

# BAPTISTS Today

**Yes, no  
& maybe**

***Baptists hold  
summer meetings***

*page 4*



# MERCER UNIVERSITY *P*REACHING CONSULTATION

September 27-29, 2009

King and Prince Beach and Golf Resort • St. Simons Island, Georgia

Co-Sponsored by

The James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology

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## Main Presenter —

**Walter Brueggemann** is one of the most significant voices in Biblical scholarship today, and he is an insightful and energetic lecturer. The author of more than 58 books, hundreds of articles, and several commentaries on books of the Bible, Brueggemann enraptures audiences with his passion and scholarship. In his hands, the prophets challenge today's church as directly as today's pundits and preachers, the sages' words still ring true, and the poets still sing. Brueggemann was professor of Old Testament and Dean at Eden Theological Seminary from 1968 until 1982. He then served as the William Marcellus McPheeters professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta from 1986 until his retirement in 2003, and currently resides in Cincinnati, Ohio.



## Other speakers scheduled for the three-day program —

- **William D. Underwood**, president, Mercer University
- **Dr. Greg DeLoach**, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Augusta, GA
- **Reverend Amy Shorner-Johnson**, Associate Pastor for Youth and Adult Education, Milledge Avenue Baptist Church, Athens, GA
- **Reverend Maurice Watson**, Pastor, Beulahland Bible Church, Macon, GA
- **Reverend Steven Wright**, Pastor, Signal Mountain Baptist Church, Signal Mountain, TN
- **Kyle Matthews**, See For Yourself Music and Minister of Worship and Mission, First Baptist Church, Greenville, SC
- **Dr. Bob Patterson**, Pastor, Warm Springs Baptist Church, Warm Springs, GA
- **Dr. Dock Hollingsworth**, Assistant Professor of Ministry Experience, McAfee School of Theology
- **Dr. Brett Younger**, Associate Professor of Preaching, McAfee School of Theology

Registration is \$100 per person and is on a first-come, first-served basis.

A golf outing is planned for Monday afternoon at The Sea Palms Golf Course.

Questions regarding registration or lodging?  
Contact Diane Frazier by calling (678) 547-6470,  
or by e-mailing [frazier\\_d@mercer.edu](mailto:frazier_d@mercer.edu).

## EVENT SCHEDULE

### Sunday Evening, September 27

- 4:00-7:15 Check in and Registration  
7:15-7:30 Music, Kyle Matthews, First Baptist Church, Greenville, SC  
7:30-8:00 William D. Underwood, President, Mercer University  
"Welcome and a Word from Mercer"  
8:00-9:00 Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary  
"The Complexity of Exceptionalism: Between Two Biblical Narratives"  
9:00-10:00 Reception provided by President's Office, Mercer University

### Monday Morning, September 28

- 8:25-8:30 Music by Kyle Matthews  
8:30-9:00 Greg DeLoach, Pastor, First Baptist Church, Augusta, GA  
"The Pastor as Poet: Imaginative Engagement"  
9:00-9:30 Amy Shorner-Johnson, Associate Pastor, Milledge Avenue Baptist Church, Athens, GA  
"It's Not Easy Preaching Green: Changing How We Approach Sermons on Environmental Responsibility"  
9:30-10:00 Maurice Watson, Pastor, Beulahland Bible Church, Macon, GA  
"A Commitment to Proclamation in a Post Modern World"  
10:00-10:30 Fellowship/Refreshments by Morningstar Treatment Services, Inc.  
10:30-10:45 Music by Kyle Matthews  
10:45-11:15 Steven Wright, Pastor, Signal Mountain Baptist Church, Signal Mountain, TN  
"Connecting the Bible and the Real World in Preaching"  
11:15-12:00 Walter Brueggemann  
"Prophetic Practice: Two Pathologies, Two Responses"

### Monday Evening, September 28 at First Baptist Church St. Simons

- 8:00 Brett Younger, McAfee School of Theology  
"When We're Not Walter Brueggemann"  
9:00 Fellowship/Refreshments by Morningstar Treatment Services, Inc., at King and Prince

### Tuesday Morning, September 29

- 8:15-8:30 Wake up to Music by Kyle Matthews  
8:30-9:00 Kyle Matthews  
"What I've Learned About Preaching From Songwriting"  
9:00-9:30 Bob Patterson, Pastor, Warm Springs Baptist Church, Warm Springs, GA  
"Preaching on Baptist Heritage"  
9:30-10:00 Dock Hollingsworth, McAfee School of Theology  
"Preaching the Literary Forms of the Sermon"  
10:00-10:20 Break and refreshments  
10:20-11:20 Walter Brueggemann  
"The Crisis of Amnesia: the Antidote of Grandparents"  
11:20-11:30 Announcement about MPC 2010 and Adjournment

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## Street Question

"Why do Baptists talk about the Bible so much?"

*By William H. Brackney*



Photo by Tony W. Cartledge. Houston's South Main Baptist Church hosted a missionary commissioning service as part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship annual gathering. **Page 4**



At the concluding business session of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, moderator Jack Glasgow of North Carolina hands over his responsibilities to Hal Bass of Arkansas who will serve the next term. CBF photo by J.V. McKinney.



# Yes, No & Maybe

## Baptist groups hold summer meetings

**S**outhern Baptists said “yes” to a hotly-debated Great Commission Resurgence (GCR) proposal. American Baptists said “no” to an organizational restructuring plan long in the works. And the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) discovered that maybe holding its meeting in Houston on a holiday weekend was not the best idea.



### SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

Messengers to the annual Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) meeting June 23-24 in Louisville approved a motion by Southern Seminary president Al Mohler to form a task force to fully evaluate the convention’s structure and effectiveness.

A much-debated and somewhat softened “Great Commission Resurgence” declaration was promoted by SBC President Johnny Hunt and shaped most significantly by Southeastern Seminary President Danny Akin. It focuses on finding ways to reverse the ongoing decline in baptism rates among SBC-related churches.

