

# BAPTISTS Today



## Vanishing Appalachia

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disappearing faith traditions  
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'natural wisdom'  
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An autonomous national Baptist news journal

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*Baptists Today* (ISSN 1072-7787)  
is published monthly by:  
*Baptists Today*  
P.O. Box 6318  
Macon, GA 31208-6318

To subscribe or place  
an advertisement,  
call 478-301-5655 or  
toll-free 1-877-752-5658.

Subscription rates:  
1 year, \$20    2 years, \$35  
1 year groups of 25 or more, \$18  
1 year groups of less than 25, \$20  
1 year Canada, \$35  
1 year foreign, \$50

Periodical postage paid  
at Macon, Ga. 31208

POSTMASTER:  
Send address corrections to:  
*Baptists Today*  
P.O. Box 6318  
Macon, GA 31208-6318

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By Les Robinson



Cover photo by John Pierce. Sweetens Cove Primitive Baptist Church in Marion County, Tenn.

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# Vanishing Appalachia

Bill Leonard explores disappearing mountain culture

ATHENS, Ga. — Literally and figuratively, the mountains of Appalachia are disappearing, Baptist historian Bill Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest Divinity School, told participants in a February conference in Athens, Ga., sponsored by Piedmont College.

“Through mountaintop removal techniques, mountains formed over five million years ago have vanished from the face of the earth, their non-coal contents tossed into valleys, creek beds and hollows with devastating effect,” he said. “... Over 500 mountains from Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia have disappeared from the face of the earth, never to return.”

But the physical destruction is just part of what is threatening Appalachia, he said. A

unique social and religious culture is fading away as well due to mass communication and the influx of newcomers.

Baptists have long been a significant part of this culture, he noted.

“Primitive Baptist meetinghouses abound in Appalachia, many used only monthly or quarterly, located off the beaten path where state or county roads turn to gravel, and not far from creeks or other natural baptismal pools,” said Leonard.



Photo by David Price/Piedmont College

However, Primitive Baptists “don’t trouble the baptismal waters like they used to,” said Leonard. “Long a minority, their number, like their faith-based culture, is dropping like a stone.”

While Primitive Baptists are found throughout the U.S., Leonard noted that they have long been counted among the mountain churches of the Appalachian region — and distinguished by their unique beliefs and practices.

For example: Primitive Baptists are strict Calvinists who often say they are “hopefully saved” since too much assurance would show a false security for one who believes the process is completed by a Sovereign God rather than by human response.

Also, Primitives reject Sunday schools, revivals, evangelism, theological education and mission endeavors, said Leonard. And, generally, mountain Primitive Baptists are not taken to paid, educated clergy.

“We don’t believe in an educated ministry,” Leonard quoted one Primitive Baptist as saying. “We saw what it did to the Presbyterians.”

Primitive Baptists share much dogma with their mountain neighbors, Old Regular Baptists, who have slightly modified Calvinism, said Leonard. Both groups practice same-sex foot washing — a third sacrament to baptism and the Lord’s Supper — as a sign of love for one another.

Some Primitives, he noted, ferment their own wine for Communion and consider total abstinence from alcohol to be liberal and unbiblical. Leonard quoted Primitive Baptist John G. Crowley of Georgia, saying that the Southern Baptist and Methodist “use of grape juice in Communion was quite appropriate since their doctrines bore the same resemblance to truth as grape juice bore to wine.”

Primitive Baptists, he said, have also been known for eschewing musical instruments in church, preaching with a “holy whine” and giving each other the kiss of peace. The latter practice has been abandoned in some churches, Leonard said, because, as one Primitive put it: “... some people got to lingering a little, so we gave it up.”

“These mountain Baptists affirm the absolute, infallible authority of the Bible but often disagree among themselves on what is most authoritative,” said Leonard. He pointed to Howard Dorgan’s study of a small subgroup of Primitive Baptist Universalists — known as “No Hellers.”

“Pressing their Calvinism to its logical — or illogical — conclusion, the Primitive Baptist Universalists insist that Christ’s atonement is so powerful that it will ultimately save everyone,” said Leonard. “The ‘elect’ are the witnesses in this world that salvation will ultimately overtake all persons.”

Leonard said the “No Hellers’ — as they are often but mistakenly called — “insist that it is hell enough down here.”

Pentecostal-Holiness groups have also had a strong presence in Appalachian culture since the early 20th century, said Leonard. Their doctrinal emphasis has been on free will and Holy Ghost baptism — expressed in speaking in tongues, healing, casting out demons, and (for some) handling serpents and drinking poison.

Holiness behavior is evident in strict dress codes and rejection of “worldliness,” he said.

“Those who break the holiness codes are often disciplined, excommunicated or ‘churched’ in hopes that they may soon repent.”

Mountain Pentecostal-Holiness preachers transcend the “holy whine” of Primitive Baptists with their “suck-and-blow” cadence, Leonard noted. And music can vary from “bluesy Gospel to quartet harmony where drums and guitars are standard liturgical equipment.”

Leonard noted that Missionary, Free Will and Independent Baptists — along with Free Methodists, Nazarenes and other evangelical groups — have thrived in Appalachia, especially in denominationally-connected rural and town churches.

Many of these congregations, he said, hold “tenaciously to a fundamental conservatism that parallels the mountain sects — with a strong allegiance to the King James Version of the Bible.”

However, the religious culture in Appalachia has gone through significant changes, said Leonard, noting the presence of not only mainline denominational churches but also other religious groups.

He pointed to West Asheville, N.C., where “one of its major streets boasts an almost door-to-door collection of denominationally

affiliated churches, while at the same time providing storefront locales for upstart congregations, like a charismatic community called ‘God’s Filling Station.’”

As Deborah McCauley expressed in her monumental study of Appalachian religion, Leonard suggested that “mountain religion” should not be confused with “Southern religion” or the condescending “religion of the poor.” He affirmed McCauley’s conclusion that “the mountainous terrain ... has had enormous impact on its character, its texture, and its religious values.”

Since her study 20 years ago, the mountain culture has been disappearing quickly, said Leonard — “hit hard by demographics, mass culture, and the destruction of the very mountains that gave religion its identity.” Likewise, denominational churches are feeling the same challenges of religious pluralism, he added.



“Such a loss has not gone unnoticed by many of the practitioners themselves,” said Leonard. “It is simply more difficult to ignore.”

Some Primitive Baptists warn of the “the last days” One observer, Leonard said, told his students: “Appalachia as a distinct region is disappearing before our eyes.”

Leonard explained the reason for reaching such a conclusion: “Mass culture, in its various expressions, has overtaken Appalachia as never before...”

Ron Eller, author of *Uneven Ground: Appalachia Since 1945*, and other observers contend that “Appalachia remains a symbol of the promise and failure of American life, culture — and we might add religion,” said Leonard.

“In many ways, Appalachian religion and culture have always been in transition,” said Leonard. “Whether in strip mining or Holy Ghost baptism, Appalachian Christians were impacted by economic realities and new movements that continually descended on traditional communities.”

Today the region is being further influenced by American mass culture, he said, “dramatically transforming a once unique segment of the country into a place like any other place.”

The extent of those changes to Appalachian churches, said Leonard, can be seen in several ways.

“Appalachia is not immune from the mega-churching of America, an ecclesiastical phenomenon occurring from coast to coast,” he said. “... Mega-churches may be doing for Appalachian ecclesiology what Wal-Mart has done for sales and services, positioning themselves on the edges of towns or counties, drivable from throughout the region, often growing in direct proportion to the decline of mom-and-pop churches in the area.”

Technology has brought home the “worldliness” against which mountain churches have long battled.

“Drive anywhere in Central Appalachia in even some of the most remote regions and what sign of technology is most obvious outside almost every mountain, roadside home?” Leonard asked. “Of course, a satellite dish, a sign of connection to mass culture — 200-plus channels — and perhaps even the Internet.”

Satellite dishes bring all kinds of religious programming — and influence — as well, said Leonard.

“Perhaps no single force is changing

Appalachian church life, worship and Christian identity like the technology of televised religion,” he said.

As a result, church music and theology are changing in the mountains — although drawing some resistance. Leonard pointed to a symbolic book burning at Amazing Grace Baptist Church in Canton, N.C., last year in which the invitation — to rid the congregation of contemporary Christian music CDs and books by Billy and Franklin Graham, Robert Schuller, Rick Warren and other evangelicals as well as the Pope — was followed by a note that “We are serving fried chicken and all the sides.”



*“Perhaps no single force is changing Appalachian church life, worship and Christian identity like the technology of televised religion.”*

Mega-churches and televised services are not the only religious influences penetrating Appalachia, said Leonard. Globalism is hard to miss in places like Asheville, N.C., with an Islamic Society and an EKANKAR Meditation Society.

However, Leonard noted that some of the demographic changes are the results of practices embraced by those who have deep roots in the region — such as declining birth rates that were once essential to sustaining farm life and doctrinal positions devoid of outreach.

“Primitive Baptists rejected direct evangelism but reproduced themselves biologically in sufficient numbers to keep the movement sustained,” he said. “Birth rates and mobility have impacted those congregations as well,

often around such basic realities as when the young people go to town churches because of their more extensive youth programs. In a sense, biology again sustains theology.”

Yet the most dramatic and visible loss of Appalachia, said Leonard, is the disappearance of mountaintops and forests, and the continuing clutter of condominiums and other construction that dots the hillsides and valleys.

However, not all losses in Appalachia are bad, said Leonard, noting the prominence of “bigotry, racism, sexism and cruelty in God’s name” practiced in the region.

“But as large pieces of their religious culture disappear or are absorbed into mass religious identities, there are some lessons — promises perhaps — that should not be lost on us,” he declared.

First, mountain churches “reflect quite tangibly the strength and danger of sacraments and symbols,” said Leonard. “Generally speaking, Appalachian mountain churches have not civilized, memorialized, intellectualized the life out of the means of Grace, the Word of God without words.”

Rather than water down their religious identity, Leonard suggested we might be renewed by it.

Second, these churches demonstrate the power of oral tradition and story telling, said Leonard.

“Oral tradition is not limited to preaching,” said Leonard. “It is inseparable from the life and witness of the religious community itself.”

Third, and finally, Leonard said, these religious communities “embody the value and fragility of sacred space, the struggle to maintain it, and the identity crisis that inevitably results when it slips away.”

“Appalachian Christians learned faith up hollows, on mountaintops, by cold clear streams and in deep lush valleys,” he said. “They’ve spent a century renegotiating faith with strip mines and strip malls, slag pits and condominium complexes, polluted rivers and manhandled mountains.”

In a sense then, said Leonard, the people of Appalachia are seeing what many others are witnessing: an undoing of sacred space across the globe.

“But if Jesus continues to tarry, the mountains continue to vanish, and the church on earth remains asleep,” he continued, “then somebody ought to try and wake it up before we all have to learn to sign the Lord’s song in a treeless, mountain-less land.” **BT**

## Barbara Brown Taylor shares 'natural wisdom'

ATHENS, Ga. — Noted preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor shared lessons from her life in the North Georgia mountains in the opening session of a February conference on "Vanishing Appalachia" sponsored by Piedmont College where she is a religion professor. She moved to Habersham County, Ga., from Atlanta 20 years ago to serve first as rector of an Episcopal church.

**T**aylor said she and husband Ed left city life to escape traffic and "keeping up with the Joneses" — and "because we wanted to grow our own vegetables."

"Appalachia is as much a culture as a place," Taylor said she quickly discovered. She shared "five pieces of 'natural wisdom' — that had nothing to do with the reasons why I moved there."

### One: Moving to a place and being from a place are two different things.

Taylor said that lesson is well illustrated in a Chuck Brodsky song titled "The Come Heres & the Been Heres."

"My gain in moving to the country was someone else's loss," she confessed. "After my house was built — I didn't want any more built."



**Family Tradition**  
The Bennie Shook Family of Young Harris, Ga., helps keep alive traditional mountain music including bluegrass and gospel. Photos by David Price/Piedmont College.



Barbara Brown Taylor

Rural communities, just like churches, have their "elders," said Taylor, adding that the "Been Heres" tire of the "Come Heres" telling them how things should be done.

### Two: Keep your voice down because everyone is related.

Taylor said she learned quickly to whisper and to avoid negative comments about others. This discipline has been good for her, she said.

"I like having to remember that my voice carries — and that gossip is toxic."

### Three: Everything comes from somewhere and goes somewhere.

Having to dig a well and run a propane line to her house, Taylor said, helped her understand this principle.

"And everyone should have to take his or her trash to the landfill at least once," she advised, noting that there is no such place as "away" — as in "take it away."

"I never saw that in the city," she said.

"I just put it on the curb and someone took it 'away.'"

In rural mountain communities, she discovered that "We are all connected by the water table and the dump."

### Four: You don't have to be afraid of the dark.

Taylor bemoans each time security lighting goes up in her community — blurring the impact of a night sky.

"There is nothing hostile about the dark to me," said Taylor, while admitting that "the first time I heard a deer snort, I prepared to die."

She has learned to make her way to the barn and back at night by the feel of the ground beneath her feet.

"I don't even bother with a flashlight anymore," she said. "I might miss a comet."

### Five: People belong to the land way more than the land belongs to the people.

The land on which she now lives has rich history, Taylor discovered. There are graves of Cherokees on the ridge and stonework that was likely used by early settlers.

"I'm ready to learn more about these people," she said of the Cherokees, settlers and moonshiners — "Been Heres & Come Heres" — who once called her home their home.

Taylor said the common themes in her discoveries relate to stewardship, relationships, kinship to the earth and story telling — "passing this natural wisdom from one generation to the next." **BT**

# quotation

“ remarks ”

“I was brought up by parents who taught me to treat everyone with respect, to treat them the way I want to be treated. It’s a simple way to go about life, but my parents taught me that from an early age.”

—Atlanta Braves 20-year-old rookie sensation Jason Heyward during a spring training interview (MLB.com)

“What (Glenn) Beck will one day sadly discover is that no one enters heaven without a letter of recommendation from the ‘least of these.’”

—Baptist minister Miguel De La Torre, who teaches ethics at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, on the Fox News commentator’s call to leave churches that promote social justice (EthicsDaily.com)

“A lot of unrepeatable time and energy went into the creation and adoption of this policy. It just seems so peripheral and small-visioned compared to the life-affirming work that God is doing in every corner of the world.”

—Pastor Julie Pennington-Russell of the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., on the continuing effort of the Georgia Baptist Convention to sever ties with churches that call female pastors (ABC-NEWS)

“The Million Dollar Bill, taken as a whole, poses no reasonable risk of deceiving an honest, sensible and unsuspecting person.”

—Judge Jorge Solis ruling that Secret Service agents violated the constitutional rights of Texas-based Great News Network when they seized thousands of “Million Dollar Bill” gospel tracts without a warrant in 2006 (RNS)

“We may be independent-minded Baptists, but we are not alone.”

—Pastor David Hughes, welcoming a standing-room-only crowd to the First Baptist Church of Winston-Salem for the annual meeting of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina in March

“We must wage war against the unholy trinity of silence, shame and stigma, as it aids and abets the spread of this deadly virus.”

—Pastor Raphael G. Warnock of the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, on taking an HIV/AIDS test during a Sunday service (RNS)

“We’re always in danger of reducing Christianity to a matter of our experience.”

—United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon (Christian Century)

“Christ is my guru. Yoga is a spiritual discipline much like prayer, meditation and fasting. No one religion can claim ownership.”

—Brooke Boon, author of the book Holy Yoga, who has trained nearly 200 Christian yogis (L.A. Times)

“How many narcissists does it take to change a light bulb? Just one. He holds the bulb while the world revolves around him.”

—Religion News Service columnist Dick Staub

“The Christian approach is to sow seeds of hope and love, even when seeds of despair and hatred promise a more satisfying harvest.”

—Episcopal priest and writer Tom Ehrlich (RNS)

“Christianity ... was never intended to be a spectator sport. God gave to the church apostles, evangelists, and pastors and teachers whose job is to equip the saints for ministry.”

—Minister and clinical psychologist Kenneth Haugk who founded Stephen Ministries in 1975 (Religion and Ethics Newsweekly)

“We have no desire to defy the larger denomination; at the same time we want to minister to all members of our congregation.”

—Pastor Dean Snyder of Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, D.C., where one in four members is gay or lesbian, on having to choose between church law and civil law permitting same-sex marriages (RNS)

“I was 25 years old and I stood up at the first service and I said, ‘I intend to give 40 years of my life to this church.’”

—Founding pastor Rick Warren on the 30th anniversary of Saddleback Church that packed the Angels baseball stadium in Anaheim for Easter services (Christian Post)

“Remember the Sabbath and keep it aerobic.”

—Interim pastor Mary E. Haddad on canceling services at All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Beverly Hills, Calif., Sunday, March 21, due to crowds and street closures caused by the Los Angeles Marathon (AP)

“Making no decision for Jesus is actually making a decision about Jesus.”

—Will Graham, son and grandson of evangelists Franklin and Billy Graham, in his first revival service that drew 3,500 to an Auburn, Ala., coliseum March 26 (Columbus Ledger-Enquirer)



# editorial

## Do critics of the President get a pass on judging hearts?

By John Pierce

**P**assionately disagreeing with a government leader's decisions is as American as baseball, apple pie, and voting singers and dancers off television with a barrage of phone calls.

Politicians are easy targets for criticism — often very well-deserved criticism. Growing tough skin comes with the territory — like it does for editors and preachers.

But it is staggering how the passion — or anger — of some critics can lead to the assumed ability to gain insight into another person's heart. That seems especially true of the constant questioning of President Obama's faith commitments.

An African-American pastor who obviously disagrees with many of the President's political decisions took after him in a column carried by Baptist Press, the public relations arm of the Southern Baptist/Republican National Convention.

Pastor Eric Redmond of Reformation Alive Baptist Church in Temple Hills, Md., leveled his charges right *after* the President and his family attended Easter services at Allen Chapel AME Church in southeast Washington, D.C.

With X-ray vision, this politically and theologically conservative pastor saw clear motives in President Obama's decision, thus far, to not join a particular local congregation. However, the pastor admitted that the First Family's earlier visit to Washington's Shiloh Baptist Church caused great disruption for that congregation — over which the President expressed regret.

