the Baptist Christian thing to do," said Battles.

With her former denominational home "severely wounded," Catherine Allen said she was looking for a "better and higher way to bring more people to a full understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

"The love of Christ compelled us to make a new way," she added.

## MOVING AHEAD

Priorities have often been a topic of discussion for the Fellowship with advocates pushing or begging for resources to support missions, theological education, communications, religious liberty or other causes.

Though in middle school, Tony Vincent remembers his pastor-father Dan returning from the 1991 gathering in Atlanta after years of attending the annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"I remember the energy and excitement and hope that Dad had," said Tony, now associate minister at Trinity Baptist Church in Seneca, S.C. "There was a noticeable difference in his voice."

Sensing his own call to ministry, Tony attended divinity school at Gardner-Webb University, one of more than a dozen schools to partner with the CBF to provide theological education as alternatives to the fundamentalist-controlled SBC seminaries.

"It was there, particularly through relationships with faculty like Doug Dickens and Sheri Adams, and enduring relationships with several classmates, that my passion for CBF grew," said Vincent, "and my desire to be actively involved in the Fellowship merged with my passion to serve God through the church."

Vincent sees CBF as "a significantly different organization" than when he began ministry 13 years ago.

"We're changing and yet it still feels like home," he said. "That's not to say we've abandoned any core identity or passion, but

as we honor and welcome those who seek to partner with us, we draw the circle wider and we are changed beautifully for it."

Vincent encourages such change.

"I hope that continues on, even if the evolution is challenging to my comfort or expectations," he said. "We're closer to the kingdom of God for it."

## NEXT GENERATION

Kristen Pope, a student at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology, a CBF partner, was one of several young Baptists interviewed for a video series being produced by the Baptist History and Heritage Society.

She confessed that her generation is known to be slightly, but not always, negative, "quick to doubt," and "very critical." Also, they tend to be suspicious of organized religion. And that's not all bad, she added.

"That is beneficial in that you know we really want to know about something before we commit ourselves to it," she said. "But it's not beneficial in that a lot of us let stereotypes about what the church is and what the church is trying to accomplish in the world dictate whether or not we go to church or engage in any kind of faith community."

Therefore, Pope finds it helpful as a young, female Baptist minister to express why she embraces that calling and identity — as a Christian, a Baptist and a CBF Baptist.

"Some people think that those things are self-evident and they are not," she said. "They weren't for me. For a long time I was a Baptist fish swimming in Baptist water and I wasn't aware of it... People sharing with me why that identity was important to them helped me to recognize in my own ways why claiming that identity was and should be important to me."

Information is not enough, however, for an experiential generation, she said.

"We want to hear, not so much about what's in your head as what's in your heart," she said. "That's what is going to move us

to come to church on a Sunday or to a social justice group that might be a part of your church.”

Karen Zimmerman, who also interviewed for the video series, was a toddler when CBF was formed. Today she is associate pastor for missions and community engagement at Atlanta’s Peachtree Baptist Church.

With both parents as ordained Baptist ministers, she grew up in “a CBF family” and “CBF was my mother tongue.” Now she claims that heritage as her own.

“As a millennial Baptist I can appreciate the struggles of the generations that came before me and have brought us to this place,” she said. “I am grateful for an organization like the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship that remains a moderate voice in a very polarized world. I am happy to identify as a CBF Baptist, and I’m looking forward to being a part of this organization for many years to come.”

Zimmerman is pleased that she is welcomed into leadership within the Fellowship where her voice is heard and respected. “I can’t think of a better place to call home.”

## LOOKING AHEAD

“While I’ve had my frustrations with CBF — more my own idealistic notions are to fault there, I suppose — I’m amazed and grateful at what God has done through the movement,” said Robert Guffey, pastor of First Baptist Church of Conway, S.C.

“When you think about missions initiatives, the broad partnerships with institutions of theological education, and the growing involvement of younger adults, for a movement this young — and 25 years is young — it is truly, amazing.”

He expressed gratitude for “robust leaders with great faith” who have led the Fellowship to be “more Christian, more early Baptist, more respectful of differences, more inclusive (for Baptists), more willing to do what made for peace and wholeness rather than spend time creating conflict over doctrinal, socioeconomic and regional differences.”



President Jimmy Carter, a Baptist layman, speaks to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Birmingham, Ala., in May 1993, saying he and his wife, Rosalynn, “found a home” in CBF. Photo by Fred S. Prouser.

Guffey appreciates the “sense of humor and willingness to try something new that is always in the air when CBF people gather,” and he hopes CBF will long be the “equiper and encourager par excellence of the churches, enabling each to do effective mission and ministry in its unique setting.”

Phill Martin of Dallas, who works with The Church Network, served as CBF moderator in 2002-03. He was attracted to CBF in its beginning by “those in the movement who were committed to the core Baptist values I had learned as a child and confirmed in seminary.”

“Although we had differences, there was a spirit of dialogue that truly demonstrated soul competency and autonomy of local congregations,” he added.

A quarter of a century later, Martin is hopeful that CBF will “remain true to its core values” and continue to affirm congregational autonomy — and “not allow individual congregations’ scriptural understanding and policies on diversity and ministry to be a divider.”

Martin sees the Fellowship as filling an important role in connecting congregations for mission and ministry and empowering individuals to do ministry. He hopes CBF will always be active in building partner-

ships with other faith groups beyond any Baptist enclave.

## CHALLENGES

David Turner, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., was drawn to CBF during his seminary days by “the passion of Cecil Sherman and later, by the spirituality of Daniel Vestal and the teaching of Bo Prosser,” he said of movement leaders.

“And I was drawn in by the focus on Baptist distinctives and support for women in ministry.”

Fears that CBF would become “a one-generation movement” have been allayed. Today, young leaders mingle with the gray-haired founders of the Fellowship at annual gatherings.

Turner is hopeful that new leaders will continue to be nurtured “to step into the shoes of those who have led so ably for so long.”

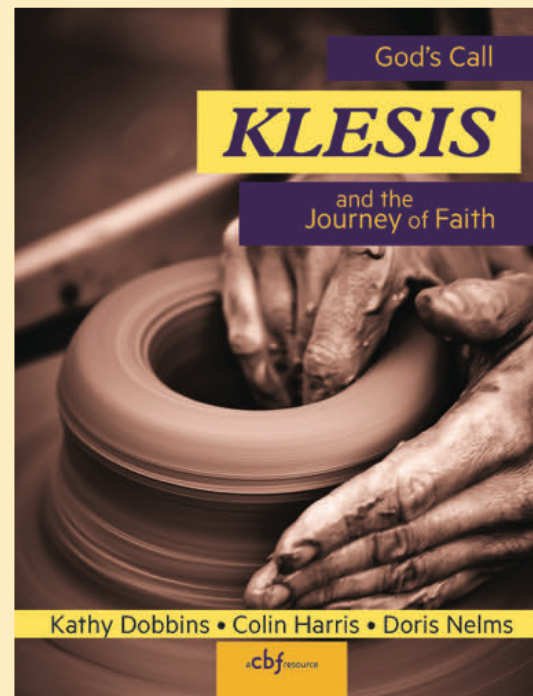
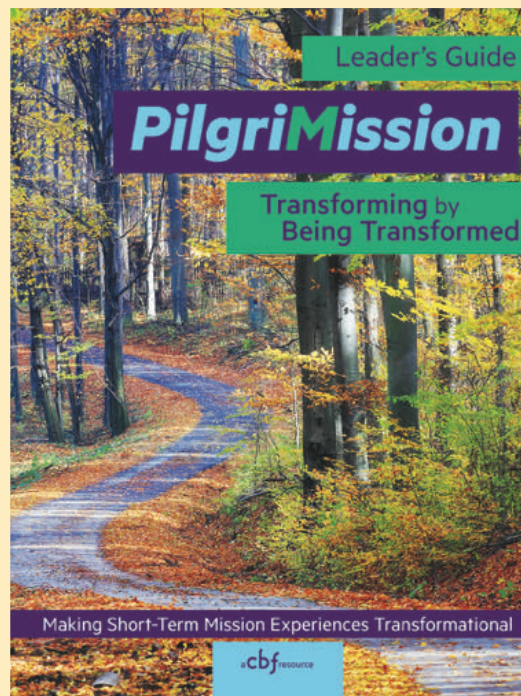
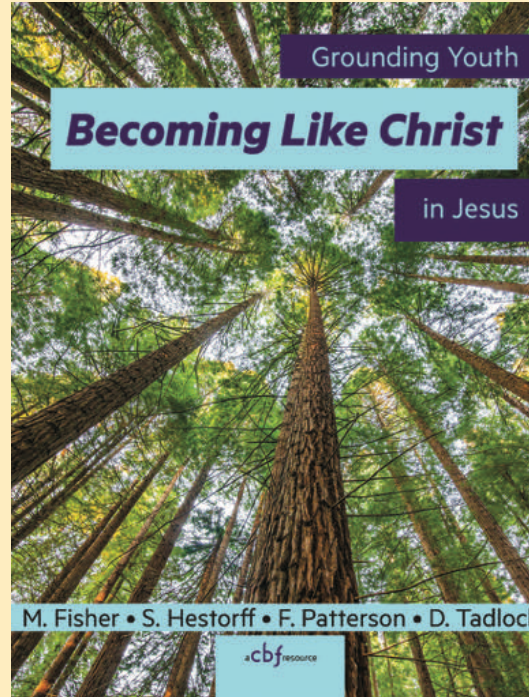
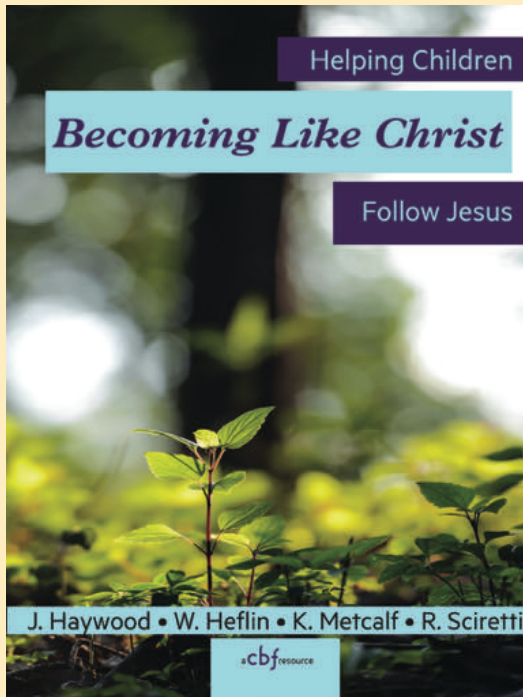
Related but autonomous seminaries and theology schools train ministers who engage in congregational life and other ministries often in partnership with the not-easily-defined network of churches that begins a yearlong celebration of its history in June.