The affirmative vote — supported in large measure by younger messengers — permitted Hunt to appoint an 18-member

**SBC President Johnny Hunt has appointed a special task force to review the convention’s structure as part of a “Great Commission Resurgence” effort in light of declining baptism statistics. Photo by Bob Allen / ABP.**

task force (later enlarged) to evaluate every level of the convention’s structure in an effort to discover how Southern Baptists can work “more faithfully and effectively together in serving Christ through the Great Commission.”

Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark., will chair the group, whose meetings will be closed to the press and whose work will be reported at the 2010 SBC meeting.

More than 8,700 messengers attended the meeting held in Louisville in recognition of Southern Seminary’s 150th anniversary. Many observers noted a larger representation of younger Baptist leaders including those with ties to Southern Seminary. (See Bob Allen’s analysis on page 10.)

- In additional actions by SBC messengers:
- Hunt was re-elected without opposition to a customary second term as president.
  - Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth was removed from affiliation with the SBC — against the church’s wishes — for being perceived as too accommodating of homosexual members. (See related story on page 14.)
  - A resolution by African-American pastor Dwight McKissic of Texas was adopted that

expressed “pride” in President Obama’s election as the nation’s first African-American president while allowing for strong criticism of his political agenda.

- Also winning favor was a resolution encouraging fellow members to support adoption, along with an affirmation that defines marriage as only between one man and one woman.
- In the pre-convention Pastor’s Conference, former Baptist pastor and Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee hit on popular anti-abortion and anti-gay themes. The former and likely future Republican presidential candidate also denounced the size of government.

“I will not need a great deal of government if I govern myself,” said Huckabee. “If everybody lived by one simple law — the Golden Rule as taught by Jesus, ‘Do unto others as you have them do unto you’ — we would need no other law on the books.”

## AMERICAN BAPTIST CHURCHES USA

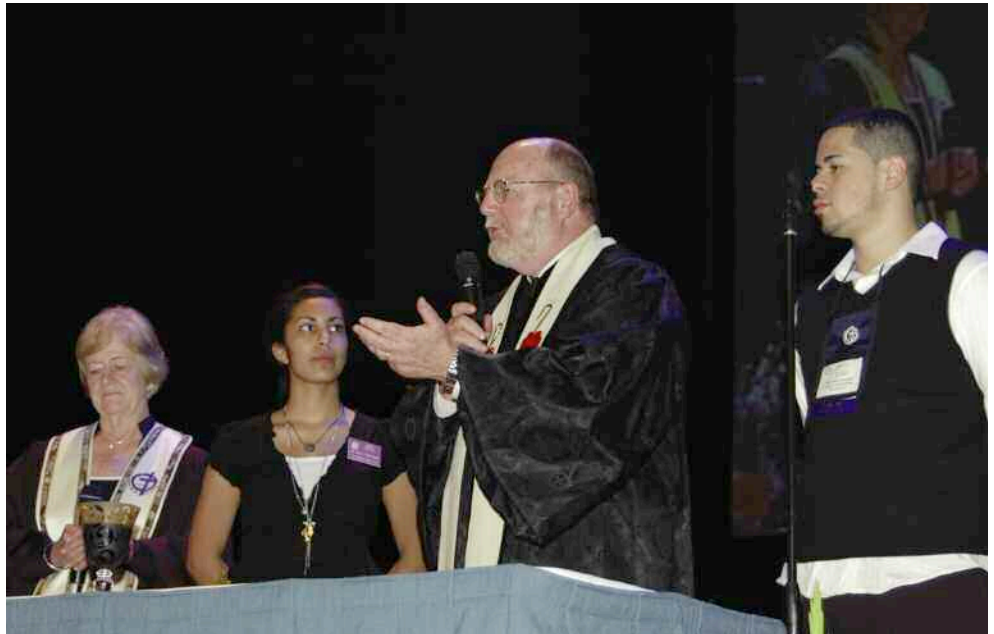
Delegates to the ABCUSA Biennial in Pasadena, Calif., June 26-28, narrowly rejected substantial bylaw changes that would have altered the structure of the historic denominational body. The proposal — shaped over the past three years — garnered a 377-217 positive vote but came up short of the two-thirds majority needed for implementation.

The proposed bylaw revisions called for granting more independence to the two mission boards — National Ministries and International Ministries — and renaming and reducing the size of the General Board.

But the point of opposition that seemed to cause the proposal’s demise centered on the method by which American Baptists could approve or rescind policy statements and resolutions in the future. The particular focus for some was on a 1992 ABC General Board statement affirming that the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching.

“Our principal concern regards the provisions of the new bylaws that transform all existing resolutions and policy statements into ‘Public Witness Statements’ of the ABCUSA, and that set a higher threshold to rescind these past statements than it will take to rescind future Public Witness Statements,” said Grant Ward, quoting from a resolution adopted by Central Baptist Church in Wayne, Pa.,

Under the new bylaws, he said, such previously adopted actions would become



Approximately 1,200 persons attended a communion service led by General Secretary Roy Medley (center) and President Mary Armacost Hulst (left) during the American Baptist Churches Biennial in Pasadena. Assisting were youth representatives Kara Lehman and Elisai Echevarria (right). Photo by Marcia Ricketts/ABCUSA.

“Public Witness Statements” that could be overturned only if initiated by the General Board and ratified by three-quarters of all regional and national boards. He said that is a higher threshold than the 66 percent majority of the General Board that enacted the resolution in 1992.

Homosexuality has been a divisive issue among American Baptists over the last decade. One regional group has broken ties with the national body, and some congregations that welcome and affirm openly gay members have affiliated with ABC regional groups outside of their geographical area.

The rule allowing churches to affiliate with “non-geographic regions” would not have been part of the new bylaws, but would have been a standing rule of the proposed Board of General Ministries (currently the General Board) that could reverse the rule by a simple majority vote.

June Totten, a delegate from Riverside Baptist Church in Washington, spoke in opposition to a proposal that would have altered the way the denomination approves public-policy statements, initiating and approving them through the boards of the denomination’s regions and agencies rather than individual delegates to biennial meetings or local congregations.