Oh, but the Rev. Redmond sees even more: "However, all American citizens should be concerned that Mr. Obama's heart toward religious matters reveals something about him: The President seems to be exhibiting an unformed conscience when it comes to standing on the most visceral personal issues."

Of course, Pastor Redmond plays his real hand by launching into political decisions of the current administration concerning abor-

tion and other issues with which he has disagreements. That is absolutely fine and proper.

It is the part about Mr. Obama's "heart" and "conscience" that reaches well beyond his designated ministerial duties and into the judgment role reserved for the divine.

This pastor uses the biblical command to "render unto God what is God's" to question the spiritual commitment of the President but ignores for himself Jesus' call to "judge not" and the biblical assertion that "man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Criticizing the President for not joining a local congregation is fair game. Using that one decision to suggest that "religious assembly and its inherent moral instruction are not issues of deep concern for the President," is beyond the good reverend's capacity.

Can we not assume then that this preacher's "moral instruction" grants him the arrogance to judge the spiritual condition of others — even those with whom he has no relationship?

My defense is not of the current President's political philosophy or activities — or even his decisions about church membership and involvement. Rather it is a simple reminder that regardless of how strongly we might disagree with other persons politically, we cannot see into their hearts and therefore cannot judge their souls.

It is amazing how little criticism was heard about former presidents with no significant church involvement as long as they gave lip service to Christian concerns and affirmed conservative political positions. I don't recall many questions about their "hearts."

At a recent Easter prayer breakfast, President Obama reminded those diverse ministers gathered for the occasion: "We are thankful for the sacrifice [Jesus] gave for the



sins of humanity. And we glory in the promise of redemption in the resurrection."

Yet those like Pastor Redmond, who disagree with him on emotionally charged political issues, apparently can tell that he didn't mean it. For they claim to read hearts — even if God said otherwise.

It's really a simple two-part formula if we can ever get past all the anger:

One, all Americans and even those beyond our borders can judge — harshly, loudly and even obnoxiously — the ideologies and decisions of our politicians from local governments to the White House.

And, two, but God, and only God, sees the heart. **BT**

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*Editor's note: This is the fifth in a yearlong series of articles on "Healthy ministers for healthy churches," produced in partnership with the Center for Congregational Health and supported by a gift from Henry V. Langford.*

# Covenants form basis for a healthy faith community

By Les Robinson

Recently I spoke with a group about the difference between a contract and a covenant. Each is an agreement based on a promise.

Some persons in the group suggested that a contract is about rights and responsibilities while a covenant is about faith entities. Others contrasted them as law versus the gospel, rules versus understandings, and goals versus expectations

To one person, a contract is an agreement between two parties while a covenant involves three — meaning that God is involved in covenant relationships. Someone else said, "A contract is about binding, but a covenant is about bonding."

All of these distinctions are good, but I particularly like the last one. No matter how we define it technically, in reality, a covenant is about building relationships between people. A covenant forms the basis for a healthy faith community. In fact, it is a living definition of community.

A covenant creates healthy boundaries and expectations. It gives order to passion, gives freedom to explore and discover, and creates a common agreement that defines loving relationships. It is a powerful tool for holding everyone accountable, because in a congregation, to go against the covenant is not to go against one person, but to sabotage the effort of the entire faith community.

## Biblical covenants

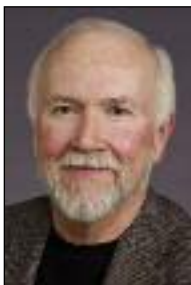
There is a solid biblical basis for covenants. Scripture reveals that God established a

number of covenants or acceptable ways of acting and behaving. The essence of all of God's covenants is love, and these covenants represent a sacred vow. Consider these:

*The Edenic Covenant* (Genesis 1–2).

Although the word "covenant" is not used, some divine promises are made. We are told to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and look after it. We also receive the warning that if we eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we will die.

*Noah's Covenant* (Genesis 6–9). God



saves the family of Noah, and uses the word "covenant" for the first time. God promises not to destroy the whole human race again through a flood, giving the rainbow as a sign.

*The Abrahamic*

*Covenant* (Genesis 12, 15, 17). God declares that Abraham's descendants will be numerous, will become a great nation, and will inherit the "promised land," later called the land of Israel.

*The Mosaic Covenant* (Exodus 19:3–6, 20–34; Deuteronomy 5–11). Herein is an example of a conditional covenant — to do what the Law orders and to obey the Ten Commandments.

*The New Covenant of Redemption and Salvation* (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Hebrews 8:8–13; Ephesians 2:8–10). Jeremiah records: "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." The Apostle Paul writes: "For it is by grace

you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."

## The importance of trust

Covenant relationships are built upon trust and they build trust. A major part of the work of a covenant is learning to trust one another and to model trustworthiness.

This does not happen automatically; it must be intentional. Lack of trust or broken trust destroys community and fellowship. In fact, merely the suspicion that a person cannot be trusted can result in severe division.

In a covenant relationship, individuals do not hold back with one another. They admit their mistakes, their weakness and their concerns. When things go wrong, they spend time mending broken community and relationships. But, none of this can happen if they first do not trust one another.

There may be numerous places that the covenant can become an effective and practical way of developing expectations and accountability among individuals and groups. However, there are two primary covenants that are healthy for every faith community: between congregation and staff, and among staff members as a team.

## Four steps for developing a covenant

So, how can we go about developing a covenant that becomes both a sacred vow and a practical tool for carrying out ministry? One method involves a simple four-step procedure. While these steps can be used for any covenant, here they describe a covenant between congregation and staff.

1. *Plan a writing team retreat.* Gather the church staff and key leaders in the faith community to become a writing team, and set a date and place for a covenant development retreat. You will need an easel, pad and different color chart markers. As you begin, be sure to establish the ground rules. This might include things like: no idea is a bad idea; this is not a debate; what is done is done in a spirit of love; and everyone must participate.

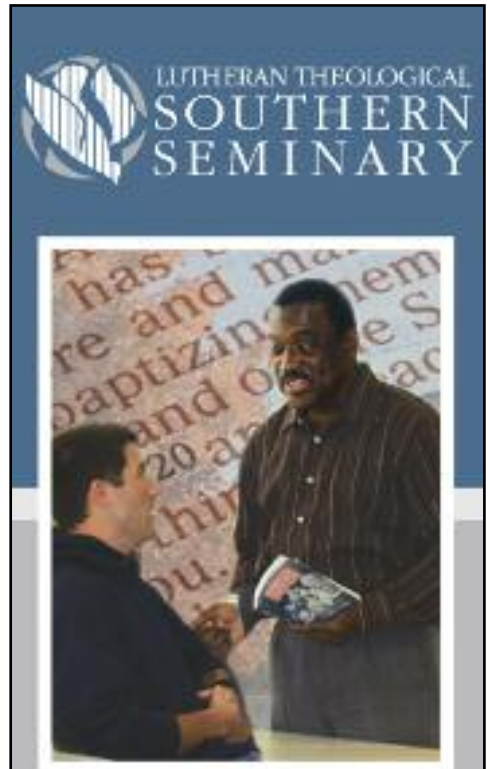
2. *Collect ideas.* The facilitator (preferably someone outside of the group) asks each person to share one item he or she wants in the covenant, and writes the response on the pad in a different color marker. The facilitator tears off each page of newsprint responses and tapes it on a wall. The process continues until ideas run out.

3. *Write the covenant.* With all of the sheets taped on the wall, the facilitator asks the participants to sort the responses by theme. These themes are written on clean newsprint; some items may stand alone. In a large group, two people can wordsmith a

theme as they seek to express the intent of the group. Smaller groups will work together on all of the themes. The result is the initial covenant, which is then typed in final form and shared with the entire faith community. All members may be invited to submit their thoughts and ideas with persons of the writing team.

4. *Keep the covenant dynamic.* The covenant should be a growing and changing document, so the group needs to set a specific time to review the covenant to negotiate changes. After the initial meeting, review it in 60 to 90 days — and then again annually or bi-annually or whatever is considered practical. During review, additional information from the entire congregation can be considered and participants can be honest about what is and is not working. **BT**

—Les Robinson is vice president and manager of interim ministry resources for the Center for Congregational Health ([healthychurch.org](http://healthychurch.org)) in Winston-Salem, N.C.

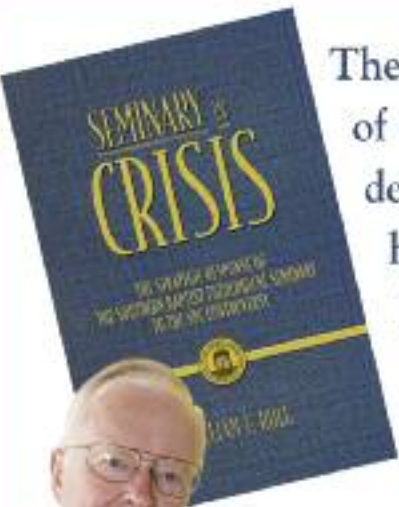


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# CBF at 20

## Sherman calls for remembering the past, growing for the future

WINSTON-SALEM, NC—

“Sometimes I hear people say ‘I don’t want to hear your war stories,’” Cecil Sherman told an overflow audience gathered in March for the annual assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina. “But it needs to be remembered.”

**R**ecalling the August 1990 meeting in Atlanta that led to CBF’s official birth the following spring, Sherman noted that the national Fellowship movement is now approaching 20 years of organized existence. Sherman, who served as CBF’s first coordinator, reflected on both the “face of conflict” within a Southern Baptist Convention overtaken by conservatism and credalism, and the “face of growth” that emerged in CBF as moderate Baptists coalesced around the historic principles they believed had been violated.

“If you were in the SBC meetings in the 1980s, you remember the spirit of those meetings,” he said, but “If you were not a part of the chemistry of that, you will not understand our birth.”

“We were denied policy-making places on boards, even though money from our churches continued pouring into the system,” he said. “We tried to tell the truth, including about the Bible. We tried to protect our friends who were teaching in seminaries.”

But, Sherman said, “If you opposed fundamentalists, the first thing you were called was a liberal — and not many Baptist churches were looking for liberals for pastors.” It took some nerve to oppose the SBC’s

rising leadership, he said.

“The people who later formed CBF were in the middle of this conflict,” Sherman said: “We were trashed, lied about and ignored.”

Like early leaders in the Civil Rights struggle, he said, a few people “grabbed hold and wouldn’t let go.” If we shouldn’t forget what Civil Rights pioneers did, ask, “Then why should we forget about the pain that brought this organization into being?”

“We stayed with our fight for 10 years and then had the grit to form a new Baptist body,” he said. “This organization exists because we fought that fight and at the appropriate time, built this house.”

Knowing when to back away from something is “an inexact science,” Sherman said, but

“We quit because we were at risk of becoming like the people we opposed.”

From the face of conflict, CBF took on a new face, one of growth. “I rejoice at the growth that has come to North Carolina CBF,” he said: “Size means strength. Strength used wisely can do an awful lot of good for God.”

As CBF emerged, some participants wanted the budding organization to focus on single issues or special interests, Sherman said, but its early and continuing focus has been in three areas: “to provide a missions delivery system for the churches” that defines missions as more than evangelism and church starts, to support Baptist theological education, and “to teach Baptist polity to people who have forgotten it or never knew it.”

Sherman recalled how CBF first funded two missionary families in Europe who



resigned rather than work under SBC restrictions. “During the next year 20 more missionaries came on the payroll of CBF,” he said, though the budget was slim. “My job was to go to churches and ask them to redirect their money from the Cooperative Program to the CBF,” he said. “If I don’t do it, missionaries don’t get paid.”

Polls taken at CBF meetings in 1993 and 1994 showed that 87 percent and 86 percent, respectively, said missions should be the first priority. “That instructed me,” Sherman said. “If that’s the way the assembly feels, I’m inclined to do what they say.”

Sherman expressed concern that too many moderate Baptist theological schools have emerged and could be “a ticket to some pretty average schools if we’re not careful.”

Knowing Baptist polity is essential, he added. When a group comes along and violates Baptist ideals, “If you don’t know the principles, you don’t know what’s being violated.”

Turning to the future, Sherman acknowledged that his generation will be off the stage as new CBF leaders set the course for the future, but he advanced three ideas “that I hope some of you will keep in mind.”

“I hope you stay in touch with mainline Baptists ... across the spectrum of size and locality,” he said, adding: “When leadership is separated from fellowship, bad things happen.”

Second, Sherman urged leaders to give missions priority. “Many things are good, but missions pulls us together.”

Third, Sherman concluded, “I hope you get leadership who have a will to grow CBF.” Choosing leaders carefully, he said, “is the difference between vitality and mediocrity.” **BT**

*Editor’s note: Baptists Today will carry several articles this year related to the 20th anniversary of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.*

# Gourley tapped as next leader of Baptist History and Heritage Society

By John Pierce  
*Baptists Today*

ATLANTA — Bruce Gourley, a historian, Internet innovator and online editor for *Baptists Today*, became executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society (BH&HS) on April 1. He is the former associate director of Mercer University's Center for Baptist Studies and the owner of the BaptistLife.com discussion forums.

Gourley is working part time from his home in Manhattan, Mont., with periodic trips to Atlanta where the society is currently based.

“(Bruce) is an accomplished writer and Baptist historian,” said Mike Williams, society president and professor at Dallas Baptist University in a letter to society leaders. “He also has an entrepreneurial spirit and the technological skills to lead the society in the 21st century.”

Gourley, a native of Douglas, Ga., is a former campus minister who taught college history courses. He is a graduate of Mercer University, Southern Baptist Seminary and Auburn University where he earned a Ph.D. in history.

He is the author of three books: *The Godmakers: The Legacy of the Southern Baptist Convention?* (1996, Providence House), *Leading the Way for 200 Years: The Story of the First Baptist Church of Huntsville, Alabama, 1809-2009* (2009, BH&HS) and *The Capsule History of Baptists* (2010, BH&HS).

Baylor University religion professor Doug Weaver, who chaired the search team, said by selecting Gourley the society expressed confidence in its future and that of the Baptist identity.

“Bruce believes that the Baptist story — of historic commitments to principles like freedom of conscience and religious liberty for all — is still important in this increasingly post-denominational world,” said Weaver. “With his passion, tireless work ethic, technological gifts and his ability to relate to younger generations, Bruce is a great choice to lead the society in the



*Gourley said his focus will be on seeing that the best of the Baptist past finds expression in the new ways into the future.*

21st century.”

Founded as the Southern Baptist Historical Society in 1938, the society chose independence in 1995 when the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention — to which the society related — was eliminated as part of the SBC restructuring.

Since 2000, the society has related closely to the then-newly formed Fellowship of Baptist Historians. The society's name change occurred in 2001, and offices were relocated from Nashville to Mercer University's Atlanta campus in 2007.

The society has a long history of producing resources on Baptist history and sponsoring an annual conference in partnership with the Fellowship of Baptist Historians. Significant attention was given to resources related to the 400th anniversary of the Baptist movement that was celebrated last year.

Also last year, Charles Deweese retired as executive director after 10 years, followed

by associate director Pamela Durso's move to lead Baptist Women in Ministry. Durso, who has continued to assist the society, called Gourley the perfect person to serve as the next executive director.

“Bruce is an established scholar, a published historian and a gifted writer,” said Durso. “He is well known and respected in Baptist circles and is committed to communicating, educating, and interpreting Baptist history for people in the pews as well as for members of the academy.”

In recent years the independent society — dependent upon contributions and revenue from the sale of resources — has faced financial struggles. Baptist historian Walter Shurden of Macon, Ga., provided leadership during the interim period and helped raise funds to ensure the society's continuation.

Longtime supporters of the society feel that its role in Baptist life remains of great value. Likewise, Gourley said his focus will be on seeing that the best of the Baptist past finds expression in the new ways into the future.

“Broadly speaking, my focus will be on casting the distinctives of 17th and 18th century Baptists — freedom of conscience, religious liberty, separation of church and state, local church autonomy, non-creedal, etc. — as the hallmarks of the Baptist faith that fit well within a 21st century paradigm, resonate both within and without Baptist life today, and are values that are intergenerational,” said Gourley.

Gourley said the society will continue to publish a journal, host an annual meeting and offer varied resources — while making better use of digital film media.

“The society will also make increased use of volunteers and seek new partnerships in terms of publishing and broadcasting Baptist history,” said Gourley.

Shurden, who has known Gourley as his student and colleague, called him “a new treasure for the Baptist people.”

Information on the society and the resources offered is available at [www.baptisthistory.org](http://www.baptisthistory.org). **BT**

# New hymnal already in second printing

By Bob Allen  
*Associated Baptist Press*

ATLANTA — A new hymnal for Baptist churches in the works for four years premiered in Atlanta March 7. Choirs from five churches gathered for a Sunday-afternoon service unveiling the *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*.

“We could not have assembled a better team,” Thomas McAfee III, a businessman and church-music proponent who initiated the hymnal product in 2006, said introducing a five-member editorial board overseeing the project to a packed sanctuary at Atlanta’s Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church.

McAfee, chairman of Hallmark Systems, Inc., a health-care company based in Macon, Ga., served as chairman and editor. He primarily oversaw the business side of the 700-page hymnal’s development, publishing and distribution.

Mark Edwards, retired longtime minister of music at First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tenn., joined the project in 2007 as vice president of music and worship resources, overseeing the music side.

Other members of the editorial board were John Simons, director of the Townsend-McAfee Institute; David Music, professor of church music at Baylor University in Waco, Texas; Milburn Price, retired dean at Samford University’s School of Performing Arts in Birmingham, Ala.; and Stanley Roberts, associate dean and director of choral activities at Mercer University.

Instead of developing the hymnal from the top down, editors and board members took a grassroots approach. They traveled across the nation, held meetings with church leaders and sought new ideas of how to meet the music needs of churches today.

The finished product is a collaborative initiative of more than 50 leaders from the United States and Canada comprising pastors, church musicians, composers, scholars and laity. All served as volunteers.

“*Celebrating Grace* is a hymnal built by Baptists for Baptists,” Edwards said in a press release on the hymnal website.

McAfee said editors vetted more than 2,500 hymns for musical, theological and language standards. Selections include familiar hymns that have been sung for



Photo courtesy of ABP

## SECOND PRINTING

The Publishing Division of Celebrating Grace, Inc. has announced that the *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* is now in its second printing. The initial printing of 25,000 hymnals filled pre-orders from churches.