Collaboration is the model by which CBF carries out many ministry functions rather than owning and operating numerous agencies and institutions. That intentional approach keeps control out of the hands of a few — a lesson learned well by those who founded this new Baptist venture.

Yet challenges remain as Fellowship Baptists seek to avoid duplication of services and scramble for limited funding. Being this kind of Baptist is often messy, leaders confess — messy, but free. **NFJ**

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Nurturing Faith, a publishing ministry of Baptists Today, Inc., collaborates with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in providing the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies, books and other resources. See church historian Bill Leonard’s analysis of the Fellowship movement on page 46.*

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# The Fellowship at 25

## *Reflecting on a Movement*

By Bill J. Leonard

In his classic work, *The Lively Experience: The Shaping of Christianity in America*, the renowned historian Sidney Mead defined a denomination as “a voluntary association of like-hearted and like-minded individuals, who are united on the basis of common beliefs for the purpose of accomplishing tangible and defined objectives.”

When Mead wrote those words in 1963, Protestant denominations in the U.S. were at the height of their influence and intactness. But by the late 1960s, the so-called “Mainline” denominations — among them the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), the Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ — began a steady decline that continues to this day, with “Mainlines” now estimated at some 13 percent of the American population.

A few years later (1972) in another classic text titled *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, author Dean Kelly wrote: “Amid the current neglect and hostility toward organized religion in general, the conservative churches, holding to seemingly outmoded theology and making strict demands on their members, have equaled or surpassed in growth the early percentage increases of the nation’s population.”

### THEN & NOW

That was then; this is now. In *American Grace* (2010), sociologists Robert Putnam and David Campbell published statistics suggesting that American Evangelicals peaked in the 1990s at some 29 percent. More recent estimates from the Pew Research Center indicate that Evangelicals number around 23 percent, a figure indicating that while *some* conservative churches are still growing, others are less so.

The Southern Baptist Convention, America’s largest Protestant body, is a case in point, reporting precipitous declines in baptisms and church memberships for at least the last seven years.

A 2014 *Christianity Today* article by Kate Tracy noted:

“In last year’s Annual Church Profile [2013], 60 percent of the more than 46,000 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) reported no youth baptisms (ages 12 to 17) in 2012, and 80 percent reported only one or zero baptisms among young adults (ages 18 to 29). One in four Southern Baptist churches reported zero baptisms overall in 2012, while the ‘only consistently growing’ baptism group was children under five years old.”

With declining worship attendance, aging constituency and diminishing baptismal statistics, the SBC often appears to share a demographic profile with

Protestant Mainlines that many never dreamed possible. Recent downsizing by various SBC agencies reflects similar fiscal realities and actions across the American denominational spectrum.

### PERMANENT TRANSITION

These transitions did not begin overnight. Indeed, in *American Mainline Religion* (1987), Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney observed that even then fewer and fewer Americans perceived their primary religious identity in terms of a denomination. That trend continues unabated.

Not only has the non-denominationalizing of American religion become increasingly normative for independent or unaffiliated “fellowships” and community churches, but a growing number of denominationally aligned congregations now minimize or distance themselves from those traditional connections.

Denominational systems of every theological and historical stripe are restructuring, downsizing and reassessing identity, even as they continue to promote and encourage collective ministries among “like-minded and like-hearted individuals.”

Denominations are not vanishing, but they are clearly in a state of permanent transition, compelled to come to terms with ecclesiastical and demographic realities that can no longer be ignored. Once the primary way of organizing Protestant communities in the U.S., denominations are now only one of multiple options for shaping congregational distinctiveness, mission and ministry.



## REDIRECTED ENERGIES

Enter the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). Founded 25 years ago (1991), the CBF began amid such transitions and their resulting tensions, commitments, uncertainties and possibilities.

Clearly, the CBF commenced as a result of a decade-long confrontation between so-called “Moderates” and “Conservatives” divided over Southern Baptist denominational theology, leadership, organization, and perhaps most importantly, identity.

The ultimate success of Conservatives in gaining majorities on SBC boards and agencies moved the Convention’s governance toward an assertively “confessional” identity — actions labeled a “takeover” by Moderates, and a “course correction” by Conservatives.

After the SBC annual meeting in New Orleans in 1990, a growing number of Moderates realized that the SBC was firmly under Conservative control, and that it was time to redirect their energies toward other spiritual, organizational and ministry-related endeavors.

A 1990 gathering in Atlanta set in motion preparations for the founding of the CBF in 1991. The beginning of the CBF was both organizational and pastoral.

Organizers shaped a movement that in many ways reflected two classic Baptist institutional options: the convention and the society methods.

Conventions (the traditional SBC model) were highly connectional systems for linking congregations in support of shared programs and ministries, while societies incorporated individuals and churches into common endeavors focused on specific types of ministry.

The society method permits CBF to develop relationships with, even fund, new ventures focusing on mission, publication, ethics, race, women in ministry and theological education. Convention-like focus offered a national framework, with links to state CBF organizations in a variety of states, largely in the American South, and connections with well-established entities such as the Baptist World Alliance, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious

Liberty, the American Baptist Churches USA, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

At the same time, CBF began with an unabashed pastoral responsibility: to assist a group of people worn out from fighting what Nancy Ammerman called “Baptist Battles.” Having lost the “battle for the soul of the SBC,” many Baptists were trying to decide if and how to leave the faith community in which they had been nurtured, baptized, educated and motivated toward Christian living.

## A SHELTER

Twenty-five years later it is easy to forget the spiritual and emotional exhaustion experienced by a generation of persons impacted by the controversy. Like the Alliance of Baptists before it, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship became “a shelter for persons distressed of conscience,” as Roger Williams called the Rhode Island colony almost four centuries earlier.

Its pastoral response to those seeking a new and needed “shelter” should not be underestimated.

After 25 years, questions remain: Is CBF a “connected” denomination or an “adaptable” society? Is it simply a non-geographic Baptist association, or merely denomination-like?

Or, given the permanent transition sweeping American religion and culture, are those the most pressing questions?

Perhaps CBF has evolved into a movement that is fluid enough to reshape itself across decades of change in response to the institutional, ecclesiastical, fiscal, societal, creative and messy realities of Protestant church life in the U.S.

What new or continuing questions are worth considering in the movement’s 25<sup>th</sup> year? My list of questions and commentary is representative, not comprehensive:

### **Amid intensifying localism, can the CBF continue to encourage coalition building?**

Seventeenth-century Baptists began with an emphasis on the “autonomy of the local congregation,” writing in one of their earliest confessions of faith (1611): “As one

congregation hath Christ, so hath all.”

Yet they quickly formed “associational” coalitions for fellowship, dialogue and collective ministry. These days, church members (Baptists and others) tend to identify and engage with their local church long before (perhaps never) looking beyond it.

Likewise, as funding and/or constituents decline, churches are increasingly forced to channel their energy and their money toward the needs of their own congregation or local community. These realities intensify the need for CBF to persistently make its case as a viable coalition of Christians, linking churches and individuals in ministries alongside and beyond their own localism.

Truth be told, congregations need those coalitions to provide some of the same spiritual and communal opportunities that drew the earliest Baptists together: fellowship, community, identity and vision beyond themselves. Those coalitions are essential. If CBF should close down tomorrow, Progressive Baptists in the South and Southwest would need to start a new coalition the next day.

### **Can CBF continue, perhaps even expand, responses to the challenge of Baptist identity?**

Across the last 25 years, one of the growing issues for many churches involved retaining or relinquishing the Baptist name, if not the Baptist identity. What “marks” of Baptist heritage are worth keeping, and what elements should be jettisoned?