“Some restructuring needs to be done, especially around finances and financial commitments, but there are many other options that could better serve our beloved ABC,” said Totten. “We have the challenge of

becoming a place where the church’s most difficult issues can be discussed and addressed.”

Also drawing debate was the aspect of the proposal that would have allowed the two mission boards to create their own governing documents and to have members from outside the makeup of the General Board. Opponents such as Totten argued that the change would “weaken our mutual accountability and leave our denomination vulnerable, as other denominations with separate boards have had them taken over one by one.”

However, proponents, including agency leaders, said the proposal would broaden participation among American Baptists.

“People will be on a single board, rather than two boards,” said Annie Marie Lebarbour, current chair of the board of directors of ABC National Ministries. “We see that new structure as providing new freedom for National Ministries.”

With the failure of the bylaws changes, ABC leaders will now regroup and decide how to present a more palatable restructuring proposal to delegates at the 2011 Biennial scheduled to meet in Puerto Rico.

Roy Medley, who was re-elected to a third four-year term as general secretary, sent a June 30 letter to members of the General Board, saying he considered the vote to be “feedback that our efforts need further work.”

Medley said American Baptists can implement some aspects of the restructuring plan — such as increased participation by the denomination’s several ethnic caucus groups

at General Board meetings — that do not require a bylaw change.

“You will agree with me, I am sure, that we do not want structure to consume the next two years,” he wrote. “There is too much important work that God is calling us to do to allow us to be diverted by that. The ABC officers and I will be discussing how we best move forward in this next phase to allow the necessary work to occur but not to fully dominate our time and deliberations.”

## COOPERATIVE BAPTIST FELLOWSHIP

The CBF General Assembly drew more than 1,600 participants — with nearly half of them from the host state — to Houston, Texas, July 1-3. The timing — intruding on a holiday weekend — and travel distance for many Fellowship supporters in the East seemed to impact attendance.

The number was lower than the previous year’s attendance of 2,050 in Memphis. North Carolinians, who have a large state CBF organization and ranked second in attendance this year, will host the assembly in Charlotte next summer.

The assembly in Houston began with the commissioning of six new mission personnel and concluded with the launch of a Bible-listening initiative calling for wide participation in 2010. A sample CD-ROM of the New Testament, produced in multiple languages by the New Mexico-based organization Faith Comes By Hearing, was offered to each participant.

A financial shortfall of approximately 20 percent dominated the business reports. However, CBF leaders said they are operating at 80 percent of the current budget in order to avoid a crisis while hopeful that funding will increase.

Jack Glasgow, pastor of Zebulon Baptist Church in Zebulon, N.C., presided over the business sessions at which a proposed \$16.1 million budget (\$400,000 less than in the previous year), the nominating committee report and strategic goals were all adopted without opposition.

Glasgow compared the 19-year-old Fellowship to the post-exilic world of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Old Testament — when those old enough to remember life before the Babylonian exile worked alongside those without such historical memory to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

“Some have stories to remember; some

have stories to forget,” Glasgow said of current CBF participants. “Some come with few stories in their rearview mirror but with burning passion for the story up ahead that is calling them to faithfulness.”

At the meeting’s end, Hall Bass, a professor at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., assumed the one-year term as moderator for 2010. Christy McMillin-Goodwin, associate minister at Oakland Baptist in Rock Hill, S.C., was voted in as moderator-elect to serve in 2011.

In his annual address, CBF executive coordinator Daniel Vestal considered the question of what keeps Fellowship Baptists connected.

He cited a common vision (to be the presence of Christ), common values (rooted in Christian theology), a shared love of freedom (for individuals and congregations), a connected larger community, and “participation in God’s mission to the world.”

“To the degree we help churches to be missional, we will be relevant,” said Vestal.

Finally, Vestal said, Fellowship Baptists are bound by providence and grace with the understanding that God can bring good out of bad.

During the assembly, \$9,848 was collected for the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Offering for Religious Liberty and Human Rights.

CBF Fellowship leaders signed a memorandum of understanding with the Japan Baptist Convention, representing an official partnership between the organizations.

Historian Bill Leonard of Wake Forest Divinity School, speaking at an Associated Baptist Press dinner, noted that the reshaping of the SBC began in Houston 30 years ago when Adrian Rogers, a leading fundamentalist pastor, was elected SBC president.

Leonard spoke about the fragmentation of Baptists and numerical decline even among Southern Baptists over the past three decades and predicted the decline will become more precipitous in coming years.

“If Baptist identity is to be carried beyond mid-century,” Leonard said, “it must be reformulated immediately.”

Baptists must decide if they want to continue the dissenting position of their ancestors, at the risk of being outsiders, or whether they want to be in the cultural mainstream, Leonard said.

Another Baptist historian, Walter Shurden, spoke to the Whitsitt Baptist

Heritage Society upon receiving the group’s annual courage award. Shurden, retired from Mercer University and serving as interim director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society, said what we call courage is often “little more than fear striking back.”

He said that moderate Baptists should be aware of both their strengths and weaknesses — such as devaluing leadership as an overreaction to authoritarian leaders.

“We need leaders, not just facilitators,” he said.

While embracing the historic Baptist principles of freedom, Shurden said the real challenge comes in following the life and teachings of Jesus.

“It is much easier to be a Baptist than to take Jesus seriously,” he said.

## OTHER BAPTIST GROUPS

The 104th Congress of Christian Education sponsored by the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (NBCUSA) drew thousands to Detroit June 22-26. One notable presence was that of former convention president Henry Lyons.

Lyons, who served a prison term from 1999-2004 for embezzlement, is seeking to reclaim the presidency when votes are cast in September of this year. He is facing current vice president Julius Scruggs of Huntsville, Ala., who reportedly has the support of Philadelphia pastor William J. Shaw who has guided the denominational group for the five-year term since Lyons’ legal troubles.

Shaw is widely credited for bringing financial integrity to the operations of NBCUSA, the nation’s largest African-American religious group

Lyons, pastor of New Salem Missionary Baptist Church in Tampa, Fla., said he has repented and been forgiven by God. Now he seeks the forgiveness of his fellow Christians.