Early orders came from churches in 28 states across the U.S. and two provinces in Canada. Additionally, missionaries in Indonesia and Ethiopia are using the hymnal.

generations, along with newer works by distinguished church music composers and arrangers.

“A hymnal project these days involves more than releasing a book,” McAfee said.

He said more than 850 music resources are available online as supplements to the hymnal. They offer churches a full line of music and worship resources for their music ministry.

Another important part of the *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*, McAfee said, is the Worship Matrix, a trademarked interactive library of online resources. They have been developed over 30 years by David Bolin, minister of music at First Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, for his personal use

and now expanded to enable worship leaders to develop balanced and cohesive services using Scripture, readings, music and prayers that complement and build on each other.

“It’s truly a one-of-a-kind [resource] and one of those things you just can’t get anywhere else,” McAfee said.

Participating in the March 7 premiere concert were The Georgia Youth Choir Festival and the choirs of First Baptist Church of Marietta, Ga.; First Baptist Church of Griffin, Ga.; First United Methodist Church of Milledgeville, Ga.; and Wieuca Road Baptist Church of Atlanta. They were accompanied by organ, piano, handbells, brass quintet, and timpani, to lead the congregation in singing

Music ministers and church music directors followed up March 8 with a full day of workshops, master classes and demonstrations, followed by an evening concert featuring the Belmont University Chorale of Nashville; the Mercer University Children’s Choir of Macon; and the choirs of First Baptist Church of Macon and Peachtree Baptist Church and Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church, both of Atlanta.

McAfee said the hymnal would not have been possible without generous support from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation in Houston and the James T. & Carolyn T. McAfee Foundation in Atlanta. **BT**

# readers' responses

## ***Celebrating Grace Hymnal* is gem**

EDITOR: I had the privilege of attending the premier of the brand new *Celebrating Grace Hymnal* at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta in March. Several hundred of us spent two days singing from this hymnal and learning about all its associated products, most of them online.

College and church choirs, brass and other instrumentalists including handbells, were on hand to play arrangements available online by the publisher. I came home so pleased about what I had heard and learned.

Later, after a careful three-hour study of the hymnal's content, I was even more impressed. The many new hymns written by current authors are outstanding. Many can be used with well-known existing tunes, and the new tunes could be learned easily by most congregations.

There is a good balance between the well-known hymns of the past and the new material. Also, there are a few contemporary hymns and choruses, and several of the beloved gospel songs from hymnals of the past.

The contents are aligned with the church year, which should please many congregations. There is a large number of Advent and Christmas hymns and carols.

This hymnal is one of the finest I have seen that moves us into the 21st century. There are 173 authors and/or tune writers who are still living. Some have several hymns or tunes in the hymnal. Many of these names are well known in hymnological circles, and their texts or tunes appear in several hymnals published in recent times.

This hymnal, which resulted from the dreams of Mercer University Chancellor

Kirby Godsey and Baptist layman J. Thomas McAfee, took several years of hard and careful work. The editorial board played a large part in the production, and many others served on committees. The hymnal was a long time coming because of the careful attention given to details.

The book itself is beautiful, easy to read and available in several colors. There is an edition without the word "Baptist" on the cover or in its content for use in churches of other denominations.

I highly recommend *Celebrating Grace* as a new hymnal that will bring honor to our Lord and joy to the congregations who will be singing from its pages.

*J. Loyd Landrum, Macon, Ga.*

*Loyd Landrum is minister of music emeritus at Macon's Vineville Baptist Church.*

## in the know

*Keeping up with people, places, and events*

### PEOPLE

**Chris and Natalie Aho** have begun work as "re-planters" with Hillcrest Baptist Church in Mobile, Ala. They will be working through the Wilshire Baptist and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship residency programs and with Alabama CBF. Chris previously served as associate minister at First Baptist Church of Mt. Airy, N.C., and Natalie as communications manager for CBF North Carolina.

**Paul Baxley** is pastor of First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga., coming from First Baptist Church of Henderson, N.C.

**Jane Esdale** died Feb. 24 in Durham, N.C., at age 62. She was founder and former director of the American Baptist-related Cameron Community Ministries in Rochester, N.Y.

**Seth Horrell** is pastor of North Riverside Baptist church in Newport News, Va. Previously he served as associate pastor of Williamsburg (Va.) Baptist Church.

**Thomas M. Huber** is director of outreach for the Ministers and Missionaries Benefit Board (MMBB). Huber will work with the 14

MMBB representatives stationed around the country to extend investment, retirement, life insurance, disability, and health insurance benefits to all eligible church workers.

**Tom J. Logue** died March 6. He was a longtime campus ministry leader who served as state director of the Baptist Student Union in Arkansas from 1955-1987. Earlier he directed the citywide BSU program in Memphis. A World War II veteran and a Ph.D. graduate from Southwestern Seminary, Logue was instrumental in leading students in racial reconciliation. In retirement, Logue became the first state coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Arkansas, serving from 1991-1995. He also wrote *God, Could You Talk a Little Louder?*, a book on grief that traced his family's experiences through the illness and death of his oldest son. A celebration of his life was held March 9 at Second Baptist Church in Little Rock.

**Terry L. Maples** is the new field coordinator for the Tennessee CBF, in partnership with the Atlanta-based national CBF. He comes from Huguenot Road Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., where he was associate pastor for education and discipleship.

**Brent McDougal** will become pastor of Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, on June 1. He currently serves as coordinator for Alabama CBF.

**Jack McKinney**, former pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., has opened McKinney Counseling and Consulting in Raleigh.

**Beverly Griner McNally**, vice president of the board of National Ministries of American Baptist Churches USA, died April 6 in Pennington, N.J., after a battle with cancer.

**David Mueller** of Kerrville, Texas, died March 26 at age 80. He was a longtime theology professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where his father also taught.

### EVENTS

The **Peace-bearing Convocation**, sponsored by the Center for Baptist Heritage & Studies, will be held in Richmond, Va., May 18. Presenters include Isam Ballenger, professor emeritus of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond; Karen Bullock, professor of Christian heritage at the B.H. Carroll Theological Institute; Robert Parham, executive director of the Center for Ethics; Ken Kessler, Empowering Leaders team leader of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board; LeDayne McLeese Polaski, program coordinator of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America; and David Brubaker, associate professor at the Center for Justice and Peacemaking at Eastern Mennonite University. Contact: (804) 289-8434. **BT**

# Obama's council report deemed partial victory for church-state separation

By Robert Marus  
Associated Baptist Press

WASHINGTON — After a year of work by President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, the panel has made its recommendations.

According to experts in religious liberty, some of them represent long-sought victories for supporters of strong church-state separation.

Nonetheless, neither the report's recommendations nor the White House actions on the subject have gone far enough to please many who were critical of previous administrations' efforts to loosen government rules on funding social services through churches and other religious organizations.

The report, released in March, makes recommendations in several areas the council was tasked with reviewing. A set of the council's recommendations about reform of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and its related programs in federal agencies dealt with many of the most controversial church-state issues surrounding the faith-based effort.

On two issues in particular — strengthening the guidance that religious groups receiving government funding receive to ensure that they do not violate the First Amendment's ban on government promotion of religion and houses of worship forming separately incorporated charities through which to carry out government-funded programs — the council's recommendations heartened church-state separationists.

But the panel was not charged with bringing a recommendation on what may be the most controversial issue surrounding the faith-based effort — the hiring rights of religious organizations that use federal funds to deliver social services.

The recommendations go “a long way in righting the church-state problems that have plagued the faith-based initiative over the past decade,” said Brent Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, who served on a sub-panel of the council that helped craft the recommendations.

“We made major strides in seeking to honor constitutional principles while ensuring

*The council recommended that granting agencies provide much clearer guidance to charities receiving government funding.*

the autonomy of religious organizations, including churches. The requirement of a separate corporation to receive the money and perform the services is crucial to achieving this goal.”

The BJC and other church-state separationist groups have argued it is the best way to ensure that government money intended for secular social services isn't diverted to worship, devotional or other religious activities.

But it was the one recommendation over which the council's members had the most sharply differing views.

“Council members are almost evenly divided over the issue of whether the government should also require houses of worship that would receive direct federal social-service funds to form separate corporations to receive those funds,” the report said. “A narrow majority of the council (13 members) believe the federal government should take such a step as a necessary means for achieving church-state separation and protecting religious autonomy, while also urging states to reduce any unnecessary administrative costs and burdens associated with attaining this status.

“A minority of the council (12 members) believe separate incorporation is sometimes, but not always, the best means to achieve these goals and should not be required because it may be prohibitively costly and would disrupt or deter other successful and constitutionally permissible relationships.”

Melissa Rogers, a former BJC general counsel and currently a professor at Wake Forest Divinity School, chaired the council. She said that even the disagreement over the separate-incorporation requirement, while closely dividing the council, nonetheless revealed some common ground on the issue.

Charles Haynes of the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center said separate incor-

poration is a best practice. “Religious charities would be wise to form separate 501(c)(3) organizations because that would both help ensure that tax money is not used for religious purposes and protect the autonomy of faith communities,” he said.

The council also recommended that granting agencies provide much clearer guidance to charities receiving government funding on how to avoid spending government dollars on activities that violate the First Amendment's prohibition on government-endorsed religion. Those recommendations drew broad support from the panel, which included Rogers and Walker as well as former Southern Baptist Convention president Frank Page and prominent African-American Baptist leaders Otis Moss Jr. and William Shaw.

“We are at a new stage when some who supported charitable choice [the Clinton-era forerunner of the Bush faith-based effort] as well as some who opposed it can agree on a list of common-ground standards that should control many issues in this area,” Rogers said.

The clearer guidance, in particular, was a valuable step for avoiding lawsuits and constitutional violations, said one legal scholar who's been tracking the faith-based effort since its beginning. “The general thrust is that the clarity is of the sort that will help,” said George Washington University Law School professor Chip Lupu.

What remains unclear is whether religious charities receiving government funding to carry out ostensibly secular social services can, nonetheless, discriminate on the basis of religion in hiring for positions dealing with those charities.

Obama promised, during a 2008 campaign speech, to reverse a Bush policy that had allowed religious charities receiving government funds to take faith into account when hiring. But, since taking office, White House officials have taken a more cautious approach to the question.

“I trust the administration will implement all of our recommendations, and in the next year fulfill President Obama's campaign promise to eliminate religious discrimination in employment for governmentally funded programs,” Walker said. **BT**



# Q&A with **Melissa Rogers**

**W**ASHINGTON (ABP) — Melissa Rogers, former general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and current professor at Baptist-related Wake Forest Divinity School, recently finished serving as the chair of President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

**Q: How did you end up on the council in the first place, and then how were you selected as the chair?**

A: [White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Director] Joshua DuBois invited me to serve on the council about a year ago, and then he asked me to serve as its chair for our last few months of work.



Melissa Rogers

**Q: The council has worked on several initiatives that President Obama has laid out that deal with faith-based and secular community-service organizations — but the most controversial dealt with whether and how deeply religious organizations such as local churches should receive and use government funding to carry out social services. What was the most difficult discussion you had to moderate in your time as chair?**

A: Perhaps the most challenging council-wide discussion was one that took place the day before we voted on the final report. The discussion focused on a recommendation in the global poverty report on what's known as the "Partner Vetting System" developed by the United States Agency for International Development.

It was my sense that there was enough agreement among us on the relevant point to come together in the end, but we had less than 24 hours to talk it over and revise the recommendation, which addresses a complicated and sensitive issue. That was challenging. Nevertheless, we were able to

work together and unanimously approve the revised recommendation and the final report the next day.

**Q: On one of those highly controversial questions — whether churches should be required to form separate non-profit corporations to receive government grants — the council narrowly decided in favor of a position that you and other Baptist supporters of strong church-state separation have supported in the past. Do you think that's a victory for church-state separation?**

A: We worked hard on developing the arguments in that part of the report, and, as you note, I certainly believe that — for the good of both church and state — the government should take this step. So I was pleased to see the proposal draw support from a large and diverse group of council members.

If you read the arguments back and forth in the report, you see that even those on the other side of this question believe separate incorporation for houses of worship is advisable in many cases, so that's also worth noting.

**Q: What about the council's support for clearer constitutional guidance to faith-based providers on how to avoid violating the Establishment Clause? Is that also a victory for those like yourself who have been critical of President Bush's faith-based effort (and charitable choice before it) for lacking clear-enough guidelines?**

A: I'm pleased that the whole council united around a call for some important reforms of the existing system. We are at a new stage when some who supported charitable choice as well as some who opposed it can agree on a list of common-ground standards that should control many issues in this area.

These aren't personal victories. Instead, they are a demonstration of the merit of the ideas and a testament to the group's dogged commitment to listen to one another and work together despite our differences on some important issues.

**Q: Do you have any indication of whether the administration will follow those particular recommendations (on separate incorporation and clearer constitutional guidance to providers)?**

A: I expect the administration to give the recommendations serious consideration in the very near term. Those of us who worked on them will continue to urge swift adoption, and I hope others will as well.

While some of our recommendations will require amendments to an existing executive order and existing regulations, a number of others may be adopted simply by making changes in practice.

**Q: The council was not charged by the administration with addressing what is possibly the most controversial part of the faith-based effort: Whether religious groups receiving government funds may discriminate in hiring on the basis of religion or other related characteristics. Of course, you've staked out a position on this in the past. Are you disappointed you didn't have the chance to deal with it as a council?**

A: I argued that the council should take on this issue (along with other issues). I don't believe we would have found the silver bullet that totally resolves the conflict and pleases everyone, but I do believe we could have performed a public service by engaging in a civil discussion, shedding more light on current law and practice, clearing up some misunderstandings, and clarifying areas of agreement and disagreement.

Having said that, let me also say that what is most important is not the advice the council has provided or the processes it used, but the decisions the administration ultimately makes on this and a host of other legal and policy issues. **BT**

—Robert Marus is managing editor and Washington bureau chief for *Associated Baptist Press*.

## guest commentary

# The ‘natural inclusion’ of religion

By Martin E. Marty

“Natural inclusion” is the mantra some scholars have used in efforts to locate a proper place and time for religion in public school curricula and textbooks. It is the opposite of “unnatural exclusion” of religion in the same locales.

It is also different from “unnatural inclusion,” which is what came to the fore again in the ongoing bizzareries exhibited in the case of the Texas School Board.

The American Academy of Religion, and scholars like Warren Nord and Charles Haynes, promote “natural inclusion.”

Such a phrase does not resolve all the controversies. There still remain valid debates over the definition of “religion,” the tonalities of the “natural,” and the strategies of “inclusion.”

However, its use is intended to counter those who, like the Texas board majority, try to privilege one religion — a fictitious invention proposed as “biblical religion” inherited from the “Founding Fathers,” who would likely find offensive the cause to which their words are being put to use. “Natural inclusion” enterprises are equally intended to counter the secular omissions of religion in public arenas, be these omissions the result of unwitting or witting patterns of neglect of faith-connected topics by educators.

This is not the place to reargue the case, but to demonstrate what “natural inclusion” can look like — evident at a lecture in Chicago, sponsored by “Facing History” and

delivered by *New York Times* columnist, and author of the really important best-seller *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, Nicholas Kristof.

After his talk, a companion attendee asked, “Did you notice that three times when he spoke of positive things that people were doing the reference was to religion?”

Thus he had told of an 18-year-old who suffered an obstetric fistula and was shunned and left in a hut with an open door, so hyenas could kill and devour her. She beat them off and literally dragged herself 32 miles to safety.

Where? To whom? To a missionary known to this girl as an agent of compassion.

Nuns were heroines in another story as well. The references were so “naturally” told that I had not even marked them for *Sightings*, perhaps because they were “hearings” and I was not recording the provocative talk.

While reflecting on this I brought back up a column from the February 28th *New York Times* in which Kristof set out to discuss people who transcend the “save-the-world” talk and action of Democrats and liberals versus the denunciation of all governmental, and thus “rat hole,” aid programs by Republicans and religious conservatives. How?



Kristof, characteristically for him and surprisingly to the camps just mentioned, reached into his vast global experience — his reading, interviewing, studying, looking, and drawing on his own reservoirs of decency and fairness. Thereupon he pointed favorably to those Evangelicals who “have become the new internationalists, pushing successfully for new American programs against AIDS and malaria” and attacking human traffickers.

He went even further and named names. “A pop quiz: What’s the largest U.S.-based international relief and development organization?”

No, not Save the Children. It’s the evangelical World Vision, with its 40,000 staff people in 100 countries.

He quoted repentant and visionary evangelical leaders who suffer from images of “preening television blowhards and hypocrites” and even from the Vatican, for its lethal policies of opposing the distribution of condoms in the poor world.

The column, a good example of “natural inclusion,” was a judgment on “snooty” secular liberals and “sanctimonious” evangelical militants. Many hope that the “natural inclusions” tribe will increase. **BT**

—Martin E. Marty is a speaker, author and teacher of religious history. This *Sightings*, column is provided by the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

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# 2010 Bible Studies

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June 6, 2010

## Sins of excess: lust and gluttony

Proverbs 7:4-5, 21-23; 23:1-3, 19-21

John Cassian, a monk from Marseilles, developed a list of eight sins in the fourth century that he claimed should be avoided at all costs because they were the greatest impediments to one's spiritual life. Almost 200 years later, Pope Gregory I reduced the number from eight to seven and stated that all people, not just monastics, should be mindful of the disastrous effects these particular sins have on one's relationship with God and fellow humans. The list names lust, gluttony, greed, envy, sloth, anger and pride as the deadliest of all sins.

Of the seven, lust and gluttony often are viewed as the most prevalent sins in our society today, and for good reason. They are the darling favorites of both the media and the public. The amount of coverage given to the indiscretions of professional golfer, Tiger Woods, and the success of NBC's reality program, *The Biggest Loser*, exemplify the notion that nothing grabs our attention and brings in ratings like a sex scandal or some sort of eating disorder.

The people of God are aware of this fascination, and are cashing in on it. Just visit a Christian bookstore or a local congregation and you will quickly discover that when it comes to talking about sin, the church speaks more about lust and gluttony than any other vice. We, of course, should not be surprised. A study series on "The Joy of Christian Sex" seems more interesting than one on "Acedia & Me: Fighting Soul-Stifling Malaise with Great Care," and it is likely to sell more copies or draw a larger crowd.