What kind of Baptist identity (or identities) does CBF and its related churches represent? How does a “Believers’ Church” tradition continue to articulate a theology of religious experience, Christian community, and caring service to persons inside and outside the church?

How might CBF assist churches in rethinking and perhaps even reasserting Baptist ways of understanding scripture, faith, church, gospel, and mission within and among participating congregations?

As interest in Baptist identity wanes or creates uncertainty, CBF might well expand its long commitment to Baptist progressivism, a hospitable traditionalism that offers



individuals and congregations a sense of identity, a place to stand — not to turn inward on themselves but outward on the world.

**What ministry networks, old and new, might CBF assist its partner institutions in cultivating and engaging?**

In an earlier era the SBC provided opportunities for particular forms of ecclesiastical, regional, and international networking among churches and agencies, clergy and laity, schools and service organizations. Ministers often attended state Baptist colleges and universities, then went to SBC-related seminaries, and developed personal and communal connections that served them throughout their lives.

Those networks, often with limited benefit to females or racial minorities, have essentially disappeared for those with CBF links. One of the Fellowship's significant and continuing contributions remains its efforts to forge formal and informal relationships with other Baptist groups, ecumenical bodies and partner institutions.

If financial and organizational limitations continue, CBF and its partners will surely need to extend connections and shared ministries with groups such as the Progressive National Baptists, the American Baptist Churches, the Alliance of

Baptists, and the New Baptist Covenant among others. Expanding these relationships also offers opportunity for increased national and international ministry, interracial cooperation and dialogue, and creative response to human need.

**What new options will CBF explore for nurturing new generations, engaging them in a gospel for the future?**

In both national and state organizations, CBF leadership has shown great intentionality in responding to new generations of Baptist clergy and laity through leadership programs, publications and student scholarships.

The increasing presence of younger constituents at CBF gatherings evidences the success of those efforts. These individuals are choosing to be Baptist at a time when they have multiple choices for expressing Christian commitments.

Their energies and their *consciences* reflect a wide spectrum of theological, spiritual, social and ethical concerns. Listening, and responding to their voices provides challenges and opportunities for the present and the future of the organization.

**How might CBF assist its partners in responding to the growing number of “nones” in American society — those who claim no discernible religious affiliation?**

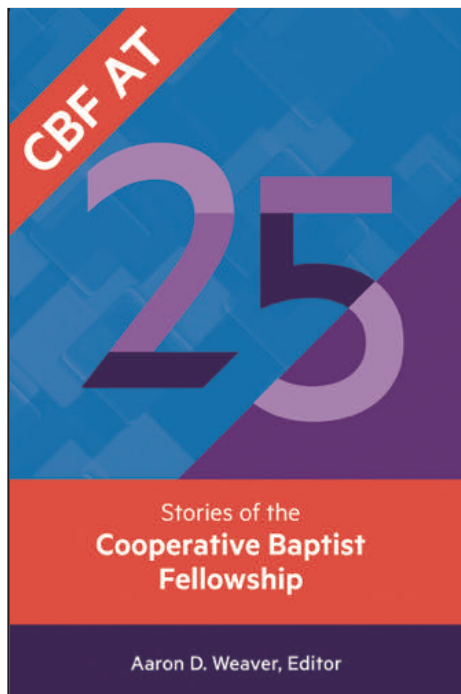
Perhaps no more sobering reality has impacted overall church life in the last decade, with statistics suggesting that one in five Americans identifying as “nones,” a figure that drops to one in three Millennials, ages 18-35.

Indeed, some studies suggest that there are about as many “nones” (21 percent) as Evangelicals (23 percent) in contemporary America.

If traditional ways of communicating the Christian message are being ignored or undermined, how does the church make its case to those on the inside looking out and on the outside no longer looking in? When the church's “witness” in the world is lost, forgotten, ignored or undermined, where will we go for help?

God grant that the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will extend its efforts to provoke us toward that gospel, not only as “a shelter for persons distressed of conscience,” but as witnesses for justice, reconciliation and compassion at the heart of the Jesus story. **NFJ**

*—Bill J. Leonard holds the James and Marilyn Dunn Chair of Baptist Studies at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity where he was the founding dean.*



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# Milepost 60

BY JOHN D. PIERCE

For many of my friends and me, this is the year we turn 60. It's amazing how quickly one can go from Chocks (or Flintstones) to silver vitamins.

Once upon a time we thought of 60 as old age. Those were the retired guys with eight and a half fingers who helped us kids with Vacation Bible School projects.

They taught us to saw, drill, and nail together rustic tie racks and make other handicrafts. Nothing conveyed the majesty of the Creator God like taking home a hand-molded, personalized ashtray at the end of the two-week conglomeration of flannel graph, mission stories, glue, stand-up/sit-down chords, Kool-Aid and cookies.

Now here we are at that advanced age; it sure sneaks up on you.

One moment Fonzie is the tough guy we want to emulate, and the next thing you know he's pushing reverse mortgages. Our favorite athletes are now promoting the latest medical products to sooth their aches and pains.

Late nights have lost their charm. And the current celebrity culture has little appeal. Movie theaters are expensive places to take a nap.

Blogger friend Leroy Seat, who served for decades as a professor and missionary in Japan, has shared that one's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday is

highly honored in many Asian cultures as being of great significance. It marks having successfully completed the 12-year zodiac cycle five times — a noteworthy accomplishment.

I'm glad to learn that; turning 60 feels significant — beyond the ensuing discounts offered.

There is some comfort in sharing this rite of passage with my classmates and other friends who bear the same number of rings around their trunks. And even the rich and famous can't escape the steady turning of the calendar.

Those whose birth certificates are marked as 1956 include Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, Bjorn Borg and Martina Navratilova, Joe Montana and Larry Byrd, Kenny G and Dorothy Hamill, Carrie Fisher and Mel Gibson, Bill Maher and Kim Cattrall.

Bo Derek turns 60 this year as well. (There's a joke in there somewhere about going from 10 to 60 in record time.)

Even David Copperfield lacks the magic to make six decades disappear.

Some say age is just a number. But it is a number that represents a very specific amount of time.

Yet, one's life is marked significantly by

much more than its quantity of time. Some of history's most remarkable and influential people lived comparably brief earthly lives: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr., to name a couple. Even Jesus accomplished his mission in the brevity of time.

So the proper perspective on aging seems to be to acknowledge and even celebrate the miles traveled with a renewed commitment to squeezing the very best and most out of whatever lies ahead. Gratitude for reaching this milepost is a good starting place.

Spiritual growth knows no age limit. Learning can continue as long as we don't

set our minds and hearts in concrete.

There are some practical ways to move forward well: staying active, continuing to explore, and avoiding the familiar trap of overstating the past while fearing a different-than-familiar future. There's always more to see, learn and do.

Denial does no good. So I'll work at accepting the reality of

being 60 — no matter how staggering that seems to be.

So it's time to light some candles, to reflect deeply, to wish — and to be grateful for the gift of life.

Did I mention that Bo Derek turns 60 this year too...? **NFJ**



Check out the ongoing blogs at [nurturingfaith.net](http://nurturingfaith.net).

# Q&A

## CNN's John Blake explores race, religion and politics

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY JOHN D. PIERCE

**A**TLANTA — John Blake grew up in Baltimore, where he attended a Baptist church, and then studied journalism at Howard University in Washington, D.C. He honed his craft in Los Angeles before moving to Atlanta in 1990.

He covered religion and other subjects for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* until 2007 when he joined CNN. He is a tennis fanatic and music buff.

Editor John Pierce turned the tables on Blake — interviewing him about the dynamic and often controversial topics that are shaping American culture.

**NF: You cover race, religion and politics. How did you get all the easy stuff?**

JB: (laughing) It is crazy. They say you never talk about race, religion and politics if you want to keep your friendships — and that is all I do! I really like it, because the stories evoke so much emotion.

A lot of us rarely interact with people who see things differently from us when it comes to politics or religion. But I have to do that. So I bring together people who see things so differently, and I try to put them together in these stories. It is really educational for me — because I become familiar with the arguments on both sides.

People can get really emotional; they track me down on Facebook and insult me. When I wrote a story about the Confederate flag, a

guy said, “I have never been so moved...; you deserve to have your ass kicked.” So it is fun, though it is dangerous too.

**NF: You have to have a tough skin, don't you?**

JB: Yeah, but I have been doing this awhile and cannot think of anything anyone said that has really made me upset. There is so much anger out there now that I just get accustomed to it.