Also this summer, the Baptist World Alliance (BWA), a worldwide fellowship of more than 200 varied Baptist bodies, is holding its annual gathering and General Council meeting in the Netherlands July 27-Aug. 1.

Contributing Editor Tony Cartledge will report for *Baptists Today* on this historic gathering that marks the 400th anniversary of the Baptist movement — traced to a congregation formed by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in Amsterdam in 1609.

The larger BWA World Congress, held every five years, is scheduled for July 28-Aug. 1, 2010 in Honolulu. **BT**

# editorial

## What if your testimony seems boring?

John Pierce

Several years ago someone told me of a Korean man whose Christian conversion brought about such remarkable change that authorities investigated to see if his wife had killed her husband and replaced him with another man.

Reportedly, he had immediately gone from being an angry, hostile, self-centered person to being a peaceful, kind and caring man. His Christian conversion was undeniable.

Such dramatic conversions make for better Christian testimonies than those nurtured in faith. Simply put, the worse one's behavior before becoming a Christian, the better the testimony.

That's why wild-living celebrities turned Christian and persons with prison records get the brightest spotlights for giving their testimonies. The contrast is clearer — and the stories more interesting.

As a Baptist Student Union summer missionary in the '70s, my team of students noticed that those with the more dramatic testimonies drew the greatest attention from listeners. Telling of growing up in a Christian home and a caring church paled in comparison to someone who was abandoned as a child or encountered a near-death experience.

To pass the time on a camp construction site, some of us would see how much

we could embellish our boring testimonies. But those stories were for our ears only — and offered as amusement rather than truth.

Often those who had dramatic conversions as adults see such radical change as the only valid experience. If they become preachers, it comes out as: "If you don't know the exact time and place when you were saved, then you haven't been saved."

Some recall the date of their "spiritual birthday" as quickly as their physical birthday — and expect all other Christians to be able to do the same.

While testimonies of dramatic conversions are widely valued, there are many for whom faith was a more gradual experience. The needed change in personality and priorities was to a less-obvious degree.

Certainly it is necessary for all Christians to make their own personal spiritual decisions and not consider faith as something that can be inherited from a family, a congregation or any other source. Specific, identifiable times of commitment provide "punctuation marks," as someone called them, that serve as reference points when faith seems hard.



The Baptist emphasis on experiential faith reminds us that our spiritual relationships are direct and personal. But we must be careful not to use our own personal faith experiences as the norm for all others.

What if Moses had said the only way to encounter God is through a burning bush that is not consumed or if Paul had insisted that true conversion requires a blinding light?

The family of faith would be quite small — and many of us would spend our days staring at shrubbery or the sky.

Those of us with the more boring accounts of found-faith might feel inferior to those with high drama in their stories. Yet our individual stories are more than "personal testimonies." They are affirmations of the faithfulness of others who taught us and nurtured us in the ways of Christ.

Yet, coming to faith from the nurture of faith does not mean that conversion (change) is unneeded. Selfishness, anger, arrogance and unfaithfulness are easily rooted in us all.

Conversion may be less obvious for some people of faith — more like scales of ignorance falling slowly from our eyes. The change is nonetheless real and necessary.

Some mistakenly see conversion as quick if not easy. A false assumption is that the work of conversion is neat and complete.

Yet just looking at the shortsightedness, division, pettiness, self-promotion and condemnation at play in our churches and denominational groups should be enough to assure us that our conversion remains incomplete.

No matter where or when the process began, or to what degree behavioral change must follow, the ongoing need for being converted more into the likeness of Christ resides with each of us.

If so, then perhaps there is no such thing as a boring testimony — if it includes the affirmation that one remains a work in progress. **BT**

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## 'STREET QUESTIONS ABOUT BAPTISTS'

Editor's note: This is the eighth article in a series titled "Street Questions about Baptists," in celebration of 400 years of the Baptist movement.

# 'Why do Baptists talk about the Bible so much?'

Yes, we've been called everything from bibliolators to Bible babblers! The Bible is of fundamental importance to Baptists and has been so for four centuries.

**B**aptists are used to debating ideas and principles from scripture — and very energetically. Typically in a Baptist argument one does not hear references to the church fathers or contemporary theologians, but to one (!) passage of scripture versus another.

If it's not in the Bible, it's suspect for most Baptists. "God said it, we believe it, and that settles it!" as the Baptist preacher has often reminded us.

In this the 400th year of Baptist development, let us go back to the first generations. In a context of religious authority that lay in an established church or in the headship of a ruling monarch, Baptists joined other dissenters in England and the wider Reformation heritage of seeking scriptural warrant for their beliefs and practices.

This led to intense study of the Bible by both early Baptist pastor leaders and laity as well. Rather than use any "authorized" version, Baptists used either the Geneva Bible in English or went directly to the original Greek texts (the New Testament and Septuagint).

Early Baptists tended to read the Bible literally and specifically. Anyone who studies the earliest confessions of faith or books written by Baptists quickly sees how Baptists lifted entire passages verbatim to define their beliefs and ethics.

Examples of this are classic Baptist positions on the identity of those for whom Christ died, the qualifications of officers in the churches, and the question of whether the Lord's Day is celebrated on the Sabbath or the first day of the week.

Nowadays one is somewhat amused to see the differences of early Baptist opinion on whether wine is to be real wine or grape juice

in the Lord's Supper, or whether women served in leadership positions in the New Testament churches.

As time went on, Baptists joined other Protestants in employing critical analytical methods to the study of the scriptures. In the writings of Thomas Grantham, an early English General Baptist theologian, one sees a primitive attempt to understand scriptural passages in light of the historic creeds and Patristic thinkers.

John Gill, of even greater stature in the 18th century, presented a large project involving Near Eastern language applications to the Old Testament, to qualify for what was likely the first university honorary degree awarded to a Baptist.

Numerous Baptists followed in the century between 1800 and 1900 with an array of concordances, language tools, gazetteers, dictionaries and commentaries to enrich the study of the Bible.