The reason is that when we think of lust we usually associate it with sex, and when we think of gluttony, we usually associate it with food. Is it any wonder why these two sins warrant so much attention? But isn't it ironic that two of life's necessities oftentimes become

detrimental to our bodies and impediments to our relationship with God? "Yet isn't this just the sort of irony that is inherent in so much of our sin? Life's necessities, when abused, become life's threat" (Will Willimon, *Sinning Like a Christian*, 127).

So, when do we cross the line? According to the wisdom teacher, virtue becomes vice whenever we pervert the good and become preoccupied with the wrong things for the wrong reasons and express our desires in the wrong ways. This is an intriguing thought, especially in a society that promotes self-indulgence, excessiveness and instantaneous gratification as the hallmarks of personal success and freedom. Nike, of course, sums up this mentality best with its admonition for us to "Just Do It!"

Reflecting on this train of thought, Will Willimon observes, "Reining in Lust [and Gluttony] is particularly tough in a society that inculcates in us the notion that expression of desire is a right, a duty for each of us, and that the only danger is repression of desire rather than its expression ... In a world of untutored, unbridled desire, we tend to grab at everything out of fear that we might neglect to seize the one thing that would give our lives meaning" (140). Like Willimon, the wisdom teacher understands the dangers that falling prey to one's desires poses; so he warns us to keep our passions in check. Otherwise, our lack of self-control could cause us embarrassment, brokenness or possibly even our lives.

At the end of the day, unbridled passion is what defines lust and gluttony. Sex and food are two of the most common and interesting things we indulge, but there are plenty of other things with which we become preoccupied and barter for with our souls. Desire is not evil, but it becomes sinful when it is misdirected and misused. All of us desire someone or something. It is part of being human. The question is who or what is the object of our affection and at what cost. As Christians, may our desire begin and end with the one "in whom we live, and move and have our being."

LESSONS FOR:  
Sunday, June 6-  
July 4, 2010

Written by Tim Cannon,  
instructor of Humanities at  
Forsyth Tech Community  
College in Winston-Salem, N.C.



*Discussion: What distinguishes a healthy desire from an unhealthy one? Is there anything in your life with which you are preoccupied or overindulging? What are the benefits and the consequences of your desire?*

June 13, 2010

## Sins of desire: greed and envy

Proverbs 3:27-28; 11:24-28; 23:17-19

On Aug. 24, 79 CE, Mount Vesuvius erupted. When the smoke cleared, more than 2,000 people were dead and Pompeii lay covered under layers of volcanic ash and debris nearly 20 feet deep. During the 18th and 19th centuries, numerous archaeological excavations were begun in this area in the hopes of discovering some valuable information about ancient Roman civilization. At one particular site, scientists unearthed the remains of a young girl whose feet were pointed toward the city gate, but the rest of her body was directed toward an object beyond her reach. The object was a bag of pearls. Apparently, in her hurried attempt to flee the city, the girl was overrun and killed by the devastating aftereffects of this natural disaster. Interestingly, as she died, she tried to grasp the sack of jewels. Why? Was it because she thought she could take the prize with her to the afterlife, or was it because she didn't want anyone else to have it?

Greed and envy are two sides of the same coin. Both are sins of desire. The former is to desire in excess what we need while neglecting to share what we have, and the latter is desiring what others have or wanting to be who they are. Like all sin, their root is selfishness, and they are expressed in the craving to possess more than is needed or possible to obtain. Of course, these definitions make greed and envy seem more cut and dry than they may be, for as we all know, the line between want and need or desire and necessity is thin.



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As I thought about the implications of that statement, I was reminded of the story of a businessman who walked out of his store one day and saw a young boy reaching up into a candy machine located outside the store. The machine had “eaten” his quarter, the boy said, and he was trying to get at the candy the stingy machine refused to cough up. It became obvious that the boy’s arm was stuck, so the man went over to help him. Unable to get the boy’s arm free, the businessman called the fire department for help, but the firemen, too, failed to loosen the boy’s arm from the metal beast. By this time, the boy’s father had heard of his son’s plight and rushed to the scene. Kneeling down beside the boy, he asked, “Son, do you have hold of a candy bar in there?” The boy indicated that he did. Then the dad said, “Son, I want you to let go.” When the boy released his grip on the candy, his arm easily slipped out of the machine.

The more I think about the nuances of this story the more I am disturbed because it addresses my own sinful tendencies. I must confess that, like the boy, I am guilty at times of surrendering my freedom by grasping for things of which I need to let go. These things usually consist of actions, attitudes, people or possessions, which are not bad in and of themselves but become destructive when they possess me rather than vice-versa. My guess is the same can be said of you.

Don’t misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with wanting to better ourselves or to obtain nice things. After all, Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). The question is: are we content with whom we are and what we have, or do we think and act as if “the grass is always greener on the other side”?

Continuing this train of thought, Will Willimon quips, “Perhaps we are among the first generation in this society to realize that desire has a way of being elevated to the level of need, and need gets further inflated to the level of rights. Our rights are thus an ever-expanding list because my desires are a bottomless pit ... Need is best if kept close to the basics — a full stomach, a roof over our heads. But it is the nature of desire to be ever growing, ever rising. And where do we get the wherewithal to say no?” (106).

According to the wisdom teacher, self-control is paramount if one is to be empowered to say, “Enough is enough. I am happy with who I am and what I have.” Obviously, what we crave and to what extent say a great deal about

who we are. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21).

People who know me know that I have a sweet tooth. I am particularly fond of cookies, cakes and candy. Of the three, my favorite indulgence is candy, and every now and then I will reward myself with a Snickers bar.

Several years ago, Snickers came out with a slogan that said, “Eat a Snickers; it satisfies your hunger.” I enjoy eating a Snickers whenever I get the chance because it is quite tasty and does indeed satisfy my immediate hunger. But in life, there are many things for which we hunger. We hunger for food, yes, but we also hunger for truth, health, love, attention, fame and fortune, and so on. In an attempt to alleviate our hunger, we gorge ourselves on a lot of stuff, and yet our cravings are rarely satisfied because they do not make our lives more bearable or significant.

Yes, Snickers makes a good afternoon snack, but at the end of the day, only Jesus satisfies our longings. He is the bread of life, the one who gives our lives meaning and provides spiritual nourishment for our starving souls. What more could we possibly gain from seeking fulfillment elsewhere?

*Discussion: What do you desire? Are you satisfied with what you have, or do you crave more? Why or why not? Do you ever compare yourself to another person and wish you could be like him/her? How would your life be different if you could switch lives with that person? How have greed and envy affected your relationship with God? With others? What is the abundant life Jesus wants to give you?*

June 20, 2010

## Sins of indifference: sloth

Proverbs 6:6-11; 24:30-34

I once heard a story about a pastor who was disappointed that things were not “happening” in his church. Out of curiosity, he asked one of the deacons, “What is wrong with our church? Is it ignorance or apathy? The deacon replied, “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

I wish I could say that this response is an isolated event, but it is not. In fact, it seems this attitude is becoming more prevalent in today’s churches. If you doubt the validity of this observation, then take a moment and ask those who are outside looking in what they think about the church. More than likely, they

will tell you they are receiving mixed signals from us.

Recently, I asked a group of students in the Introduction to World Religions college class I teach: “What role does the church play in your life and community?” I received very negative responses. When I inquired as to why the students had such a low opinion of the church, the consensus was that the church gave mixed signals. When I asked them to be more specific, they said they often hear one thing from the ministers and members on Sunday and see another from Monday through Saturday. In other words, they indicated there is a disconnect between what Christians are saying and how they are behaving. Naturally, I assumed the students were referring to our bouts with hypocrisy, but as it turns out, they were more offended by our complicity than our duplicity. Simply put, my students were offended by people who were singing, “Standing on the Promises,” when they were merely sitting on the premises.

These students are not alone in their disappointment with the church. Throughout history, critics have complained that more congregants go through the motions of religious instruction than experience it in a transformative way. The desert fathers called this propensity to avoid engagement “sloth” — the sin of indifference and complacency. Other words commonly used to describe this state of mind are impassivity, neglectfulness, indolence, idleness and laziness.

When compared to the other sins, sloth doesn’t seem so bad; it certainly doesn’t appear to be deadly. It makes sense to have envy, lust, greed, anger and pride on the list because they have a dark and potentially naughty edge to them, but sloth is ... boring. Even the name is unexciting. So why list it with the other six?

According to the wisdom teacher, apathy is deadly because it drowns the will in a sea of triviality, which in turn, distracts people from paying attention to things that matter. Agreeing with this assessment, Dorothy Sayers observes, sloth is a silent assassin that sneaks up on you quietly and takes you by surprise because “It is the sin which believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, loves nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and only remains alive because there is nothing it would die for” (Dunnam, *The Workbook on the Seven Deadly Sins*, 107).

Sayers’ insights remind me of the story of a stranger who walked into a church and asked



to see the pastor. After meeting with him, the stranger told the pastor he wanted to become a member of the church. Naturally, the pastor was excited, that is, until the stranger said he wouldn't participate in any of the programs and probably wouldn't come to church much either. When asked what he expected to give and receive as a result of this arrangement, the stranger quipped, "Nothing!" Curious, the pastor inquired, "Then why join us?" Not to be outdone, the stranger retorted, "No particular reason; one church is as good as another."

In response, the pastor commended the stranger on his honesty and desire to belong to a church, and then suggested he try another congregation in the area at which he might feel more comfortable. Taking the pastor's advice, the stranger got directions and went on his way. Arriving at the address the pastor had given him, the stranger was amused by what stood before him — an old abandoned church building, boarded up and ready for demolition. The lesson was clear. This is what happens to both the individual and the church when sloth eats away at the soul and extinguishes the fire of faith.

In the same way, the wisdom teacher reminds us that the worshipping community is not an idle place where religious couch potatoes gather to be entertained but rather is a sacred place where sinners come to love God and one another in Jesus' name. Too many churches have forgotten who they are and why they exist. To be sure, this lapse in memory has not been intentional; forgetfulness does not occur overnight. It happens gradually over time, wearing down the spirit in slow degrees. Such is the nature of mediocrity.

For this reason, the wisdom teacher reminds us that we exist, not to sit in a pew, but to be active in ministry. Although the Bible doesn't give us a detailed blueprint of how we are to engage, it does give us some hints. The life of Jesus, of course, offers the clearest picture of what being Christian and doing church look like ... feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, housing the homeless, healing the sick, visiting the imprisoned, liberating the oppressed and loving one's enemies.

Sloth is not sensational, but its consequences are deadly, especially when it comes to Christian maturity and congregational effectiveness. As you think about the nuances of this sin, ask yourself if you are a doer of the Word or a hearer only. Do you pray like Isaiah saying, "Here am I, Lord, send me!" or do you pray like the unknown author of the following poem?

I love thy church, O God;  
Her walls before me stand.  
But please excuse my absence, Lord;  
This bed is simply grand.

A charge to keep I have;  
A God to glorify;  
But, Lord, don't ask for cash from me;  
Thy glory comes too high.

Am I a soldier of the Cross,  
A follower of the Lamb?  
Yes! Though I seldom pray or pay,  
I still insist I am.

Must Jesus bear the Cross alone,  
And all the world go free?  
No! Others, Lord, should do their part,  
But please don't count on me.

*Discussion: Do your actions coincide with what you say? Are you a pew sitter or an active participant in the life and ministry of the church? Do you focus your attention on trivialities or things that matter?*

June 27, 2010

## Sins of vengeance: anger

Proverbs 14:16-17, 29; 19:11-12;  
22:24-25

A boy on his way home from school was pushed into the mud by a bully. As he cleaned himself off, he vowed to get even. An adult who had witnessed the incident reminded him of the Bible verse that says, "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord." "That's fine," said the boy, "God's got until Saturday; after that, he's all mine!"

Is there anyone in your life who gets under your skin and irritates you? In his book, *Who's Pushing Your Buttons: Handling the Difficult People in Your Life*, popular psychologist John Townsend acknowledges that everyone knows someone who rubs him or her the wrong way. The question is, "How do we respond to such people, especially when they push our buttons?" For most of us, our first impulse is to get angry and get even.

Interestingly, of the seven deadly sins, anger is the one that scares us the most. Our fear stems from the fact that it is an emotional response that frequently predisposes us to fight or flee from those whom we perceive to be a threat. And reactions of this nature oftentimes

make us feel guilty because most of us have been taught that we are to "be nice," which means not getting mad or upset. But it is important to note that even though we are to be considerate of others, not all anger is inappropriate.

Take this episode in Jesus' life, for example. According to John, Jesus went to the temple, and upon entering the courts, he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at the tables exchanging money. In response, he made a whip, overturned the tables and drove everyone from the temple area. Interestingly, we are told that although Jesus was angry; he did not sin. Why? Because his anger was not the result of personal hurt or wounded pride but was directed against actions that violated God's way and harmed others. We refer to this outrage as "righteous indignation" (Dunnam, 77). There are times when anger is a good thing, especially when it is the impetus that motivates us to stand up for what's right and act accordingly.

Unfortunately, our anger is not always holy and just. As Will Willimon observes, "Anger tends to drive us, not in prophetic zeal to right what's wrong with us and the world, but rather even deeper into ourselves, in seething, simmering resentment" (74). I agree. Experience teaches us that undisciplined anger has a tendency to cloud our judgments. When this occurs, rationality goes out the window, and we often end up doing things that are out of character for us. This happened to NASCAR driver, Carl Edwards, at this year's spring race in Atlanta.

On lap 39, Brad Keselowski and Edwards made contact on the restart, sending Edwards into the wall and ruining his chances to win. On the initial replay, it looked as if Keselowski got into the back of Edwards. Upon further review, however, Edwards actually came down in front of Keselowski and started a chain of events that led to Edwards and Joey Logano wrecking their cars.

After spending numerous laps behind the wall, Edwards returned to the track and proceeded to finish the race as best he could. However, with six laps to go, Edwards got behind Keselowski and intentionally rammed his car at 195 m.p.h. The result was Keselowski hitting the wall and flipping upside down on the front stretch at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Fortunately, no one was hurt seriously by this incident. After the race, Carl Edwards posted the following on his Facebook page:

"Considering that Brad wrecks me with no regard for anyone's safety or hard work,

should I: A-Keep letting him wreck me? B-Confront him after the race? C-Wait til Bristol and collect other cars? or D-Take care of it now? I want to be clear that I was surprised at his flight and very relieved when he walked away. Every person has to decide what code they want to live by, and hopefully this explains mine.”

Edwards is considered by most of his fans and peers as a nice guy, but on this day, his anger got the best of him, and he lost control of his faculties. Edwards was wrong, but lest we become too critical of him, we need to remember that we are capable of reacting in the same manner. Anger, after all, comes with being human. The question is what will we do with it?

Thinking about an appropriate reply, Maxie Dunnam says that we must find resolution to our anger or it will consume us with “resentment that leads to self-hate and hatred of others; bitterness that mushrooms as it feeds on the real and/or imagined wrongs done to us; malignant grudge that destroy us, not the one against whom we have the grudges; hostility that makes us suspicious of the motives of others, turns others into enemies, and makes us defensive in our reactions and responses” (89).

According to the wisdom teacher, a faithful response to anger involves neither fight nor flight but a calm self-defined assessment of who we are and what we are doing, as well as a willingness to live with the consequences. Sooner or later, loving God and neighbor must come to terms with striking back or getting even with our enemies. As you encounter anger in your life, remember the Beatitude that says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

*Discussion: What makes you angry? Are these things matters of great importance or mere trifles? What distinguishes one from another? When is anger holy? When is anger sinful? How does anger affect you?*

**July 4, 2010**

## The original sin: pride

Proverbs 11:2; 16:5, 18-19; 27:1-6

There’s a popular reality show on T.V. called “American Idol.” The premise of this show is simple: contestants perform and compete for votes from viewers. If you’re the low vote getter, then you’re kicked off. At the end of the season, the lone person standing is crowned the

American Idol.

Truth be told, all of us have idols. Our idols are more than contestants on a variety show. These false gods come in many shapes and sizes. Nonetheless, in America, our idols tend to be molded in the image of the three P’s: power, possessions and prestige. These categories pretty much cover all the bases.

But there is another P that is important in this conversation: pride. According to the dictionary, pride is either an undue sense of one’s own superiority or a proper sense of one’s own dignity and worth. Obviously, there is a significant difference between self-infatuation and self-respect, and the impact of each can have either a positive or negative effect depending on the context. So, how do you discern when one is exhibiting a healthy self-esteem or a smug arrogance?

According to Maxie Dunnam, pride is constructive when it gives us a sense of achievement or aspiration to do the best we can. In many cases, it is the impetus that drives both individuals and society toward creativity and human betterment. People, after all, want to be remembered in a positive light, and pride often is a great motivator to make a name for ourselves. As we know, many people have done remarkable things as a result of this incentive. Of course, wanting to be recognized for our accomplishments is not necessarily a bad thing, but it can if it leads us to place our own interests above the interests of God and others. The Bible is filled with stories that illustrate what happens when this line of demarcation is crossed. Take, for example, the accounts of the fall of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:1-5), the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), and the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14).

Even though the biblical narrative provides us with vivid illustrations, there are times when we experience events that bring the truth of God to bear upon us in ways that the text does not. I had such an experience last summer when my family and I went to Myrtle Beach. While there, we visited the NASCAR speedway, which is an enormous go-cart complex that has rides for all ages. To our delight, our oldest son was big enough to ride one of the smaller go-carts. He was ecstatic, not only because he was going to ride but also because he was going to race against two other kids. The race turned out to be follow-the-leader around a circular track at 5 m.p.h., but he did well, and everyone had a great time.

While standing in line for the fourth time, my son looked up at me with excitement in his eyes and said, “Daddy, this time I’m going to

pass someone.” The father who had been standing next to me with his children heard my son’s comment and smiled. You could sense the competitive spirit in the air. It just so happened that his children and my son ended up racing one another. It didn’t look good for Noah. The other two boys were older and more experienced drivers, and he was at the end of the pack. Passing them was going to be near impossible.

The race began, and as expected, the other two boys took off. Noah followed suit. Suddenly, one boy hit the side rail, and Noah slid around him. Eventually he caught up with the other boy. Noah tried every technique he had learned by watching NASCAR races with us, but he could not pass the bigger boy. The other dad and I laughed, shared a few pats on the back and encouraged our children as they raced one another. Then the signal shown — last lap. To my surprise, the dad next to me called to his son and said, “Let him pass,” which he did. Not only did Noah pass two cars, but he also won the race. You have never seen a little boy and his daddy so happy — both sets.

