

Baptists ODAY

NEWS JOURNAL

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from President
Carter

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John D. Pierce

Executive Editor
editor@baptiststoday.org

Julie Steele

Chief Operations Officer
jsteele@baptiststoday.org

Jackie B. Riley

Managing Editor
jackie@baptiststoday.org

Tony W. Cartledge

Contributing Editor
cartledge@baptiststoday.org

Bruce T. Gourley

Online Editor
gourley@baptiststoday.org

David Cassidy

Church Resources Editor
david@thefaithlab.com

Steve DeVane

Contributing Writer
steve@baptiststoday.org

Terri Byrd

Contributing Writer

Vickie Frayne

Art Director

Jannie Lister

Customer Service Manager
jannie@baptiststoday.org

Kimberly L. Hovis

Marketing Associate
kim@baptiststoday.org

Walker Knight, Publisher Emeritus

Jack U. Harwell, Editor Emeritus

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Former CBF Foundation president Don Durham has taken to the fields to grow produce and Christian disciples. Photo by John Pierce. **Story on page 4**

Jimmy Carter photo provided by the Carter Center.

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Writing Submissions

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Contact Information

- 478-301-5655 / 1-877-752-5658
- info@baptiststoday.org
- *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
JOHN PIERCE

Growing among the 'hard- living'

Durham follows call from
foundation to the farm

HEALING SPRINGS, N.C. — Don Durham has not always looked and acted like this. For goodness sakes, he was president of a Baptist foundation where he manned an Atlanta office and met with donors.

Now he bounces his white pickup truck into a field near the little crossroads of Healing Springs — just west of Denton, N.C. He pulls gloves over his hands and a wide-brim hat over his bushy head before stomping up and down the rows of okra until his five-gallon bucket is full.

“I grew up in a thoroughly blue-collar, working-class context,” said Durham, beginning his tale of transition. “Then I went off to college and started living in a different world ... somewhat unconsciously.”

Whatever produce is picked goes straight to a daily free-meal program provided by a bikers’ ministry in nearby Thomasville known as His Laboring Few. The women preparing the food give Don an unwelcoming look — but he knows better.

With sweat on their brows and fans redistributing the muggy air, they are up to their elbows in recently donated produce coming in from the fields ripe until harvest. But the okra, corn and beans that Don drops off now will be frozen or canned for use in the colder seasons.



'HARD LIVING'

On Jan. 8, 2008, Don had a little time to kill between appointments and went for a walk in Daytona Beach, Fla., where he encountered some down-to-earth folks in “cut-offs and tank tops” — and it struck a chord.

“I started remembering pieces of myself

that I’d not interacted with in 20 years or more,” he said. “It was both home and foreign to me.”

But it was not a passing thought — in fact, Don calls it an epiphany.

“It took me a couple of weeks to realize this was not just nostalgia but something to



Don Durham credits produce farmer Bill Wallace (right) with lending “skill and encouragement.”

pay attention to,” he said — bypassing some tall okra stalks that contained a bird’s nest.

Returning to Atlanta from Daytona, Don read and reread the writings of Tex Sample on ministry among working-class people. While many blue-collar persons are deeply involved in church life, a segment is far removed. Sample describes them as “survivors” or the “hard living.”

Those are the ones Don could not get off his mind and heart. For them, Don said, “Church is just one more place to go where you’re told you’re not good enough.”

And, after giving himself a six-month waiting period to avoid impulse buying, Don reconnected with another good memory of his youth. He bought a used 2003 Harley-Davidson Road Glide motorcycle.

He would ride it for leisure and on business trips — even taking it to the West Coast for a conference. Truck stops and Waffle Houses brought him back in touch with those to whom he was being drawn.

Don said the Tex Sample books and other writings, along with a renewed sensitivity to the hard-living population, “gave me language for understanding what happened to me in Daytona.”

FIELD OF A DREAM

Don grew up in little Horneytown, N.C., near High Point, where some family remains. And his two daughters live with their mother in Concord, N.C., near Charlotte.

So Don began to use maps and back-road trips to locate an ideal place to live out his new vision. One day, in the Cooperative Baptist

Fellowship Foundation office he shared at that time with Gary Skeen of CBF’s Church Benefits Board, he mentioned that the rural area around Denton was a good spot.

“Are you talking about Denton, N.C.?” asked Skeen. “My family has a farm there.”

Don said he and Gary found the spot on a map; it was exactly where Don had been looking. The 40-acre farm — with a barn but no house — has about 15-20 cleared, but mostly unused, acres.

After Gary explained Don’s dream to his relatives who now own the land, they agreed to let Don begin farming it. Gary said the experience reminded him that “God works in relationships.”

“The Skeens just feel blessed that the availability of the family farm — with help and guidance from family friends, farmers and the home church — has now become a part of Don’s unfolding vision for ministry and is playing a part in providing food for folks in need.”

Grateful for the farmland, and reaffirmed that he was following the right path, Don knew that much more needed to come together before he could uproot himself from Atlanta and begin planting himself and crops in North Carolina.

HELPING HANDS

He discovered “Fields of Hope” in Mars Hills, N.C. This ministry in the western part of the state takes a very similar approach to what Don had envisioned, and became his model.

His plan was simple: Start with about an acre of produce this season and grow along with the volunteer base. Early help came from his connection with the bikers’ ministry and some neighbors.

Don’s paternal grandfather was a sharecropper. But farming was never part of Don’s daily life or education. So he needed help with both the techniques of farming and harvesting the results.

Two local farmers — who are Baptist laymen — graciously offered expertise and equipment: Norbert Snyder, a member of Denton’s First Baptist Church that handles gifts to Don’s new ministry, and Bill Wallace, who grows produce down on Lick Creek Church Road and sells some of it under a tent in Denton.

Norbert brought over a tractor and planter that saved Don from having to plant by hand — and has provided other equipment when needed.

“What hasn’t he done?” Don said with appreciation. “Norbert’s been there every step of the way.”

And Bill, said Don, has “helped me know what to plant and when to plant; he lent me skill and encouragement.”

“I grew up doing grunt work on a farm, but didn’t learn how to farm,” said Don, who is now learning on the job and being well mentored.

Volunteer labor has come primarily through the bikers’ ministry — often just called “The Few” — thanks to chapter coordinator Joe Walker whom Don describes as “a model of servanthood.”

WELL PLANTED

Don calls the donated fields “Healing Springs Acres” after the nearby crossroads. But he is already seeing healing spring up for those who work the land with him, for those who benefit from what is reaped, and for himself.

Moving from a steady income to this new venture has been a leap of faith. Don supports himself through coaching and consulting and is now interim pastor of First Baptist Church in Elkin, N.C.

“I have no illusions of the farm supporting me,” he said. “But I hope it can support itself.”

Don hopes to add some honeybee hives to the land to help with pollination and to produce another food crop. And after planting winter cover crops, he can give more time to building closer ties within the community.

And as relationships grow and ripen like squash and tomatoes, Don plans to invite some of the “hard-living” folks to join him in learning more about the life and teachings of Jesus. He knows that typical strategies for church starting don’t apply well to this segment of the population.

The vision — which he pondered some 18 months after the memorable day in Daytona before making the move — has made it through the first growing season. It remains ever strong — and yet simple.

“If we can build the volunteer base, we can provide food to every feeding ministry in surrounding counties,” said the novice farmer who hopes to add hands and another plot of produce next year.

And: “My hope is to collect volunteers and then start a Bible study on the life of Jesus” — the One who often calls followers to, or back to, places of growth and service they could not have imagined on their own. **BT**

quotation remarks

“In the wake of every natural disaster, some public figure feels compelled to utter a theological interpretation of events that is clear, compelling and fundamentally wrong.”

—Pastor Bob Setzer of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga. (ABP)

“I’d love to be able to say that our dazzling wit and slashing rhetorical attacks are persuading people to abandon organized religion in droves. But the truth is that the churches’ wounds are largely self-inflicted.”

—Atheist author Adam Lee, writing at *Alternet.org* about the growing popularity of atheism (RNS)

“No.” “No.” “Once in awhile.”

—St. Louis Cardinals first baseman and Christian humanitarian Albert Pujols when asked by 60 Minutes correspondent Bob Simon if he ever smokes, drinks or curses

“Everything comes from God ...”

—Alfonzo Riggins of the Cathedral of Prayer Church in Columbus, Ga., after someone anonymously placed an \$80,000 winning lottery ticket in the collection plate (*wfsa.com*)

“A life-long Baptist, Mark Hatfield took his faith seriously. He integrated his Christianity into his public life, but without judging or coercing others to do the same.”

—J. Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, on longtime Republican Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon who died Aug. 7 at age 89 (ABP)

“You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating.”

—UCC pastor Lillian Daniel of Glen Ellyn, Ill., responding to those who say they are “spiritual but not religious” (*ucc.org*)

“When you ignore science, you end up with egg on your face. The Catholic Church has had an awful lot of egg on its face for centuries because of Galileo. And Protestants would do very well to look at that and to learn from it.”

—Karl Giberson, former professor of physics at Eastern Nazarene College who authored *The Language of Science and Faith* with Francis Collins, concerning literal biblical interpretations of Creation (NPR)

“She never worried. She just never was a worrier.”

—Sidney Cooper on his mother Besse Cooper of Monroe, Ga., who celebrated her 115th birthday on Aug. 26 and was recognized as the oldest person in the world by Guinness Book of World Records (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

“We get a lot of visitors here, from Korea, China, India, the U.S. They’re all so grateful to God for William Carey. He introduced the gospel to so many.”

—Pastor David Gamston of Carey Baptist Church in Moulton, England, that celebrated the 250th anniversary of the pioneer Baptist missionary’s birth in August (Baptist Times)

“We do not treat others as we wish to be treated. That’s true for the rich who lack concern for the poor, and the powerless who take the law into their own hands.”

—Religion News Service columnist Dick Staub

“... At a time when religious denominations are embroiled in numerous conflicts over sexuality, homosexuality, same-sex marriage and other sexual issues our generation of pastors and other religious professionals today remain unprepared to deal with these issues.”

—From *the Sex and the Seminary Study* conducted by the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice and Healing and Union Theological Seminary in New York (*christianpost.com*)

“North Korea and evangelical empires have the same principle of leadership: nepotism to the nth degree. You may not get the call, but you inherit the mailing list.”

—Frank Schaeffer, son of the late influential evangelical leader Francis Schaeffer (New York Times)

“It goes to show at some level there’s a fear of exposing what it means to follow the Bible literally.”

—Writer Rachel Held Evans, who is spending a full year trying to follow biblical laws concerning women, on the irony that her strongest criticism comes from those who claim to take the Bible literally (*slate.com*)

Countering misconstrued notions an ongoing challenge

My editorial writing in recent months has centered around one major theme: The Gospel of Jesus Christ makes less of an impact when Christianity gets equated with attitudes of judgment and actions of exclusion. In fact, it even fails to get a fair public hearing.

Recently one friend quoted another as saying: “I feel like most of my evangelism anymore is apologizing for what other Christians have done to them.”

Certainly none of us is a pure representative of the faith that we claim. Yet one of the most effective ways to counter the poor public perception often associated with modern American Christianity is to simply own up to such shortcomings.

The larger society does not expect perfection from Christians, but instead humility, kindness and respect. Those attributes come through much more clearly in the form of sympathetic hearing and generous service — such as disaster relief, health care and engagement with those who struggle for the necessities of life — than through loud, public pronouncements that reek of self-righteousness more than truth.

We who bear the Baptist name — birthed out of the good stuff of individual conscience, personal faith and unfettered religious freedom for all — have an additional challenge. There are many who wear our brand, yet do not possess our understanding of faith.

Exclusion seems to be the *modus operandi* for many Christian groups today — especially some Baptists.

Recently, an association of Baptist

churches in North Carolina booted a congregation for calling a female pastor. They spoke of their “right” as an autonomous group to take such action. But having a right and doing what is right are two different things.

Another Baptist association, this one in Kentucky, excluded a member congregation for providing meeting space each month to a group that is hospitable toward gay and lesbian persons and family members.



The public message these Baptist groups probably think they are conveying — if they think much about it at all — is that they stand firmly for truth. Yet there is a much greater probability that those hearing such news assume that these Baptist Christians — and many if not all Baptists and Christians — have less compassion and a lower understanding of human value than society at large.

With puffed chests, these Baptists continue down the narrow trail of preserving some skewed vision of “doctrinal purity.” In reality, it is a death march toward irrelevance. And they drag a whole lot of us along with them — if we fail to articulate and demonstrate the vital differences.

While those of us well versed in the nuances of the broader Baptist and Christian spectrums can separate ourselves from such ignorance and isolation, the larger society does not take the time and effort to do so.

Yet it is not enough to simply say that we do not wish to be defined by those held captive to the fear of change and who use condemnation and exclusion as favored

weapons. We must create every opportunity — individually and as churches and fellowships of churches — to show an understandably suspicious and diverse society that the Christian faith and the Baptist tradition represent something more appealing and life giving.

We could cut and run — or we can counter these misconstrued understandings of truth that allow no space to grow or to catch new light. Prepackaged and controlled misrepresentations of the Christian faith — which try to put Jesus in binders and reduce his teachings to justifications for exclusion — cannot compare to the high yet wonderful risk of setting the Spirit free.

Many of us are weary of always having to say: “That’s not us; that’s not the gospel.” But perhaps the better — or certainly added — response is to show and share the difference at every opportunity. **BT**

What should I read between monthly issues of *Baptists Today*?

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We who bear the Baptist name — birthed out of the good stuff of individual conscience, personal faith and unfettered religious freedom for all — have an additional challenge. There are many who wear our brand, yet do not possess our understanding of faith.

Vestal to retire as CBF executive coordinator next summer

ATLANTA — Saying he is “sensing a release from that calling,” Executive Coordinator Daniel Vestal told the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Advisory Council Sept. 9 that he will retire June 30, 2012 — or earlier if his successor is found.

“Often I have prayed for wisdom as I approached times of transition,” Vestal, who will turn 67 this month, told the leadership group composed of CBF officers, Coordinating Council chairs and national staff coordinators, according to a statement released to media. “Now is such a time for transition.”

A former pastor and Southern Baptist Convention presidential candidate, Vestal played a key role in calling moderate Baptists together in the early '90s to respond to the growing fundamentalism in the SBC. Two consecutive meetings in Atlanta led to the formation of the Fellowship.

Following the retirement of the first coordinator, Cecil Sherman, Vestal was elected to the position in 1996. In an interview earlier this year with *Baptists Today*, Vestal said he struggled at that time with the sense of calling

to be CBF coordinator.

“All I had known in ministry was the role of pastor, and I grieved over the possibility of leaving that role,” he told the news journal. However, Vestal said he finally “came to a peace” about assuming the CBF leadership position that he has now held for 15 years.

Vestal told *Baptists Today* that his role has changed every few years as the Fellowship faced different challenges and opportunities. The early years required responses to constant attacks by SBC leadership seeking to discredit CBF, he said.

Vestal said he then gave attention to creating “some sense of cohesiveness” since many of those coming into the Fellowship brought strong support for a particular issue, agenda or region. Attention was also given to showing the viability of CBF, he said.

“Then we faced the collective responsibility of strategic planning, visioning and prioritizing which required my involvement,” he said.

In response to the announcement of



Daniel Vestal

Vestal’s retirement, CBF Moderator Colleen Burroughs of Birmingham, Ala., praised Vestal for his leadership, kindness and diplomacy according to the statement.

“Dr. Vestal has been our shepherd for a long time, guiding us past a painful conflict and pointing us toward the goal of being the presence of Christ in the world,” said Burroughs, vice president of Passport Inc. “This has been a healing season, and he leaves us as we are walking stronger as a Fellowship.”

Vestal said he and his wife, Earlene, are considering future ministry opportunities and plan to remain close to the Fellowship.

“Our love for CBF is strong, and we look forward to continued involvement,” he said according to the statement. “The decision to retire from CBF does not mean we are retiring from active ministry. We are in a discerning process about our next place of ministry and ask for prayer from the Fellowship community.”

Vestal said he has “great hope for the future of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ... because of the quality and character of present and emerging leadership.”

The Fellowship’s officers will begin the process of finding Vestal’s replacement by appointing a search committee. **BT**

Baptists Today adds directors to board, elects new officers

ATLANTA — Layman Gary Eubanks of Marietta, Ga., and hospital chaplain Kelly Belcher of Spartanburg, S.C., have completed terms as chairman and vice chair of the Board of Directors of Baptists Today, Inc., the not-for-profit organization that produces *Baptists Today* news journal and the new Nurturing Faith Bible Studies. Both will continue serving on the Executive Committee of the self-perpetuating 35-member board.

Church historian Walter B. Shurden of Macon, Ga., was elected as the new chairman during the board’s Sept. 22-23 meeting in Atlanta. Retired physician Robert Cates of Rome, Ga., now serves as vice chair. Re-elected as chair of the budget and finance committee is layman Charles Schaible of Macon.

In addition to these five directors, others

who will serve on the Executive Committee are Nannette Avery of Signal Mountain, Tenn., Tommy Boland of Alpharetta, Ga., and Jimmy Allen of Big Canoe, Ga.

“Gary Eubanks and Kelly Belcher have provided excellent leadership during a three-year period of significant strengthening of the news journal and expanding its influence,” said Executive Editor John Pierce. “We are very grateful to them and all of the directors who invest themselves so faithfully and effectively in the unique and timely mission of *Baptists Today*.”

Those recognized for completing their terms of service on the Board of Directors were Allen Abbott of Peachtree City, Ga., David Currie of San Angelo, Texas, Tom McAfee of Macon, Ga., Sarah Timmerman of Cairo, Ga.,

and Clem White of St. Petersburg, Fla.