Adoniram Judson, one of the best educated Baptists of his era (actually trained as a Congregationalist under the esteemed Andover Old Testament scholar, Moses Stuart), vigorously supported new translations of the Bible, rejecting the predominance of the King James Version among

most other denominations in the mid-19th century. William Newton Clarke, a New Testament theologian and Bible commentator in the 1880s-1890s, was the preferred American biblical theologian among Protestant European exegetes in his era.

In the last hundred years, the University of Chicago and seminaries such as Rochester and Southern became famous for biblical scholarship — no matter what one's denomination. Names like William R. Harper, A.T. Robertson, Edgar J. Goodspeed, H.H. Rowley, Helen Barrett Montgomery and H.E. Dana were well-regarded assets in pastoral libraries and advanced scholarship.

Today, George R. Beasley-Murray, Jorge Pixley, David Bartlett, David Scholer, Alan Culpepper, Charles Talbert and Phyllis Tribble are well known in biblical studies senior scholarship.

Contemporary Baptists value the Bible for several reasons. First, in the Gospels one finds the sacred record of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Being very Christological in emphasis, these passages are of paramount importance.

Among the Pauline and general letters, one finds how the earliest churches interpreted the gospel and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, arrived at a consensus about how to structure the church and carry out the Great Commission of Jesus. Ironically, if one casually surveys typical published Baptist sermons, there is a significant use of Paul's letters in particular among Baptists. Paul is the interpreter *par excellence* of the teachings of Jesus, for many Baptists.

In various critical moments in recent Baptist history, mainstream Baptists have declined to underwrite a creedal statement or



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confession of faith, because they do not want to diminish the direct authority of scripture in the life of the church.

Also, many Baptists recognize that the scriptures can lend themselves to varying interpretations and each believer is called upon to exercise his/her gifts to apply the Bible to specific life situations. The cherished principle of religious liberty or soul freedom guarantees that there will not be any overarching system of biblical interpretation to which all believers must adhere.

Two issues involving the Bible seem to energize Baptists like few others. First is the debate over which translation or paraphrase most adequately reflects the Word of God.

Most Baptists, not well informed of their history, do not realize how their forbears in the 17th century would have had little regard for anything authorized by King James I. Those who are ardent “King James only” types don’t recall the harsh treatment of dissenters that in large part focused the birth of the Baptist movement.

Now whether one uses the NIV or NRSV or some other popular translation can often be the basis of fellowship among Baptists.

The second issue, namely whether one holds scripture to be the highest unassailable authority or the Lord Jesus Christ himself, has drawn moderates and fundamentalists to the battlefield. Since the advent of fundamentalism, many Baptists have been conditioned to build their personal theologies upon an infallible or inerrant book as the source of their faith and life.

Others have hearkened back to their Christological center-points and responded that the true Word is always only the living Christ and that scripture itself must come under the authority of Jesus Christ. That debate will continue to deeply divide and define Baptist groups from each other.

What Baptists and their critics have concluded is that the Bible is often not a last word in resolving questions about the Christian faith and experience, no matter what the various confessions of faith mandate for their adherents. Because we come from different perspectives, languages, cultures and educational experiences, we bring a vast amount of baggage to our task of interpretation.

Add to that our biases as evangelicals, progressives, moderates or liberals — theologically speaking — and there is an excellent probability that Baptists will exhibit a wide variety of scriptural interpretations.

In my current role as a historical theologian, I try to strike a note of integrity in my understanding and use of the Bible. I affirm the authority of scripture in all matters of faith and life: that is solid, historic Christian thinking and doing.

But I am also aware that my experience and the experiences of others, plus our four centuries of a growing Baptist tradition, play an important role in how I interpret the scriptures and where I place the appropriate emphases in my ministry.

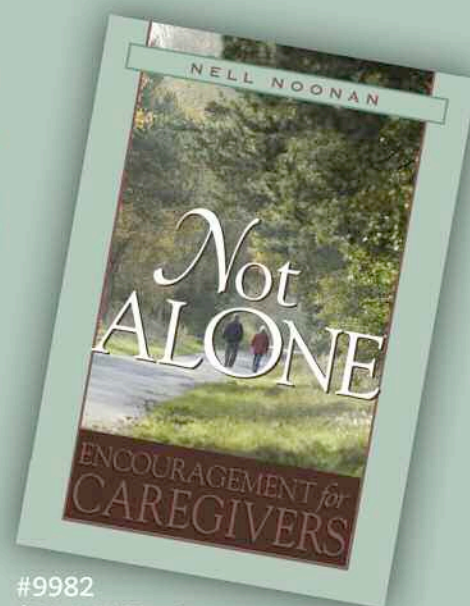
And, to be honest, growing from my sense of what it means to be created in God’s

image and the responsible use of my “redeemed” conscience (to use Helmut Thielicke’s principle), I recognize situations in which my human reason helps me to respond to ethical questions and contemporary theological concerns. What I’ve come to rely upon is a theological method that has Christ at its center, but recognizes the interaction of scripture, experience, reason and tradition with a large measure of grace and humility.

As a longtime Baptist, I am enriched by conversations about the Bible. How about you? **BT**

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# Generation gap creates dilemma for SBC

By Bob Allen  
*Associated Baptist Press*

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The 2009 Southern Baptist Convention marked the 30th anniversary of the launch of a theological/political movement aimed at stopping the nation's second-largest faith group from drifting into liberalism and inevitable decline.

Three decades later, Southern Baptists are baptizing fewer new converts than in the 1970s. Total church membership is starting to drop, and a recent study warned that years of precipitous decline may lie ahead.

Meanwhile, the old guard that led the “conservative resurgence” is moving off the scene, followed by a generation behind them that needs some convincing that the SBC is the best vehicle for their investment of their churches’ mission dollars and energy.

SBC President Johnny Hunt succeeded his first year in office in rallying younger Baptists. They came to Louisville in unusually large numbers to support Hunt’s Great Commission Task Force, which they hope will find ways to make the convention more responsive and relevant to their goals for ministry.

Rather than stepping into pulpits of traditional Southern Baptist churches, some of these young ministers want to start new churches that appeal more directly to the interests of their generation. That involves outreach innovations, like a church in St. Louis that invites people once a month to gather at a local pub to talk about theology.