I was happy for my son, but I was happier for the dad whom I hugged and thanked because he didn’t have to do what he did, but he cared enough about his son and my son to teach all of us an important lesson that day. God’s kingdom is not about coming in first or second but in finishing the race of life together. To be honest, there have been times when I have forgotten this basic Christian principle. On this day, however, I was reminded by a father that what makes us human is not our mind but our heart, not our ability to succeed but our ability to love. Pride is sinful when moments like this are prevented from occurring because we are so wrapped up in ourselves that we don’t pay attention to and show compassion toward others.

As the wisdom teacher reminds us, pride has both its benefits and consequences. There’s nothing wrong with building an impressive résumé, but at the end of the day, life is not about power, prestige or possessions. It is about people caring for one another in such a way that no one has to feel the pressure to impress. God’s kingdom, after all, is big enough for everyone to be recognized for who they are.

*Discussion: Many people believe that all sin finds its root in the sin of pride. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? In what ways is pride exhibited in your life? Have these manifestations proven to be beneficial or counterproductive? How so? Does pride lead you to think of yourself or others first? Are you pleased with your response?*



# 2010 ChurchWorks!

Good ideas for effective ministry

Brought to you this  
month  
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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This newly-named resource page is provided in partnership with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's Congregational Formation and writers gracious enough to share their good ideas for creative and effective ministry. To submit an article for consideration or to receive writer's guidelines for the ChurchWorks! page in Baptists Today, contact Managing Editor Jackie Riley (jackie@baptiststoday.org). For more ministry resources, subscribe to the electronic ChurchWorks! newsletter at <http://www.thefellowship.info/News/subscribe>.*

## Be a Saturday night caller!

**H**ere is a best practice I've used when leading a Sunday school class — and have urged other teachers to put into practice. The concept came to me from my longtime mentor, Neil Jackson, but I've tweaked it through the years to fit my personality.

### The plan

Call the people on your class roll each week in less than one hour.

### The process

Since most people are home on Saturday between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., make a brief "howdy" phone call to let class members know you are prepared for them and care for them. Call every member and prospect on your class enrollment.

This type of call takes about 30-45 seconds. If the line is busy, don't call back. If you get voice mail, just leave a short message.

If you teach adult couples, you can speak with just one person. Keep it simple and make it fun.

Here's a sample phone conversation:

*"Hello, Johnny, this is Bo. You had a good week? (pause for response) Well I was just finishing up the lesson and wanted you to know you were on my mind. (pause for another response) Just wanted you to know that I'm thinking about*

*you and praying for you and your family. Hey, I'll see you when I see you! Bye."*

You want each class member to know that you are prepared for him or her. You don't want to have a "tell me your life history" type of phone conversation. You are simply calling to build relationships.

You didn't say, "I'll see you tomorrow." Don't put any guilt on the person; this is not to ask for excused absences. Simply say, "I'll see you when I see you."

Let the person respond. This type of call is short, to the point, conveys

friendship, and is personal.

After you hang up, make a note if you need to and then move on to the next name on the roll. It's easy; it's fun. And, after a few weeks you'll get beyond the awkwardness.

In fact, people will come to anticipate the call with excitement.

### The benefits

- The teacher will keep in closer contact with the class members and prospects.
- The teacher will hear prayer concerns or stories that will enhance the class.
- The teacher will be able to better focus teaching toward class needs.
- Class participants will feel warmth and concern from the teacher.
- Participants will build a deeper allegiance to the class.
- The class will develop a greater awareness of outreach and hospitality.

### What to expect

You can call a class of 30 in about 40 minutes. One or two persons might have information to share, but most will thank you for the call and move on. If you have a large class (more than 50 on roll), you may have to share this responsibility. But, the point is to model outreach and caring for your class.

You'll be amazed at the results. Your class will begin relating on a deeper level. Your class discussions will have more meaning. And, you'll become a more inviting and hospitable small group.

Some teachers ask, "Can't we just email our class or post on a Facebook group?" Well, of course you can. However, there is nothing like a personal phone call that says, "I care about you." Try it and let me know what happens. **BT**



**ChurchWorks** is provided by the Congregational Life office of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in partnership with Baptists Today and for those dedicated lay leaders working in the educational ministries of local churches. This month's page was written by Bo Prosser, coordinator of congregational formation for CBF. Resource Page Archives are available at [www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page](http://www.thefellowship.info/Resources/Church-Resources/Baptists-Today-resource-page).

**Pastor:** Beaver Dam Baptist Church is a historic church at the heart of a small, rural community in western Kentucky. BDBC is widely known for both its music ministry and youth ministry, led by two full-time ministers, and a growing Christian education ministry, including a preschool and K-6 elementary school. In 2009, BDBC contributed more than \$100,000 to local, state and international missions, with undesignated receipts totaling nearly \$660,000. BDBC affirms the 1963 *Baptist Faith & Message*. For more information, or to submit a résumé, please contact: BDBC Pastor Search Committee, P.O. Box 242, Beaver Dam, KY 42320.

Wake Forest Baptist Church is an autonomous Baptist congregation that meets on the campus of Wake Forest University. We are a welcoming and affirming congregation with a strong commitment to social justice, inclusiveness and meaningful worship. Our membership is drawn from the campus and the city, as well as from communities surrounding Winston-Salem. We have a long and rich partnership with the Alliance of Baptists. We are seeking a **pastor** to join our ministry team. Rev. Susan Parker will serve as pastor with special emphasis in pastoral ministry. We are looking for a pastor to take particular leadership in preaching and worship. This individual will assist our team in the growth of our congregation and our mission to the community. Please visit our website at [www.wakeforestbaptist.org](http://www.wakeforestbaptist.org) to see a job description and to learn more about us. Interested parties should send a résumé by June 15 to: Wake Forest Baptist Church, P.O. Box 7326, Winston-Salem, NC, 27109-7326.

Freemason Street Baptist Church ([www.freemasonstreet.org](http://www.freemasonstreet.org)), a historic yet progressive CBF congregation in downtown Norfolk, Va., is seeking a **minister of spiritual formation and Christian education**. We seek a person of faith maturity, energy, creativity, warmth and vision. A Master of Divinity degree is required. Send inquiries or résumés by June 1 to: Search Committee, Freemason Street Baptist Church, P.O. Box 1739, Norfolk, VA 23501.

First Baptist Church, Carrollton, Ga. ([www.carrolltonfirstbaptist.com](http://www.carrolltonfirstbaptist.com)), is seeking a **minister of music**. Average attendance is about 400 combined in two morning traditional worship services. The church is affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention. Candidates should have a calling to music ministry and submit a statement of faith of not more than 300 words. A seminary degree is preferred. Send résumé to: Dr. Steve Davis, 102 Dixie St., Carrollton, GA 30117 or [steve@carrolltonfirstbaptist.com](mailto:steve@carrolltonfirstbaptist.com).

Winter Park Baptist Church in Wilmington, N.C., is seeking candidates for **associate pastor for children and families**. Come help us show the children and families of our church and our community how much God loves them, and help them respond with love for God and neighbor. A seminary degree or extensive ministry experience is preferred. Send résumés to: [eric@winterparkbaptist.org](mailto:eric@winterparkbaptist.org) or Winter Park Baptist Church, 4700 Wrightsville Ave., Wilmington, NC 28403.

Fellowship Baptist Church, a CBF church in Fitzgerald, Ga., is seeking a **part-time** (up to 20 hours weekly) **children/youth coordinator**. Responsibilities include planning and leading Wednesday night and Sunday morning activities. This would be an ideal position for a seminary student. For more information, contact Miriam Reeves at [emreeves@windstream.net](mailto:emreeves@windstream.net) or (229) 423-9423.

Trinity Baptist Church, Raleigh, N.C., is seeking a **part-time** (30 hours) **student ministry associate**. This person will oversee ministry to middle school students and their families. In addition, he or she will assist in high school and college ministries utilizing his or her giftedness. To view a complete job description, go to [www.tbcraleigh.com](http://www.tbcraleigh.com). Please send résumés by May 16 to: Rev. Andy Jung, Trinity Baptist Church, 4815 Six Forks Rd., Raleigh, NC 27609.

**Alabama CBF** has formed a search committee for the purpose of recommending a new **coordinator** to the coordinating council. The committee believes the successful candidate will possess a strong sense of calling and passion for the work of Alabama CBF. Utilizing quality communication skills and public speaking experience, the person will represent CBF to a variety of churches, institutions and agencies throughout Alabama, as well as at the national level of CBF. The new coordinator should have experience in the local church setting and be able to make connections with individuals in a variety of staff positions. The search committee will gladly review résumés of all candidates, men or women. Respond with résumés to: Dr. Alvin Pelton, Mountain Brook Baptist Church, 3631 Montevallo Rd., S., Birmingham, AL 35213-4205, or [alvin@mbbc.org](mailto:alvin@mbbc.org).

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## Pat Anderson to edit ethics journal

The Board of Directors of *Christian Ethics Today* has chosen Patrick R. Anderson as the next editor of the journal effective January 2011. He will succeed Joe E. Trull who took over the position from the late Foy Valentine in 2000.

The journal, begun in 1995, is published quarterly and given free upon request to anyone in the United States or Canada. It is also available online at [www.christian-ethicstoday.com](http://www.christian-ethicstoday.com).

Anderson, who earned the Ph.D. in criminology at Florida State University, is a longtime professor and author specializing

in public policy regarding crime and justice.

Active in Baptist life, he is former moderator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and currently leads pastors on mission immersion trips to difficult settings in the world where CBF missionaries work.

He and his wife, Carolyn, established and led the CBF of Florida. They divide their time between Cedar Key, Fla., and Beech Mountain, N.C.

Trull is a former ethics professor at New Orleans Baptist Seminary where he retired in 1999 before assuming the editorship of the journal. **BT**



# Garrett pens 'treasury of Baptist theological heritage'

*A review by Steven R. Harmon*

## **Baptist Theology: A Four-Century Study**

by James Leo Garrett Jr.  
(2009, Mercer University Press)

**J**ames Leo Garrett Jr. supervised my doctoral dissertation. His insistence that theology must pay close attention to the historical context of its development and his ability to hold fidelity to the Baptist tradition and ecumenical openness in creative tension have probably influenced my own career as a theologian more than anything else. Nevertheless, I'll do my best to offer an objective assessment of this book's value.

Timed to coincide with the 2009 quadricentennial celebration of Baptist beginnings, this volume lives up to its subtitle. It treats in exhaustive detail four centuries of Baptist theology, defined as "the doctrinal beliefs of the people called Baptists" and drawing upon "their confessions of faith, the teachings of their major theologians, and their principal theological movements and controversies."

Other books published in the past two decades have taken various approaches to surveying the development of Baptist theology over the same span of time.

*Baptist Theologians* (ed. Timothy George and David Dockery, Broadman, 1990), included biographical and interpretive chapters by multiple authors on selected theologians of the Baptist tradition.

*Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (ed. Curtis Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Rosalee Velloso Ewell, Judson Press, 1999) included important historical introductions to the development of Baptist theology interspersed throughout its collection of representative theological writings from the Baptist and broader Free Church traditions.

William Brackney's *A Genetic History of Baptist Thought* (Mercer University Press, 2004) most closely approximates the scope (592 pp.) and detail of Garrett's book, but Brackney limits his geographical focus to Great Britain and North America.

Only Garrett attempts to give detailed

attention to the confessional and systematic theologies of the global Baptist community, with major sections on Baptist theology in African, Latin American, Asian and Australian contexts.

Garrett begins with a chapter on "The Roots of Baptist Beliefs" that rightly dispels the notion that Baptist theology is simply the recovery in the 17th century of the faith and practice of the New Testament. Rather, the earliest Baptists and their confessions of faith demonstrate continuity with the theology hammered out by the church in the first few centuries after the New Testament era, especially as summarized by the ancient ecumenical creeds, as well as with various aspects of the theology of pre-Reformation reforming movements, the "Magisterial" Protestant Reformers, and the Anabaptists of the Radical Reformation.

The volume ends with an overview of the contributions of "New Voices in Baptist Theology" of the baby-boom generation (all North American and British theologians). In between, readers looking for a map of the Baptist theological forest will also encounter a very full inventory of many of the individual trees that have grown within it.

Some readers may quibble with Garrett's decisions about which trees warrant inclusion and description in this inventory. Yet it is appropriate to the Baptist theological tradition that he has given considerable attention to the theology of influential pastors as well as academic theologians, and that in light of the Baptist biblicistic impulse he has also included the proposals of Baptist biblical scholars who have influenced the development of Baptist theology.

One could wish that Garrett had provided a more extensive treatment of the work of African-American Baptist theologians beyond James Deotis Roberts, to whom a section of just over three pages is

devoted. Garrett notes that Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings "had theological content" but does not explore this content as he did with other influential pastoral and public ministerial figures such as W.A. Criswell, Billy Graham and John Piper.

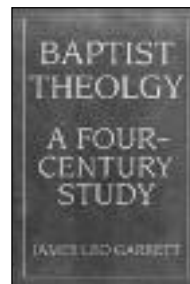
The writings of Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays and James H. Evans are notably absent from this treatment. The 36-page chapter on "African-American Baptist Traditions" in Brackney's volume is accordingly a needed complement to this aspect of Garrett's book.

This reviewer would not share Garrett's negative evaluations of recent efforts to recover more sacramental understandings of baptism and the Lord's Supper among British Baptists and of proposals for recognition that prospective members who wish to join a Baptist congregation from infant-baptizing churches and who have joined their baptism with subsequent personal faith should be regarded as having met the conditions for Baptist church membership without the requirement of rebaptism.

Garrett describes such proposals as "open membership that elevates ecumenism over believer's baptism by immersion" but this ignores the accompanying insistence that Baptist congregations will continue to baptize only believers by immersion as a distinctive disciple-making practice offered as a gift to the rest of the church.

The characterization of British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes as "anticonfessional" seems unfounded in light of the extensive interaction with Baptist confessions of faith evident in several of Fiddes' ecumenical writings. But these are personal disagreements with a few of Garrett's own theological assessments of some expressions of Baptist theology, and they should not detract from the service Garrett and Mercer University Press have rendered Baptists by making available this treasury of their theological heritage. **BT**

—*Harmon is associate professor of divinity at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala.*



# Hull analyzes leadership skills of two seminary presidents during time of crisis

*A review by Larry L. McSwain*

## **Seminary in Crisis: The Strategic Response of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary to the SBC Controversy**

by William E. Hull

*(Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2010)*

**W**illiam E. Hull's wide-ranging interests in Baptist institutions and congregations, biblical scholarship, strategic leadership, and the influence of cultural change on Baptists in the South are demonstrated once again in *Seminary in Crisis*.

This case study analyzes the strategic leadership skills of two Southern Seminary presidents, Duke K. McCall and Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., who served from 1968-1993. This honest assessment is somewhat painful to review as one who lived in the chaos of the events of this era with enormous respect and affection for both leaders as well as the author.

The central theme is based on James P. Boyce's tripartite 1856 inaugural address envisioning a new kind of seminary. The three elements were the proposals of: 1) a curriculum that would train broadly in the same classroom both the classically educated and those lacking collegiate training; 2) recruitment of a faculty capable of offering advanced levels of learning for the most academically promising, an emphasis that resulted in a Ph.D. program at Southern early in the history of theological education in the U.S.; and 3) an agreed-upon "declaration of doctrine" to ensure the churches of the seminary's fidelity to theological integrity. That declaration became the Abstract of Principles.

Interestingly, this framework is the same as that employed by Gregory Wills in his *Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1859-2009*. The difference is that Hull emphasizes the first two of Boyce's triad while Wills gives primary emphasis to the third, writing a 547-page history of the

theological controversies in the 150 years of the seminary. What matters most for Will's history is commitment by the seminary as a Calvinist theological entity accountable to Southern Baptists through a Board of Trustees responsible for maintaining that accountability.

Hull's second chapter is a masterful construction of the backgrounds, approaches and elections of McCall and Honeycutt. Both were products of the same Southern ethos, essentially the same educational training, and worked together to lead the seminary during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet their styles of leadership were remarkably different.

Hull's focus is on the respective strategies each employed to face the threat of the "conservative/inerrantist/fundamentalist" forces in Southern Baptist life. Southern Seminary was a clear target of these forces after 1979. What the author wishes to explore is how each president could arrive at different strategies for facing these challenges when both sought to preserve the seminary's tradition of open theological inquiry.

McCall was the brilliant organizational strategist who, by virtue of his leadership of Broadway Baptist Church, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the Executive Committee of the SBC between the ages of 26-37, developed a high tolerance for risk and confrontation, when necessary, to achieve his objectives. On the other hand, Honeycutt was the idealist who worked by consensus and was a product of the institutional culture of a faculty at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary as well as Southern.

These differences in temperament contrasted a style of leadership based on outwitting the opponent versus teaching the

opponent. Hull summarizes: "Therefore, [McCall] often utilized the element of surprise, of stealth, even of subterfuge when coming up against a numerically superior foe. He always had at least two or three contingency plans as backups should the chosen strategy fail to work."

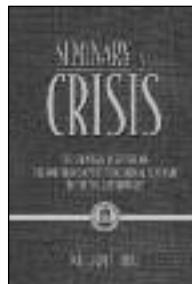
In contrast, "When faced with conflict over competing beliefs, rather than seek to discredit the view of his opponents, [Honeycutt] would offer them an explanation of what he believed was the true view. Rather than plan a covert operation to catch his critics unprepared, he was transparently clear to friend and foe alike."

McCall is described as a strategist while Honeycutt was a teacher "who, in a showdown, was willing to risk everything on his conviction that Southern Seminary would prevail simply because it had a better grasp of the truth than did its detractors."

The third chapter is the heart of book. Strategic options for how the president could have best preserved the Southern tradition are explored. McCall the strategist had guided a bylaw change in the seminary charter at the 1975 SBC meeting, an innocuous action to the casual observer. The 1954 version of the charter provided the nomination of two persons for each trustee vacancy at the seminary. The existing board would elect from the two nominees. This process meant at least one nominee would be disappointed.