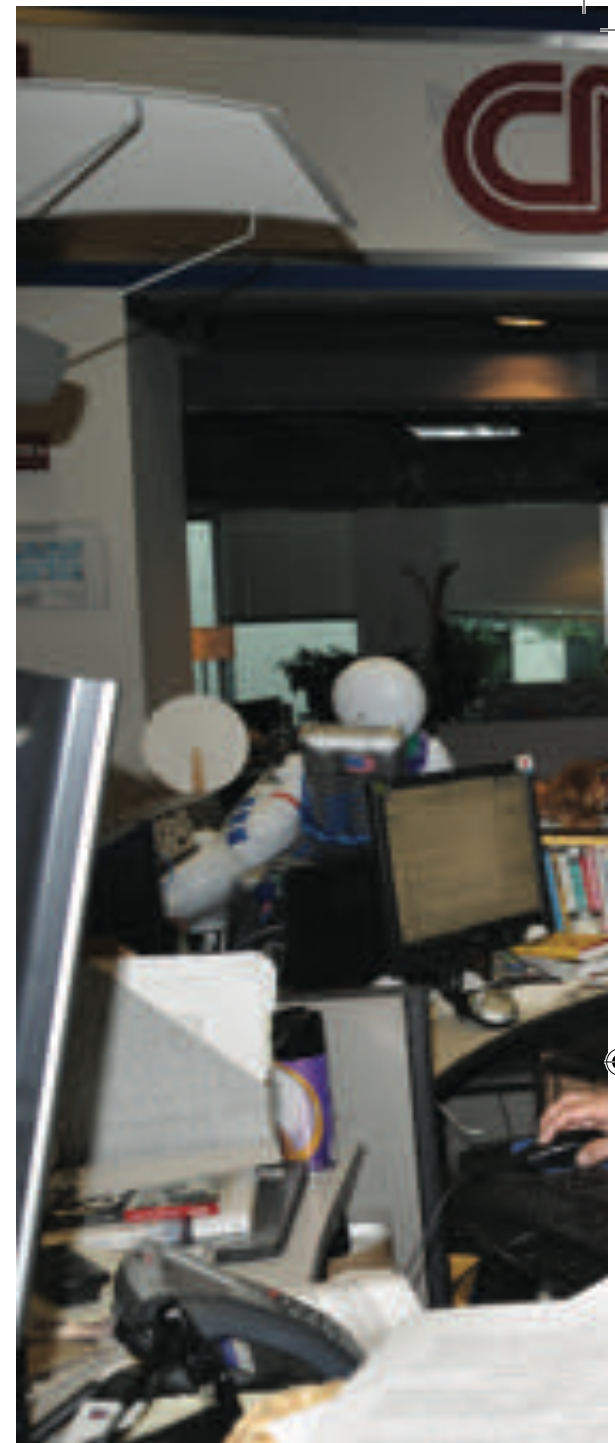
It is kind of easier because I am just a name. These people do not know me. Even when they think they do — if they reach out to me on Twitter or Facebook — I do not take it personally.

**NF: Concerns over race and racism are everywhere and, before the focus shifted to Missouri and beyond, it was on your hometown of Baltimore. How was it different when you approached an issue or an incident with that kind of personal connection?**

JB: That is a really good question because that was the first time I had that experience. I had covered the L.A. riots and all sorts of racially explosive stories. But I went back to Baltimore and saw that the riots took place literally in the neighborhood where I grew up.

Where I caught the bus to go to school. Where I went to church. Where I would walk at night to [see] my high school girlfriend. I never felt so sad writing a story, and am still digesting it.

Not only was it sad to see the place



where I grew up look like one of those German cities after World War II, but also I have my family still there. A lot of my family is caught up with some of the same stuff that sparked the riot.

I have people in my family struggling with drugs, no education, single moms: that is all in my family. So all of that together weighed on me when I went back to Baltimore.

I tried to use it to give insight into what happened there in a way that maybe other journals could not. And I think I wrote one of the best pieces I have ever written because



John Blake works in the bustling newsroom at CNN's headquarters in Atlanta, Ga.

of that — calling it “Lord of the Flies Comes to Baltimore.” I compared what Baltimore was like when I was growing up with what it had become, and I tried to explain why people were so angry.

I tried to ground it not in a lot of sociological talk but in stories of people I knew.

**NF: Attention shifted to Missouri, first at Ferguson and then the University of Missouri. What happened at the university dealt with issues concerning race and First Amendment rights. What was your take on the situation there?**

JB: I saw it differently because of the First Amendment issues and because there has been a lot written now about the so-called coddling of young people. There is this belief out there that the new generation of college students is very intolerant when it comes to considering other points of view.

What got to me was seeing those students and teachers trying to keep out the photographer. As a journalist and a student of the Civil Rights Movement, that was bewildering to me.

What if at the Edmund Pettus Bridge

march in Selma in '65, [Martin Luther] King and John Lewis and all those people had told those photographers and journalists they didn't want to talk to the media? “Get out of my face; I am trying to create a safe space here.”

That would have seemed so self-defeating and ludicrous because the press can be your ally.

So I see that in some of the younger activists, and don't quite get it. In fact, I went to Morehouse [College] to cover a student protest about Ferguson and the

students would not talk to me. They said the administration said they were not supposed to talk to media.

I am like, “You are on the campus where Dr. King attended. There is a statute of Dr. King looming in the background as you tell me you cannot talk to media. Here is this man who wrote beautifully about civil disobedience, how sometimes you need to create tension to have justice in the ‘Letter from the Birmingham Jail.’ Somebody who talked about how you have to be a drum major for righteousness and stand up to authorities, and you cannot even stand up to a little college administrator to talk about racism?”

I don’t quite understand it. I have been talking to some of my colleagues about it. Maybe it is because they grew up with a social media landscape. If you spend time with Facebook and Twitter, and do not want to consider someone’s point of view or if someone is irritating you, you can just “unfriend” them.

So maybe they see that as a virtue — a way of “unfriending” the media or people that irritate them. But I think it is self-defeating.

These people are young and they will learn and grow, and they have a lot of courage and energy. They put this stuff out on the map. You have to give them credit for that.

**NF: Atlanta, where you live now, is the cradle of the Civil Rights Movement. I thought about your book on the children of the civil rights leaders when President Carter announced last year that he was working with the King children to resolve their conflicts over their father’s valuable possessions. Are you still paying attention to what is happening with the offspring of civil rights leaders?**

JB: Yes, I do. In fact, I just talked about it with a guy who is doing a documentary on that subject. He was interviewing me about it. I pay attention because I think it is fascinating.

For example, I remember for years going down to the King Center for all those celebrations of King’s birthday and all the dignitaries would gather and Mrs. King would get up and talk about how the movement was still relevant.

In the ’90s, particularly, there was not a lot of energy out there about race or a lot of discussion about that. But now there is — and where is a Bernice King or a Martin [Luther] King III?

It seems like they could and should have an audience and that they have an opportunity to show that the King Center and the SCLC are still relevant. But I think because of all the infighting they have squandered any kind of political credibility they could have had.

So that voice is silent. You do not really hear anything about them like you should. This is a great time. Instead of going around giving these speeches for however much they might get, they could really speak to this stuff.

**NF: You previously covered the religion beat for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Religion reporters for daily newspapers are not as common as before. Overall, how do you think religion is getting covered now, and has social media filled some of that gap?**

JB: I think there has been a tremendous loss, and social media does not really fill that gap. With newspapers you had trained journalists who were expected to be fair and know the subject and give all sides a voice. But they have been kind of weeded out because of the collapse of newspapers.

Often the people writing or talking about religion on the social media landscape are more like shouting about religion as opposed to covering it. It is a lot of bloggers, a lot of “my opinion.”

But I think we miss the reporting of people like Gayle White who used to cover religion for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. So I think religion coverage has suffered.

**NF: How is CNN at covering religion?**

JB: I think we are doing an excellent job, and I am not saying it just because I work here. We have been recognized by Religion News Service, the American Academy of Religion and other groups for our coverage over the years.

We have had some really good people. They were giving a lot of emphasis to religion when I came here. I was really surprised at

that. I think they saw that when we write stories about religion they get a lot of coverage. It is a good journalistic decision.

We have Daniel Burke, who used to work for Religion News Service, and they don’t get any better when it comes to religion. It is not just Christianity; we do a lot with other faiths and things about spirituality and the so-called “nones.”

Our religion coverage appears primarily in two places on the web. We have a religion section. But a lot of our religion stories just appeared on the main page and then they migrate to kind of a religion section that people can go to if they just want to see all religion stories.

Then we have the network coverage of religion, and they are coming closer together because Daniel will go on TV a lot and do videos and talk about the pope and other religious subjects.

**NF: There are certain religion stories you cannot miss, like the pope’s visit. I guess some of the lesser stories require you to raise the visibility of the religious factors. We know that religion is not a completely separate topic from politics and race.**

JB: I agree.

**NF: How do you use social media, and do you find it hard to separate professional from personal dimensions?**

JB: I am kind of a timid user because I do not really want to spend too much time on social media. I have found that, for example, I might go on my Facebook page to look at something and 15 cat videos later two hours of my life have gone by.

And I find that it is like an echo chamber. Everybody is kind of saying the same stuff, so I try to be sparing about my time spent in social media. I put my stories on Facebook [and] I go on Twitter, but I am not real aggressive in that landscape even though I get a lot of people reaching out to me.

Some of the best stories I do come from reading books. We only have so much time, and I would rather read a book than spend two hours on Facebook.

So I just try to put myself out there, put my stories out, go on Twitter — but that is it. That is a challenge because a lot

of really angry people want to debate about stuff.

You asked about the personal side. I think the challenge is not to get personal. I do not try to change people's mind. I do not try to debate. I do not try to tell them what I think because I do not think they really care.