That may appeal to Christians with spiked hair and body piercings, but it doesn’t sit well with many traditional Baptists, especially those of the Greatest Generation who were raised in an era when Baptists didn’t dance, drink or go to the movies on Sunday.

Roger Moran, a Missouri layman who served the conservative resurgence faithfully in ideological battles with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and before that the Baptist Joint Committee, brought 4,000 copies of a 47-page pamphlet warning messengers of perils of the “emergent” or “emerging” church, but he handed out only a few hundred before convention officials asked him to stop.

One of the most-spoken names at this year’s convention was Mark Driscoll, though he wasn’t there and isn’t even a Baptist. He

“The Southern Baptist Convention is an archaic denominational dinosaur with a bloated bureaucratic infrastructure on the fast track to irrelevance.”

—JONATHAN MERRITT,  
SON OF FORMER SBC PRESIDENT JAMES MERRITT

has spoken at an SBC seminary, however, and a number of younger SBC ministers are involved with the Acts 29 Network, a church-planting movement Driscoll co-founded.

Eight motions brought to the floor during business sessions discouraged Southern Baptists from associating with Acts 29, mainly over Driscoll’s reported use of vulgar language and acknowledgment that he drinks alcohol.

Most were ruled out of order, but three were referred to SBC boards of trustees, which now must consider them and report their action to the convention next year.

Driscoll, 38, pastor of 7,000-member Mars Hill Church in Seattle, was an original member of the emerging church movement in the 1990s. Later he distanced himself from the “generous orthodoxy” view of Brian McLaren, another prominent voice of the emerging church.

Driscoll believes in “complementarianism,” a view that men and women are created equal in value but each gender has unique roles in the home and church. That puts him solidly in step with the 2000 revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message*, which says the husband is leader of the household and the wife should “submit herself graciously” to his headship.

He also supports the “New Calvinism” — identified by *Time Magazine* as number three of “10 ideas changing the world right now.” That aligns him with Baptist brethren such as Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who made the motion that authorized Hunt to appoint a Great Commission Task Force.

One messenger who spoke in opposition to the task force motion said sarcastically he

didn’t need a study to tell him what is going wrong in the Southern Baptist Convention — it’s Calvinism.

That assessment seemed to be shared by some of the convention’s top leaders. During his report Morris Chapman, head of the SBC Executive Committee, criticized both Calvinism and “church-growth methodologies that masquerade under the guise of Bible exposition [that] are increasingly known for the crude themes and the vulgar language of their strongest advocates.”

A couple of hours later at a luncheon for young pastors, Southeastern Seminary President Danny Akin apologized for Chapman’s remarks and called them “shameful,” an unusually strong word typically reserved for godless atheists and moderate Baptists.

Moran argues that “cultural liberalism” that claims to be biblically conservative but tolerates ungodly living is just as dangerous as theological liberalism to the SBC.

Many young pastors, meanwhile, are on the fence about the wisdom of investing resources in a denomination they see as wedded to methodologies from the 1950s and seemingly more interested in political clout than ministering to “the least of these.”

Jonathan Merritt, son of former SBC President James Merritt, described his ambivalence in a recent blog.

“The Southern Baptist Convention is an archaic denominational dinosaur with a bloated bureaucratic infrastructure on the fast track to irrelevance,” he wrote. On the other hand, he continued, the SBC “does more missions work than any other organization on this planet and has many other vibrant and impactful ministries.”

That is why Merritt said he supports the current discussion about the denomination’s future.

“Southern Baptists are faced with a choice from which they cannot hide,” he said. “Either they will keep kicking the can of reality while they fade into cultural irrelevance or they will act aggressively to refine our processes while preserving the wonderful work being done by so many. Southern Baptists have a choice: change or die.” **BT**

—Bob Allen is senior writer for  
*Associated Baptist Press*.



## commentary

# Should Baptists have more children for the cause of missions?

By Tony W. Cartledge

**S**ome denominational leaders have proposed the idea that Baptists should combat falling baptism numbers, at least in part, by having more children.

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has long blogged concerns about the trend toward fewer children. Like the Southern Seminary-housed “Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood” and other members of the “full quiver” movement, Mohler has advocated having larger families as a Christian duty and has even spoken of deliberate childlessness as moral rebellion against God.

Now Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary president Danny Akin, a former member of Mohler’s faculty, has joined the effort to promote larger families among Baptists.

In an April 16 chapel sermon, as reported by Associated Baptist Press, Akin said Mohler had shown him statistics comparing the decline in Baptist birthrates to the decline in baptisms, suggesting that one way for Baptists to battle falling baptisms is to have more children.

If there is a direct correlation between lower birthrates and fewer baptisms among

Baptists, it would seem to suggest that our own children have been our main mission field all along. Akin suggested that the more children we have, the larger our “primary mission field.”

I won’t argue the logic of that — if Baptists have more children, they’ll almost certainly produce more Baptists. But that’s not the primary reason we should have children, and I don’t think either Akin or Mohler would argue for that.

What disturbed me most is that Akin went on to speak approvingly of comments made by Bertha Smith, in which she derided birth control as a sin and argued that Muslims will take over the world because they tend to have more children than Christians.

Akin called her a “prophetess,” and added: “You say, ‘What are you saying?’ I’m saying you need to have a bunch of kids.”

Having more children “has a missiological motivation,” he said.

This argument has been made before, in various settings: since Muslim families tend to have lots of children, Christians

should have more children in order to keep them from taking over.

There are many good reasons for having children. In my view, raising more kids in order to outnumber adherents to a competing religion is not one of them.

That may have been good advice in the patriarchal age, when God predicted that Abraham’s descendants would be as the sand of the sea, and it may have been important in more primitive periods when many children died and parents had no social security beyond their children. But we don’t live in those worlds.

I have no argument with those who want to have large families, but reject the notion that Christians are obligated to produce as many children as possible.

There is no doubt that Christians have a missiological imperative to influence our world. Jesus clearly taught us to go and make disciples, teaching others his way.

Yet I can’t recall a single instance in which Jesus suggested that his followers should have large families as a strategic component of our mission.