The 1975 change was made to elect a singular nominee from the convention and provided the option of a called meeting of the board to elect or remove a trustee. It read, "a trustee may be elected or removed from office only by a two-thirds vote of those present and voting in a stated or called meeting of the Board of Trustees." McCall had frequently stated, especially in faculty conversations, the trustees were in effect a "self-perpetuating" board in that they alone elected the trustees.

After Honeycutt's famous "To Your Tents, O Israel" sermon in the Fall of 1984



rallying “moderate/progressive/liberal” loyalists to organize for the election of a different kind of convention president at the Dallas SBC in 1985, McCall met with him to try to convince him to exercise the bylaw option by rejecting the future SBC-nominated trustees.

According to Hull, McCall considered the sermon a mistake in strategy because it characterized the rising fundamentalist leadership as an aberrant group within the denomination. McCall felt there was no way to win the battle on the floor of the convention and an organizational strategy would be required. He advised working with trustees to reject all future nominees and lead the seminary into a freestanding entity unconnected to the SBC.

Hull argues that Honeycutt was too deeply entrenched in the SBC ethos to exercise such an approach, choosing instead to attempt to work with the new board constituency with trust that the truth would ultimately prevail.

Hull’s realism forces him to explore the legal possibilities for the McCall option using as examples the Baptist colleges that have engaged in similar legal strategies to change their relationships with state conventions, notably Samford University. He is confident a legal argument could be found to support McCall’s approach.

Having personally had numerous conversations with Honeycutt on this matter, he was not convinced such was possible given the language of the charter requiring nominations to the Board of Trustees from the SBC.

Wills describes in his history a serious discussion of exercising the option by the trustee Executive Committee in 1987-1988 of simply rejecting the SBC nominations rather than fully implementing the McCall strategy. This would have fixed the board at a status quo level.

The Executive Committee and board vigorously debated the option in April 1988, with only two trustees opposing the election of SBC nominees that year. Both resigned from the board. There is agreement with Hull’s analysis that Honeycutt remained neutral, “but he opposed the idea of making the seminary independent of the convention.”

Soon the charter was changed again to eliminate the election of trustees by the board. As an observer at that meeting,

“moderate” trustees were generally as unwilling as the newer ones to exercise this option. If the board could not be convinced in 1988, given the obvious changes underway, I am doubtful McCall himself could have convinced two-thirds of the board to such action in 1984. The trustees were more like Honeycutt in their loyalty to the SBC.

In the fourth chapter, Hull assesses the costs of the choice of the McCall option, had it been exercised. His discussion of the limitations of trustees of SBC entities in comparison with the lay-oriented and long tenure of college trustees is superb and deserves careful review by all concerned with leading denominational institutions.

Hull is forthright in anticipating the realities of a successful break with the SBC — prolonged legal battles with the SBC, enormous energy in shaping a new mission for the seminary constituencies, direct fund-raising among the churches in competition with the Cooperative Program, the reduction of more than half of the faculty and staff, charging relatively high rates of tuition for students, and aggressive recruitment of students to achieve a head count half of its former size.

The evaluation of Honeycutt for failure to exercise this direction is negative. In Hull’s judgment, he misjudged the resolve of the conservative resurgent leadership and should have known his strategy of outlasting them would not work. He concludes: “Why would he risk delivering the seminary into the hands of its avowed enemies by his oft-repeated pledge of unconditional loyalty to the SBC?”

It was a conclusion he would realize only after his retirement and subsequent isolation from any meaningful involvement in a new seminary direction under the leadership of R. Albert Mohler. Hull’s assessment of the conservative ethos of unity and perseverance toward future goals is an important section for moderates to study. The new direction of the seminary after 1993 is documented as quite successful in relation to the conservative agenda.

The author moves in chapter five to a discussion of the difficulties of leading in the midst of chaos and recognition of the potential for failure of any chosen outcome. Inserted into the discussion is an interesting review of the role of faculty for the leader of an educational institution.

Hull is affirmative of Southern’s faculty in terms of their academic achievements, but critical of their singular focus on internal ethos to the exclusion of external church realities. He proposes the importance of assessment systems that include contributions to training for the leadership of the churches. It is a section faculty would profit from reading and discussing.

Hull is charitable to both leaders in his summation: “Pervasive as it was, however, unpredictability was not the most formidable challenge to the decision-making process at Southern in 1984. Rather, it was the extremely high risk of failure involved in pursuing either option being proposed.”

A dramatic shift in emphasis is made in the last section as Hull reflects on the future of theological education at Southern where a conservative, Calvinist conformity is expected for the next several decades, if not longer.

Since the churches are diverse in theological perspective and their lay leaders are able to function with effective togetherness, he envisions the need for a diverse seminary experience amid the current ideological split between “conservative/inerrantist/fundamentalist” and “moderate/progressive/liberal.” He imagines such taking place at Southern at some time in the future if the Boyce legacy is truly to be fulfilled.

In this way, he is concluding with a vision that unites the triad of Boyce’s vision. This hopefulness seems optimistic to me given the unwillingness of one side on the controversy to consider its view as other than absolute truth. Such perspectives are not amenable to dialogue.

To the author’s assertion, “It is much easier to structure a deliberate balance between diverse viewpoints as regards classroom teachers, required reading, visiting lecturers, and library acquisitions than it is to go to 40,000 churches and show their feuding pastors how to work cooperatively across ideological lines,” we can all offer hearty agreement. Here is an analysis that all future leaders of Baptist life should study and discuss across the lines of their differences. After all, that is what pastors must do constantly in their congregations. **BT**

—Larry L. McSwain is Watkins Christian Foundation Professor of Leadership Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

# the lighter side

## Missing the game

By Brett Younger

Our tickets for the Hawks-Warriors game were only — and I write this sarcastically — \$30, so we were up high and at the end of the court. I was excited when we picked up the tickets because they said “Row 13.” I still have not figured out how there were 75 rows between the court and “Row 13.”

At halftime, the ushers gave the young people seated in front of me long white balloons — the kind people used to make balloon animals with — only now they are called “thunderstix.” The justification for the indefensible cruelty of giving the young people in front of me long white balloons was the questionable belief that waving these would distract the opposing team into poor shooting. I suppose the bizarre assumption was that a Golden State player would go to the free throw line and just as he was about to shoot think, “Those skinny white balloons are really neat. I’ve got to get one of those.” Thinking this would cause him to miss the free throw.

This seems unlikely.

Wouldn’t it be better for fans to hold up signs that say, “Did you leave your oven on?” “Did you forget your mother’s birthday?” or “If free throws are free, then why are you making several million dollars for missing them?” These signs seem at least as distracting as balloons.

As far as I could tell, I was the only person bothered by the ubiquitous inflatables. I kept thinking, “I paid \$30 to watch a basketball game through a forest of long, white balloons. These balloons are not keeping the Golden State Warriors from seeing the goal. They are keeping me from seeing the Golden State Warriors.”

Realizing that balloons do not add to my enjoyment of basketball helped me recognize that there are other things I do not need with my basketball game.

I do not need a dozen 19-year-old girls — the A-Town Dancers — in skimpy outfits shaking their backsides during timeouts.

I do not need 9-year-old girls (who I am

sure think being an A-Town Dancer would be way cooler than being a professor) shaking what will one day be their backsides on the Jumbotron.

I do not need Harry the Hawk, who looks inexplicably like a rooster, shaking his backside, as he or she frequently did.

I do not need to watch guys older than me shoot basketballs at big buckets to win groceries. If they need groceries, they should not spend \$30 to go to a game.

I do not need to hear who can scream the loudest to win a pizza.

I do not need Frisbees flying through the arena or T-shirts shot from cannons at unsuspecting members of the crowd.

I do not need Queen’s “We Will Rock You” at a volume to make my head ache or twinkling disco balls that make my head swim.

I really do not need the short white guys in sequined jumpsuits who use trampolines so that they can dunk during timeouts like the tall black guys who do not need trampolines do during the game.

Dr. Naismith would not recognize his game. It was enough to make Bobby Knight throw a chair. People who love basketball — the game itself — deserve better. If we are not careful, we fail to see what we came to see.

I realize that confessing my dislike for skinny white balloons, skinny energetic dance teams, and shiny jumpsuits makes me sound like a grumpy old man, but I think it has more to do with my inability to focus in the midst of a cacophony of glitter and rocket-propelled clothing. Some of us do better when we watch one thing at a time. We need to pay attention to catch what most deserves our attention.

This is a lifelong struggle. We have to learn to push aside the balloons, Frisbees and dancing girls who are always trying to capture our interest in order to focus on what really matters. If we don’t, then we will miss the game. **BT**

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

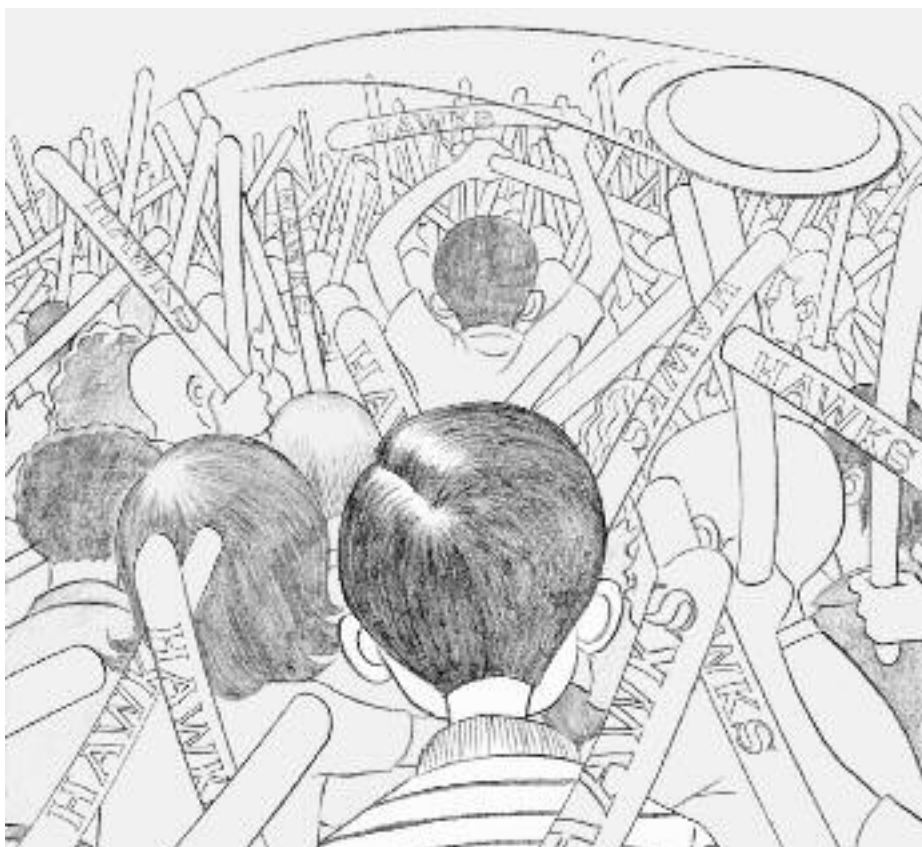


Illustration by Scott Brooks

## How's your muchness?

By Tony W. Cartledge  
Posted March 10, 2010  
[www.tonycartledge.com](http://www.tonycartledge.com)

When I was a boy, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* were part of the cultural background, largely through Disney cartoons, but I don't think I ever read either of the books (they were about a girl, after all).

I did, however, recently see Tim Burton's angular interpretation of the classic stories in his movie version of *Alice in Wonderland*. My favorite line in the movie came when the young woman Alice, who had been shrunk at the time, first met the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, and the Doormouse at their thoroughly bonkers outdoor tea party.

Alice, we learn, had been to Underland (which she called "Wonderland") as a child, but had forgotten it. Whether it was due to her size or her failed memory, I don't

know, but the Hatter said to Alice, "You've lost your muchness. You were much muchier ..."

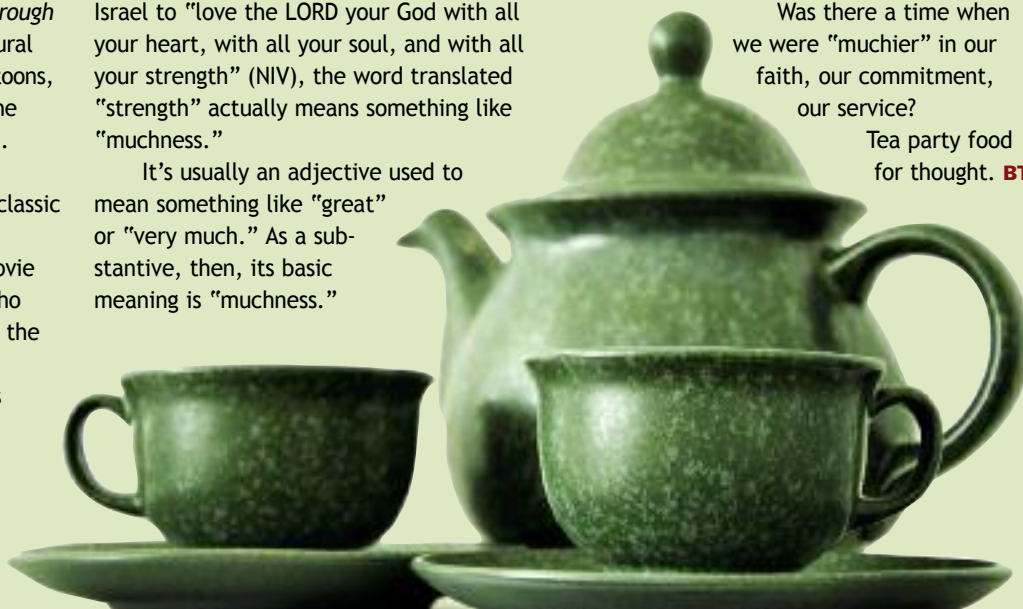
I liked the line because it has a Hebrew ring. In Deuteronomy 6:4-5, when Moses told Israel to "love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (NIV), the word translated "strength" actually means something like "muchness."

It's usually an adjective used to mean something like "great" or "very much." As a substantive, then, its basic meaning is "muchness."

I won't try to analyze what it was that Alice had lost, but it occurs to me that it is always a good time for Christians to ask if we have lost any "muchness" in our love for God.

Was there a time when we were "muchier" in our faith, our commitment, our service?

Tea party food for thought. **BT**



## Preserving the songs that help preserve us

By John Pierce  
Posted March 23, 2010  
[www.johndpierce.com](http://www.johndpierce.com)

The late music educator Dr. Lee Norris Mackey of Chattanooga, Tenn., received a grant in the 1980s to conduct a study that revealed a decline in the performance of Negro spirituals. As a result, he co-founded the Chattanooga Choral Society for the Preservation of African American Song.

It is a long name, but one that explains the group's important role. He didn't have to start from scratch as former students and choir members influenced by the late Mrs. Edmonia Johnson Simmons — as was Dr. Mackey — had gathered for several years to lift their voices together informally or in churches.

Since 1990, the choir has benefited from the excellent skills of composer Dr. Roland Carter, a professor of American music at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

The group's first concert was held on Nov. 17, 1984, at the historically African-American First Baptist Church on East 8th

Street and the most recent one was on March 21 of this year — my first Sunday as interim pastor — at the historically white First Baptist Church in the Golden Gateway of downtown Chattanooga.

Beautiful renditions of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," "Ride On Jesus," "I Know that I've Been Changed," "Dwell in this House," "Close to Thee" and "You Must Have that True Religion" wafted through the massive sanctuary and the hearts of those blessed to be there.

Then the choir gave way to internationally-known vocalist Wintley Phipps — who sang a wider array of music including Negro spirituals such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Go Down, Moses," "Down by the Riverside" and "I Got a Home in that Rock (Don't You See)."

He explained that Negro spirituals could be played on the five-note scale found on the black keys of a piano —

what some call "the slave scale."

Since slaves were not taught to read, the great stories of the Bible were passed along by song, Phipps said, calling that approach "the most effective way of teaching anything." He commended those who are helping to preserve "the greatest volume of music by a people in slavery."

While the Bible teaches that the Israelites hung up their harps when in Babylonian captivity, said Phipps, African slaves raised their voices in song.

Phipps closed the inspiring evening with his booming version of former slave ship captain John Newton's "Amazing Grace" — a "white spiritual" that follows the "slave scale."

Newton likely heard the melody from the slaves he once transported before his heart was changed, said Phipps, who has sung the beloved song thousands of times before everyone from Mother Teresa on down to several U.S. presidents.

Someone has called the spirituals "a disturbing kind of joy," he said, noting that those kept in bondage were able to look beyond their earthly masters and embrace their heavenly Master. **BT**



Wintley Phipps

# Lighter *plates*

Churches  
continue  
to wrestle  
with drop  
in donations

BY KIMBERLEE HAUSS  
*Religion News Service*

**T**he number of churches that reported a drop in giving due to the sour economy rose nearly 10 percent last year, according to new survey. In 2009, 38 percent of churches reported a decline in giving, versus 29 percent in 2008.

Megachurches — those with 2,000 members are more — were hit hardest, with 47 percent reporting a decrease in giving last year, up from 23 percent in 2008.

The second State of the Plate study, by Colorado Springs-based Maximum Generosity and Christianity Today International, was based on data from 1,017 churches. The study included small and large churches, as well as mainline, evangelical, Pentecostal, nondenominational, Catholic and Orthodox parishes.

“Multiple research projects last year documented the sharp decline in church giving,” said Brian Kluth, founder of Maximum Generosity. “Our research this year shows

things have only gotten worse for a growing number of churches.”

West Coast states suffered most from the depressed economy: 55 percent reported decreased giving. Mountain states were close behind with 48 percent reporting a drop in giving.

The study also found that December contributions, usually high during the holiday season, fell short of expectations, leaving many churches in the hole as they started the new year.

Even so, 45 percent of churches increased their budget for 2010, and 24 percent kept their budget the same. The report said the 34 percent of churches that scaled back made cuts in travel and conferences, ministry programs and expansion or renovation projects.

The survey, sent via e-mail, was not a traditional random phone sample and does not have a statistical margin of error.

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# Always the **seeker**

At 90, New Mexico native still values 'fresh ideas'

ROSWELL, N.M. — At 90 years old, Morgan Nelson is an active seeker. He seeks answers, seeks challenges, seeks opportunities and seeks the other side of issues.