I just listen, and a lot of times I will call them. I had one guy who was really mad at me, cursing at me. I called him and he was just stunned. I said, "Let's just talk it out" — and I just listened to him, and he was cool.

**NF:** It is [easier] to post a hateful, angry comment or even send an email than it is to talk on a phone. It is actually kind of frightening to see the level of hostility over religion and politics that can grow in social media.

**Let's shift direction: As a producer and writer, what are you looking for? What kinds of stories catch your attention?**

**JB:** Stories that are original. They say you tell a great musician by just the sound of their instrument. If you hear a couple notes, you know that is Coltrane or Carlos Santana — because no one sounds like them.

I like reading stories I have not read before — something distinctive that readers have not thought of before. That to me is one of the most exciting things and is what I try to do.

**NF:** You said that you get some of your story ideas from books. Where else do you fish for stories?

**JB:** Actually, I do not fish for stories. They come to me. I am really fortunate in that, for whatever reason, I have always had a lot of ideas that just come to me. I think maybe because I am very curious and I pay attention.

When I go outside I am not looking at my cell phone while walking down the street. I look at people; I listen; I eavesdrop; I wonder; I ask questions — and things just come to me. And I get upset about stuff. I get curious, and things just happen.

For example, last year I was on vacation and heard about Hulk Hogan. He was caught on tape using the N-word. Then he came out with a statement saying, "Well, that is not who I am; I am not a racist."

I was in my backyard mowing the grass

and thought: I am so tired of what happens when people get caught blatantly saying racist things. No one is ever a racist.

I asked myself what would happen if somebody just admitted it. As a person of color, I would respect them more. Then I thought that could be an interesting article — to ask that question.

Are we at the place now where a person could admit that they struggle with racism like we can admit now we struggle with drugs or whatever? So I wrote the story with the headline, "Go ahead: admit you're a racist."

It was one of the most popular things I've written, and I had not read that story anywhere. It just came to me because I was thinking about Hulk Hogan.

**NF:** The up and down sides to what we do is [that] you are never off the job, are you? I have stopped mowing the grass many times to jot down an idea or a line or a phrase.

**JB:** Yeah, I think it is fun.

**NF:** I do not know if this connects with you, but it does with me. In both a specifically theological sense, but also much more generally, people seem drawn to stories about redemption.

**JB:** Yes. It is one of the most popular things, but very difficult to do because it can easily collapse into clichés. But I love those stories.

I wrote a redemption story about D.E. Paulk, known as the nephew of Earl Paulk who founded this big church — Chapel Hill Harvester — in Atlanta. But D.E. discovered that his "uncle" was really his father.

I called to see if he would talk to me. Not only did he talk to me, but his mother — the one who slept with her husband's brother — talked to me. And her husband talked too.

They all talked about their feelings — and about what happened and why. It took me about six months to do it. But it was a story about redemption.

[D.E.] remained a person of faith and found a way through it. And his parents are still together. That was a story about redemption that was really powerful.

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**NF:** Finally, we know that diversity is easier to seek than to achieve. From your perspective, are Americans in general and within religious groups more specifically losing or gaining ground when it comes to diversity? Do you see any hopeful signs in the coverage that you do?

**JB:** That is a big question. I see both hopeful and troubling signs when it comes to diversity in religion and in this country.

In religion there are hopeful signs because a lot of megachurches now are interracial. You hear a lot more churches talk about that, and I think it is good. But I think some churches misunderstand diversity.

They think it is simply putting a certain amount of people of color in the pews. But for a community to be truly diverse, those people in the pews should be represented in the leadership as well. Their culture should be represented in worship styles and things like that.

That is harder to achieve than just simply stacking the pews with different colors. I do not think a lot of churches still get that. As far as diversity in this country, I think the future is going to be very rocky.

There is this belief that younger people who grow up and see so much diversity in popular culture are going to automatically be more tolerant. I do not believe that. We are still very segregated in our lives, in schools, in churches — and as this country becomes browner, I just think there is going to be tremendous tension.

This is kind of rare in history. We are a multiracial democracy. We have gone from a country that was built on white supremacy to a country that is going to in a sense be led by people who come from a different point of view and different history.

That is a wrenching change, and I think you see a lot of the fear and anger. So I do not think it is going to be an easy road.

In history there have not been that many democracies. This thing could fall apart. People just assume it is always going to be this way. But it does not have to be this way.

With a demigod and enough fear out there, democracy can collapse. I hope that is not part of our future.

Sociologist Robert Putnam, who wrote the book *Bowling Alone*, did research on



interracial communities that had been previously all white. What happened when people of color started moving in? Did these people seek out one another?

If you live in a neighborhood that was all white, but then you have a Latino person down the street, then you have a black person, does that create tolerance? He discovered that when you bring different groups together in this country, it creates more intolerance. He said they “hunker down.”

They withdraw from community. So just because you bring all these people together demographically does not mean they are going to reach out.

So we can have a future where different groups hunker down, withdraw and see the other as the enemy. It is just continual tension; that is what I get concerned about. I just think it is going to be a struggle.

**NF:** You mentioned there are some hopeful signs in the religious communities, but on the other hand there are also some very fearful religious people who are driving the division and the fear that leads to hatred. We know that hatred grows out of fear. So is there a mission for religious communities to be a part of the solution rather than part of the problem?

**JB:** Yeah. During the Civil Rights Movement you had leaders who played to people’s fears or to their hopes. Someone like George Wallace played to people’s fears. Someone like King played to people’s hopes. I am hoping we will have leaders who can play to people’s hopes.

Those stands can be very unpopular. You have to be prophetic although you might lose money and influence. For

example, I am wondering who is going to be the first mainstream evangelical pastor who gets up in a pulpit on a Sunday morning and says, “Guess what? I do not just tolerate gays and lesbians; I affirm them. We are not going to play the game where we know you are there but we do not say anything.”

What a lot of churches do now is like: we are not going to make a big issue out of it; we are just going to let it be.

But what happens if a pastor does that? I mean, that is prophetic and you could pay the price. During the Civil Rights Movement you had white pastors who did not talk about race because they did not want to stir up a storm.

But then you had white pastors who got up there and said, “This is wrong. This is immoral. We cannot treat people different because of their skin color.”

And they paid the price. That was prophetic, and as this country changes with all this tension, we are going to need pastors to be prophetic.

I do not know if that is out there, because in many church models now the big pastors are more like CEOs — the business types who have these religious empires. It is hard to be prophetic when you have so much to lose.

**NF:** I read a news story about First Baptist Church of Orlando grappling with the immigration issue after a well-loved Hispanic family in the church was designated for deportation. It went from being a political issue to a personal one.

We see that with gay/lesbian issues as well as immigration and other concerns when it moves from political philosophy to personal relationships.

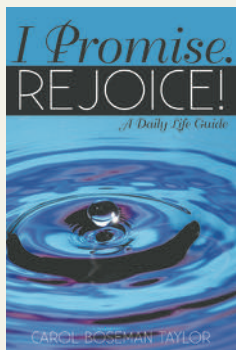
**JB:** I totally agree. I think people who speak out and do not hide themselves in the pews will help that process. I have seen it in my own life. I think about things I used to believe and why they changed.

Almost always, it does not come from reading a book or someone persuading me to change. It’s because I met someone. I got to know them and realized a lot of my assumptions were misplaced.

The best thing about covering religion — and I have been doing this for a while — is that it has really changed me. **NJF**

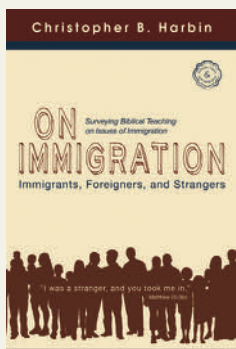
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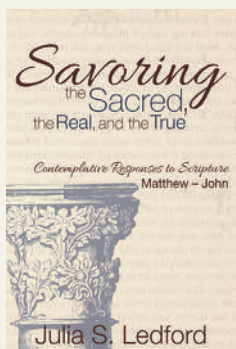
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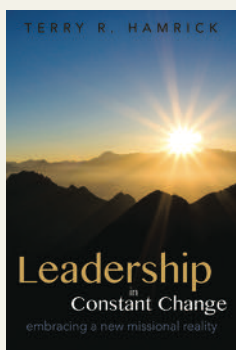
## ON IMMIGRATION

Christopher Harbin examines what the Bible says about our attitudes, reactions and interactions related to immigration and how to treat people of a different group, identity, ethnicity or origin.



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Julia Ledford seeks to open a fresh perspective into the Gospels through prayers that foster dialogue between the Word of God and the reader — and with the world.

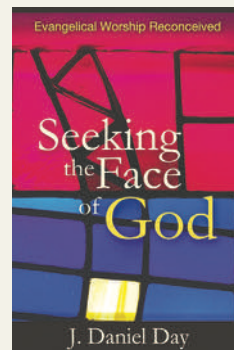


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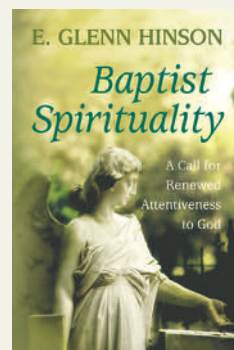
## SEEKING THE FACE OF GOD

Daniel Day shows how the practices of the ancient church and the theological wisdom of later centuries present worship as a joyful discipline.