Newly-elected directors are Don Brewer of Gainesville, Ga., Fisher Humphreys of Birmingham, Ala., Cathy Turner of Clemson, S.C., Tom Waller of Alpharetta, Ga., Roger Paynter of Austin, Texas, Kathy Richardson of Rome, Ga., Cynthia Wise of Birmingham, Ala., and William Neal of Stone Mountain, Ga., who previously served as a director.

Re-elected to second three-year terms were current directors Shurden, Avery, Macon Sheppard of Folly Beach, S.C., and Leo Thorne of Valley Forge, Penn.

“These directors bring so much talent and such deep commitments to this endeavor,” said Pierce. “It is a joy to work closely with them and to see the impact of their wisdom, experience and resources.” **BT**

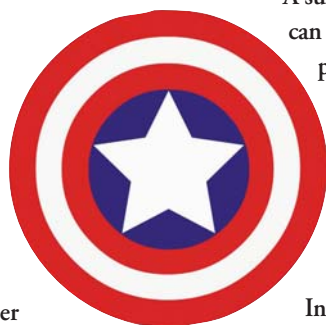
Captain America vs. the Bible:

Americans flunk question on biblical quote

By Adelle M. Banks
Religion News Service

Pop quiz: Who said: "We often suffer, but we are never crushed. Even when we don't know what to do, we never give up"?

According to a recent poll, more Americans attributed the passage to comic book hero Captain America, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and former President George W. Bush than its



actual source: the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians.

A survey commissioned by the American Bible Society found that 56 percent of Americans surveyed misattributed the quote. At 27 percent, King received the most misplaced credit; just 12 percent correctly attributed it to the Bible.

The survey by Harris Interactive was conducted online among 2,572 adults. **BT**

Poll shows evangelical divide on gay marriage

By Bruce Nolan
Religion News Service

It's not news that young people are more liberal on issues like same-sex marriage, but a new poll charts just how deeply that split has been carved into the white evangelical community, one of the most socially conservative groups on the American religious landscape.

The poll, released in late August by the Washington-based Public Religion Research Institute, found that 44 percent of young evangelicals between the ages of 18 to 29 favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry.

By contrast, the white evangelical community as a whole (even counting those relatively liberal young adults) is solidly opposed to same-sex marriage, by slightly more than 80 percent.

More broadly, the poll found "at least a 20-point generation gap between millennials (age 18-29) and seniors (65 and over) on every public policy measure in the survey concerning rights for gay and lesbian people."

The poll also found that a slight majority of all Catholics (52 percent) favor same-sex marriage, despite the energetic teaching of their church to the contrary.

The PRRI poll confirmed findings from other polls over the last five years that Americans have come to a tipping point on the issue of same-sex marriage: either equally divided or slightly in favor.

"This is the first year that support for allowing gay and lesbian couples to marry is not a minority position," said Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute **BT**

Church embezzler gets 44 months in prison

By Bob Allen
Associated Baptist Press

MORRISTOWN, Tenn. — A 70-year-old widow who stole \$1.5 million as financial secretary of a Baptist church was sentenced Sept. 1 to 44 months in prison.

Under federal sentencing guidelines, Barbara Whitt, who pleaded guilty in February to bank fraud and money laundering, could have served as little as 41 months or as long as 51 months. According to media reports, U.S. District Judge Leon Jordan refused to give the minimum sentence to send a message to the public.

According to her indictment, Whitt stole money from First Baptist Church in Morristown, Tenn., for nearly three years before a church audit discovered \$500,000 missing in May 2010. Prosecutors said she wrote 1,647 checks to herself that she cashed at a nearby bank on her lunch hour.

Her lawyer claimed in a sentencing memorandum that her 40-year-old son and only living close relative, Michael Dean Whitt,

manipulated her by telling her he needed money to pay the IRS for his business or he would be sent to prison. He then spent the money on things like motor vehicles, a boat, consumer electronics and drugs.

U.S. District Attorney William Killian said Whitt kept the books for her son's company and would have known that the money wasn't being used for legitimate business expenses.

Whitt was financial secretary at First Baptist Church from 1964 until 2010, but a member of a different church. According to local media, her pastor, Todd Stinnett of Grace Baptist Church, testified that she had apologized and taken responsibility for her actions.

Dean Haun, senior pastor of First Baptist Church, said he and his 2,500-member congregation have forgiven her despite "the hurt, disappointment and shock of her actions."

According to the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*, Judge Jordan told her she is fortunate to have so much support, love and forgiveness, but that "We must send a message to the public." **BT**

2011 CBF of Georgia General Assembly



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|--|---|
| 6:00 p.m. Registration | 7:30 a.m. Advocates and Pastors Breakfasts* |
| 6:30 p.m. Pre-service Music | 9:00 a.m. Breakouts and Staff Networks |
| 6:45 p.m. Business Meeting/ Worship Service | 10:15 a.m. Break |
| 8:30 p.m. Dessert Reception | 10:45 a.m. Breakouts and Staff Networks |
| | 12:00 p.m. Missions Luncheon** |

*Reservations required / **Reservations required and \$10 due at the door

'Discovering meaningful opportunities for accelerating or launching activities to help the least, the last and the lost is the essence of the common ground of the [New Baptist] Covenant.'

New Baptist Covenant II: A giant step forward for Baptists

I long have been troubled by the fact that our Baptist faith family is so divided by racial, economic, gender and doctrinal differences. This often has reduced our effectiveness in applying the biblical principles of justice, mercy and love.

The New Baptist Covenant II meetings across the nation Nov. 17-18, with its Day of Service on Nov. 19, create the opportunity for a giant step forward for Baptist believers. We not only will join together to recertify our common faith and values without regard to race, ethnicity, partisanship or geography, but also have an opportunity to translate our words into action in our own neighborhoods.

The highly successful New Baptist Covenant celebration in Atlanta in 2008 brought together more than 15,000 Baptists from across the United States and Canada from 30 different Baptist organizations to examine the challenges of the Luke 4 mandate. This historic event in the life of Baptists created a catalyst for new relationships and collaborations in sharing good news with the poor, bringing sight to the blind, setting the captive free, and proclaiming the acceptable year of our Lord.

The following year four areas decided to have New Baptist Covenant Regional Gatherings. I spoke at Norman, Okla., Kansas City, Mo., Winston-Salem, N.C., and Birmingham, Ala. In each of them I found the excitement of people of common faith and concerns getting to know each other. They

were sharing innovative ways of meeting the challenges of sharing the good news of God and demonstrating his love.

The presidents of all four of the National Baptist Conventions, the officers of American Baptist Churches, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, leaders of the Baptist World Alliance, leaders of Baptist Hispanic, Korean and Native American groups are at work in contributing to the New Baptist Covenant movement.

Historically, Baptists in early American experience chose to meet in a Triennial Convention. In this triennial year of the New Baptist Covenant we are moving into local churches through satellite and Internet communications.

The anchor church will be Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta. Ten cities have invited the program to strategic churches to be shared in regional meetings by satellite. They stretch from New York to Los Angeles.

In addition, the Internet Webcam offers the opportunity for churches and communities across the nation to have access. Churches and campuses across the nation can come together to participate in this event.

Wherever the Webcam is utilized, a prior agreement must be created that the meeting will be across racial lines. This provides occasions for small towns as well as huge cities to work together in accelerating or creating service opportunities of doing the work of Christ.

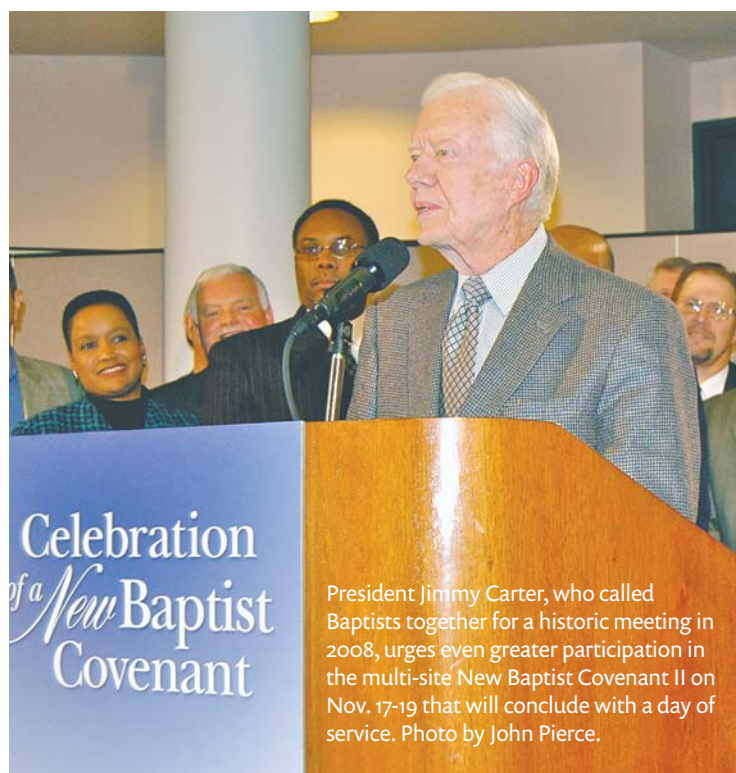
New Baptist Covenant II could be the largest Baptist meeting in our nation's history. The important thing, however, is not the size of the audience. It is seizing the opportunity to work together as we worship together.

Discovering meaningful opportunities for accelerating or launching activities to help the least, the last and the lost is the essence of the common ground of the Covenant. We do not intend [to create] another denominational organization or convention. Our efforts are centered in joining hands in what we are doing to fulfill the Luke 4 mandate.

A day of service and work on Saturday will provide opportunity for us to implement the Gospel message together. Youth groups are being galvanized into action. People of all ages are making Saturday, Nov. 19, a day to remember.

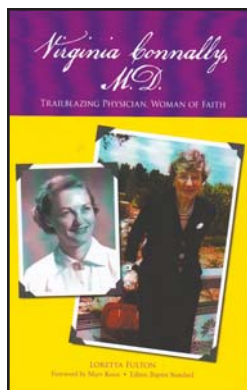
Detailed information on New Baptist Covenant II can be found at newbaptistcovenant.org. I call all Baptists to prayer intercession for this experience to be touched by God. **BT**

—President Jimmy Carter is a lay leader and Sunday school teacher in Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga.



President Jimmy Carter, who called Baptists together for a historic meeting in 2008, urges even greater participation in the multi-site New Baptist Covenant II on Nov. 17-19 that will conclude with a day of service. Photo by John Pierce.

By John Pierce

**Virginia Connally, M.D.**

Copies may be purchased from Texas Star Trading Company at texas trading.com or (325) 672-9696.

A remarkable woman: New book details Dr. Connally's life of service

Virginia Boyd Connally, M.D., is my 98-year-old friend in Abilene, Texas. She is simply remarkable.

I got to know Dr. Connally while touring England together in 2005. Then in 2009, I visited in her home to conduct an interview for a feature story. We had a delightful conversation there and then went out for lunch together.

With nearly a century of remarkable living already behind her, it was not hard to fill a few pages in a news journal with wonderful stories about Virginia.

She was the first female physician in that part of West Texas — opening her eye, ear, nose and throat practice in Abilene in 1940. Timing was good, she said, in that some of the male doctors were heading off to war.

Someone once asked if there were patients who would not come to her because she was female. Dr. Connally quipped: “I don’t know; I didn’t see them.”

A native of Temple, Texas, she attended Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene and lived with an aunt and uncle there. Her uncle, a surgeon, influenced her to become a physician.

So, after graduation, she attended LSU Medical School and then did her internship and residency in New Orleans. The Catholic nuns there impressed her with their concern for the poor and suffering.

She also heeded a warning from her aunt: “Don’t ever let me catch you without a book.”

Reading deep and wide, Virginia became interested in a variety of topics outside her vocation. Her medical practice was just one place for serving others.

Dr. Connally has given much of her life (time, resources and influence) to the cause of Christian missions from service in her nearby church and college alma mater in Abilene to the many corners of the world where she has traveled.

The larger story of her life is now told in



Dr. Virginia Connally (left) and friend Janet Erwin visit Coventry Cathedral as part of a 2005 tour of England that included the 100-year celebration of the Baptist World Alliance. Photo by John Pierce.

the book, *Virginia Connally, M.D.: Trailblazing Physician, Woman of Faith* by Loretta Fulton.

I am pleased that the book makes references to my article “Medicine & Missions: Ground-breaking physician’s full life marked by service to others” (*Baptists Today*, October 2009).

And she really hasn’t slowed much as she approaches the century mark.

In the book’s introduction, my friend and fellow journalist Marv Knox of Texas tells how Virginia — at age 94 — was determined to attend the historic Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant that President Carter called together in Atlanta in early 2008. She knew getting around the expansive convention center would require stamina — or wheels.

So she moved her bedroom upstairs for this well-reasoned observation: “I figured climbing the stairs several times a day would build up my legs, and then getting around in

Atlanta would be no problem.”

It worked. Several of us were witnesses. And I don’t recall us waiting around on Virginia when we traipsed across England in 2005. It is an example of the determination that has fueled her long and productive life.

Dr. Connally is a gracious person with a quick mind and wit. She attracts people like bugs to a light — whether a down-and-out stranger or those in positions of power.

Her late husband Ed Connally was deeply involved in Texas politics (serving as chairman of the state Democratic party in 1960), which led to a personal relationship with LBJ and a longtime friendship with First Lady “Lady Bird” Johnson who died in 2007.

The Connallys owned interest in an airline company that enabled Virginia to travel the world to encourage and assist missionaries. Among the close relationships she established was one with Bertha Smith, the legendary missionary to China from South Carolina who lived to be nearly 100.

Often the Connallys would bring missionaries from around the world to Abilene to visit Hardin-Simmons and the First Baptist Church. And Virginia has established a mission center on the university campus and purchased the home next to hers to house visiting missionaries.

This kind and generous woman is a true pioneer. As I wrote in the article a couple of years ago, she has broken more West Texas ground than a dozen plowshares.

Being true to her aunt’s warning and to her own generous spirit, Dr. Connally told me that she keeps buying up books — so they eventually can be passed out at her funeral.

Fortunately, there is now a book that tells us more about the life of this remarkable woman herself — who passed along this advice to me once: “Never tell people how old you are. I did, and they started treating me that way.” **BT**

—This media article first appeared as an editor’s blog at baptiststoday.org.

Man or metaphor?

Did the human race really start with two people, one made from clay and the other from bone? Does Genesis 2-3 intend to portray an accurate history of creation, or to use metaphor in asserting that humans have been sinful from the beginning?

This old question hit the news recently, following an NPR report featuring opinions on either side of the issue. In the course of that interview, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Albert Mohler declared that “without Adam, the work of Christ makes no sense whatsoever in Paul’s description of the Gospel, which is the classic description of the Gospel we have in the New Testament.”

Writing in his blog, Mohler argued that “the denial of a historical Adam and Eve as the first parents of all humanity and the solitary first human pair severs the link between Adam and Christ which is so crucial to the Gospel.”

Christianity Today joined the discourse with an editorial suggesting that if there was no historical Adam and Eve, there can be no gospel.

The current debate reflects a tiff between religious dogma and scientific discoveries, a historical belief in a literal “first pair” as opposed to genomic evidence that suggests a larger population.

Genomics aside, recent arguments appear to ignore the obvious fact that Genesis relates two very different creation stories. Some contend that Gen. 2:4b-25 is simply a more detailed view of human creation as told in Gen. 1:1-2:4a, but no honest reading of the two can support the idea.

The first story majestically describes a seven-day creative sequence in which an unseen God (*Elohim*) speaks a creative word and light, the earth, the seas, plants, the heavenly bodies, fish, fowl, and humans come into existence, with humans coming last as the crown of creation.

The clear implication is that humans were created en masse in the same way that plants, fish, creeping things, wild and domestic animals were created. Nothing about Genesis 1 suggests the original creation of just one pair of butterflies or one pair of cows, for example. The

creation of humans, with the exception of their being made in God’s image, is told in the same way, in the plural, and with the added note that the initial creation of humans included both males and females.

In contrast, the second story describes a one-day event in which a very anthropomorphic God (called *Yahweh Elohim*) makes a single man from the dust of the earth, even before God created plants by “planting a garden” in Eden. The man is called “Adam,” a Hebrew word that means “humankind.”

Animals were created, according to the story, in an effort to find a suitable partner for the man, who names them, but finds no mate. At the very end of the story, God gives Adam divine anesthesia, removes something from his side, and uses it to make a woman, with whom Adam is delighted. Only when both exist is humanity complete.

Both stories testify to Israel’s belief that God created humankind. The very presence of two different stories suggests that, for the Hebrews, the belief in God as Creator was

much more important than the details of how creation came about.

Genesis 3 — the infamous story of “the fall” — is a continuation of the second creation story. In the familiar account of Adam and Eve choosing to disobey God by eating from a forbidden tree, we find the added testimony that humans have been prone to sin from the beginning.

This is reinforced by further stories in Genesis 4 (Cain murdering Abel), in Genesis 6-9 (a world so corrupt that God regrets making it and drowns everyone but Noah’s family members, who then return to sinful ways), and in Genesis 11 (the tower of Babel).

In other words, Genesis is filled with stories in which humans demonstrate a proclivity toward sin, and the stories do not presume that all would have remained righteous if only Adam and Eve had held firm against the serpent’s probing questions.

Mohler and others cite as a doctrinal core Paul’s contention that the saving work of Christ reversed the sinful fall of Adam (Rom. 5:12-21, 1 Cor. 15:21-23), thus insisting that if there was no historical Adam, then the work of Christ makes no sense.