If Christians truly impact the world, it will be through the lives we live and the compassion we show — not the number of children we produce. **BT**



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# Congressman acknowledges Baptists as ‘missionaries for the First Amendment’

HOUSTON — U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Texas) thanked Baptists for showing him the importance of protecting religious freedom — an insight that changed his political priorities.

“Thank you for the impact you have had on my life,” said Edwards during a luncheon sponsored by the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) held July 3 in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) annual assembly.

A lifelong Methodist, Edwards said his understanding of and appreciation for Baptist commitments to freedom began to emerge when he married and heard his father-in-law preach at the First Baptist Church of Waco, Texas.

Edwards said he had never heard of John Leland, the early Baptist religious freedom advocate, who greatly influenced James Madison and the early American political process that led to the constitutional guarantee that government would neither promote one religion over another nor inhibit religious expression.

“I revere that conviction,” he said of the Baptist emphasis on religious liberty.

He credits Herbert Reynolds, the late president of Baylor University, with bringing the importance of religious freedom to his attention and for giving him a copy of the historic address on the subject by Baptist preacher George W. Truett in 1920 on the steps of the U.S. Capitol while Southern Baptists gathered in the nation’s capital.

“Upon reading that speech, I was hooked,” said Edwards. “At that point there was no turning back for me.”

Baptist leaders — including those who have staffed the BJC — “became my mentors,” Edwards acknowledged.

The 10-term congressman said he sensed a “moral and religious obligation” to

Congressman Chet Edwards and his wife, Lea Ann, along with their two sons, attend Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, and McLean Baptist Church in McLean, Va.



defend religious liberty in his legislative role.

Babs Baugh of San Antonio, Texas, whose late father, layman John Baugh, was among those the congressman credited for influencing his appreciation for religious liberty, called Edwards “our strongest proponent of religious liberty and separation of church and state” in Congress.

Edwards responded that any influence he has had in Congress to protect and promote religious liberty is because of Baptist influences.

“I can think of no greater cause to which to be committed,” said Edwards, calling himself a “blessed beneficiary” of Baptist leaders who enlightened him about the importance of religious freedom.

While successful efforts to defend religious liberty have been accomplished in recent years, Edwards said he understands the constant threat from those who willingly or unknowingly seek to weaken the constitutional guarantees. John Baugh called them “patient and persistent

revolutionaries,” Edwards recalled.

Edwards expressed regret that the majority of Americans now think of the “separation of church and state” as a negative concept — misrepresenting the religious liberty principle as a tenant of political liberalism. He urged Christians to not allow atheist groups to become the face of opposition to those seeking political favor for a particular faith expression.

The battle to defend church-state separation is an ongoing one,” said Edwards. “I think we can beat back these attacks ... (with) persistent hard work.”

He urged Baptists to continue their efforts — individually and through the BJC — to bring clearer understanding of religious liberty to those who are mistaken about its importance.

“As Herb Reynolds did with me, you can plant the seeds of understanding...,” he said. “The freedom of our faith and the future of our children depend on our efforts.” **BT**

# quotation

“ r e m a r k s ”

“What Jesus is calling us to is living with and among people that are different from us, ... meeting their needs but not seeing them as a need, but one of us. In short, we are to love in particular not in general.”

—Julie Merritt, pastor of Providence Baptist Church in Hendersonville, N.C., speaking to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Houston

“If it had been a few more laps, I think Ricky would’ve gotten me because my tire was giving out.”

—Pastor Bill Black, of Riverside Baptist Church in Savannah, Ga., on winning the ninth annual “Faster Pastor” race June 12 at Oglethorpe Speedway Park in Pooler, Ga., by edging out three-time winner and United Methodist pastor Ricky Rushing (Savannah Morning News)

“If the Bible says that all throughout the history of God’s people he has chosen to measure the integrity of our faith by our concern for the poor, then there are radical implications here. We do not have time to play games with our lives, and we don’t have time to play games in the church.”

—David Platt, pastor of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Ala., in a June 24 theme interpretation at the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Louisville (BP)

## In the news, 25 years ago . . .

“Churches in business sessions have gone on record against it, and the First Baptist Church of Decatur, Ga., took out an ad in the *Atlanta Constitution* expressing their disapproval.”

—Reporting in the August/September 1984 issue of SBC Today on reaction to a Southern Baptist Convention resolution opposing women as ordained ministers

“We’re not the National Association for the Advancement of a Colored Person.”

—NAACP president Ben Jealous, telling the National Baptist Convention USA that President Obama’s election is not the end to racial inequality (Detroit Free Press)

“If God is truly Almighty, he will hardly be threatened by our puny efforts to understand the workings of his natural world.”

—Geneticist Francis S. Collins, tapped to head the National Institutes of Health, in his 2006 book, *The Language of God*

“The new policy will allow Liberty (University) to protect its Christian mission and at the same time will allow the political clubs to achieve their objectives.”

—Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. on a new policy that classifies all political organizations as “unofficial clubs” after an outcry following the school’s ban of the student-led College Democrats (RNS)

“With a world in crisis and our nation in challenge such of which we have not seen in decades, the clear and certain proclamation of the gospel is paramount. I pray that ... Southern Baptists will rally to the bold call of evangelism for this hour.”

—Evangelist Billy Graham, 90, in a handwritten note read at the June meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (RNS)

“We are to love the people of the world no matter what they believe; we are not to love the value system of the world. And the problem today is a lot of Christians are getting that reversed. They love the value system and hate the people.”

—Baptist pastor and author Rick Warren, speaking June 23 to a group of breakaway Episcopalians in Texas, as quoted by *The Associated Press* (RNS)

“My own belief is that at some level of their souls they know that those who engineered the Conservative Resurgence are responsible for a brokenness, the self-inflicted wounds created in the body of Christ called Southern Baptists. Rather than admit that their attempts to save the Bible had the unintended effect of weakening the convention through division, they stubbornly continue to ignore the obvious.”

—Editor Jim White of the *Virginia Baptist newspaper*, *Religious Herald*, on the current state of the Southern Baptist Convention

“The Catholic Church’s prohibition on artificial means of contraception has very little effect on the behavior of American Catholics. But its stance endangers millions of lives worldwide.”