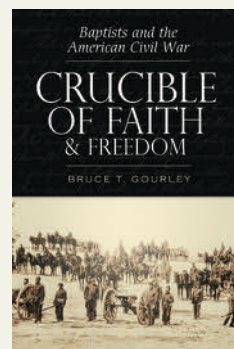
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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Paul Wallace holds a Ph.D. in experimental nuclear physics from Duke University with post-doctoral work in gamma-ray astronomy. Also, he received a Master of Divinity in historical theology from Emory University's Candler School of Theology.

Currently, he teaches physics and astronomy at Agnes Scott College in Decatur, Ga., writes at psnt.net, and is a member of First Baptist Church of Decatur where he was ordained to ministry. He occasionally teaches seminary

classes and twice has served on the faculty of the Emory-Tibet Science Initiative in India.

The following article is excerpted and adapted from his new book, *Stars Beneath Us: Finding God in the Evolving Cosmos* (Fortress Press).

Beginning with the next issue of *Nurturing Faith Journal*, Wallace will write a column titled "Questions That Christians Ask Scientists." You may submit a question for consideration by email to editor@nurturingfaith.net.

# Faith & Science

## *Far from decent society*

BY PAUL WALLACE

Here's a surprising but true fact: The medieval cosmos, widely considered to have taken its last breath sometime in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, lives again in the hearts and minds of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century Catholic splinter group.

**T**he group's ringleader is Robert Sungenis, who insists the earth does not move. For him, our fair planet sits motionless in the middle of all things. The other planets, the sun, and, one supposes, every star and every galaxy (not to mention something very major called "dark matter") all move around us.

In 2014 Sungenis and his collaborators produced a documentary film called *The Principle*. The name refers to the key idea they reject: the Copernican Principle — actually, an assumption — which states that the earth is not in a central, specially favored position in the cosmos.

Is the Copernican Principle true? Strictly speaking, we don't know. What we *do* know, however, is how fruitful it is. If you make an assumption and subsequently get tangled in a thicket of problems and incon-

sistencies, you will eventually work your way around to questioning the assumption.

But if the assumption leads to solutions and powerful, self-consistent theories, the scientific community tends to think it's true. And so far the Copernican Principle has been fruitful.

### THE WHIRLWIND

One of the reasons Sungenis and his group dislike the Copernican Principle is that they understand it to mean that because the earth is not in a special place, then human beings are not a special species.

"The world has been shaped by two great assertions: One places us in the center of it all and the other one relegates us to utter insignificance," writes Rick DeLano, the writer and producer of *The Principle*, on the film's website.

But the Copernican Principle says nothing of the kind. It's not a principle about the relative significance or specialness of creatures, human or otherwise.

We could, however, propose such a principle. And, in keeping with the convention of naming ideas after those that first popularized them, we could call it the "Whirlwind Principle." This principle may be stated: The human species is not a central, specially favored species in the cosmos.

It's tempting to reject this principle

outright, for it suggests unsettling lines of thought. It slings mud in the face of virtually all Western religion and philosophy. It goes too far.

But then, so does the biblical book of Job.

Job's journey, you will recall, began on a sunny day atop the human social pyramid. His significance not only surpassed all others in Uz, but also as a human being he was above every creature on earth. He was righteous, generous, fair-minded, wise, respected by all. He was the very reflection of God who sat enthroned high above heaven and earth.

Or so he thought.

His losses took him from the pinnacle of human society to its cellar: "But now they make sport of me, those who are younger than I, whose fathers I would have disdained to set with the dogs of my flock," he laments in 30:1.

From the bottom everything looked different, and it was from this location that, over the course of 36 chapters, he argued with his friends over the meaning of wisdom, the elusiveness of justice, and the character of God. He thought he could go no lower: "My spirit is broken, my days are extinct, the grave is ready for me" (17:1).

But the whirlwind showed up and drove poor Job even further from the good

things of life, further from decent society, further from justice, further from security. The direction was outward, away from human civilization and into the howling waste, the desolation of sand and rock, the empty and unmapped lands, and into the presence of chaos itself.

What he found out there, surprisingly, was life. True, it was not life as he normally thought about it. It was alien and strange, even freakish. It was wild and free. It mocked human civilization and refused human control. Some of it was modest, nearly invisible. Some of it was unthinking and violent. Some was primordial and fearless. It was not “pretty.” But it was life, thriving in places and conditions Job could never hope to survive, far beyond the comforts of human cities.

And God was delighted by all of it.

Like scientists with their Copernican Principle, before his descent Job carried with him a working, if unnamed, assumption about the centrality of human beings, a kind of inverted Whirlwind Principle. This faulty assumption was challenged by traveling to extremes and going beyond them, by being shown what could not normally be seen.

The whirlwind took Job on a tour that was, in its day, cosmic in the full sense of the word. One can never be sure, but I like to think that if the book of Job were written for us today, it’s not to the desert that the whirlwind would take us, but into a wilderness far greater in scale and strangeness.

## THE NIGHT SKY

My night walks had become habitual. They were not solitary as a rule, but they usually turned out that way. A sophomore at Young Harris College, I was walking alone up an unlit mountain road in North Georgia.

It was a little foolish, actually, for muscle cars were a source of considerable fascination for some local young men who relished furious nighttime flights up and down the sinuous mountain asphalt.

No place had been provided for a fool to walk. Almost without exception there was a wall of rock on one side and a steep drop-off on the other.

In the silence of the night I could hear



the cars coming a full minute before they roared past me, so I had time to press myself against a rock or crouch at the lip of earth’s descent. As they passed, I had to shut my eyes against the loss of night vision.

It is unlikely that my presence ever registered with the drivers at all. If it did, it must have been as a ghostly apparition at the instant of passing.

Foolish it was, but peril is a vague thing in the mind of a young person, and I was drawn by a prospect seen only after sunset and in outposts of sweet remoteness: the night sky.

I walked in complete darkness. Other than the asphalt under my feet, the only way to tell I was on track was by looking up: stars shining between the trees created a kind of overhead reflection of the road, making it easy to follow.

Finally the road leveled and the sky opened to the north. I left the asphalt and walked freely across a field, miraculously flat and more than 100 yards on a side.

When I reached my destination I stopped and lay on my back upon the face of the planet with my feet pointed south. Then I looked up.

By that time I had taken several astronomy classes, so I had some idea of what I was looking at. Jupiter and Mars stood near the western horizon. Jupiter was bright white, and Mars was ruddy and darker.

These occupied the extreme foreground. Light years beyond them, stars were scattered from horizon to horizon and outward beyond the edge of visibility, like the lights of ships spread across an infinite sea.

Familiar constellations popped out one by one. The Milky Way was a glowing band arcing high above, farther out than the stars.

I was also aware of a much vaster emptiness beyond the Milky Way, stretching beyond the limits of imagination and thinly populated in all directions by galaxies far too faint to see.

The face of *our* wilderness is heart-breakingly beautiful. **NFJ**

# James K. Polk (1845-1849)

By Bruce Gourley

**B**orn in 1795 in Mecklenburg County, N.C., at the age of 10 James Knox Polk traveled westward with his family. Crossing the Appalachian Mountains, the Polks settled on the Tennessee frontier. There young James learned of hard work, rural resourcefulness and local democracy.

Following two and a half years of formal schooling, Polk returned to his home state to attend the University of North Carolina. A growing interest in law and government underpinned his studies in mathematics and the classics. Graduating with honors and moving back to Tennessee, Polk studied law while clerking with the state Senate.

Establishing a law practice in Columbia, a 27-year-old Polk won a seat in the Tennessee legislature. Marriage to Sarah Childress followed.

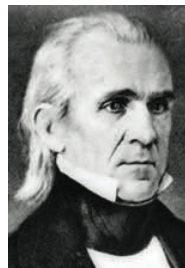
The well-connected daughter of a prominent Murfreesboro merchant and planter, Sarah helped further Polk's growing political ambitions. In 1825 at 29 years of age, Polk won election to the U.S. Congress as a Jacksonian Democrat.

For 14 years Polk served in the House, including two terms as Speaker. Acquiring a plantation in Tennessee, Polk in 1839 left Congress, moved back home and successfully ran for the governorship. Serving as chief executive of Tennessee from 1839-1841, he lost re-election in two subsequent attempts.

Harboring greater ambitions despite political setbacks, Polk remained active in and devoted to Democratic politics. Delegates to the 1844 Democratic Convention rewarded his faithfulness by making

him their vice-presidential choice. When the convention deadlocked on a presidential nominee, delegates turned to Polk as a compromise "dark horse" candidate.

Campaigning on promises of westward expansion, Polk appealed to Americans seeking new opportunities beyond increasingly crowded eastern cities. Overcoming critics who feared that an aggressive western push would upend relations with Great Britain in the North or Mexico in the Southwest, the slaveholding cotton planter in 1844 became the 11<sup>th</sup> man elected to the presidency.



Polk's ascendancy to the presidency kept the nation's highest office safely in the hands of southerners, pleasing planters of the South while further inflaming a rapidly-growing northern abolitionist movement.