This is what happens when you insist on always interpreting the Bible literally — you get backed into a corner and have to defend an argument that makes no sense. Can humankind not be sinful and in need of a savior without blaming it on a single man? For all we know, even Paul may have been speaking metaphorically.

The clear testimony of scripture is that humans have always been sinful and God has always sought ways of repairing the breach in that relationship, culminating with the advent of Christ. To make the need for or value of Christ’s atoning work subject to a literal interpretation of both Paul and Genesis, thus claiming that Christ’s work is pointless without a historical Adam, is a fine way to miss the point entirely. **BT**

—This column first appeared as a blog at baptiststoday.org.



Evangelical, fundamentalist and born-again not interchangeable labels

A week or two after the 2004 election, I was dining with some friends in New York when the conversation turned to religion and politics — the two things that you’re never supposed to discuss in polite company.

George W. Bush had just been re-elected with the help of what was described in the media as “evangelical voters.” And knowing that I am an evangelical Christian, my friends were terribly curious.

“What, exactly, is an evangelical?” one gentleman asked, as if he were inquiring about my time living among the lowland gorillas of Cameroon.

I suddenly found myself as cultural translator for the evangelical mind. “As I understand it,” I began, “what ‘evangelical’ really means is that a person believes in Jesus Christ, has a personal relationship with him and because of that relationship feels compelled to share their experience of God’s love with other people. How they choose to share that ‘good news’ with others is entirely up to the individual. Beyond that, the rest is details and style.”

Most of my friends knew evangelicalism only through the big, bellicose voices of TV preachers and religio-political activists such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell and Chuck Colson. Not surprisingly, my friends hadn’t experienced an evangelicalism that sounded particularly loving, accepting or open-minded.

After eschewing the descriptor because I hadn’t wanted to be associated with a faith tradition known more for harsh judgmentalism and fearmongering than the revolutionary love and freedom that Jesus taught, I began publicly referring to myself again as an evangelical. By speaking up, I hoped I might help reclaim “evangelical” for what it is supposed to mean.

With the 2012 presidential race upon us, the “evangelical” question is once again front and center. As I read a profile in *The New Yorker* of candidate Michele Bachmann of Minnesota, who proudly wears the evangelical label, it was painfully clear that the what-is-an-evangelical question remains largely unanswered for many who live outside the born-again bubble.

The piece, titled “Leap of Faith,” delved into Bachmann’s rise to public and political prominence, focusing particularly on her religious and philosophical beliefs. The story was well researched and eloquently written, but I was struck by the author’s use of the terms “evangelical,” “born-again” and “fundamentalist.”

It seemed they were employed interchangeably, as if their definitions were synonymous. In popular culture, those terms are shorthand for “staunchly conservative,” “small-minded,” and “mean-spirited.” It’s a matter of semantics, but it is spiritually significant.

The word “evangelical” comes from the Greek “*evangelion*,” meaning “the good news” or “the gospel.” During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther adopted the word to describe his breakaway church; for hundreds of years thereafter, “evangelical” meant, simply, “Protestant.”

Today, in American society the term is used in three ways, according to the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College:

- **Theologically**, it is an umbrella term for Christians who believe in the need for conversion, the command to spread the gospel, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the primacy of Jesus Christ’s atoning death on the cross.
- **Stylistically**, “evangelical” also describes a kind of religious practice as much as a set of doctrines. This is where you really see the diversity of evangelicalism: Mennonites, African-American Baptists, Southern Baptists, Catholic charismatics and Dutch Reformed all fall under the “evangelical-as-a-style” umbrella.
- **Politically**, “evangelical” describes a coalition of Protestants (including evangelist Billy Graham) who used the term in an attempt to distance themselves from the “Christian fundamentalist” movements of the 1920s and



’30s. Fundamentalism’s hallmarks were (and to a certain extent remain) anti-intellectualism, anti-modernity and a belief that the church should not engage with culture. Mainstream evangelicals, by contrast, sought to actively be a part of culture in order to transform it.

“Evangelical” and “fundamentalist” are not one in the same. They are in many ways opposites. In fact, Christian fundamentalists have more in common with fundamentalists from other religions than they do with other Christians: a siege mentality and distrust of the “other,” topped with a liberal dose of ardent legalism.

“Born-again,” meanwhile, is a colloquialism derived from Jesus’ own words in the New Testament, that describes a conversion experience where a person encounters God and is spiritually transformed. Not all evangelicals and fundamentalists use those words to describe themselves, but many in each group do.

The Bachmann profile describes the late evangelist and thinker Francis Schaeffer, a figure nearly as legendary in evangelical circles as Graham, as one of the “exotic” influences on the congresswoman’s worldview, which has been “shaped by institutions and people unfamiliar to most Americans.”

Pollsters and scholars estimate that evangelicals comprise roughly 30 percent of the U.S. population — a minority to be sure, but hardly an obscure one.

If the *New Yorker* piece is any indication, apparently we evangelicals remain an elusive, vastly misunderstood lot — 30 years after evangelicals became a potent political force. In the popular imagination at least, evangelicalism is an ideological monolith.

Those of us in the media would do well to treat evangelicals as neither homogenous nor uncommon, and choose our words more carefully. **BT**

—Cathleen Falsani is an award-winning columnist and former religion news writer for the Chicago Sun Times.

The complexity of immigration and the pursuit of justice

By Rachel Johnson

President Obama's announcement in August that his administration will suspend deportation hearings against thousands of undocumented immigrants marked a significant milestone in the country's ongoing immigration debate.

After weeks of having all the oxygen in the national discourse sucked up by the struggling economy, a narrowly averted default crisis and credit downgrade, the President's actions redirected our attention to an issue that continues to impact millions of lives in this country.

And we are reminded of one very simple fact: immigration is a complex issue. Take as an example the story of Nazry Mustakim.

Naz (as he is known to his loved ones) legally moved to the U.S. from Singapore in 1992 when he was 13. In his 20s, Naz, like millions in this country, became addicted to drugs and was arrested as a result. He pled guilty to a drug charge and was sentenced to rehabilitation and 10 years probation.

It was during his rehab that Naz came to know Jesus and converted to Christianity. In the more than five years that he has been clean, Naz has become a Narcotics Anonymous sponsor, graduated from college, completed his probation early, and has begun working at the faith-based non-profit where he did his rehab — and where he met Hope, with whom he just celebrated his one-year wedding anniversary. During this time, Naz was also reissued a green card.

Naz's friends and family speak movingly about the power of his Christian witness and story of redemption. After marrying, Naz and Hope bought a house in one of the most impoverished areas in Waco, Texas. The couple says they feel called to invest their lives in their

community and to work alongside the vulnerable and marginalized there.

Then, in March of this year, Naz was picked up by I.C.E. (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) and informed that because of his drug plea the government is initiating deportation proceedings against him. Since then he has been held at a detention center in southern Texas, more than 250 miles from his wife.

Nazry's story is not the typical one you hear when immigration is discussed, that of dangerous border crossing and life without documentation. But like many stories of immigration and deportation, it exists in shades of gray and eschews simplistic morality.

Naz came to the U.S. legally. He made mistakes and broke the law. His attorney failed to advise him that pleading guilty would automatically void his permanent resident status (courts are now required to inform defendants of how their plea impacts their residency). He faithfully fulfilled all court mandates and became an integral part of his community. For four years the U.S. government not only did not deport Naz, but also re-issued him a green card.

Naz's conversion to Christianity has resulted in him being ostracized by his Muslim family and community in Singapore. If he is forced to return, Singapore, which is especially harsh on drug charges, could choose to retry him with the possibility of particularly draconian sentencing.

It can be tempting to reduce Nazry's story to simple black-and-white terms: he broke the law and therefore he should be deported. Likewise, it's tempting to view all immigration stories through a similar lens. But such unequivocal legalism isn't American, and it isn't Christian.



Rachel Johnson

Let me be clear, the United States has every right to set laws for who can enter the country and the conditions under which they can stay here. Progressives do ourselves a disservice when we do not explicitly acknowledge this fact (though most of us believe it to be true).

As the Apostle Paul wrote, "The state does not bear the sword in vain" (Rom. 13:4). But in our zeal to uphold the law, we must never confuse it with being identical to justice instead of a tool for achieving justice. Paul is clear on that as well.

America's jurisprudence is revolutionary in the world because it favors the individual over the state. We are innocent until proven guilty; we are protected from unlawful search and seizure and must be advised of our rights. To use religious language, the legal ideals of this country favor grace over judgment.

Why then, when it comes to immigration, are we so quick to establish laws that pass unilateral judgment against whole groups of people? Shouldn't we rather determine who we welcome by the standard of who we want to be as a country? Isn't the U.S. strengthened by having people who are invested in their communities and families, those who are dedicated to service and improving society?

This is where the Christian narrative can be especially instructive because it has a framework for holding the tension between law and grace, guilt and forgiveness.

The story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11) is perhaps the best illustration of this principle. Progressives are fond of this story for Jesus' pronouncement, "Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone" (v. 7). But the story doesn't end there. After the condemning crowd disperses, Jesus turns to the woman and says, "Go, and sin no more" (v. 11).

Much is held in those two pronouncements. There is such a thing as individual responsibility. But time and again in the Gospels — without contradicting the law

— Jesus reminds us of the perils of twisting the ideal of justice until it becomes an idol of condemnation rather than a means of redemption.

The obvious counter-argument to this piece is that while individual Christians may be called to show grace and forgiveness, the American judicial system isn't equipped to tackle immigration on a case-by-case basis. But, if Christian conservatives are correct (as I believe they are) in saying they cannot separate their personal faith from their political views, then Christians should be advocating for immigration laws that align with our understanding of biblical justice that fosters reconciliation and shalom (as the Southern Baptist Convention recently has done).

Second, having common legal standards for how immigration cases are handled doesn't have to preclude measures that can take into account an individual's specific circumstances. Judges can and should be given greater

discretion in the factors they are allowed to consider in deportation hearings.

This was the case up until 1996, when legislation was enacted (in contradiction to international human rights standards) that

'Jesus reminds us of the perils of twisting the ideal of justice until it becomes an idol of condemnation rather than a means of redemption.'

severely limited a judge's ability to consider the circumstances of an individual's case and determine whether deportation is warranted or would be detrimental to the community. If the goal of our immigration laws is justice and not wholesale judgment on a class of people, then

giving the judicial system the flexibility to balance the law and grace, justice and mercy, just makes sense.

I'll say it again: immigration is a complex issue. Because of their faith, Nazry and Hope believe that God is working even in the midst of their difficult situation and will be glorified whatever the outcome.

But theirs is far from the only story in our country's ongoing immigration struggles. And unless we grapple with the hard questions of upholding the law while welcoming people who make vital contributions to our communities and nation, it is not only individual lives that will be impacted, but also the country as a whole that will suffer. **BT**

—Rachel Johnson is program director for American Values Network and a member of Calvary Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. This column first appeared at buffingtonpost.com.

Justice prevails

By Tony W. Cartledge
Contributing Editor

When news trickled out in early September that Hector Villanueva had been granted relief from the threat of deportation, he wasn't the only one who felt relief. It had been a long, nervous year.

I first wrote about the case more than a year ago, shortly after five carloads of various immigration and law enforcement officials showed up at his house at 6:30 a.m., arrested him in front of his wife and children, and hauled him off to a deportation center.

Villanueva, a popular pastor and leader among Hispanic Baptists affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina (CBFNC), had been in the United States since he was three years old, when his family moved from Mexico to California. He speaks English and Spanish equally well. His wife and six children (two of them adopted) are U.S. citizens.

Villanueva wanted to become a citizen of his adopted country, too, but his application led instead to incarceration when it was discovered that he had a prison record. Sixteen years ago, poor and homeless and living in



California, Villanueva had tried to cash a check that wasn't his. He served a year in jail for that — far more time than many have pulled for much larger crimes.

While in prison, Villanueva became an avid follower of Christ and active in Baptist life. He came to North Carolina in 2006, and with the help of pastor Javier Benitez and the CBFNC Hispanic Network, became active in church planting. He currently serves as the bivocational pastor of Iglesia Bautista la Roca in Siler City, doing home repairs to supplement his income.

After Villanueva's arrest, CBFNC friends rallied around him and posted bail while he awaited a hearing. Under a deportation order for a crime that was not a deporting offense when he committed it, Villanueva's only hope was that the judge might grant a "discretionary waiver" allowing him to stay because he has a wife and children to support.

After a year of waiting, Villanueva had his day in court on Sept. 2. Friends and supporters from CBFNC not only paid his legal bills, but also showed up, three dozen strong,

in the Charlotte courtroom where Villanueva appeared before Judge Barry Pettinato.

A string of character witnesses were prepared to testify, but none was called. When Judge Pettinato heard Villanueva's own fervent testimony and saw the evidence of support from those gathered in the courtroom, he quickly granted Villanueva the needed waiver of relief. It was simply the right thing to do.

Villanueva's case throws a spotlight on ways in which "homeland security" laws targeting truly dangerous people can also ensnare persons whose presence makes America a better nation. The positive outcome offers some measure of hope for others in similar situations, like Nazry Mustakim, whose story is told in the column above.

Like Villanueva, Mustakim found Christ after getting into trouble with the law, and has turned his new life into one of service as he and his wife Hope work among people who live on the margins of life through Mission Waco in Texas.

As we recognize the good work of those who supported Villanueva and thank God for the good verdict in his case, we pray for Mustakim and for others who seek justice and whose contributions will strengthen our country — if they are allowed to stay. **BT**

Villanueva's case throws a spotlight on ways in which "homeland security" laws targeting truly dangerous people can also ensnare persons whose presence makes America a better nation.

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*Jud Reasons, associate pastor,
First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Ala.*

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Popular Bible teacher and writer **Tony W. Cartledge** writes each of the weekly Bible studies in *Baptists Today* (beginning on page 18). Themes are based on selected texts from the Revised Common Lectionary.

These lessons — found exclusively in this Nurturing Faith section of *Baptists Today* — form the foundation for the teaching resources for all age groups. **Each class participant should have a copy of *Baptists Today* with these lessons in hand.**

Christian educator **Rick Jordan** of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina provides a teaching plan for each lesson, available at nurturingfaith.net. His FIT FAITH approach to teaching allows for class engagement with the biblical texts as well as with one another.

The Youth Lessons — now found on pages 22-23 — build off of Tony's Bible studies and direct these biblical truths to the daily lives of students. Curriculum developer **David Cassidy** writes the youth lessons in the news journal, and student minister **Jeremy Colliver** provides the online teaching guides for each lesson found at nurturingfaith.net (or linked from baptiststoday.org).

The Nurturing Faith Bible Studies in *Baptists Today* provide a complete curriculum for adults and youth to be used by Sunday school classes or other weekly Bible study groups. Class members get excellent weekly Bible lessons — along with the timely information in the news journal. And teachers have free access to abundant teaching resources at nurturingfaith.net.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 78:1-8

Nov. 6, 2011

Psalming the Blues

If asked to name their favorite book in the Old Testament, I suspect more people would choose the Book of Psalms than any other. The psalms reflect the reality of our lives through pain and praise, rage and rejoicing, pride and penitence. It is in these psalms that we find the texts for our November lessons.

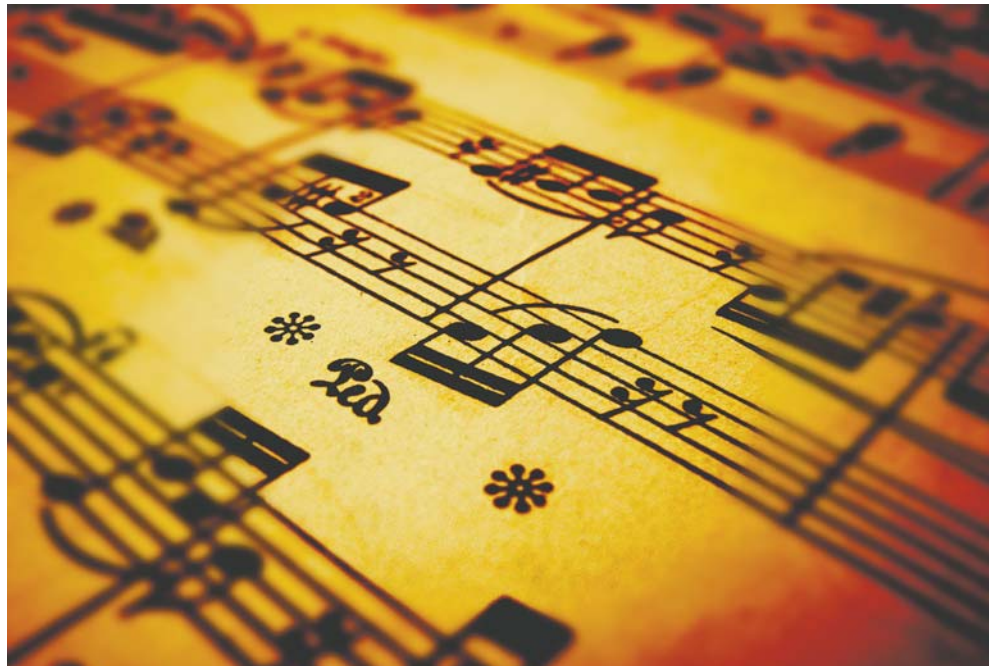
We should not forget that the Psalms served as Israel's hymnbook. Their words are couched in lyrical fashion, and occasional introductory notes offer enigmatic hints as to how the song was to be performed. If only we knew the tunes!

Fifteen years ago, when I was a pastor, I planned a series of sermons from the psalms, trying to imagine what musical style the writer would have adopted if he or she were writing a similar song today. Then I recast the words of the text into passable English lyrics and encouraged the congregation to sing them with me.

It just so happens that all four of the psalm texts in the lectionary for November were among those I chose for the series. All four, I believe, lend themselves to interpretation through different genres of modern music. Today's text reminds me of the blues.