“**T**he key to most things is using critical thinking,” said Nelson. “You need to continue to open yourself up to fresh ideas and new information. When you look at different sides of issues and think about them, then you have the chance to change your mind. You can’t do that if you just accept what people feed you and don’t put some critical thinking to it.”

Many of the answers Nelson has sought over the past nine decades have enabled him to enhance the quality of life in his hometown of Roswell, N.M.

Growing up on the family farm, Nelson and his father sought answers on how to best harness the water of the Roswell Artesian Basin for irrigation. The answers they found enabled them to transform more than 1,000 acres of the plains of Roswell into productive harvests of corn, alfalfa, cotton, pecans and chilies over the years.

“The irrigation system transformed Roswell into an agricultural center,” explained Nelson, who still has an active role on the farm, now operated by one of his daughters and her husband.

Nelson’s search for answers to meeting Roswell’s water needs is detailed in the book *High and Dry: The Texas-New Mexico Struggle for the Pecos River* (University of New Mexico Press, 2002) by G. Emlen Hall.

With a degree in mechanical engineering in hand from New Mexico State University, Nelson enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1941. He served as an engineering and maintenance supply officer in Europe and the Middle East during World War II.

The young engineer returned to the farm after the war. In 1949, at the age of 30, Nelson was elected to the state legislature.

That same year he met his future wife,



Joyce. They had three daughters and had been married for 58 years when she died in 2008.

In 1951, Nelson was recalled to military duty for the Korean War. Afterward, he continued in the Air Force Reserves at Walker Air Force Base in Roswell, retiring at the rank of Colonel in 1967.

Throughout his 12 years in the New Mexico legislature, Nelson sought answers to the concerns surrounding the artesian water rights, seeking to stabilize Roswell’s use of water so the area could continue to be a major agricultural center in the Southwest.

He also sought to provide more higher education opportunities by authoring the legislation that created the state’s community college system. The law led to the creation of Eastern New Mexico University – Roswell, where he is a member of the Foundation’s Board of Directors.

“We need to provide students with opportunities to get their education,” he said. “It is great for Roswell.”

Just as he has always been a seeker of information in his personal and professional life, Nelson is a seeker in his spiritual life.

“I belong to the seeker side of Baptists,” Nelson said. “I am always seeking to find out more.”

One place where he seeks information is

For information on how you can support the ongoing mission of *Baptists Today* news journal, contact Keithen Tucker at [ktucker@baptiststoday.org](mailto:ktucker@baptiststoday.org) or (478) 330-5613.

*Baptists Today*. Nelson has been a faithful reader of the monthly news journal for many years.

“It is the only paper that I read cover to cover,” he said. “I really mark it up. It is a challenge sometimes, and that’s what I like. It exposes you to more than one thought.”

Nelson gives copies of *Baptists Today* to fellow church members and suggests they read it.

“If they like it, I send them a subscription,” he said. “There are a couple of us who get together and discuss some of the articles.”

He believes having a Baptist publication that is independent is extremely important.

“The free press — either religious or business-wise or political — keeps us on our toes,” he said. “We have a free press in this country. They have an obligation to tell it like it is, and *Baptists Today* does that. They don’t pull the punch on very many things. I am really impressed with that.”

The longtime Sunday school teacher is concerned that people are too accepting of what they are told instead of seeking out the facts for themselves.

“When you don’t have a wide range of thinking, you become pretty insular and isolated,” he explained. “I like that *Baptists Today* gives various positions. I always read John Pierce’s articles first because he is provocative. He challenges me to think about issues, and that is good.”

Nelson has been seeking answers for nine decades, and he credits his Baptist roots for his commitment to being a seeker.

“Baptists are not supposed to be complacent,” he said. “We need to ask questions, and we need to look at all sides. Then you can decide. That is what it means to be a Baptist.” **BT**

# Bad news, but good news

Diana Butler Bass looks at what does and doesn't work for churches



*“In 1965, we had a better chance of seeing a ghost in America than a Hindu or Buddhist.”*

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — After years of teaching Christian history, Diana Butler Bass became curious about why some churches work so well while others do not. The Lily Foundation provided an opportunity for her to go out searching for answers to her questions, beginning with: “What doesn’t work and why?”

**W**hile admitting a preference for words over numbers, Bass shared some revealing statistics in a presentation at the ChurchWorks Conference in Nashville, sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in February.

“Numbers tell stories if you let them,” she said to a group of primarily church educators and young Baptist leaders, while suggesting that self-reported numbers about good religious practice — such as church attendance — are typically overstated.

However, the data she shared revealed clear and significant shifts.

Americans — coming in at 69-80 percent depending on the survey — rank high in belief in God when compared to other nations. Yet that statistic was 90-95 percent just 15 years ago.

A significant gap remains between those who affirm belief in God and those who participate in a congregation. Gallup reported 40 percent of Americans attend church weekly while other polls suggested that somewhere between 28-50 percent rarely or never attend services.

The American religious landscape, said Bass, is being shaped by both “a softening of belief in God and the decline in church attendance.”

Denominational dominance has faded away as well. A 2008 Pew study showed that

Protestants (including Anglicans, mainline denominations and evangelicals) make up 50 percent of the U.S. population — falling from 66 percent just three to four decades ago.

The big difference in church growth before and after 1960, said Bass, came from the emergence of the birth-control pill. Churches began reproducing fewer members. And “there are fewer sheep to steal,” she said.

But there is no going back, Bass noted.

“Religious life in the United States of America is entirely different today than it has been at any other time in American history,” she said. “In 1965, we had a better chance of seeing a ghost in America than a Hindu or Buddhist.”

The loss of market share — with Protestant churches falling from two-thirds to one-half of the U.S. population — along with growing religious pluralism, has caused some evangelicals to aggressively seek to define America as a “Christian nation.”

“People only argue over questions like that when things are going away,” said Bass, noting that for a long time America was just assumed to be Christian by the overwhelming statistics. “Now it’s an open question.”

According to the 2008 Pew report, two categories showed significant increases — with 16 percent of Americans identifying themselves as “none of the above, includes atheist, agnostic, a-religious and other” and 12 percent



identifying with “other world religions.”

The latest category is called “post-theists,” said Bass.

“To reject God you had be a theist first,” she explained. “Now what’s showing up are those with no reference for God at all.”

Immigration has played a major role in the shifting U.S. religious landscape, said Bass, pointing to legal changes in 1964 that opened the doors for a large number of Asians. And the Roman Catholic Church’s slight statistical decline — to 22 percent of the U.S. population — doesn’t tell the whole story, said Bass.

“One in 10 adult Americans, born in the U.S., is an ex-Roman Catholic,” she said. “Immigration is the only thing sustaining the Roman Catholic community in the U.S.”

In mainline Protestant denominations, Bass said, liberalism was blamed for the decline. Many claimed that only conservative churches were growing. While that argument had some evidence in the late ’60s until about 1985, statistics show “that’s no longer true,” said Bass.

She pointed to Southern Baptist Convention leaders who said the only way to grow the denomination was to become more theologically and politically conservative. Some, she said, claimed the denominational group would double in size.

“How’s that going for you now, boys?” she asked rhetorically.

Bass said the SBC is experiencing “the same sort of hemorrhaging as mainline Protestants.” She noted that the loss of 2.2 million SBC members in the decade between 1996 and 2006 is equal to the size of the entire Episcopal Church in the U.S.

Lutherans, she said, are having similar experiences.

The old theory about which denominations will succeed is “all wrong,” said Bass. What was considered “conventional wisdom needs to be thrown out,” she added.

Bass said the religious and political quarreling among Christian groups has pushed people away from churches. “They look at the church as an argument for or against God,” she said.

A hopeful sign, said Bass, is that atheists “are rejecting us for the right reasons” — that Christian churches are too violent, too political and too judgmental.

“Stop blaming the victims,” said Bass. “Those people have something to tell us

*“One in 10 adult Americans, born in the U.S., is an ex-Roman Catholic. ... Immigration is the only thing sustaining the Roman Catholic community in the U.S.”*

about what we are doing wrong.”

Many people who have rejected the church and profess no faith, she said, are “longing for something that is loving, connects people and allows them to live morally and ethically.”

When surveyed, more Americans (25 percent now) are saying now that they are spiritual (but not religious). Only 8 percent chose the opposite designation of being religious — but not spiritual.

Bass said her father-in-law fit that latter category. “He would say, ‘I’m not spiritual; I’m a Presbyterian.’”

The big question for church leaders in light of these significant shifts in the religious landscape, said Bass, is: “What does this mean for the context of our ministries?”

Bass’ in-depth study of varied yet vibrant mainline churches across the U.S. resulted in the 2006 book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. Founding dates ranged from 1636 to 2004 — each “remarkably alive” and intergenerational, she said.

“Christians of several different generations need to learn how to listen to each other and care for each other,” said Bass.

Common traits or patterns she discovered included vital worship, deep spiritual practices, generous hospitality, a passion for justice, theological reflection and a valuing of the church’s tradition. And the church’s ministries were carried out with a keen awareness of their time and place.

“Part of our job,” Bass said of church leaders, “is to be honest — that the world is in a different place.

Too often, she added, churches ignore sociological change and create “cultures of illusion” that everything is just like it was before — “it is not.”

A church historian and Episcopalian, Bass chided her mostly-Baptist audience to be

**Selections from *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith***

(HarperSanFrancisco, 2006)

- “During the time that I have been tracking mainline vitality, evangelical voices have grown louder and more insistent that they — and they alone — are the true Christians, the ones with true doctrine, true morals, and true politics.”
- “There seem to be different sorts of Christians today, those who prefer to build walled villages and do not want to see, and those who take risks in the wilderness and are willing to open their eyes.”
- “In the 1960s and 1970s, *tradition* was a negative word. Yet, in the *Newsweek* poll, 71 percent responded that their religious practices were ‘very traditional’ or ‘somewhat traditional.’ Tradition has become a positive term.”
- “Many told me how hard it was to share their faith because the media had conflated ‘Christian’ with ‘fundamentalist,’ leaving them bereft of a public vocabulary to talk about their beliefs.”
- “True Christian hospitality is not a recruitment strategy designed to manipulate strangers into church membership. Rather, it is a central practice of the Christian faith — something Christians are called to do for the sake of that thing itself.”
- “Discernment does not simply confirm our hunches or intuitions. Instead, it is a perilous practice that involves self-criticism, questions, and risk — and it often redirects our lives.”
- “I encountered people who did not buy the latest Christian products in order to make their lives better; they were not primarily spiritual consumers. Instead, they were Christian practitioners, pilgrims who knew that faith is a craft learned over time in community.”

true to their heritage of dissent.

“If I hear one more thing about Baptists being institutional, I think I’m going to throw up,” she said, noting that Baptists were the ones who critiqued the institutional church.

The Baptist tradition of “standing over and against imperial power” has been weakened — she said — by denominational leaders who are “too cozy with the power.” The Baptist role of challenging power is still needed, however.

“If we didn’t have you (Baptists), we’d have to invent you.”

Bass admitted, however, that the message of change — as ministers often discover — is not always warmly embraced.

“It’s tough living in a place where people don’t want to hear that,” she said of the radically changed and changing American religious landscape.

American Christians typically equate church health with size, Bass said — adding that the measuring stick goes back to the revivals of the First Great Awakening. And sometimes, she said, reported numbers didn’t equal reality.

For example, attendance at a George Whitefield revival in Philadelphia in 1740 was estimated at 40,000 — an interesting number, she said, since the entire population of the city at that time was around 20,000.

Historians, she noted, estimate that there were only 40 churches in the entire Roman Empire in A.D. 100. Since most were house churches, the total size of the Christian church would have been around 6,000-10,000.

“If we judge Christianity only by its size,” said Bass, “then Jesus fails and the early church fails.”

Churches, she said, must put an emphasis on following Jesus — and not be afraid to ask of their current approach, “If all of this is not working — what is working?”

Bass told of her own experience in a historic congregation in Santa Barbara, Calif., that went from near-death to renewal. Through prayer and discernment, the congregation discovered a new vision, she said.

They even asked whether the large Neo-Gothic building was an asset or “holding them back.” Through the process, it was considered important to their new vision and was restored.

“It was all about identity,” said Bass of

the church finding a new vision out of which its ministries grew.

That personal experience led Bass to ask, “What worked?” — and to seek a pattern of common traits in 50 diverse, mainline churches that were being renewed. Bass said she and the other researchers were looking for “spiritual vitality” not evident in other congregations.

About this same time, she noted, Pastor Bill Hybels of the massive Willow Creek Church near Chicago presented results from a self-study showing that the church’s efforts had not increased the love of God and neighbor in members as it had intended. He announced a major refocus on spiritual practices.

Bass warned church leaders about expecting too much renewal from specific programs — which tend to influence congregations for only the time frame that the program is carried out. Programs, she said, are like dieting; they only work if they lead to long-term practices.

“When things are not going well, churches often panic and look to the denomination for a program that works,” she said. “Then they follow the program for three to four months, tell the denomination that it didn’t work — and either don’t send more money (to the denomination) or ask for another program.”

The emphasis, she said, should move from program to spiritual practice.

“There is no external fix (program) that will sustain a congregation unless the program teaches another way of being,” said Bass.

What congregations often need are “deep practices of spiritual formation, hospitality toward children and intergenerational community.”

These revitalized churches “really called people to a way of life in Jesus,” she said. “Programs cost money; practices cost nothing but your entire life.”

The needed resources for most congregations can be found within, she said, such as “experts in spiritual practices” — those who pray, reflect and make faith central to their daily living. They can even help others learn to die well.

“Older people are not ‘problems to be solved,’ but extraordinary practitioners of the Christian way of life,” said Bass.

We sometime think church works because it’s a miracle, she said, when it is

really a community of spiritual practice.

Bass warned: “I think religion in the U.S. is on its way out, but I also think spirituality is not going away.”

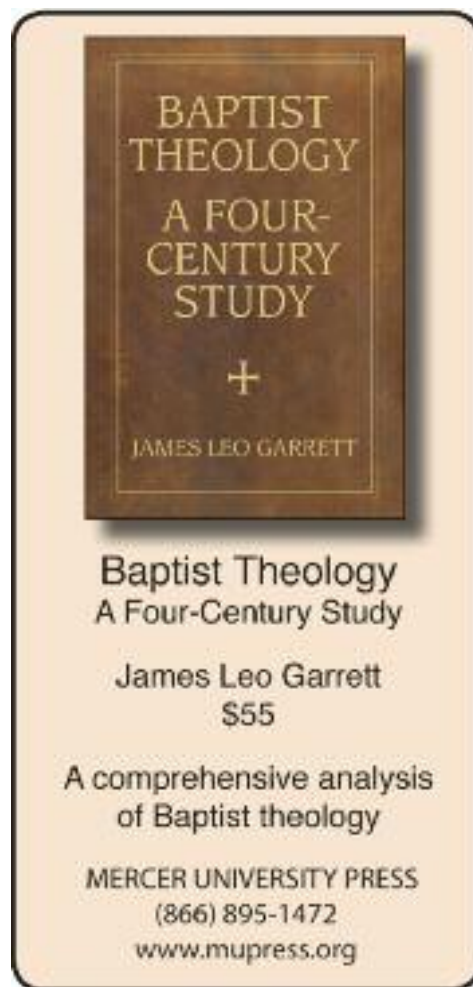
Traditional churches can be renewed to address that change, said Bass, offering a parallel.

“No one looks at the disappearance of phone booths and says, ‘Communication is going away,’” she said. “Are we ... trying to fix phone booths or are we trying to figure out how to communicate?”

Churches can be “riding the wave of spirituality,” she said. “This is a real possibility for us.”

While few Americans claim to be religious but not spiritual, more than half (55 percent) of those surveyed self-identified as being spiritual and religious — an indication that participating in a vibrant faith community is desirable.

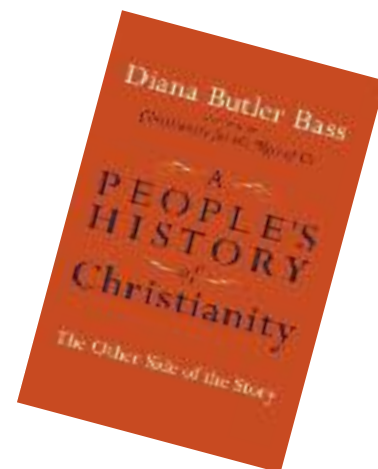
Bass said she is very hopeful that congregations can hear both the calls of the current culture and the Gospel — and ask, “What expressions of the church have relevance in our world today?” **BT**



*“I have waited since ... my first course in church history for someone to write this book.”*

# Usable history

Church historian traces love of God and neighbor through the ages



The next time a layperson asks me to recommend a book on the history of Christianity — Up to this point in my 55-year ministry, I have had two such requests! — I am going to say, “Diana Butler Bass’s *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (HarperOne, 2009).”

**A**nd the next time a seminary graduate asks me to recommend a refresher volume on church history (once in 55 years) I am going to recommend Diana Butler Bass. And the next time a professor of church history asks me to recommend a good book on whatever subject she teaches (zilch in 55 years), I am going to recommend Diana Butler Bass’s book.

Laypeople can ENJOY this book; preachers can PREACH from this book; church historians can discover how, if it is not too late, to TEACH church history from this book. It is just that good in my judgment.

This stunningly different survey of church history answers the question: “Across the ages, since the first century, how have Christians loved God and loved neighbor?” It is basically and fundamentally that: a history of how God’s people have unpacked for 2,000 years Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question (Mark 12: 28ff).

I have waited since the fall of 1958 and my first course in church history for someone to write this book. I — along with many of the preachers who are reading this — cut my church history teeth on Williston Walker’s enormously dense and exceedingly

unliterary tome. It is the kind of book that gives “history” a horrible name.

Bass, on the other hand, gives history a happy name. She describes her book, not immodestly or incorrectly, as “usable history.”

The book contains “stories told for the purpose of strengthening community by deepening its spiritual practices and renewing its vision of social justice.” How about that for the purpose of a book on the history of Christianity?

“Deepening spiritual practices” is what those left of center need. “Renewing its vision of social justice” is served up for those to the right of center. She challenges us all, conservative, moderate and liberal, with the stories she tells.