President Polk pushed through a tariff act and a federal treasury act designed to tamp down on wild financial speculation, both favored by southern planters. His westward expansion policy led to Texas statehood, the annexation of California and New Mexico, and victory in the Mexican-American War.

Subsequently, southern planters clamored for the expansion of slavery into the new southwestern territories. Meanwhile, Iowa and Wisconsin gained admittance into the union.

Polk's pro-slavery position, however, proved less robust than that desired by Deep South slave owners. Arguing for the contin-

uation of the 1820 Missouri Compromise slave line to the Pacific Ocean, thereby confining slavery to the South, Polk evoked the wrath of planters.

National tensions during Polk's presidency led elite Baptist planters of the South, condemning abolitionists as evil, to split from northern Baptists and establish the slave-based Southern Baptist Convention. The creation of the SBC presaged the coming of the American Civil War.

The son of a deistic father and Presbyterian mother, James Polk remained religiously ambivalent in a period of religious revivals that birthed and matured the abolitionist movement in the North, even as white southern Christianity consolidated around the biblical support of African slavery.

Experiencing a Methodist camp meeting during his congressional years gave Polk "predilections" for Methodism, yet he rarely if ever attended church.

Evidencing deistic influences, Polk as president voiced strong convictions for freedom of conscience. In his inaugural address of March 4, 1845 he declared:

It [the U.S. Government] is a common protector of each and all the States; of every man who lives upon our soil, whether of native or foreign birth; of every religious sect, in their worship of the Almighty according to the dictates of their own conscience; of every shade of opinion, and the most free inquiry; of every art, trade, and occupation consistent with the laws of the States.

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*These are the 11th and 12th in a series of articles by historian Bruce Gourley on the religious faith of U.S. presidents. Gourley is online editor and contributing writer for Nurturing Faith Journal and executive director of the Baptist History & Heritage Society. His latest book, Baptists and the American Civil War: Crucible of Faith and Freedom, a compilation of articles from the recent series on Baptists and the American Civil War, is available from Nurturing Faith.*

In the address Polk also noted: “One great object of the Constitution was to restrain majorities from oppressing minorities or encroaching upon their just rights. Minorities have a right to appeal to the Constitution as a shield against such oppression.”

Later in his presidency Polk expressed appreciation that “under our Constitution there was no connection between church and state,” noting that “in my action as President of the United States I recognized no distinction of creeds in my appointments office.”

Amid outrage over Mormon discrimination and crimes against citizens of western Illinois and under pressure from a senator to constrain the sect, Polk called the Mormon faith “absurd” but refused to take federal action. “If I could interfere with the Mormons,” he noted, “I could with the Baptists, or any other religious sect; and by the constitution any citizen had a right to adopt his own religious faith.”

Rarely mentioning the divine in public utterances or private writings during his

presidency, on few occasions Polk referenced the “Supreme Ruler of the Universe,” “benignant providence” or “God.” Upon his wife’s urgings, however, Polk periodically attended a Presbyterian church in the District of Columbia. Otherwise, it appears that religion seldom entered his thoughts.

A biographer summarized Polk’s singular focus by noting that other than politics, the president “had no aspirations, intellectual interests, recreation, or even friendships.” As Polk himself noted in his presidential diary on April 1, 1846, “My time has been wholly occupied in my office, in the discharge of my public duties. My confinement to my office has been constant and unceasing and my labours very great.”

Polk’s workaholic proclivity impacted his health. Weary and worn, in 1848 he chose not to seek re-election. Three months after leaving office and upon his deathbed, Polk summoned the Methodist revivalist John B. McFerrin, who had enthralled him years earlier.

Polk requested and McFerrin administered baptism into the Methodist church. James K. Polk died of cholera on June 15, 1849 at the relatively young age of 53. Among his last words were, “I love you, Sarah. For all eternity, I love you.”

After Polk’s death McFerrin claimed to have overheard a conversation where the former president after his baptism expressed faith in “Jesus Christ” as “Lord and Savior.” The uncorroborated story is in the vein of earlier apocryphal efforts by Christian ministers seeking to reshape presidential narratives from deist or secular to religious.

Although having pleased neither northern abolitionists nor southern planters during his presidency, Polk’s legacy in time came to be viewed in light of his successes in enlarging U.S. borders to the West coast. In the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century James K. Polk came to be viewed as the most influential president between Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln, often ranked among the top 10 to 12 presidents of all time. **NFJ**

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# Zachary Taylor (1849-50)

By Bruce Gourley

Born in Orange County, Va., on Nov. 24, 1784, Zachary Taylor, the future 12<sup>th</sup> president of the United States and the seventh from Old Dominion, claimed as an ancestor *Mayflower* immigrant and theocratic Puritan leader William Brewster.

**R**eligion, however, mattered little to the aristocratic Taylor family that moved to present-day Louisville, Ky., a frontier area on the verge of settlement. There Zachary's father enlarged his wealth by buying cheap land and acquiring slaves.

Zachary's religious upbringing is unknown, and he received little formal education on the Kentucky frontier, his handwriting later described as "that of a near illiterate."

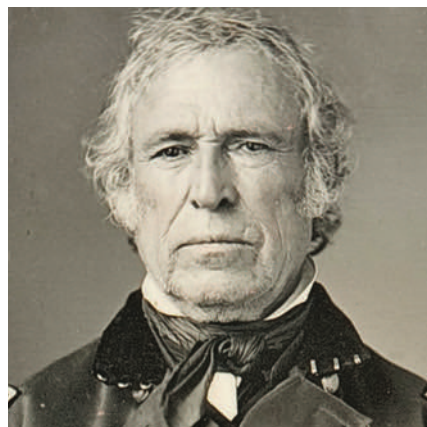
With college out of reach, the young man joined the U.S. Army in 1808 as a first lieutenant of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Serving in Louisiana, he soon attained the rank of captain.

Marriage offered opportunities for advancement, and in 1810 Taylor wed Margaret Mackall Smith, the daughter of a prominent Louisville planter family. Thereafter he purchased plantations in Louisville and Mississippi, acquiring more than 200 slaves.

Military service took Taylor to Indiana Territory, where during the War of 1812 he successfully defended Fort Harrison against an Indian attack commanded by Shawnee chief Tecumseh. More skirmishes followed, as did a promotion to major and two years of service in Michigan Territory, after which Taylor returned to his family in Louisville.

For the career military officer and planter, a second stint in Louisiana led to the purchase of a third plantation, this time in Baton Rouge, where he moved his family.

Later, Taylor garnered national



attention in Florida's Second Seminole War, emerging victorious in the 1837 Battle of Lake Okeechobee, among the largest 19<sup>th</sup>-century U.S.-Indian engagements. Promotion to brigadier general followed, and in 1838 Taylor assumed command of all American troops in Florida.

An 1841 administrative appointment as commander of the Second Department of the Army's Western Division enabled Taylor to devote his spare time to land speculation and a growing interest in politics.

Deployed again during the Mexican-American War, he won critical battles that contributed to victory over Mexico. Returning to Louisiana in 1847 as a national hero, Taylor numbered among the most popular men in the nation.

His nuanced political sentiments proved timely amid escalating and complicated slavery tensions. A wealthy planter, he nonetheless opposed the westward expansion of slavery, believing the dry western lands unsuitable for growing cotton or sugar.

Although a southerner, his nationalist convictions harbored anti-secession views. Yet he quietly supported states rights and opposed protective tariffs and federal infrastructure, positions favored by southern planters.

Northern abolitionists, meanwhile, opposed the slave-owning Taylor.

Both major national political parties, the Whigs and Democrats, courted Taylor. Opting for the Whigs, he became their 1848 presidential candidate. Seeking to unite opposing internal factions, the party selected anti-slavery, prominent New York politician Millard Fillmore as its vice-presidential nominee.

The Taylor-Fillmore ticket won the election. But upon taking his seat in the White House, Taylor pursued his own initiatives independently of the party platform. Although passively supporting key policies friendly to southern slave owners, in hopes of achieving sectional compromise he stopped short of advocating for the extension of slavery westward.

Exhibiting no religious sentiments prior to his presidency, Taylor surprisingly refused to be inaugurated on the traditional date of March 4 due to the day's falling on a Sunday. Perhaps desiring not to upset the nation's Christians, he nonetheless closed his inaugural address with the vaguest of deistic-like references that, while prioritizing national reconciliation, could not have pleased the religiously devout:

In conclusion I congratulate you, my fellow-citizens, upon the high state of prosperity to which the goodness of Divine Providence has conducted our common country. Let us invoke a continuance of the same protecting care which has led us from

small beginnings to the eminence we this day occupy, and let us seek to deserve that continuance by prudence and moderation in our councils, by well-directed attempts to assuage the bitterness which too often marks unavoidable differences of opinion, by the promulgation and practice of just and liberal principles, and by an enlarged patriotism, which shall acknowledge no limits but those of our own widespread Republic.

Deistic sentiments aside, a summer cholera epidemic posed a dilemma. Unlike Andrew Jackson during an 1832 outbreak, Taylor succumbed to public pressure and issued a formal appeal to God for healing. On July 3, 1849 he proclaimed August 3 a national day of “fasting, humiliation and prayer.”