God sings the blues

We can't do justice to vv. 1-8 without some appreciation for the entire psalm. Scholars have attached a variety of labels to Psalm 78. It clearly begins with a theme common to Israel's wisdom teachers, but the latter part has



been called everything from a descriptive hymn of praise to a meditation or philosophy of history.

The text also has strong theological and political overtones — and in Israel the two were rarely separate. The psalm's primary purpose is to challenge hearers to learn a positive lesson from the negative example of Israel's history. It does this through a succession of reminders recounting God's deliverance and provision, Israel's stubborn rebellion, and God's response with both judgment and grace. As a secondary function, the psalm concludes with an affirmation of the Davidic dynasty as God's choice to rule over the Hebrews. ↓

The psalm may have been written as early as the 10th century B.C., though some scholars date it as late as the post-exilic period. Though it does not specifically mention the division of the kingdoms or the destruction of the Northern Kingdom (referred to in the psalm as "Israel" or "Ephraim"), the psalm seems to presume it.

One who reads through the entire psalm cannot help but join the psalmist in frustration over Israel's historical pattern of divine deliverance followed by

human rebellion. God gives Israel covenant rules to live by, works miracles on their behalf, delivers them from Egypt, provides food and water in the wilderness, shows grace and patience beyond measure — and is perpetually thanked with forgetfulness, complaints, sinfulness and rebellion.

In keeping with the covenant rules set out in the law, God is compelled to judge the people for their shortcomings, but judgment is always tempered with grace and hope that the people will yet learn their lessons.

The song is, without question, a royal downer. Despite God's best efforts, nothing goes right and the only hope that remains is in David's descendants. It is this constant theme of human stubbornness and failure that makes the psalm so blue: God is singing the blues over Israel. ↓

Riddle me this (vv. 1-4)


The psalm begins in the fashion of typical wisdom teachings, with an imperative call for people to heed the speaker and learn from his words (v. 1). These words, we learn, are in the form

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of a “parable” or “dark sayings from of old” (NRSV is used here and following, unless otherwise indicated). 

The word translated as “parable” is the same word (*mashal*) typically used for proverbial statements that are usually much shorter than Psalm 78, but both are stories told with an intent to teach.

The parable, however, is a paradox. The word behind “dark sayings” commonly means “riddle.” Wisdom teachers of the ancient Near East often used riddles as teaching methods, and the Hebrews were no different. In this case, the writer doesn’t claim to ask a question with a trick answer. The riddle he tells is an unsolved question, a puzzle for pondering: how is it that Israel could persistently respond to God’s grace and goodness with rebellion rather than repentance, with sin instead of obedience?


The call to learn from the past for the sake of the present and the hope of the future is a common theme in the Old Testament. The psalmist emphasizes the deep roots of the story he is about to tell, the history he is about to recount, in a variety of ways. His riddles are “of old” (v. 2), things “that our ancestors have told us” (v. 3).

The psalmist declares his determination to keep the traditions alive, even when they are painful. Perhaps he

The making of a Maskil:

The superscription to Psalm 78 labels it a “Maskil.” The term is derived from a Hebrew verb that means “to be prudent” or “to ponder.” That is a fitting description of this psalm, which is designed to inspire meditation on how one should act in response to God’s goodness, especially in the light of Israel’s history. We would also do well to ponder its message.



recalled Moses’ call for the Israelites to love God with all their heart, soul and strength, to remember God’s commandments, and to conscientiously pass them on to their children from generation to generation (Deut. 6:4-9). 

Modern believers might wonder how a perceptive poet would describe the level of faithfulness in our lives, or in our churches. Would he or she also see it as a puzzle, an amazing conundrum in which God’s steadfast love is met with indifferent devotion or intentional determination to put our way above God’s way?

Here’s the deal (vv. 5-8)

The psalmist could not charge Israel with failure without a reminder of the preconditions they had violated, so the teacher reminds Israel how the people had willingly entered a covenant with God. Note the poetic inclusion of both the southern (Jacob) and northern (Israel) tribes in v. 5: “He established a decree in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel.”

The verse consists of two couplets, and in each of them the second line amplifies the meaning of the first. The word for “decree” can also mean “testimony” or “law,” and in v. 5 its sense is clarified by the use of the parallel term *torah*, or “law,” in the second line of the couplet.

It was not enough to give the law to the Exodus generation alone, however: the covenant was to be binding on all future generations. Thus, for the people to remain faithful to their special relationship with God, they must not only live by it, but also pass it on to their children, who would teach it to the next generation, not yet born (v. 6).

The psalmist understood that Israel was always just one generation from paganism: if the current generation did not both practice and preach the law

that bound them in covenant with God, there would be little hope for Israel’s future.

If they faithfully passed on their faith, however, future Hebrews would understand that they are to “set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (v. 7). This would be the ideal scenario: faith propagating faith from generation to generation.

The lectionary text ends with v. 7, but the psalmist’s introductory thought is not complete if we do not continue through v. 8. There we learn the sad truth that many in Israel had not lived up to their calling. They had not remembered their responsibilities to God, but chose to follow other paths and worship other gods. Thus, the writer speaks of ancestors he describes as “a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God” (v. 8).

The psalmist apparently has in mind the very first generation of Israel, the very people who had been delivered from Egypt and who solemnly entered a binding covenant with God at Sinai. The remainder of the psalm recounts in graphic detail the many ways in which that generation ignored or forgot God’s many displays of grace and provision, choosing to complain about what they didn’t have rather than appreciating what God had provided.

The challenge of today’s text is obvious: believers in Christ do not relate to God based on the same covenant under which Israel lived, but we do live in a relationship with God based on the grace God has shown through Christ, and our response to God’s redemptive acts. Each generation is responsible for teaching our children the ways of God in order that they, too, may find their hope in God.

The teacher who composed Psalm 78 was convinced that Israel’s people were poor students of history, failing to learn from the past in order to live more faithfully in the present and to ensure a more hopeful future. Are we doing any better? **BT**

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 123

Nov. 13, 2011

A Spiritual Psalm

Have you ever felt the cold sting of contempt? Can you remember situations in which others looked down on you, despised you or called you names? Can you remember how deeply that hurt, especially if it went on and on?

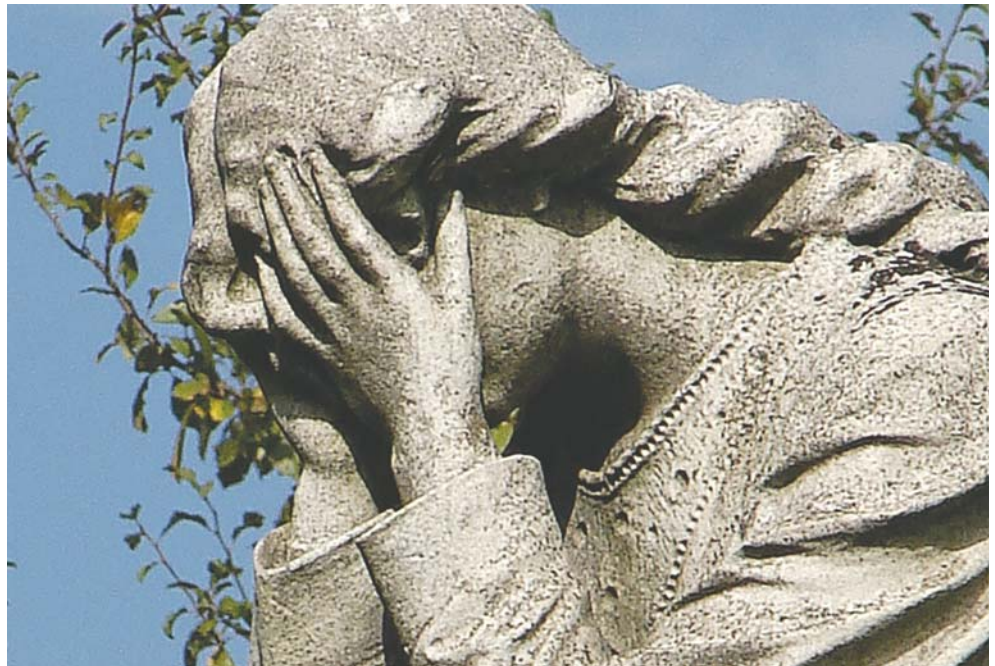
The author of today's text knew that feeling. So did others in whose behalf the psalmist prayed. Psalm 123 is a short, plaintive appeal to God from suffering Hebrews who have been scorned and mistreated by prideful people who act as if they are superior.

How does one express such sorrow in the form of a song? I described last week's text (Psalm 78) as one in which the psalmist, in God's behalf, "sang the blues" over Israel's persistent pattern of rebellion.

In Psalm 123, it is not God who is grieving, but the people, and their situation seems to be one that goes deeper than the blues. It's not just that things haven't gone their way. They have been abused and degraded, forced into a place that robbed them of dignity and purpose. They may have felt in danger of losing what little identity they had left. That kind of feeling seems deeper and darker than the blues.

What kind of song could give voice to that kind of pain and pathos that goes beyond the blues, and yet not give up altogether? We don't know what kind of tune or rhythm the ancient psalmist used when he penned this prayer, but if we sang it today, I am confident that it would sound like a Negro spiritual.

The dark period in which slavery thrived in America stands as an



ignoble blemish on our history. Men and women and children were robbed of their freedom, separated from their families, traded, loaned, and used like any other kind of property.

We wonder how anyone could have survived such abuse. Yet, by strength of will and by human hope and often by faith in God, many did survive, and they left a legacy of courage and determination and shared hope that found its voice in a style of music we speak of as "spirituals." Spirituals possess a haunting style that almost miraculously finds a way to express deep pathos and abiding hope at the same time.

I hear the same thing when I read Psalm 123, and try to imagine how it would have sounded. I think it sounds like a spiritual. (👇 See the online resource "Digging Deeper" and the online video for a "spiritual" rendition of the text).

An unfair world (vv. 3-4)

Ordinarily, we study a text by beginning at the beginning, but with this one, it's best to start with the final two verses and work backward because

it's in vv. 3-4 that we find the cause of the people's pain, for which vv. 1-2 is a response.

The psalmist speaks of a life that overflows with the contempt of others (v. 3). The Hebrew term we translate as "contempt" would be pronounced "booz," surprisingly similar in sound to the modern practice of showing derision to a speaker or athlete with a rain of boos.

The closing verse repeats the thought of v. 3 with only slightly more detail: those who scorn the psalmist are described as "those who are at ease" (NRSV, the NET has "the self-assured") and "the proud."

So, what was the situation in life of these burdened people? The psalm itself offers few clues, certainly not enough to arrive at a firm conclusion. Some scholars envision that the psalm emerged from the exilic period, where many Israelites were forcibly relocated to Babylon and some were pressed into involuntary servitude.

Others imagine a post-exilic setting, as Hebrews newly returned from the exile faced hostile opposition from neighboring peoples as they struggled to regain their standing and re-establish

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



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Acting and reacting (vv. 1-2)

If public embarrassment or criticism should come as no surprise, then what do we do when it comes? How do we react when others hurt us? Our first reaction may be to strike back. Children, for example, learn the art of name calling early on, and sometimes it takes a while to grow out of it.


Belittling others is a natural way of reacting when others treat us badly. But God's people are called to live a different kind of life, to set a different kind of example. We are not only to act like God's people, but also to react like God's people.

The author of Psalm 123 dealt with adversity by trusting in God for personal strength to endure, and by leaving any vengeance in the hands of God. The psalmist did not speak harm to the hurtful, but cried in hope to the helpful, trusting in God for mercy and grace to replace the scorn and contempt that filled his soul.


In the first verse, the writer speaks as an individual, but with v. 2 it becomes evident that he or she is praying on behalf of a beleaguered people. In addressing God as "you who are enthroned in the heavens," the supplicant acknowledges that God alone is sovereign – thus throwing a spotlight on the errant assumption of those who think they are in a position to heap scorn upon others.

With v. 2, the author employs the central metaphor in the psalm, likening the suffering people's situation to that of servants who have no power of their own, but must look to the hand of their master for protection. In Hebrew thought, the image of a "hand" is often used as a metaphor for power, especially of God, who could deliver Israel "with a mighty hand" (Exod. 32:11) or whose hand could "be heavy" against Israel's enemies (1 Sam. 5:6, see also Deut. 2:15; Ps. 18:35, 21:8, 31:15, 63:8,


themselves in Jerusalem.

It is just as likely, however, that the psalm could reflect the lot of the many poor people who endured harsh economic conditions and suffered at the hands of their own countrymen. 

Sometimes it is best, I think, that we don't know the precise setting of a psalm, for the very ambiguity of it allows the psalm to speak more clearly to our own place in life. The author of this psalm sang of personal suffering, both for himself and for the entire group of worshipers who were with him. They had been badly mistreated. They had been abused and victimized by others who were more powerful. They had been left with no one to call upon except for God himself.

Perhaps you can identify with that kind of song. Perhaps you have known what it is to feel mistreated, put down or humiliated. Few things leave our spirits more bruised than to be shamed, demeaned or degraded before others. It is not something we forget easily. 

We all have to learn, at some point, that life isn't always fair. Sometimes it seems that God doesn't care. We live in a world where people are often mistreated, and being a Christian does not protect us from it.


Brotherly injustice: Eighth-century prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah of Jerusalem condemned wealthy Israelites who took advantage of the poor, creating untenable situations in which unpayable debts led to the loss of land, homes and even personal freedom. If "those who are at ease" in v. 4 is intended to denote wealthy persons who demean their servants or hired help, that might suggest a situation that pits differing economic classes among the Hebrews. 

among others).

The first two couplets of v. 2 are in synonymous parallel, a common poetic style in which the second line echoes the thought of the first. Here, the poet's reference to male servants in the first line and a female servant in the next "conveys a sense of inclusiveness: Everyone in this community, man and woman, looks urgently to God for a sign of grace" (Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* [New York: Norton & Co., 2007], 441).

The psalmist recognizes that the only hope for the oppressed is found in God: while proud humans show only contempt, the downtrodden cry out to God "until he has mercy upon us" (v. 4).

When Jesus talked to his disciples about dealing with hurtful people, he said: "I say to you that listen: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27-28).

Jesus took the psalmist's approach, but he took it a step further. The world we inhabit lives by the rule of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a push for a push, and a name for a name. But Jesus tells us to follow a different road. He tells us to take all the hurt that others pour out, and turn it into something positive. He calls us to be transformers, to turn evil into good. 

Jesus took the worst this world could throw at him — suffering rejection by religious leaders, beatings at the hands of Roman soldiers, curses from the crowd and the awful indignities of the cross — and he turned it into the best thing that could be done for the world. He challenges us to follow his example, to be transformers, to make our world a better place.

The world is not a fair place to live, and life is often hard. But even when people mistreat us, when life does not seem fair, we can look up to heaven, we can trust in God's care, we can follow Christ's example, we can transform evil into good. When we recognize that happening, it may be the greatest miracle we will ever see. **BT**

Youth

NOVEMBER 6-NOVEMBER 27

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

Your Generation?

Have you ever thought about the influence of your generation? What trends will your generation start? What discoveries will you make? What sort of difference will your generation make in the world?

Psalm 78 is a reminder of the importance of each generation. Think about it ... If your generation does not pass your faith along to the next generation, how will the world be changed? How will people learn about God?

In this psalm, the psalmist reminds the hearers of the ways that those who came before them often forgot or turned away from God, and pleads with them to remember God and share God's love and deeds with the next generation.

One of the most powerful ways of sharing our faith is through traditions. Our habits, the seasons we observe, the special events

that happen each year — these are all traditions, and they are a great way stories and values are shared.

Do you enjoy your family's traditions around Thanksgiving and Christmas? Chances are, you know exactly what will occur during those special times, and you will likely continue those traditions as you mature.

What about the traditions at your church and in your youth group? What events do you enjoy from year to year? These traditions help your youth group pass your faith and experiences to new generations.

The psalmist also understands the power of traditions, and encourages us to keep them as a way of passing along our faith. We read in verse 4: "We will not hide them from their children; we will tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done."

NOVEMBER 6

Think About It:

Read Psalm 78 and think of the ways your church and family have passed their faith to your generation.

Make a Choice:

Already, your generation is older than the children in your church. Will you be part of helping these children discover and grow in faith?

Pray:

Offer a prayer thanking God for the persons and traditions that have passed faith to you. Ask God's guidance as your generation shares God's love with new generations.

When Life Hurts

Have you ever found a song comforting when you are hurting? Music and lyrics can express powerful feelings and help us deal with life's tough times. Did you know that psalms are often like songs?

When you read the brief Psalm 123, it is easy to imagine the feelings of the psalmist. Psalm 123 expresses the pain of being looked down upon, of being called names, of being despised. In verse 4 we read: "Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud." Have you ever felt this sort of pain?

The Hebrew people often felt the scorn of others, and psalms like this one helped remind them that God cared for them and shared in their pain. They were not alone.

All of us face hard times in life ... times when life is not fair, when we are misunderstood, insulted or feel left out. When we feel these things, it can be helpful to share our feelings with God. Whether we write a song (much like the psalmist) or poem, write in a journal, or just offer a prayer, we can find comfort in the fact that God is with us and understands our pain.

As Christians, we also have the stories of Jesus and the ways he suffered and hurt during his life. He genuinely understood what it is like to be scorned, ridiculed and looked down upon.

Read Psalm 123 and remember that, no matter how frustrating life can be, God is bigger than our hurts. God is with us and will help us through the toughest times.

NOVEMBER 13

Think About It:

When have you felt poorly treated by others? How did you cope with your feelings? Did you turn toward God when you felt hurt?