The history of Christianity is divided into five sections, each depicted by a single phrase that describes the era:

1. Early Christianity (The Way)
2. Medieval Christianity (The Cathedral)
3. Reformation Christianity (The Word)
4. Modern Christianity (The Quest)
5. Contemporary Christianity (The River)

Criticisms of the book often serve only to point out its strengths.

“It is too brief to cover the subject with a large font in only 353 pages.”

Absolutely! But brevity is part of the genius of the book.

“It focuses on Western Christianity, ignoring the story of the church in the East (Orthodoxy) and South America (liberation theology).”

Correct again, but Diana Butler Bass is an American Episcopalian with an evangelical background and her target audiences doubtless were people such as you and me, readers of *Baptists Today*, Western Christians. Another counterpoint to this particular criticism is that she includes people some

histories seldom, if ever, mention.

“She has anti-institutional and anti-hierarchical bias.”

Bingo! But I come away from the book thinking she is a historian who loves the Big Church and who wants to write history in order to help contemporary Christians grow in faith and not to engage in institutional brag.

“The author slights the importance of doctrine.”

True again. But there are far more histories of doctrine and theology than there are histories that bring to life spiritual practices and the struggle for justice. Admittedly, she does not get bogged down in the early theological controversies over the human and divine nature of Christ. Be thankful and cut her some slack.

Finally, “She overuses contemporary, often personal, stories to convince the reader of the relevance of the history.”

I think that strategy only makes the book more readable and relevant. Those of us who are Sunday school teachers, preachers and church historians could learn from her at this point.

This is not a “seminary” book, but the kind that needs to be studied in local churches. That is precisely why I am co-leading a seminar at our church for eight Wednesday nights in which we are discussing the book. Without apology, we hope to “use” this history to grow bigger souls. **BT**

—Church historian Walter B. Shurden is minister at large for Mercer University and a teacher at the First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Ga.

# A conversation about character with N.T. Wright

In his latest book, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright of Durham, England, calls for a return to virtue as the means to re-orient the church and society at large.

Christians have become so preoccupied with who gets their eternal reward and who doesn't, Wright says, that they've lost sight of the bulk of the New Testament, which instructs believers on how to live this life, here and now.

Rather than a polemic in support of a more strident legalism or a treatise on what some might call "cheap grace," Wright argues that the idea of virtue — moral strength — is the best way forward through our troubled times.

Wright discussed how virtue can be fostered in secular society as well as how the church can reclaim the message of the gospel. Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: It would seem the Western world has not dealt well with the nervous times we're living in. Is this because we have not developed the virtues we ought to have?**

A: We just haven't had that discussion. People in public discourse haven't had that to fall back on, so it's, "Well, these people over here believe in a whole lot of rules. Well, good luck to them, but we don't like rules." Or, "Those people over there believe in doing what comes naturally. Well, that sounds like fun." And then the only question is, "Is it going to hurt anybody?"

That's the way that we've done a lot of our implicit and sometimes explicit moral reasoning. And it's starting to show.

**Q: How do you persuade people to embrace virtue?**

A: People are getting totally fed up with the rule-book mentality in society as a whole. Character is what counts, not being able to



Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright is the author of the new book, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*. RNS photo courtesy HarperOne.

check boxes on forms.

That's a kind of a groundswell in the wider secular society, as well as in the church. We need to ride that wave. Creating more and more rules is never the way to live a fully human life.

**Q: In terms of fostering character and virtue, can society at large get there without the leadership of the church?**

A: Well, that's an interesting one, isn't it? God is good, and God's grace does stuff sometimes despite the church and sometimes through the church.

When I look at South Africa and what

happened there over the last 20 or 30 years, I see on the one hand Desmond Tutu — one of the greatest Christian leaders of the 20th century. And I see on the other hand Nelson Mandela, who did not present himself as a "Christian leader."

He just happened to be an extraordinary human being who, in his years in prison, had learned virtue. He'd learned patience, dignity, self-control, composure, and was able to come out as a man of real stature.

I would say that, again and again, the church has an almost accidental leadership role where people emerge in communities and are in the right place, say the right thing, give comfort to the right people.

I don't want to say that this is something Christian people can do and nobody else can do, but I do want to say that when Christian people are prepared to be led and guided by God to develop character, then leadership skills emerge in unlikely places, and sometimes turn up just when that society needs them.

**Q: The development of virtue, as you describe it, is individual but you say it cannot be done in a vacuum. It must be done in community?**

A: I think it's rather like saying there may be machines that enable you to practice baseball by yourself — you know, a machine that will fling a ball at you and you hit it back. But in reality, if you want to learn how to play baseball, you have to have at least two other people and preferably even a few more than that.

The thing we need to learn is that morality is rather like that. It isn't just an individual thing. It is about how we work together. **BT**

*"Character is what counts, not being able to check boxes on forms."*

# God in a box?

Film probes  
Americans'  
images of God

**W**ASHINGTON — On the big screen, God has been played by everyone from George Burns (*Oh, God!*) to Alanis Morissette (*Dogma*) to Morgan Freeman (*Bruce Almighty*).

On the small screen of people's imaginations, God frequently looks like an old man in the clouds, like something out of *The Simpsons*. Or Kenny Rogers. Or more ambiguous terms like creator, energy, love or nature.

That's how some Americans described their image of God in a small independent documentary titled *God in the Box*.

"I really wanted to be able to look behind people's eyes and see what God looks like to them and what God means to them," said filmmaker Nathan Lang. "They're not leaving novels about their feelings, they're leaving just snapshots."

Lang's four-man crew traveled across the country for three years with a phone-booth-sized black box that they set up on street corners. The hope was that people would feel comfortable enough in the anonymity of the box to share their thoughts and visions of God.

The documentary, still in the final editing stage, hasn't been publicly released, but Lang hopes to take the film on the film festival circuit. Until then, he's showing it at synagogues, churches, mosques and community centers and anywhere people want to see it.

Passersby stepped inside the box as cameras and microphones captured their insights while they sketched their image of God.

"Our hope was just that people would take it seriously when they went in and ... take a moment and reveal themselves," Lang said. "And 99.9 percent did. They were quite sincere about it."

The documentary features three groups of people: the filmmakers, the participants and a few religious experts. The storyline is built around the people in the box, but it also traces Lang's personal journey.

Lang was raised Jewish but had many questions about God. As he crisscrossed America, he found the majority of participants had an opinion, but many, like him,



Filmmaker Nathan Lang, seen here on a street corner in Washington, D.C., invited passersby to enter a large black box and describe their image of God for his new film, *God in the Box*. RNS photo courtesy Nathan Lang.

were less than certain about their answers.

Respondents answered with everything from God does not exist, to God is the creator of all things. Some said God was energy, while others called God a conscience, a second chance, a higher power and love. When asked to describe or draw God, some people drew things in nature, others sketched symbols like hearts and crosses, while still others said he looked like Kenny Rogers.

Amid the variety of answers, Lang said one thing was clear: People were taking the questions seriously, even if they didn't know the answers.

"People were incredibly honest and were willing to reveal parts of themselves that I don't know if I would reveal if I had walked into that box under those same circumstances," Lang said.

At a recent screening here, Graylan Hagler, senior minister at Washington's Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ, said the privacy of the box offered

people a safe place to share their feelings.

"It's interesting how people, when they get into a place where they know that they are respected and (are) not going to be judged or criticized, have a tendency to get truthful," Hagler said.

Although respondents were willing to open up and share, the project that began with questions ultimately ended with them, as well.

"It's more about the question than about the answer," said Rabbi M. Bruce Lustig of the Washington Hebrew Congregation.

The documentary ends with the filmmakers themselves stepping into the box and confronting their own questions. After three years of traveling in search of answers, Lang, too, still had a hard time stating his view of God.

"I'm a prisoner," he said, "in my own device."

More information on the film can be found at [www.godinthebox.com](http://www.godinthebox.com). **BT**

# Baptist blogger Michael Spencer, dead at 53

By Bob Allen  
*Associated Baptist Press*

ONEIDA, Ky. — Michael Spencer, voice behind the popular and sometimes controversial Christian blog Internet Monk, died April 5 after a four-month battle with cancer.

Spencer, 53, an ordained Baptist minister who graduated from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1984, began blogging from an out-of-the-way unincorporated town in southeastern Kentucky in 2000. Today Internet Monk claims 700,000 visitors a year and is consistently ranked as one of the 20 most popular blogs in the Christian blogosphere.

For two decades Spencer worked as a campus minister, Bible and English teacher and in other jobs at Oneida Baptist Institute, a Christian boarding school affiliated with the Kentucky Baptist Convention. He lost his job shortly before his diagnosis but managed to keep his work-provided health insurance by participating in COBRA with financial assistance from friends.

Spencer was supply preaching at a small Presbyterian church when he began experiencing dizzy spells and nausea last year. He was diagnosed with a non-specific cancer and had a small mass removed from the base of his brain on Christmas Eve.

He began radiation and chemotherapy

but doctors said in early March the cancer was too advanced and aggressive to expect any remission. At the urging of his oncologist, who told him chemotherapy was not working, he and his wife, Denise, opted to discontinue treatment March 23.

Michael Mercer, a hospice chaplain from Franklin, Ind., who had been filling in for Spencer at Internet Monk the last few months, reported April 5 that Spencer had passed away at his home, surrounded by family.

“Words are hard to come by at this moment,” Mercer wrote. “At a more appropriate time tomorrow, I will say more.”

Weblogs, which evolved from personal diaries on websites, were just gaining popularity when Spencer began Internet Monk. As of 2008, Technorati counted the total number of blogs at 133 million.

A lifelong Baptist, Spencer chose the name for his blog because of his interest in Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Kentucky and one of the most influential Catholic writers in the 20th century. Merton died in 1968 — coincidentally, also at the age of 53.

A frequent critic of the status quo,



Michael Spencer

Spencer was sometimes accused of being anti-evangelical. He described himself as a Baptist who was open to other traditions — including Catholicism — but said he chose to remain a Protestant, an evangelical and a Baptist for a reason.

“Being realistically critical isn’t hatred,” he wrote on an FAQ page of the blog. “I am critical and honest about the issues in my tradition that are problems.”

Spencer’s biggest splash came in January of 2009, when three blog posts he wrote appeared as a single op-ed piece in the *Christian Science Monitor*. The article, which began with, “We are on the verge — within 10 years — of a major collapse of evangelical Christianity,” was picked up by the *Drudge Report* and got attention from all around the world.

*Christianity Today* ranked it as one of the top-10 theology stories of 2009. Spencer called it “my 15 minutes.”

Spencer and a diverse group of fellow Christians started a group blog called The Boar’s Head Tavern in February 2002. Tributes poured into the site April 6, along with other blogs and sites, including BeliefNet and the conservative Catholic magazine *First Things*.

Spencer’s first book, *Mere Churchianity — Finding Your Way Back to Jesus-Shaped Spirituality*, is due for release this fall. **BT**

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# Creationism critic wins Templeton Prize

*Francisco Ayala is 'surprised and astonished' by \$1.5 million win*

By Chris Herlinger  
*Religion News Service*

**A** former Dominican priest and outspoken critic of creationism has won this year's Templeton Prize — an honor awarded to scholars who study how science and religion intersect.

Francisco J. Ayala is a professor of both biology and philosophy at the University of California, Irvine, where he has been a leading critic of creationism as an erroneous attempt to blend faith and science.

But neither do the two realms contradict each other, said Ayala on March 25 at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, where he was announced the award's winner. At \$1.5 million, the Templeton prize is the world's largest annual award given to an individual.

"If they are properly understood, they cannot be in contradiction because science and religion concern different matters," Ayala said.

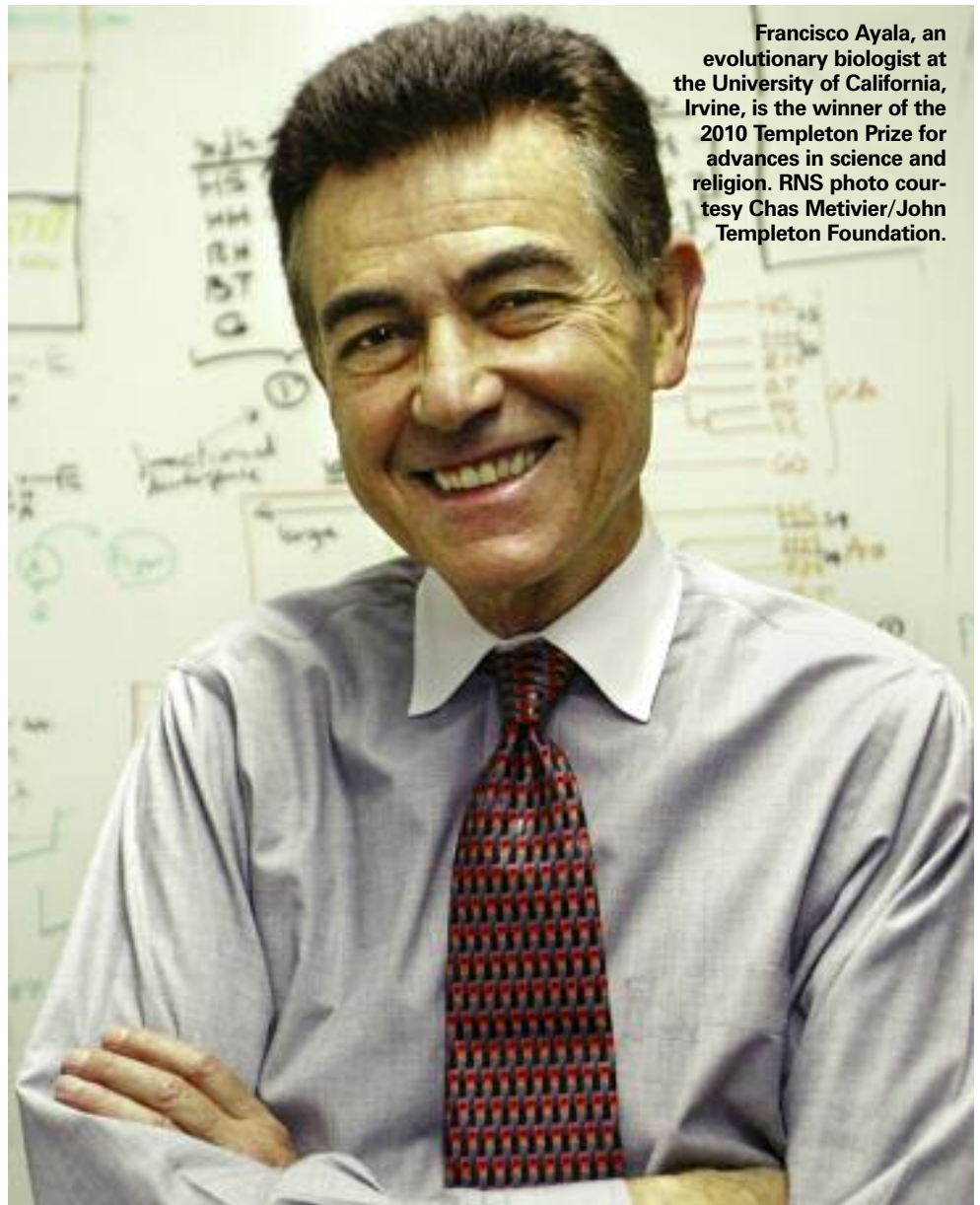
Whereas science concerns the natural world, religion concerns the meaning and purpose of the world and of human life, added the 76-year-old molecular biologist.

Ayala's scientific research centers on molecular biology and includes finding cures for diseases such as malaria; he earned a 2001 National Medal of Science from former President George W. Bush.

Ayala has also been a passionate defender of the theory of evolution, writing several books on the topic, and appearing as a witness in an Arkansas court case on teaching creationism in public schools in 1981. The court eventually ruled that creationism lacks scientific merit and was an unconstitutional entanglement of church and state.

In announcing the award, John M. Templeton Jr., the president and chairman of the John Templeton Foundation, said Ayala's "clear voice in matters of science and faith" echoes "the foundation's belief that evolution of the mind and truly open-minded inquiry can lead to real spiritual progress in the world."

In an interview, Ayala said he was "surprised and astonished" at winning the award. "It's such an unexpected gift," he said.



Francisco Ayala, an evolutionary biologist at the University of California, Irvine, is the winner of the 2010 Templeton Prize for advances in science and religion. RNS photo courtesy Chas Metvier/John Templeton Foundation.

Ayala, a native of Spain, was ordained a Dominican priest in 1960 and like others of his generation was influenced by the Jesuit paleontologist and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, who argued humanity and the planet were undergoing an ongoing evolution. Ayala left the priesthood soon after his ordination to study genetics.

Ayala said he does not consider himself a "Catholic scientist," but rather a scientist who is interested in spiritual questions. Still, he said his relations with the Catholic church remain cordial, noting the church's supportive intellectual tradition of scientific inquiry.

In his March 25 remarks, Ayala, now a naturalized American citizen, drew upon a

well-known painting of Spanish artist Pablo Picasso to make a point about how to relate science and religion.

"Scientific knowledge, like the description of the size, materials, and geometry of (Picasso's) 'Guernica,' is satisfying and useful," he said, "but once science has its say, there remains much about reality that is of interest: questions of value, meaning and purpose that are beyond science's scope."

The Templeton Prize was created by the late John Templeton, an investor and philanthropist who died in 2008. Ayala will be presented the award on May 5 by Prince Philip at a ceremony at Buckingham Palace in London. **BT**

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Church in the Meadows, Lakeland, Fla.

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Covenant Baptist Church, Gastonia, N.C.

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Druid Hills Baptist Church, Atlanta, Ga.

Emerywood Baptist Church, High Point, N.C.

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First Baptist Church, Cape Girardeau, Mo.

First Baptist Church, Carolina Beach, N.C.

First Baptist Church, Chattanooga, Tenn.

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First Baptist Church, Columbus, Ga.

First Baptist Church, Commerce, Ga.

First Baptist Church, Conway, S.C.

First Baptist Church, Dalton, Ga.

First Baptist Church, Forest City, N.C.

First Baptist Church, Fort Myers, Fla.

First Baptist Church, Frankfort, Ky.

First Baptist Church, Gainesville, Fla.

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First Baptist Church, Gastonia, N.C.

First Baptist Church, Greenville, S.C.

First Baptist Church, Greenwood, S.C.

First Baptist Church, Griffin, Ga.

First Baptist Church, Hawkinsville, Ga.

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