Asking “persons of all religious denominations to abstain, as far as possible, from secular occupations, and to assemble in their respective places of public worship” on the designated day, Taylor hoped that “the Almighty, in His own good time” would

“stay the destroying hand which is now lifted up against us.”

The following day, July 4, the president attended a local Sabbath school celebration. Although he rarely if ever attended church services, on this occasion Taylor voiced inclusive support of religion and morality:

“The only ground of hope for the continuance of our free institutions is the proper moral and religious training of the children, that they may be prepared to discharge aright the duties of men and citizens.”

When the epidemic subsided, however, Taylor followed a precedent set by many former presidents in refusing to designate a day of national thanksgiving to God.

“While uniting cordially in the universal feeling of thankfulness to God for his manifold blessings, and especially for the abatement of the pestilence which so lately walked in our midst,” Taylor noted in a letter, “I have yet thought it most proper to leave the subject of a Thanksgiving Proclamation where custom in many parts of the country has so long consigned it, in the hands of the Governors of the several States.”

A month later in his State of the Union address Taylor returned to deistic language, thanking “a kind Providence” and “the Almighty” for ending “a dreadful pestilence” and restoring an “inestimable blessing of general health.”

Slavery, though, remained the real pestilence in the land. Taylor stayed opposed to the western expansion of slavery, his resistance paradoxically thwarting efforts for a political compromise.

However, his sudden and unexpected death in July 1850, possibly from cholera, set in motion the Compromise of 1850, a set of bills designed to alleviate sectional tensions over slavery. California was admitted as a free state, the citizens of Utah and New Mexico territories were allowed to determine the status of slavery within their borders, and the slave trade was banned in the District of Columbia.

Taylor’s passing thus brought an end to an unusual presidency whereby one of the secular nation’s most secular leaders proved more responsive to civil religious pressures than his mostly ambivalent to minimally religious predecessors. **NFJ**

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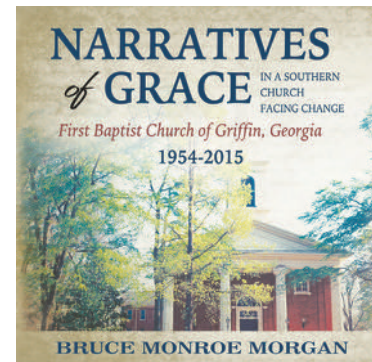
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# Is there another way?

By Randy Carter

Commercials about the candidates running for president and other public offices being so deplorable strike me as ridiculous, but I watch them. I want to understand the larger culture into which they fit.

Individually, they may be absurd and unconvincing. Taken as a whole, however, they show that the only way to “win” in our political system is to create distance from the other. Our national political culture is one of distance.

Therefore, when we disagree on a particular political issue we do so within the larger culture characterized by being for/against, right/left, and with me/against me.

That is exactly what the political world wants so that candidates can clearly set themselves apart from others.

What we long for in the church is the opposite: a community in which those near and far are invited in Christ to come together.

The Apostle Paul described the church as the community where “aliens” and “strangers” become citizens — and where dividing walls of hostility are broken down so that a “new humanity” might be created in Christ (Eph. 2:11-22).

It is more difficult than ever to live into that vision of the church because of the influence of the national political culture on people in the church.

I am finding it a greater challenge to lead in the local congregation and among networked churches in which diversity of opinion and conviction exists.

I serve a congregation in which there

is difference of opinion and conviction on same-sex marriage. As pastor, of course, that means my conviction on same-sex marriage aligns with some but not others.

Those with whom my conviction aligns are happy; those with whom I disagree are less happy.

But, can we remain together as a congregation? Or, will those who disagree feel distanced from me and others in the church?

This is where the influence of our national political culture rears its ugly head. You are with me or against me. You are red or blue. You belong or don't belong.

That is the way of our political culture. It is not the way of the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, I have been speaking to the congregation about an alternative to the pervasive two-party culture.

It is the way of Eph. 4:3 where we make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

It is the way where we walk in the truth while refusing at the same time to dismiss unity.

I have no problem stating my convictions on the truth of the Scriptures, but I have a real problem with the idea that truth and unity can be separated. I don't see in the Bible where I get to pick one over the other.

I cannot stand alone in truth and dismiss unity as secondary. Neither can I champion unity at the expense of truth for some mushy sense of togetherness that has no ground.

Somehow, by God's grace and wisdom, I must lead the congregation to live in the tension of truth and unity. Paul tells us to make “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace because there is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all ...” (Eph. 4:3-6).

The Beloved Community we long for in the local congregation and networks of churches cannot be a community of truth or unity. Biblically, it must be a community of truth and unity. **NFJ**

—Randy Carter is pastor of First Baptist Church of Hillsborough, N.C.

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# Netflix next frontier

## Sermons hit online video streaming service

BY KATHERINE DAVIS-YOUNG  
*Religion News Service*

LOS ANGELES — Alongside programs like *Orange Is the New Black* and *House of Cards*, Netflix now offers another type of content: sermons.

“I believe if Jesus were on planet Earth today in the flesh he’d be on Netflix,” said Ed Young of Grapevine, Texas, one of the first pastors to have his sermons on the online video streaming service.

Young spearheaded the effort to get Christian talks onto Netflix. He said he believes, like Jesus, he should find ways to appeal to the masses. It’s that attitude that makes the partnership with Netflix an unsurprising, if unprecedented, convergence of evangelical faith and popular media.

“It fits with patterns that are long-established,” said Stewart M. Hoover, director of the Center for Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Hoover pointed out that evangelical churches have been quick to adapt to radio, then television and other technologies as they have developed.

Young’s Fellowship Church is no

exception. Young has penned more than a dozen books; he has had television programs on the E! network and other cable channels; he hosts iTunes podcasts and offers video content on YouTube and Roku.

“Jesus said that we should become fishers of men. If I’m going to catch the most fish, I’ve got to put a lot of hooks in the water,” Young said of his many media projects. “But I’m most excited about Netflix right now.”

Young’s *Fifty Shades of THEY* Netflix series includes five episodes. The pastor paces a colorfully lit stage, offering jocular interpretations of Christian teachings to an audience of hundreds.

The three other Netflix pioneers have series with similar formats. In *#DeathTo-Selfie*, young, T-shirt-clad pastor Steven Furtick talks about identity.

Georgia pastor Andy Stanley addresses working through challenges in *Starting Over*. And in *Winning Life’s Battles*, televangelist Joyce Meyer preaches to a massive auditorium.

“More and more people are cutting the cord,” said Paul Huse, executive director of marketing for Joyce Meyer Ministries. “Even though we’re on six or seven cable networks, more people are moving away from that and we want to be where they can

still access us.”

Netflix did not provide many guidelines in terms of content for the episodes but did ask that the programs avoid product promotion or invitations for viewers to make donations, Huse said.

The move to Netflix made sense for the pastors, but for Netflix it’s a logical fit too, said Tom Nunan, lecturer at UCLA’s School of Theater, Film and Television and longtime Hollywood producer.

“Most people perceive Netflix as a competitor to HBO or Showtime,” Nunan said, pointing to the original edgy, adult content that has earned the platform industry-wide recognition,” said Nunan. “But in many ways, Netflix is the opposite of traditional networks, which target specific niche audiences. Netflix is trying to be all things to all people.”

Nunan added that the entertainment industry has profited from religious content since the days of Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments*.

“Spirituality, generally speaking, is very good business,” he added.

Netflix representatives issued a statement saying, “Titles are continuously being added to the service to meet the diverse tastes of our more than 75 million members around the world.” **NFJ**

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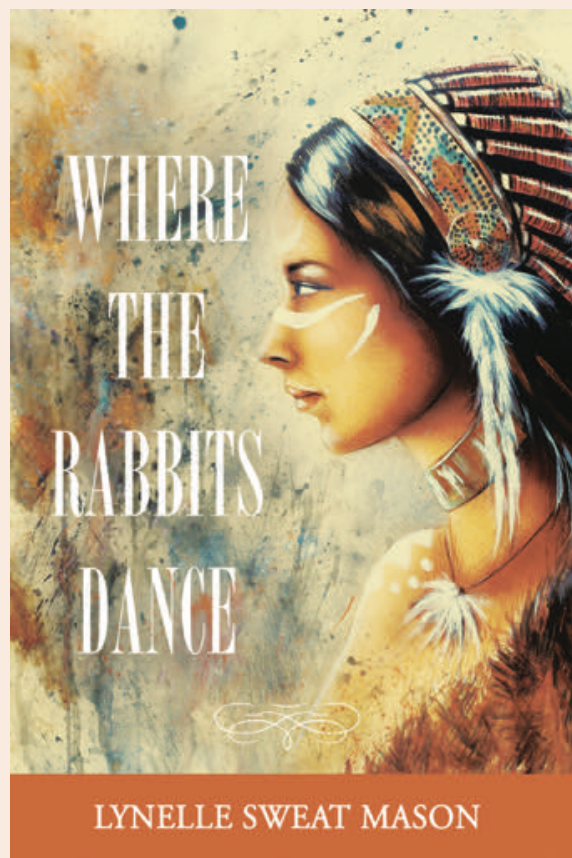
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