Make a Choice:

When we hurt, we either turn toward God or away from God. Where will you turn when you feel hurt? When you have friends who hurt, will you help them rely on God?

Pray:

Thank God for being with you and sharing in your pain, even when life is unfair. Ask for the strength to do the same for others in Christ's name.

David Cassady and Jeremy Colliver



Praise God!

Are you ready for Thanksgiving? Besides being thankful for a few days off from school, this season is a good time to think about other parts of our lives where we are grateful.

This Sunday's psalm is Psalm 100, a short five verses in length. Take a moment to read it. If it helps, imagine that the psalm was sung as worshippers entered the Temple (which may in fact have been the case). It calls us to "make a joyful noise" to God and be happy!

Your church's worship services may also often begin with a song and prayer of praise. When we are thankful, our focus is on God and not ourselves. It is an attitude that naturally leads us into worship. Go ahead and try it. Focus on those experiences or people for which you are thankful, and notice how you feel.

Being thankful is not only polite, but also a sign of wisdom and maturity. Our culture often emphasizes the things we do, our accomplishments, our efforts, our creations. But even the most talented, hard-working people have to admit they do not act alone. Their life and talent are gifts, and those who have encouraged, taught and supported them over the years played an important role. The mature person sees that much of the goodness of life comes from others and from God.

Of course, sometimes it is hard to feel thankful. If you are feeling sadness or loss, it may seem strange to be grateful. Psalm 100 reminds us that no matter how good or bad we currently feel, God sticks with us and never stops loving us.

NOVEMBER 20

Think About It:

How often are you grateful? As you have matured, have you found yourself being more or less thankful?

Make a Choice:

This is the season of Thanksgiving. Will you find ways to show your gratitude to those in your life who care for you? Will you take time to thank God?

Pray:

Offer a prayer of "images." In your prayer, do not use words; instead, offer to God images of people and experiences for which you are grateful.

When God Seems Silent

Do you ever wonder if God hears your prayers, or if they matter? When you pray, are you able to be open and honest with God about your feelings, or do you keep things polite and careful? Does God ever seem to be silent in response to your prayers?

In Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, we read a prayer to God that is full of emotion. Representing his people, the psalmist expresses their fear that God is angry with them and their sense that God is ignoring their prayers. In verse 4 we hear their plea: "O Lord God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?" The psalmist then reminds God of the ways God has shown love and care for the people in the past, and calls upon God to again rescue them from their troubles and their enemies.

Even those strongest in their faith encounter times when God seems silent, when God does not seem to respond. We may pray for help making a decision, or guidance around a relationship, or rescue from a problem or conflict. But God seems silent, and we do not sense any sort of response or guidance.

When your life seems hard, painful or unfair, how do you feel about God? Do you assume that the tough times are something God has caused, or do you understand God to be walking with you through hard days, helping you along?

The psalmist models one way to cope with God's silence. In Psalm 80, the prayer is continued and genuine feelings are not kept hidden, but shared with God. Most of all, the psalmist gives God time, and waits for God.

NOVEMBER 27

Think About It:

When your life seems hard, painful or unfair, how do you feel about God? Has it ever seemed that God was silent? How did you handle that?

Make a Choice:

When our prayers seem unanswered, or God appears silent, we can either be angry with God and stop praying, or we can (like the psalmist) keep praying and express our feelings to God. Which will you choose?

Pray:

What are you feeling and experiencing this week? Offer your real feelings (even if they are angry) to God in a prayer. Be yourself.

Bible Study

with Tony W. Cartledge

Psalm 100

Nov. 20, 2011

Praise God!

Psalm 100 contains deep and basic truths about who God is, who humans are, and how the two should relate. It is, as its superscription suggests, a “Psalm of Thanksgiving.” The song calls us to be thankful that God is, that God has created us, and that God has called us into relationship.

In approaching the Thanksgiving season, you may have special reasons for gratitude. Perhaps you got a nice raise or a promotion. Maybe your family has grown closer this year. Maybe you were able to accomplish some of your life’s ambitions. Maybe you feel that you have contributed something positive to the world.

Then again, things may not have gone so well. Perhaps you or someone you love has faced serious illness. Maybe your job got downsized, and you’ve been unable to find other employment. Maybe your family is cracking at the seams, and you don’t know what to do about it. Maybe you are asking, “What do I have to be so thankful for?”

Psalm 100 was written for people on both ends of the spectrum, and in between. It was written for every person who believes, and even for those who do not believe. It is a joyful invitation for all people on earth to celebrate God, and to celebrate God’s goodness.

The psalm is only five verses long, and it falls naturally into two parts. The first three verses call us to celebrate the belief that the LORD is God. The last two verses call us to celebrate that the LORD is good. Herein lies the main point of the psalm.

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



Celebrate: the LORD is God! (vv. 1-3)

The psalm begins with an imperative invitation to praise that could be spoken by a worship leader: “Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all the earth!” (v. 1). The word “joyful” is not in the text, but is often inserted to reflect the context. The Hebrew says, “Shout to Yahweh, all the earth!”

In the context of praise, one would expect such shouts to be joyful. The phrase “all the earth” implies that the call to worship Yahweh is universal.

What type of joyful noise might the poet have had in mind? The psalm as a whole is clearly a hymn of praise, and it appears to be associated with the worshipers’ entrance into the temple courts. Thus, as liturgical churches may play or sing an introit while worship leaders enter the sanctuary (often to the musical shout of an organ), the psalm may have served as a brief call to worship, inviting pilgrims massed outside to come forward into the temple courts.

As a rule, Baptists in America rarely do much shouting in church, though many African-American

congregations and others with Pentecostal leanings have no compunctions against verbal praise or interjections from the congregation. Here, as in other areas, culture plays a large role in influencing our style of worship.

Does the psalm suggest that churches should seek a hymn-leader like Otis Day from the movie *Animal House*, singing “Shout! a little bit louder now, Shout! a little bit louder now, Shout! real loud now, Shout! come on now ...”? Perhaps not.

But what do we need? When it comes to praising God in church, it’s not the volume that counts, but the attitude. Shouting joyfully is just the first of three responses the psalmist calls for: in gathering for worship we are not only to make a joyful noise, but also to “worship the Lord with gladness” and “come into his presence with singing” (v. 2). All of the verbs are imperatives. As far as the psalmist was concerned, there was no role for wallflowers at the temple — all were called to worship and to sing.

If only we knew what joyful tunes or harmonies the people of Israel might have sung! But we cannot.

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Think instead about this: if a songwriter set out to pen something akin to Psalm 100 today, what sort of tune would she use? Take a few moments to think about it. What are some examples of happy joyous music? Do you have any favorite praise choruses or traditional hymns designed to praise God?

If I were writing Psalm 100 today, I'd set it to a joyful, Caribbean beat with steel drums — something that makes hearers want to join in, and maybe even to move. 🇺🇸

Psalm 100 calls us to praise the Lord, and to do so with joy. Now the important question is “Why?” And the first answer is this: because the one we praise is God.

Verse 3 calls worshipers to “know that the LORD is God.” In Hebrew, the word we translate as “know” implies personal, intimate knowledge that comes through experience. That is where worship begins. The psalmist does not challenge us to simply know about God, but to know God. 🇺🇸

This is emphasized by the poet's use of God's personal name revealed to Moses; the name Yahweh, which means something like “the one who is,” or “the one who causes to be.” English translations usually render “Yahweh” as LORD, in all capital letters. 🇺🇸

Although I've rendered the divine

Thanks and thanksgiving:

Verse 4 contains both the noun (thanksgiving) and verb (give thanks) forms of the basic Hebrew root for expressing gratitude. The noun form could refer either to a thanksgiving sacrifice or offering, or to the vocal praise that constitutes thanksgiving (Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100, Word Biblical Commentary* [Waco: Word Books, 1990], 538).



name as “Yahweh,” we really don't know how it was pronounced. The Hebrew Bible was written with consonants only, and by the time vowels were added, God's name was considered too holy to pronounce. Rather than attempt a pronunciation of the sacred name, or to show respect for those who believe it should not be spoken, many writers prefer to write YHWH, sometimes called “the Tetragrammaton.”

Why do we worship Yahweh? Because Yahweh is God! There really is a God, says the psalmist, and we know God's name, and we know that Yahweh cares for us in a special way.

There really is a God, and we belong to him. “It is he that hath made us,” v. 3 declares, “and we are his” (NRSV). As God's people, we are like sheep in God's pasture, a common metaphor in Psalms (23:1, 28:9, 74:1, 77:21, 78:52-53, 80:1, 95:7). This claim tells us something about our basic identity in life. It tells us who we are, from whence we came and where we belong. We came from God, who created us, and we belong in God's pasture, where the one who made us also cares for us.

**Celebrate: the LORD is good!
(vv. 4-5)**

Some interpreters see vv. 1-4 as an extended call to praise, with v. 5 furnishing the reason for praise. I prefer to see a two-part structure in which vv. 1-2 serve as an initial call to praise, with a reason for praise given in v. 3. This is followed by a second call to praise in v. 4, with a second reason for praise given in v. 5.

Having called the congregation to order with an initial burst of jubilation in vv. 1-3, we can envision the worship leader now inviting the people to come forward to the temple's inner courtyard: “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him, and bless his name!” (v. 4). 🇺🇸

Here we have three more enthusiastic imperatives — Enter! Give Thanks! Bless! The psalmist understood the human need to acknowledge the Creator and to respond with thanksgiving and praise.

Why should we do this? Because Yahweh is not only God (v. 3), but also good (v. 5): “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

God's goodness is shown in a steadfast or faithful love for God's people. The word translated “steadfast love” (*chesed*) comes from a verbal root that means to be good or kind. It is commonly translated with words such as “kindness,” “lovingkindness” or “mercy.” As a divine attribute, it also carries the connotation of loyalty or commitment to covenant promises, leading to its frequent translation as “steadfast love.”

In choosing this term and combining it with “faithfulness,” the psalmist insists that God's love is not volatile or shallow. It is a deep love, an abiding love, an eternal love. Believing this, those who trust in God need never feel alone: God's love is dependable and sure.

What are some of the ways we see evidence of God's creative power and enduring love? Can you see it in the world around you, in giant bales of hay that dot the fields, in the smell of the crisp fall air, in the colors of leaves and the songs of birds?

Can you see glimpses of God's love in the devotion of a spouse or a child — or parents whose love never stops? Are you fortunate enough to see it in the support of friends who truly care about your well-being? 🇺🇸

Other humans may disappoint us by showing love that wavers or making promises they don't keep. In the face of such disappointment, the assurance of God's loyal love is particularly welcome — and worthy of praise. When life seems fragile and friendships fickle, it is a comfort to be reminded that the Lord we know is not only truly God, but also truly good. **BT**

Bible Study


with Tony W. Cartledge


Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Nov. 27, 2011

Call 911!


Do you sometimes think your prayers go unanswered because God is angry with you? Do you ever get angry with God because you cry out and God remains silent? Have you made promises, on occasion, that if God would just answer your prayer, you'd do certain things in return?

If so, you're not the first. Those themes are common in Israel's hymnbook, which contained many laments, including Psalm 80. We can't be sure how the psalm came about,  but what's important is that it emerged from a perspective of deep loss and frustration. The psalmist wrote in behalf of a people who had lost their pride, their power and their position as a world leader.

If the people of Israel had owned hound dogs and pick-up trucks, no doubt they would have lost them, too. That's why I'm convinced that if this psalmist had written his song today, it would have been a country song. 


One of the central themes of country music is the element of loss ... lost love, lost happiness, lost opportunities. This song speaks of many deprivations, but the most heartfelt loss is the presence of God.


Restore us, O God ... (vv. 1-3)

Psalm 80 is preceded by a lengthy superscription that probably has to do with the song's tune.  The psalm is a prime example of a communal lament in which a leader either sang in behalf of the larger group or led



them all in singing a plaintive prayer to God. Laments typically contain an address to God, a complaint about the worshiper(s)' present plight and a plea for help. Vows to praise God in return for answered prayer are also common.

A threefold appeal for Yahweh to save (vv. 3, 7, 19) divides the psalm into three unequal parts: an invocation and appeal (vv. 1-3); a complaint (vv. 4-7); and an extended metaphor comparing Israel to a vine, concluding with a vow (vv. 8-19). 

The imperative appeal for God to hear employs three participle phrases as divine epithets. "Shepherd of Israel," "you who lead Joseph like a flock," and "you who sit enthroned between the cherubim" (v. 1) all recall earlier periods when God was thought to have led Israel in visible ways, as during the Exodus from Egypt. 

The community pleads for the exalted God who has led them in the past to "shine forth" before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh, to "awaken" in power, and to come with salvation. But why mention only three tribes?

Note that the psalm invokes God's attention with images from Israel's

memory of how God — enthroned above the Ark of the Covenant — led Israel in the wilderness. Num. 2:17-24 says that when the Israelites set out on each stage of their wilderness journey, the first three tribes to follow the Ark were Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh — the same order as Ps. 80:2. It is as if the psalmist is praying for God to come again and lead the tribes through their present trial.

The images of God's awakening to Israel's plight, shining forth, and coming to save are echoed in the first instance of the repeated refrain: "Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (v. 3, see also vv. 7 and 20).

God's face was traditionally thought to shine with glory, so much that Moses' face also shone after being in God's presence (Exod. 34:29). But, the expression may also reflect a cultural background in which gods do battle with each other, with the winners "shining forth" in victory. Examples can be found in Canaanite literature (Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco: Word Books, 1990], 305). Similar images of

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nurturingfaith.net

the “divine shine” are found in Ps. 50:2 and 94:1.

Readers may also contemplate a connection with the Aaronic blessing of Num. 6:24-26: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

Calling upon God to “shine forth” was a poetic way of asking God to show favor toward Israel and come with saving power.

Let your face shine upon us ... (vv. 4-7)

Why would this request be appropriate? Because the people seem convinced that God is furious with them and no longer listens to their prayers. God’s face, rather than shining forth in favor, is wreathed in smoke from God’s smoldering anger (v. 4).

The people have been praying, the psalmist implies, but God has responded with fumes rather than favor. The question is how long (literally, “until when?”) this state of affairs will continue.

Indeed, the psalm laments that God actively opposes the people: while they have prayed for merciful deliverance, God

Torrents of tears: The term “bowlful” (NRSV) as a measure of tears to be drunk translates the word *shalish*, which means “a third.” Here it refers to a third of a larger measure, just as we think of a “quart” as a fourth of a gallon. Unfortunately, the text doesn’t say which larger measure the psalmist has in mind, but the clear implication is that Israel drank tears in quantity. Whether we think of kegs, steins, jugs or buckets, the image is clear.



has given them “the bread of tears” to eat and buckets of tears to drink (v. 5).

And why so many tears? “You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors,” the psalmist cried, “and our enemies mock us” (v. 6). Note the direct accusation that God is the source of the people’s trouble. This is not out of line with the traditional Old Testament belief that God’s favor mirrors human behavior.

This theology, especially clear in the book of Deuteronomy (classically expressed in ch. 28), lies behind the contention of the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings that God used foreign nations as divine agents to punish the Hebrews when they chose to reject God’s leadership and follow other gods.

The books of Job and Ecclesiastes thoroughly questioned the adequacy of such a quid pro quo theology, and the New Testament ushered in a new covenant in which salvation comes by grace rather than works. Even so, the notion that “you get what you deserve” remains a popular belief.

In the psalmist’s mind, good or bad fortune was always divinely determined. We may not hold to the same theology, but we still have a tendency to blame our troubles on God rather than accepting responsibility for our own actions. As a result, we sometimes think of God more as a cosmic repairman we call on to fix things rather than a loving shepherd we follow every day.

That we may be saved (vv. 17-19)

The lectionary skips over vv. 8-16, an extended metaphor in which the psalmist imagines God as an active horticulturalist who took a grape vine (clearly Israel) from Egypt, cleared out the promised land, and transplanted the vine in a new home (vv. 8-9). The verdant vine then spread from the mountains of the southern Negev to the cedars of Lebanon, from the

Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River — borders that were promised in Deut. 11:22-25 and approximately realized under David’s rule (vv. 10-11).

But that was in the past. The psalm declares that God had broken down the protective walls of the vineyard, allowing anyone to pick its fruit and wild animals to ravage it (vv. 12-13, compare Isa. 5:1-7). The community cries out as the personified vine, pleading for God to have pity on it as “the son you have raised up for yourself” (v. 15), but which has been cut and burned (v. 16).

The request of favor for “the man at your right hand” parallels “the son of man you have raised up for yourself” (vv. 15, 17). While some speculate that this is a reference to Benjamin (whose name means “son of the right hand”) or to a particular king, the more straightforward allusion is to Israel, the vine that God had initially blessed and later cursed.

How could the community attract God’s attention, change God’s mind, persuade God to shine forth with renewed favor and deliverance?

In times of extremity, ancient peoples often resorted to making vows to God, conditional promises that ask God for something and promise something in return.

Thus, the prayer for the hand of God’s blessing in v. 17 is followed by the promise, “then we will not turn away from you” (v. 18a). The vow is then repeated, in different words: “revive us, and (then) we will call on your name” (v. 18b).

The closing verse repeats the refrain found in vv. 3 and 7, asking God to come with shining face to deliver the people from their trouble.

Does this psalm reflect the way we pray? When we find ourselves in distress, are we likely to try swinging a deal with God?

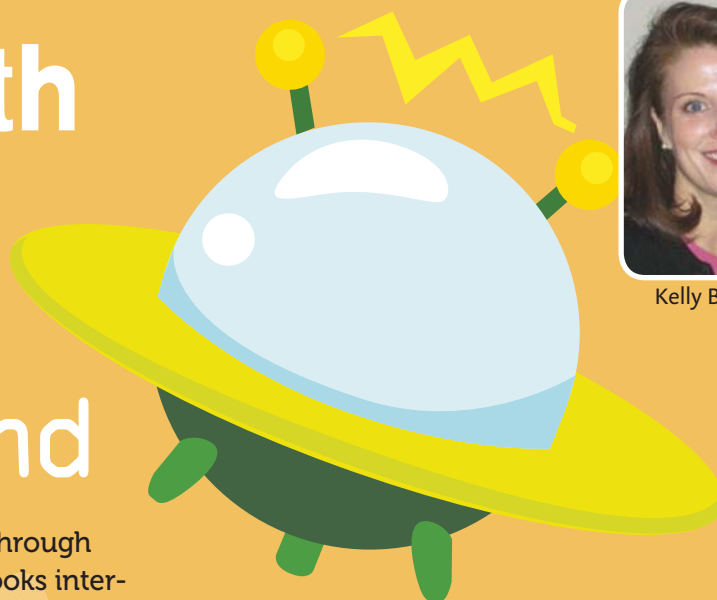
Have we ever prayed like this: “Oh God, if you will get me out of this mess, I promise to straighten up” — or “I promise to get back in church,” or “I’ll do whatever you want me to do”?

Should we? **BT**

Adventures with Luler the Hound



Kelly Belcher



You are on a space ship with Luler flying through another galaxy. You spot a planet that looks interesting and you land your ship to explore. While you and Luler are walking around, you hear a funny noise and see a giant waterfall over a huge rock — tall as a building. You come upon hundreds of beings from the planet who are standing in front of the waterfall making a strange noise.

But then Luler barks! They all turn around and stare at you. Pretty scary! So you say, "I come to visit your planet in peace, and this is my dog, Luler. We are curious about you and what you are doing to make that noise."

One of the beings answers you: "We are glad to see you, but you have interrupted us in the middle of our worship. The noise you heard was one we make when we worship here at the Rock of the Waterfall."

They would have no clue about anything on Earth. How will you explain the way you worship in your church back home?

The Bow Wow

Luler says to spend time every day worshipping God. Draw a picture of yourself worshipping. Worship means "a time of showing love and devotion to God." It doesn't just happen at church!



The Question Box

How would you describe these things?

- your sanctuary
- your Sunday school class
- the Bible
- prayer
- hymns

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Pastor: University Baptist Church in Shawnee, Okla., is seeking a creative, proven pastor with ministry experience, strong preaching skills and accredited seminary education. Detailed church and pastor profiles and application or nomination guidelines can be found at ubcshawnee.org.

Pastor: Grove Park Baptist Church (groveparkbaptist.com) is seeking an ordained Baptist minister. We prefer someone with a master's degree or higher along with 5 years pastoral experience. GPBC is located in Clinton, N.C., a rural/farming community nestled 1 hour between Raleigh and Wilmington, and is the county seat of North Carolina's largest county. GPBC is dually aligned with CBF and SBC, and serves its members with traditional services. While we are seeking to retain our traditional style of worship, we are seeking a pastor who is open to some contemporary worship/music. GPBC is also served by 2 additional full-time staff members and 1 part-time staff member. Send résumés to mescronce2004@yahoo.com.

Associate Pastor: First Baptist Church, Albemarle, N.C., is seeking a full-time associate pastor/minister of education for church life, outreach and missions. A seminary degree is preferred. FBC affirms the 1963 *Baptist Faith & Message* and recognizes the call of women to leadership roles. Address résumés/inquiries to revrog@fbc-albemarle.org.

Minister to Youth: Trinity Baptist Church, Cordova, Tenn., is prayerfully seeking a full-time youth minister. Trinity is dually aligned with SBC/CBF. Trinity Baptist Church is a missions minded, loving congregation. In general, attendance is around 500 in worship and 410 in Sunday school. Trinity's youth ministry offers a full range of ministries: Sunday school, discipleship, missions foreign and local, fellowships and camps. The youth minister will find a collaborative multi-staff working environment, active youth ministry and support from parents of youth. Our church is looking for a male or female candidate who exhibits excellent relationship skills with the ability to communicate with our current youth culture. If interested in applying, please email cover letter and résumé to tsimons@trinitybaptistchurch.org. No phone calls please.

Sean O. Allen is pastor of Greystone Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., coming from Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, where he was ministry development director for the Gaston Christian Center Project and Scholar in Residence.

Kristina Woods Brown was ordained to ministry Aug. 21 by First Baptist Church of Murfreesboro, Tenn., where she serves as minister of community ministries and communications.

Robert F. Browning is pastor of First Baptist Church of Frankfort, Ky., coming from Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., where he served for 12 years.

Brian Dixon received the Ralph Garfield Schell Presidential Award from the American Baptist Ministers Council Senate in August. Dixon, a native of Northern Ireland, is pastor of First Baptist Church of Medford, Mass.

Searcy S. Garrison of Atlanta died Sept. 6 at age 100. He was executive secretary of the Georgia Baptist Convention from 1955 until his retirement in 1980. He then served for 10 years as an administrator for Georgia Baptist Homes retirement community.

Lou Ann Gilliam is director of church and community relations for Chowan University in Murfreesboro, N.C. Her husband, Trey Gilliam, has joined Chowan's religion faculty.

Timothy Heilman is vice president of advancement and a director of community life at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, coming from St. Paul's College in Lawrenceville, Va.

Bill J. Leonard, church historian and founding dean of Wake Forest University School of Divinity, has been named the first James and Marilyn Dunn Chair of Baptist Studies at the school. James Dunn is a member of the school's faculty known for his leadership of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and his expertise on church-state issues, and Marilyn is a well-known Baptist musician.

The Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C., announces the following staff changes: **Elizabeth Kennett** is full-time network coordinator for healthy faith communities. **Melissa**

Clodfelter accepted a position with Wake Forest University as associate director of professional and leadership development, but will continue as the center's coordinator of coach training. **Mike Queen**, recently retired pastor of First Baptist Church of Wilmington, N.C., is part-time pastor in residence, with an emphasis on mentoring younger ministers. **Monica Corbitt Rivers**, a licensed psychologist and leadership consultant, is coordinator of the African-American clergy and congregational health initiative. **Larry Williams** has retired after nine years of leading the pastor as spiritual guide program.

Cecil Ray of Georgetown, Texas, died Aug. 23 at age 88. He promoted the Southern Baptist Cooperative Program for the Baptist General Convention of Texas (1961-1975) before becoming executive director of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (1976-1983). He then served as national director (1984-1988) for Planned Growth in Giving, an effort to raise funds to support the SBC Bold Mission Thrust. He was also known for his inventions that improved the quality of life for his daughter, Susan, a quadriplegic due to polio who became a writer using a specialized typewriter her father helped to design.

T Thomas has resigned as coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma to become pastor of Evangelical Baptist Church in Argenteuil, France, in early October. In 1992, he and his wife **Kathie** were among the first missionaries appointed by the newly-formed Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. They worked with Romani people in Europe, India, North Africa and the Middle East, following a 17-year mission career with Southern Baptists. Kathie, who serves as finance and communications director for CBFO, will wrap up her work in Oklahoma before moving to France.

Jessica and Darren Williams are the pastors of Nomini Baptist Church in Montross, Va., after having served as minister of children and minister of youth at Trinity Baptist Church in Seneca, S.C. Both are graduates of McAfee School of Theology.

Mary An Wilson is pastor of Woodland Forest Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa, Ala., where she has served in other ministry roles. **BT**

Bread of heaven

I have never been on a spiritual pilgrimage to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, Our Lady of Lourdes in France or the Precious Moments Chapel in Carthage, Mo., but I have experienced the International Biscuit Festival in Knoxville, Tenn.

Fifteen thousand biscuit lovers responded to the invitation to “get our biscuit on.” Each one understood that “biscuits” is the perfect way to end the sentence, “Pass the ...”

The purpose of art exhibitions is to teach us to pay attention to the grandeur of the ordinary world, but the International Biscuit Festival points to the grandeur of an otherworldly experience. The festival celebrates the gathering of flour, salt, butter, milk and baking powder into God's most perfect food.

Biscuit Boulevard was filled with big tents and gingham-covered tables. The greeters' name tags implored us, “Ask me about my biscuits.” What do biscuit evangelists do with these T-shirts the rest of the year?

*Man cannot live by biscuits alone,
but it's fun to try
I'm soft, fluffy, and warm on the inside
BYOB — Butter Your Own Biscuits
Life is a biscuit
Biscuit in the oven*

The tasting area was two blocks of flaky heaven. If you are picturing biscuits from Hardee's, Chick-fil-A, or McDonald's with a slab of sausage in the middle, you are a biscuit beginner. Neither are these your grandmother's biscuits — even if they were wonderful.

Twenty gastronomic geniuses brought their signature biscuits. The University of Tennessee Culinary Institute had, appropriately, an orange and yellow biscuit. Callie's Charleston Pimento Cheese Biscuit claimed to be Oprah's favorite. We enjoyed pizza biscuits, chocolate biscuits, sweet potato



casserole biscuits, blueberry and jalapeno biscuits, barbecue biscuits with tomato jam and smoked cheddar, apple butter biscuits with honey and cinnamon, and Rheem bologna German blue cheese brie biscuits. One restaurant served gluten-free biscuits. (We need to care for those with serious allergies, but gluten — whatever it is — sounds like a crucial ingredient in biscuits. This may be like decaf coffee — what's the point?)

Last year's winning biscuit was an Elvis biscuit with — you guessed it — peanut butter and banana. This year's winner was Cafe 4's entry — an orange cranberry streusel biscuit that featured a zesty cream cheese center. Early on we stopped asking, “What kind of biscuits do we want?” and asked only “Why would we turn down any biscuit?”

We did not arrive in time for the “Pre-heat Show,” but we caught several acts from The Sweet Tea Tour. I am disappointed that we missed hearing the Black Bottom Biscuits. (Limp Bizkit must not have been invited.)

My favorite event was the Miss and Mr. Biscuit Pageant. We had the good fortune of sitting behind Miss Biscuit 2010. She shouted

encouraging comments to this year's contestants: “Work that apron.” More interesting were the disparaging remarks she whispered about this year's contestants: “What a Pillsbury Dough Boy he is.” Biscuit pageants are cut throat.

I liked the poem that began “The air was cool. The oven was hot.” But some of the poetry was not the best: “I love biscuits more than my life. I'd like to have a biscuit for my wife.” Neither of these contestants won. The judges were not swayed by the contestant who tossed flying biscuits into the crowd. Miss Biscuit 2011 Sara Quall earned the judges' favor with biscuit song stylings. Her spirited rap number began, “I like big biscuits I cannot lie.” (In the midst of big biscuits it was appropriate that the festival raised funds for Second Harvest to eliminate childhood hunger.)

The intellectual aspects of biscuits were not overlooked. Barnes and Noble's tent was filled with biscuit literature: *You're the Butter on My Biscuit*, *Butter My Butt and Call Me a Biscuit*, and *Bon Appetit Y'all*. If Borders had a larger biscuit section, they would still be in business.

I looked for *Biscuits in the Bible*, but surprisingly it was not there. How have scholars missed this rich area of study? The Bible mentions what could be translated biscuits many times. The manna from heaven might be biscuits. At the feeding of the five thousand, Philip finds a boy with five fish and what may be two biscuits. Surely some Southern scholar has argued that there were biscuits at the Lord's Supper.

The one who said “I am the Bread of Life” must love this festival and the great variety of people who shared what felt a little like dinner on the grounds and a little like communion. Is it too much to suggest that biscuits can be an essential ingredient in our Christian discipleship? Biscuits help us follow the command in the Psalms to “Taste and see that God is good.” **BT**

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





Tales of three temples

When Americans think of the Southeast Asian country of Cambodia, they may recall its close proximity to Vietnam or the atrocities of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge regime that murdered more than a million citizens in the late 1970s, giving rise to the term “killing fields.”

Few, perhaps, are aware that northern Cambodia is home to some of the great architectural wonders of the world, a collection of Hindu and Buddhist temples built between the 11th and 13th centuries that rank among the most impressive shrines to be found anywhere. The temples are not only a treat for the eyes: for those who have ears to hear, they speak.

Angkor Wat

Like a city of ancient towers, Angkor Wat rises from the Cambodian jungle. Although its name means “temple city,” its primary residents were the gods.

Built over an 80-year period beginning in the early 12th century and never completely finished, the colossal complex was a project of

the Khmer king Suryavarman II (1112-1152), dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu.

The temple is surrounded by a rectangular moat 200 yards wide and more than a mile in length on the longest side. Its outer wall encloses 203 acres, giving it the reputation as the largest religious building in the world.

The lower galleries of the main temple complex contain intricate bas-reliefs that extend for more than half a mile. Beautifully carved, the reliefs relate victories of the king, depictions of heaven and hell, the Hindu creation myth known as the “churning of the Ocean of Milk,” and scenes from familiar epics such as the Ramayana.

Smaller reliefs throughout the temple portray “heavenly nymphs,” women in elaborate headdresses, some called *apsaras*, others *devatas*.

The central part of the temple, built in

Godlike devas (right) guard the causeway leading to Angkor Thom, where giant faces of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara watch over the Bayon Temple (facing page). Jungle overgrowth is characteristic of the Ta Prohm temple (below), once abandoned for 400 years. Temple visitors include young monks (p. 34), walking by one of the libraries of Angkor Wat.



successively higher levels, portrays the Hindu concept of Mount Meru as the home of the gods, with its five towers representing mountain peaks. Priests who ascended to the highest towers were forced to climb a stairway so steep that one must cling to it with both hands and feet, thus remaining prostrate before the gods.

The temple is an incredible architectural and artistic wonder, impressive on every level. Could a follower of Jesus profit from visiting a site so dedicated to a different understanding of God?

Yes.

First, one cannot help being overwhelmed by the temple's epic scale and the effort expended in building it: inscriptions claim that its construction required 300,000 workers and 6,000 elephants!

A second notable aspect is that, though the temple was built as a Hindu shrine dedicated to Vishnu, in the 13th century a later king transformed it into a center of Theravada Buddhism. Tall statues of Vishnu were demoted to lower galleries, and images of the Buddha were given prime position in the towers.

Local worshippers continued to patronize both Hindu and Buddhist notions of faith and



“It’s worth asking ourselves to what extent we are made in God’s image, and in what ways we fashion God into our image, a deity who favors our personal desires.”

worship, however, a second-nature syncretism that continues to the present day. Though officially Buddhist, modern Cambodians continue to honor the Hindu gods.

I couldn't help but ponder ways in which Christian churches may also be converted to different understandings of belief. Even when sharing a common Christian faith, we may hold to very different views of God as a harsh and judgmental deity who focuses on rewards and punishments, or a God of love who seeks the good of all, or something in between.

Likewise, most modern Christians hold to a comfortable syncretism in which our faith is so flavored by consumerist materialism that our lives are hardly distinguishable from those who don't claim Christ at all.

Angkor Wat was built to honor gods unfamiliar to most Christians, but it offers a wealth of meditative material to any who come with open eyes and a wondering heart.

Bayon

A hundred years after the heyday of Angkor Wat, the Khmer capital of ancient Cambodia was overrun in a surprise attack by a people called the Chams. A new king, Jayavarman VII (1181-1219), rose to power by successfully evicting the interlopers. To celebrate and consolidate his victory, he built a new capital city just north of Angkor Wat, and called it Angkor Thom: “the Great City.”

And Angkor Thom was impressive. Laid out in a huge square, the city was surrounded

by a wide moat and a wall 25 feet tall. Some historians believe it may have supported up to a million people — far larger than any European city of the time.

The causeway leading to the south gate of the city is lined by the giant statues of 54 *devas* (gods) to the left, and an equal number of *asuras* (demons) to the right, all of whom grip the body of the seven-headed serpent, Naga. The gate itself, more than 60 feet in height, is decorated with elephant heads and topped by four enormous faces that stare unnervingly in every direction.

At the very center of Angkor Thom lies the Bayon temple, perhaps the ultimate head trip. It is built in three levels, with the lower levels, both square, featuring nearly a mile of intricate bas-reliefs depicting historical and mythical events.

Visitors on brain-overload usually skip those, however, and are taken directly to the third level, a mind-bending circular platform dominated by 54 towers of varying heights, all of them topped by the same four monumental faces featured on the city gates.

The towers were designed to promote a new religion favored by Jayavarman VII, Mahayana Buddhism. Unlike Theravada Buddhism, which forswears gods and portrays the Buddha only as a guide to the goal of enlightenment, Mahayana Buddhism thinks of several personages as at least godlike, including the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, who represents those who seek enlightenment.



The all-seeing faces of the Bayon temple were almost certainly modeled on the king's face, though they officially depicted the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Thus, peasants who came to the city would have been suitably impressed by the tall towers and the all-seeing eyes of the king-who-looks-like-a-god. At almost any spot on the temple platform, a dozen of the faces are visible, some at eye-level, some peering magnanimously from above.

It's just plain spooky.

It is also a clear reminder of the human tendency to make our concept of God in our own image. Jayavarman VII didn't go as far as the kings of ancient Egypt and Sumeria, who declared themselves to be gods, but he made sure at least one god-like figure looked like him.

Isn't that the way it is? Even in the Hebrew Bible, while some sources imagine God only as hidden in a cloud or residing above the heavens, others portray God in human form. In Genesis 2-3, for example, God kneels in the mud to hand-make a man, then performs surgery on him to make a woman, and later walks with them in the cool of the garden. Later, God walks, talks, eats and argues with Abraham like a regular (if very powerful) guy.

Limited by our own experience of humanity, it's not surprising that humans think of God in human terms, though stretched into super-human qualities accompanied by super-human powers. When we think of God as loving and kind, we are working from our own experience of love. When we think of God as being judgmental, we are in touch with our own desire to criticize or condemn.

Nevertheless, we hold to the belief that God, in scripture, inspired human writers to

reveal aspects of God's nature that we might not come to naturally. That same scripture declares that God chose to create humans in God's own image (Genesis 1). That's an amazing thought, though no one can claim to fully comprehend it. Something about us is very much like God.

In our daily life and relation to God, however, it's worth asking ourselves to what extent we are made in God's image, and in what ways we fashion God into our image, a deity who favors our personal desires. Some make God into a get-rich guru, while others call on God to condemn those with whom they disagree, and yet others think of God as a feel-good spirit with whom most anything goes.

When we ponder our understanding of God, it's worth asking ourselves who's made in whose image.

Ta Prohm

Less than a mile from Angkor Thom lie the ruins of Ta Prohm, perhaps the most photogenic of all the temples near Siem Reap. Like the Bayon temple at Angkor Thom, Ta Prohm was built by the iconic king Jayavarman VII as a monument to Mahayana Buddhism.

Construction of Ta Prohm ("ancestor Brahma") was begun in 1186 A.D. The spacious temple was originally known as Rajavihara, "the Monastery of the King," and it was built to honor the king's mother. Her face was used as the model for the central image, that of Prajnaparamita, the personification of wisdom.

The temple apparently also served as a monastery and training school for monks, and in its heyday it was a beehive of activity: a rare inscription found at Ta Prohm claims that the site was home to 12,500 people including

2,700 officials of various sorts and 615 dancers, with 80,000 other persons in surrounding villages providing support services.

Even with an allowance for considerable royal exaggeration, Ta Prohm must have been a vibrant and happening place.

The life went out of Ta Prohm with the fall of the Khmer empire in the 15th century, however. The temple was abandoned, and the verdant jungle soon swallowed it.

Few Westerners knew of its existence until the Angkor Wat area was publicized by French explorer Henri Mouhot in the mid-19th century. Civil war and its aftermath rendered the area something less than safe until the late 1990s, but Ta Prohm is once again a busy place, teeming with activity.

The modern curators of Ta Prohm have done much to reclaim the temple's 39 towers and many corridors from the jungle, while leaving in place a number of the more picturesque silk cottonwood and spung trees, whose massive roots have crumbled much of the temple while holding other parts of it in place.

The imposing sight of sturdy temple walls crumbling in the grip of giant reptilian roots is not soon lost on the visitor. One tries to imagine the grandeur of the place before invasive rhizomes crept through cracks and dislodged huge stones that litter the passageways and make some of them impassable. One wonders what now lies hidden, like the face of a once-proud *devata* that peers implacably through a crack in the encroaching blanket of rootstock.

Walking through the ruins of Ta Prohm, the thoughtful Christian cannot help but ponder the reality of churches who once harbored a vitality that is now rootbound and lost behind the overgrowth of traditions that have nothing to do with faith, or cultural concessions that preserve only occasional glimpses at the face and the call of Jesus.

I've never seen a church with physical trees growing like steeples from their roofs, or with giant roots breaking through the stained glass, but I have seen the metaphorical equivalent, and it is neither picturesque nor pretty.

Deep in the heart of Ta Prohm, a small but tall room still serves its original purpose as a meditative echo chamber. Clapping, shouting or whistling have no effect at all — but one who stands by the wall and strikes his or her chest with a fist is greeted by a deep and resonant THOOM ... oom ... that sets the whole body vibrating.

When we gather in our churches, perhaps a bit more beating of the breast could lead us to resonate more clearly with the One who is the true root of our faith, and regain the vitality Jesus described as abundant life. **BT**

BAPTISTS AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

The battles taking place in these autumn days are minor compared to the earlier Battle of Bull Run / Manassas. Nonetheless, this month in Loudoun County, Va., the second largest battle in the eastern theatre to date—the Battle of Ball’s Bluff — takes place.

Still glorying over their earlier triumphs, the Confederates again emerge victorious. Making matters all the worse for the seemingly hapless United States of America is the death of Oregon Senator Edward Baker during the battle. The only sitting American senator ever killed on the battlefield, Baker had raised a brigade on the West coast and returned East to fight the enemy.

As annual associational Baptist meetings in the South convene this month, Christian nationalism rides the swell of a rising Confederacy. Baptists of the Chattahoochee Baptist Association in north Georgia make clear their convictions in a report on “State and Country”:

“Whereas, Abraham Lincoln is endeavoring to subjugate the Southern states contrary to the Constitution which he has taken an oath to carry out to the letter and, if he is successful, he will deprive us of our rights, religious and politically bequeathed to us by our forefathers, and will confiscate our property and do violence to our persons to such an extent that death itself would be preferable;

“Resolved, that, while we look to the God of Justice, we will defend our rights with our blood and our treasure at all hazards, and to the last extremity, and we believe that every friend of the Southern Confederacy will do likewise.”

Further westward, the Mississippi Baptist Association adopts a resolution regarding the war:

“Resolved, That Saturday before the first Lord’s day in November be recommended to the churches composing this Association as a day to be devoted to

fasting and prayer in view of the state of our Confederacy and the war that is being waged against us.”

As white southern triumphalism and prayers for the Confederacy carry the day, cooler heads are fewer and less vocal. Among the outliers is Leonard Stephens, longtime Kentucky Baptist layman and state politician, who in a private letter to his brother lends a measured voice to the nationalist rhetoric:

“You & I my Brother have had no thing to do with the bringing on of this war, But we are certain to have a good deal to do with its consequences, for if it lasts much longer our Great Grand children will be taxed all their lives to pay its expenses. Does it not behoove every man then that has influence to endeavor to induce the Southern States to return to their allegiance as loyal citizens.

“Please give me your views candidly

150 YEARS AGO

October 1861

in regard to this whole matter, & if we differ or if you do not agree with me, we will still be Brothers & have the same affectionate feelings for each other as we have always done ...”

Other than Stephens’ optimistic timeline, the words of the border state Baptist will prove to be prophetic.

Both sides claim the moral high ground. The South has come too far to entertain the possibility of backing down. Yet in the battle for freedom for all vs. freedom for whites only, the North’s superior financial resources and manpower are destined to ultimately prevail. **BT**

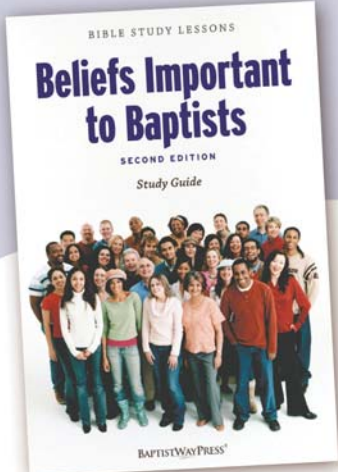
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‘Crazy brilliant’

Baton Rouge church takes two-by-two approach to pastoral leadership

“After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.” (Luke 10:1)

BATON ROUGE, La. — Jesus sent out his disciples two by two. Now a team of pastors is fulfilling that commission at University Baptist Church.

In July, Mike Massar and Griff Martin became co-pastors of the 500-member church in a scenic grove of sprawling live oaks near the Louisiana State University campus. University Baptist, affiliated with both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, has a local reputation for being somewhat more progressive than other area Baptist churches.

Massar, 62, and Martin, 31, came from Sugar Land Baptist Church near Houston, Texas, where Massar served as executive pastor and Martin as associate pastor for the past two years.

“People have two responses; they say either this is the most brilliant model we’ve ever heard of — or this is crazy,” Martin said. “We have realized there is a very thin line between crazy and brilliance.”

“It may just be crazy brilliant,” added Massar. “We do think it is the model for the future.”

One benefit the co-pastor model provides, both men said, is having an accountability partner that many traditional pastors don’t have.

“So often the pastor is a lonely position,” said Massar. “Having someone to share that with is good for me.”

Martin said the arrangement has “pushed both of us into Christ-likeness as much as marriage and parenting because you have got to be selfless. It’s not about us — it’s about Christ and his calling and the church.”

The co-pastor model goes beyond Jesus sending disciples out in pairs, said Massar, noting that Paul teamed up with Barnabas and Simon Peter partnered with John Mark.

Co-pastor leadership is rare but not unheard of in Southern Baptist churches, said John L. Yeats, director of communications and public policy for the Louisiana Baptist Convention and recording secretary for the Southern Baptist Convention.

He cited two prominent Southern Baptist

congregations as examples: Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield, Calif., where Roger Spradlin and Phil Neighbors are co-pastors, and First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., where Homer Lindsay Jr. served as co-pastor with his father and later with Jerry Vines who once served as SBC president.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches, more open to women in ministry than Southern Baptists, have a small but growing number of congregations led by married couples as co-pastors. But Reid Doster, coordinator for CBF in Louisiana, said he didn’t know of any CBF-related churches in his state with co-pastors — other than University Baptist. But he called it “a splendid and elegant strategy.”

“When you meet Mike and Griff, you don’t think in terms of differences but of ‘differentness,’” said Doster. “Differences imply inherent tension. ‘Differentness,’ on the other hand, celebrates unique gifts that are complementary, not contradictory — gears that mesh rather than grind.”

University Baptist has chosen to build upon their co-pastors’ natural strengths, said Doster.

Dudley Fricke, who chaired University Baptist's pastoral search committee, said they wrestled with the co-pastor concept — as well as the cost of two salaries — ever since their former pastor, Jay Hogewood, left nearly two years ago.

"To my surprise and delight, the church bought into it immediately," Fricke said. "[Mike and Griff] have a sort-of synergy between them."

Both men are married — Mike to Lisa and Griff to Abby — and they're not shy about comparing their professional relationship to a marriage. They admit to occasionally finishing each other's sentences.

"One of the components of a good marriage is that both the husband and wife want the other to succeed more than they want to succeed and that has to be part of this," Martin said. "We want the church to know there are two pastors but one pastoral voice."

Both visit the sick, teach Bible classes, share the pulpit on alternating weeks and occasionally co-preach the same sermon.

"We share the same work habits; we're both energetic and take-charge kind of guys," Massar said. "One of the great things about this is that we don't have to have our way."

They each benefit from the partnership according to their respective ages.

"I've seen friends burn out in their first church," the younger Martin said, "but I get a bonus from Mike being a mentor."

Massar countered: "I don't think of it as a mentor and mentee; I definitely see him as a brother rather than someone who is in training."

The congregation has responded favorably.

"This is a new concept for us and it seems to be working," said Bob Bozeman, a member since 1991. "They both have a lot of energy and ideas and dedication."

"I think this will be very good," said Edith Kirkpatrick, a 20-year member. "I hope we can get more college students."

"I think it will be great to have both of them; it will be different," said LSU student Breanne Strawn. "They feed off each other a lot."

Massar grew up attending church in Midland, Texas. His faith was challenged when his best friend was fatally struck in the head by a discus thrown at a high school track and field meet.

"A lot of people said this is God's will," he said. "I really struggled with that."

At Baylor University, Massar first planned on a career in dentistry. But that

changed after he discussed his friend's death with a religion professor.

"He showed me Christianity had a wonderful side that welcomed my questions," Massar recalled.

So Massar changed majors and graduated with a religion degree. From 1974 to 1982 he served on the youth staff of Seventh and James Baptist Church on the Baylor campus. Feeling a call to pastoral ministry, he attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

From 1982 to 1989 he was pastor of Wildewood Baptist Church in Houston and started an ecumenical community ministry, the Northwest Assistance Ministries. In 1988 he earned the doctor of ministry degree from the Graduate Theological Foundation at Notre Dame University. He and Lisa have three adult children.

"I believe your relationship with Christ is intensely personal, but I also want to be a respecter of other persons' walks and even other persons' faiths," said Massar. "I'm not going to judge them. I love the inclusiveness that God so loved the world and not just part of us. He loves us all. My job is not to send people to hell; my job is to point people to heaven."

Martin, like Masser, is the oldest son in his family. He grew up in a church in Austin, Texas.

"Faith to me is a large ocean, and my entire life I've been learning to swim deeper and deeper into it," he said. "I can think of several very personal intimate experiences in pastors' offices, and at youth camps and in Nicaragua and Kenya where I can tell you of a 'Nicodemus moment' where God has called me deeper. There have been times and places where there has been a divine encounter, truly spiritual in every sense of that word."

Martin majored in journalism at Baylor University before earning his masters degree at Baylor's Truett Seminary. He is currently completing his doctorate there as well.

He worked as youth pastor at Columbus Avenue Baptist Church in Waco, growing the youth program by 150 students, before being called to Sugar Land in 2008. He and Abby have a 2-year-old daughter, Blake.

"I think God speaks through his word; I think he speaks through creation; I think he speaks through his people," said Martin. "I think God is an incredible communicator of truth."

And at University Baptist in Baton Rouge, members are getting used to hearing God speak through both of their pastors. **BT**

—Mark H. Hunter is a freelance writer in Baton Rouge, La. More on University Baptist Church can be found at abc-br.org.

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Anna Carter Florence is the Peter Marshall Associate Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia and is an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Her first book, *Preaching as Testimony*, was published in 2007 (WJKP).

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Dr. Volf is founder and Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture and Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology, Yale University Divinity School, New Haven, CT. His most significant books include *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996) and *A Public Faith: On How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (2011).

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January: A New Beginning

Jan. 1 — Luke 2:22-40

“Welcome, Welcome, Welcome!”

Jesus is circumcised, then blessed by Simeon and Anna.

Jan. 8 — Mark 1:4-11

“Taking the Plunge”

Jesus is baptized by John and blessed by a sign from the heavens.

Jan. 15 — John 1:43-51

“Come and See”

Jesus calls Philip and Nathaniel, who is surprised.

Jan. 22 — Mark 1:14-20

“Come with Me”

Jesus preaches and four men sign up for the program.

Jan. 29 — Mark 1:21-28

“Listen to Me”

In Capernaum, Jesus teaches with authority and amazes his hearers.

February: Unexpected Blessings

Feb. 5 — Isaiah 40:21-31

“Finding God in Every Gear”

God promises strength for those who fly, run or walk.

Feb. 12 — 2 Kings 5:1-14

“A Muddy Water Miracle”

Elisha teaches Naaman the power of obedience.

Feb. 19 — 2 Kings 2:1-12

“Give Me a Double!”

As Elijah flies away, Elisha seeks a double portion of his spirit.

Feb. 26 — Genesis 9:8-17

“Always and Never”

God’s covenant with Noah has something old, something new and something never.

March: Let’s Make a Deal

Mar. 4 — Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

“Yes, I Did Promise ...”

God reiterates the promises to Abraham, who is bound to be wondering ...

Mar. 11 — Exodus 20:1-17

“Here’s the Deal ...”

The covenant at Sinai: what God expects the Israelites to do.

Mar. 18 — Num. 21:4-9

“A Bump in the Road”

Rebellion in the wilderness calls forth snakes to fear and to admire.

Mar. 25 — Jer. 31:31-34

“A New Deal”

The prophet Jeremiah promises broken Israel a new deal and a new heart.

April: The Heart of the Gospel

April 1 — Mark 11:1-11

“Triumph and Tears”

The crowds cry “Hosanna,” but Jesus has other thoughts.

April 8 — Mark 16:1-8

“Scary Good News”

Getting what you want isn’t always what you want.

April 15 — Acts 4:32-35

“One Heart, One Mind, One Pocketbook?”

The first church offers a lesson in sharing vs. materialism.

April 22 — Acts 3:12-19 (1-11, 20-21)

“The Last Piece of the Puzzle”

Peter explains how Jesus’ work connects to God’s ongoing work.

April 29 — Acts 4:5-12 (1-12)

“No Other Way”

John and Peter testify to the Sanhedrin, speak of Jesus as the only way to salvation.

May: One For All

May 6 — Acts 8:26-40

“What Hinders Me?”

Phillip and the Ethiopian official learn from each other.

May 13 — Acts 10:44-48

“Could It Be?”

At Joppa, Peter learns a lesson for the world.

May 20 — Acts 1:1-11

“Life Is Different Now”

As Jesus ascends to heaven, the disciples learn that life will be different.

May 27 — Acts 2:1-21

“Well, Blow Me Down!”

A mighty rushing wind ushers in a new era at Pentecost.

June: Fit For a King?

June 3 — Psalm 29

“O Worship the King”

A powerful psalm testifies that God reigns eternally, and humans should remember.

June 10 — 1 Sam. 8:4-11 (12-15), 16-20 (11:14-15)

“A King To Fight Our Battles”

The elders of Israel ask for a king they can see, one who will lead them into battle.

June 17 — 1 Sam. 15:34-16:13

“A King in Waiting”

When Saul turns out to be a disaster, David is designated as king-in-waiting.

June 24 — 1 Sam. 17:57-18:5, 18:10-16

“Actions Speak Louder Than Names”

Saul holds the title, but David acts like a king.

July: So Close, and Yet So Far

July 1 — 2 Sam. 1:1, 17-27

“How the Mighty Have Fallen”

David laments the old king and prepares to become the new one.

July 8 — 2 Sam. 5:1-5, 9-10

“Well, If You Insist ...”

David becomes king over all Israel, and takes Jerusalem to be his own city.

July 15 — 2 Sam. 6:1-5, 12b-19

“A Marriage of Church and State”

David makes Jerusalem the center of both church and state: why was it OK for Israel, but not for us?

July 22 — 2 Sam. 7:1-14a

“I Promise: Forever!”

God makes an amazing promise to David and his descendants: what will happen?

July 29 — 2 Sam. 11:1-15

“How the Mighty Have Fallen Again”

David grows slack and metaphorically falls on his own sword.

August: Up, Up and Away

August 5 — Eph. 4:1-16

“Grow Up!”

Paul calls believers to grow up in faith and maturity, expressing gifts within the body.

August 12 — Eph. 4:25-5:2

“Build Up!”

Paul challenges church members to love and build up others for the sake of Christ.

August 19 — Eph. 5:15-20

“Live Up!”

Paul charges us to live up to our potential by making wise decisions.

August 26 — Eph. 6:10-20

“Armor Up!”

Paul gets metaphorical and calls believers to “put on the whole armor of God.”

September: Wise Women

Sept. 2 — Song of Songs 2:8-15

“A Woman Who Loves”

A maiden happily sings the praises of her beloved.

Sept. 9 — Prov. 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

“A Word About Justice”

Three proverbs relating to economic justice, where women do better than men.

Sept. 16 — Prov. 1:20-33

“A Shout in the Street”

Lady Wisdom issues a call to those who would be wise.

Sept. 23 — Prov. 31:10-31

“A Woman Beyond Belief”

Could anyone really live up to the “ideal woman’s” reputation? Should they try?

Sept. 30 — Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

“A Winning Woman”

Esther’s courage and cleverness save the Hebrews.

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October: Hard Lessons

Oct. 7 — Job 1:1, 2:1-10

“When God Takes a Bet”

Job suffers as the subject of a heavenly wager.

Oct. 14 — Job 23:1-9, 16-17

“When Life Isn’t Fair”

Job wants God to answer his complaint but is also afraid.

Oct. 21 — Job 38:1-7, (34-41)

“When God Takes the Stand”

When God speaks, Job gets more of an answer than he wants.

Oct. 28 — Job 42:1-6, 10-17

“When God Settles Debts”

God restores Job’s fortunes, but not because he passes the test ...

November: What Would Jesus Think?

Nov. 4 — Mark 12:28-34

“What Rules Matter Most?”

Jesus opines on the greatest commandment, or two.

Nov. 11 — Mark 12:38-44

“What Really Pleases God?”

Jesus has a go at pride and humility.

Nov. 18 — Mark 13:1-8

“What About the Future?”

Jesus on the fate of Jerusalem, and other fates, too?

Nov. 25 — John 18:33-37

“What Really Counts?”

Jesus takes the Kingdom of God over any earthly rule.

December: Living in Between

Dec. 2 — Jer. 33:14-16

“New Things Coming”

Jeremiah prophesies the coming of a “righteous branch” that will change things.

Dec. 9 — Luke 3:1-6

“People, Get Ready”

John the Baptist, an unlikely conductor, calls people to get on the train.

Dec. 16 — Luke 3:7-18

“You’ve Got To Be Kidding”

John’s hard preaching seems designed to alienate, but still wins followers.

Dec. 23 — Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

“Fetal Attraction”

Mary and Elizabeth, both pregnant, rejoice in imagining what their children will do.

Dec. 30 — Luke 2:41-52

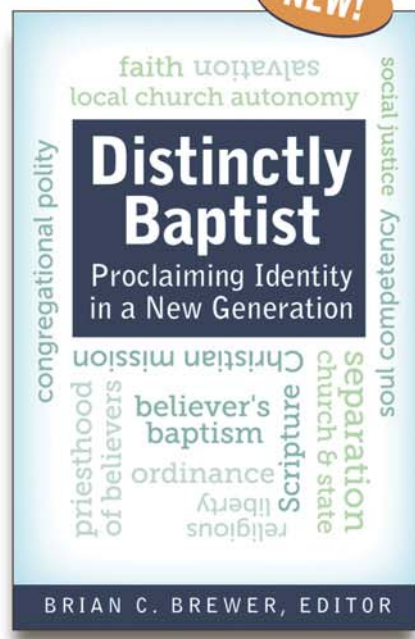
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Authentic community:

The transition from familiar strangers to family of faith

By Beth Kennett

Authentic community creates an image of people living and working together, being honest and approachable, kind, compassionate, trustworthy, and open to healthy communication. However, this picture is not easy to paint.

In order to be an authentic community, people must be willing to acknowledge reality, to be honest about likes and dislikes, and to confront difficult truths. Authentic community is about relationships that move beyond the surface of pleasantries and allow people to know something of others' experiences and passions.

Authentic community allows people to be who they are, who God called them to be, and to nurture whom God is calling them to become as individuals and as a community of faithful people.

Congregations have an opportunity to create an authentic community that will enhance and strengthen the lives of individuals as well as to create an impact on society that will make a difference for our current generations and generations to come.

Familiar strangers

Individuals today are becoming more and more isolated. We work alone, we play alone, and we even make decisions alone — without thinking of the impact on others. We have been duped into believing that life is easier if we do not involve others.

In his book, *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam states: "The single most common finding from a half century's research on the correlates of life satisfaction, not only in the United States but around the world, is that happiness is best predicted by the breadth and depth of one's social connections" (p. 332).

He goes on to say: "Where once we could fall back on social capital — families, churches, friends — these no longer are strong enough to cushion our fall. In our personal lives as well as in our collective life ... we are paying a significant price for a quarter century's disengagement from one another" (p. 335).

Our church is experiencing a stronger sense of community across generational lines.

There is scientific evidence to prove that we are damaging our health through a lack of relationships and personal contact with others.

Every week, churches offer opportunities for individuals to connect through worship services, prayer times, Bible studies, programs and ministry — meaningful life experiences. Yet participation in these particular opportunities has been declining for 50 years.

Every week fewer and fewer people, who really barely know each other, are gathering with the intent of making a difference in their lives and in the lives of others. Those who do gather, sit side by side with people they barely know or know only on the surface.

Every week buildings are half-full of people who believe that they do not have the time to get to know each other as anything more than acquaintances. Church buildings contain groups of familiar strangers who are trying to function as congregations. Authentic community is nowhere in sight.

Transitioning to a family of faith

The apostle Paul understands the concept of authentic community and repeatedly shares ways congregations can live better as a group, as a church. He speaks of belonging and connecting, of communicating and accepting, of being a place where no one is an outsider.

Paul encourages the church to focus on the teachings and actions of Jesus in order to develop into healthy communities of faith. Jesus, before his death, gives a new command to his disciples. It is in incorporating love into

every aspect of our individual lives and the life of our community so that we begin to understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

It is through relationship with God and living the teachings of Jesus Christ that we can establish authentic community within the church. It is through nurturing communities that we experience healthier living.

Building community

Congregations have many opportunities to build community and nurture relationships among individuals. But congregations must recognize and embrace these opportunities.

It is easy to reduce the time necessary for shared prayer joys and concerns, planned fellowship activities, icebreakers and other ways for individuals to learn more about each other. It is imperative in all of the programming that congregations do, to include opportunities for healthy relationships to develop.

I am part of a small congregation — 102 confirmed members and 36 active children. Two years ago, we intentionally began planning opportunities for individuals to connect other than on Sundays and we encourage people to connect through social media, email and texting.

Our church is experiencing a stronger sense of community across generational lines. This year we experienced more regular attendance than ever before during the summer months. This is a positive transition toward becoming an authentic community.

Through the natural process of congregational life, authentic community can be nurtured. If a congregation is purposeful in the day-to-day life of planning, implementing, serving and worshipping, familiar strangers will develop deeper and more meaningful relationships that will lead our congregations to being families of faithful people. **BT**

—Beth Kennett is network coordinator for healthy faith communities for the Center for Congregational Health in Winston-Salem, N.C.



Young college president leads evangelical up-and-comers

WENHAM, Mass. — For the past decade, sociologist D. Michael Lindsay has been living the very phenomenon he’s studied in depth: evangelicals climbing the ranks of secular institutions and becoming American elites.

Yet in a surprise move, this 39-year-old rising star has traded a tenure-track position at Rice University to become president of Gordon College, a respected outpost of evangelicalism 25 miles north of Boston.

Some of Lindsay’s former students have wondered why he would leave a highly ranked university with a growing, well-funded sociology department. For Lindsay, it’s a matter of calling.

“I know that I’m the right person for Gordon,” Lindsay said, “because what I bring to the table today is what Gordon happens to need right now.”

Lindsay was baptized at 11 in First Baptist Church of Jackson, Miss., but has experience in other faith traditions. He burnished his national reputation with his 2007 book, *Faith in the Halls of Power:*

How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite. His broader research interest deals with leadership.

Lindsay has spent countless hours talking with CEOs, big city mayors and even former U.S. presidents about their lives and work. His Platinum Study, featuring interviews with 550 leaders in various fields, is said to represent the largest body of interview data ever collected from a cross section of American leaders.

He’s built a reputation as a capable fundraiser for numerous projects and now plans to leverage both his experience and his power-packed Rolodex to help Gordon raise its profile.

Paul Corts, president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, hopes Lindsay can help galvanize interest in data collection and analysis across Christian higher education.



D. Michael Lindsay

“We want to take advantage of his background and skills,” Corts said. “Research is increasingly important for us and our institutions. ... So having people like this in our leadership will be very helpful to our whole movement.”

Lindsay is apt to hold Gordon and Christian higher education to high standards. He expected his research assistants to wear sharp business casual attire when working on his projects. If a student’s cell phone ever rang during class, Lindsay would assess a \$5 fine to help pay for an end-of-semester party at his home.

The most successful leaders are those “who found their talents and skills matched up with what was needed at a particular time at a particular organization,” said Lindsay.

He’s not pushing an evangelical agenda or “trying to help people who I like to get power or have influence or shape public policy,” Lindsay added. Instead, he’s curious how effective leaders get to where they are, and what helps them exercise good judgment over the long term. **BT**

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American politics more religious than American voters

Has America gotten more religious, or just American politics? The country has grown less religious since the 1970s, while frequent churchgoers are now much more likely to vote Republican or support the Tea Party, according to recent studies.

As a result, faith-filled rhetoric and campaign stops make Americans appear more Christian than they really are, according to Mark Chaves, a Duke University professor of sociology and religion.

The rise of megachurches, with their memberships in the thousands, also fuels the misperception that most Americans attend services weekly, when only one in four Americans actually do, he added.

“The Michele Bachmanns and Rick Warrens of the world are playing to a base that’s much smaller than it was in the 1970s and 1980s,” said Chaves, whose new book, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*, analyzes trends based on data from the General Social Survey and the National Congregations Study.

Using data collected between 1972 and 2008, Chaves said America is not only losing its religion, but also has lost confidence in religious leaders and wants them to be less involved in politics.

Researchers say the trends reflect myriad factors: disillusionment with clergy and political scandals; the country’s increasing diversity, fueled by immigration and intermarriage; and younger generations that tend to be more highly educated and socially liberal.

Chaves also interprets these trends as a “backlash” against the politicization of religion that began with Jerry Falwell and the rise of the religious right in the 1970s.

The findings — along with new research by Harvard professor Robert D. Putnam and Notre Dame professor David E. Campbell, co-authors of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* — paint a shifting portrait of American politics.

The Tea Party’s sinking approval



Mark Chaves is a professor of sociology and religion at Duke University Divinity School.

rating — currently at 20 percent, below Republicans, Democrats, atheists and Muslims — signals a growing discomfort with mingling faith and politics, Putnam and Campbell wrote in *The New York Times*.

What’s more, Putnam and Campbell say the Tea Party is much more religious than originally thought.

“The Tea Party’s generals may say their overriding concern is a smaller government,” they concluded, “but not their rank and file, who are more concerned about putting God in government.”

Some core American beliefs have remained stable over the past two generations, however, including belief in a higher power, the afterlife and the belief that God is personally concerned with human beings.

“Compared to Europe, Canada and Australia, Americans are still very religious,” Chaves conceded.

Among the other findings in *American Religion*:

- There is a declining (though still very high) belief in God or a higher power: In the 1950s, 99 percent of Americans said they

believed in God; in 2008, about 93 percent did.

- Nearly 20 percent of Americans now say they have no religion, compared to just 3 percent in 1957.
- Only 25 percent of Americans attend weekly religious services, although up to 40 percent claim they do.
- Fewer Americans approve of their religious leaders getting involved in politics. In 1991, about 30 percent of Americans strongly agreed that religious leaders should avoid political involvement; by 2008, 44 percent felt that way.
- Belief that the Bible should be taken literally dropped from about 40 percent in the early 1970s to about 30 percent in 2008; Chaves said this trend corresponds with the rise in college education.
- From 1972 to 2008, the percentage of people with great confidence in religious leaders declined from 35 percent to less than 25 percent. A sharp dip around 2002 was probably due to the Catholic Church clergy abuse scandal, but otherwise the trend has consistently been downward for decades, along with interest in joining the clergy.

Immigration from Africa and Asia, intermarriage and assimilation have diversified America’s religious beliefs since the early 1970s. Continuing that trend, Chaves believes Americans will grow more accepting of Muslims over the next generation, as has happened with other minorities.

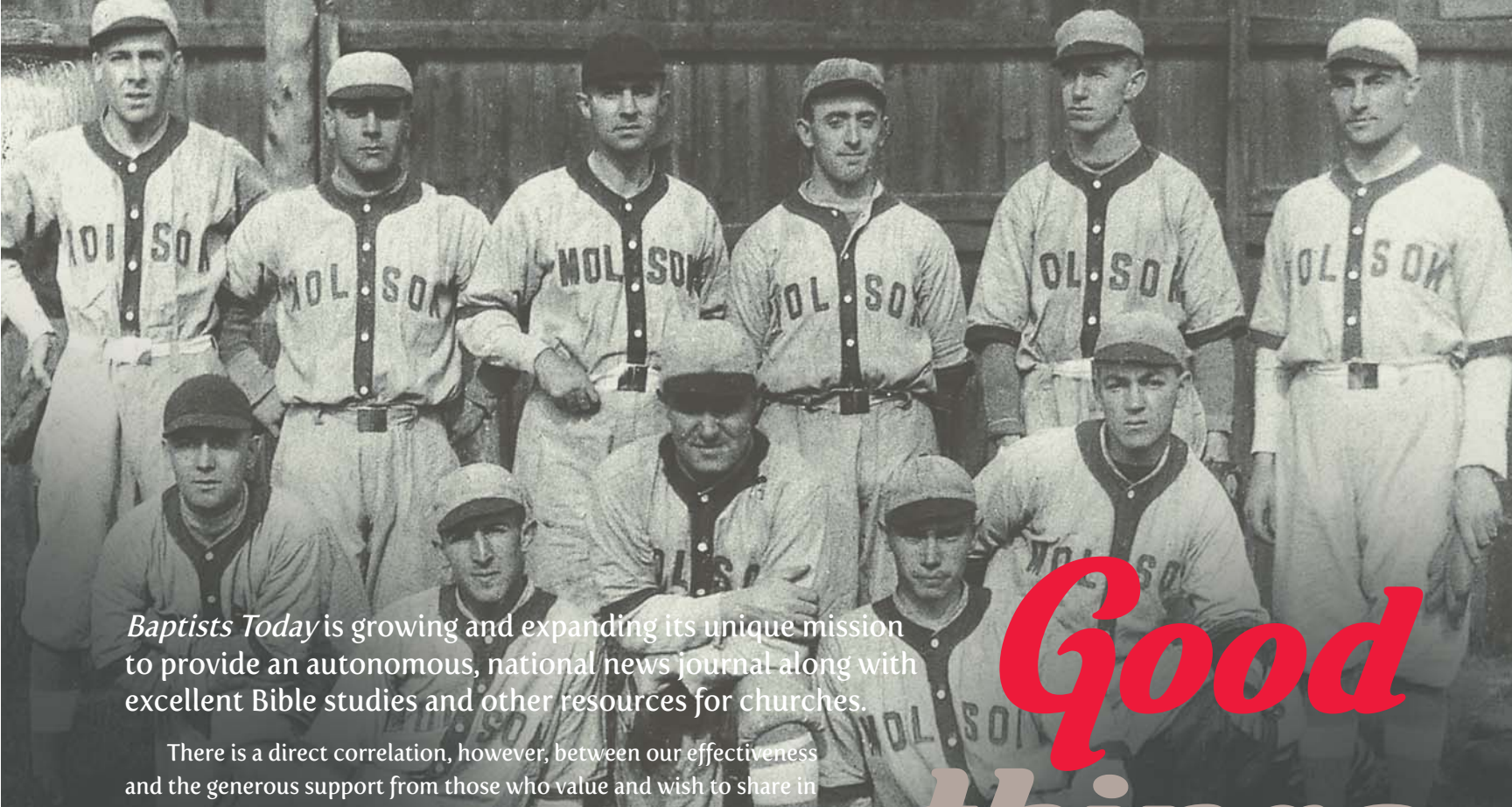
He cited Putnam and Campbell’s “Aunt Susan Principle,” the idea that people are less suspicious of other faiths when someone they know is a member.

Putnam calls Chaves’ book “an important contribution to clarifying the facts about religious change in America,” but cautions against oversimplifying the data.

“The story is a bit more complicated than simply a linear trend down,” he said.

Whatever the interpretation, Chaves says one thing is clear: American religiosity is either stable or in slow decline — and he leans towards the latter.

“Either way,” he concludes, “it’s not going up.” **BT**



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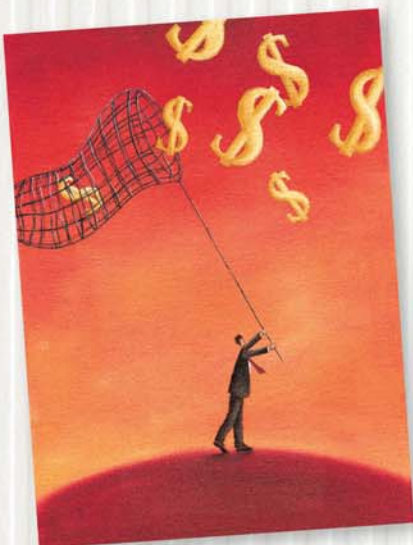
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