—Christian Century editor John M. Buchanan on *Roman Catholic opposition to the distribution of condoms in Africa where AIDS is epidemic*

“It was probably something he should not have been doing.”

—Brian Roark, attorney for University of Texas linebacker Sergio Kindle who received a concussion after crashing his car into an Austin apartment building June 24 while sending a text message (AP)

# Kentucky Baptist school cancels mission trip for the church dismissed from SBC

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) — With four days notice, a Kentucky Baptist university withdrew its invitation to host a youth mission team from Texas after the Southern Baptist Convention disfellowshipped their church for its toleration of homosexuals.

Brent Beasley, pastor of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, said the church's youth minister received a call June 30 from an official at the University of the Cumberlands informing her that the congregation's youth choir was no longer welcome to stay in dorms or perform mission work through the school's Mountain Outreach construction program, which builds houses for the disadvantaged in Appalachia.

Beasley said a church near the school's Williamsburg, Ky., campus also canceled a concert that had been scheduled as part of the mission trip. He said a big part of the 12-day mission trip/choir tour scheduled to begin July 3 was the stop at the university affiliated with the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

The Mountain Outreach program was established in 1982 by two students overwhelmed by the tar-paper shacks without electricity or running water they saw while on a driving tour of rural areas long plagued by poverty.

Beasley said Broadway's youth minister, Fran Patterson, scrambled to find alternative plans for that part of the itinerary.

The First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tenn., stepped in to provide housing, permitting Broadway's youth to work through Mission Encounter. Another Nashville congregation, Glendale Baptist Church, hosted the choir before they moved on to Washington, D.C.

Beasley, whose first Sunday as Broadway's new senior pastor was July 5, said the Broadway Chapel Choir, as the youth choir is called, has been taking these kinds of mission trips for years.

"All these kids want to do is praise God with their singing and serve God by helping those in poverty," Beasley said. "We're not going to let denominational politics keep them from doing this good work."

The Southern Baptist Convention voted without discussion June 23 to accept the unanimous recommendation of the SBC Executive Committee to sever a 125-year-old relationship with Broadway. The committee said the congregation failed to prove it had not acted to "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior," a requirement for SBC membership since the early 1990s.

The action was in response to a motion at last year's annual meeting calling for an investigation after news reports about a controversy at Broadway over whether to include photographs of same-sex couples in a new church directory. The church eventually resolved the issue with a compromise that used candid photos of all members instead of family portraits, but in the process church

leaders acknowledged there were a handful of openly gay members and that some of them served on church committees.

The SBC amended its constitution in 1992 and 1993 to change membership requirements by adding a prohibition on affiliating with churches that "act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

Until then the convention, formed in 1845 to defend slavery, had defined membership by financial contributions and not by any moral issue.

The 1992 action — ratified the following year — was in response to two churches in North Carolina making news at the time for their views on homosexuality. Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh had blessed a same-sex union, and Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill had licensed a gay divinity student to the gospel ministry.

Between 1993 and 2009, the SBC

membership amendment had been applied only to churches that took some formal action such as ordaining a homosexual or blessing a same-sex relationship.

In 1993 a messenger rose to challenge the seating of messengers from Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. He argued the congregation tacitly violated the membership article by failing to exercise

church discipline on a member, President Bill Clinton, over his policies on homosexuality and abortion.

After interviewing messengers from the church, however, the SBC credentials committee ruled that the convention could not hold churches liable for actions of an individual member and recommended that Immanuel's messengers be seated.

Formerly called Cumberland College, the University of the Cumberlands was



founded by Baptist ministers in 1889. The school has historically served students primarily from the collective mountain regions of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio and Alabama.

University officials declined to comment on their rationale for revoking the invitation to Broadway's mission team.

Sing Oldham, vice president for convention relations for the SBC Executive Committee, said Southern Baptist leaders delayed taking action against Broadway Baptist Church until the eve of the annual convention meeting in hopes the church would take steps to communicate "unambiguous consonance" with SBC membership requirements. Oldham said any subsequent action by any other Baptist body "is fully under the purview of its respective board of trustees or other governing authority." **BT**

## After mere months on job, Riverside pastor resigns

NEW YORK (ABP) — A Baptist minister and former Wake Forest Divinity School professor has resigned just nine months after becoming senior pastor of New York's Riverside Church, a historic congregation identified with the 20th-century Social Gospel movement that downplayed individual piety while emphasizing justice issues such as poverty and civil rights.

According to the *New York Times*, Pastor Brad Braxton was the focus of intense infighting over his large compensation package and the mission of the church. Its previous pastors included the great preachers and social-justice activists Harry Emerson Fosdick and William Sloane Coffin.

Braxton, 40, said in a letter to the congregation he was stepping aside to allow the church to work through issues such as

solidifying its identity and deciding exactly what kind of pastor it wants leading it and its many affiliated ministries.

Jean Schmidt, chair of Riverside's church council, said Braxton's decision "illuminated the need for our church community to gain clarity on our shared mission" and for "deep soul-searching and conversations that will allow us to move forward as a stronger, more unified congregation."

Braxton moved to the church in September after four years as associate professor of homiletics and New Testament at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. Before that Braxton, an African American and former Rhodes Scholar, taught at Wake Forest, a traditionally Baptist school formerly affiliated with the Baptist State

Convention of North Carolina. Braxton succeeded James Forbes, who retired after 18 years at age 70 amid criticism over his leadership by some church members.

The *Times* said church leaders had hoped Braxton, who calls himself a "progressive evangelical," would bridge differences between older white members rooted in the struggles of the civil-rights and Vietnam eras and less-politicized younger African-American members. Their ranks swelled at Riverside under Forbes while many older white members left, and blacks now comprise about 60 percent of the church's membership.

The church, started with Baptist roots and financial backing by John D. Rockefeller, is now dually aligned with the United Church of Christ and American Baptist Churches USA. **BT**

## Survey finds that overall, gays are not godless

(RNS) — A significant majority of gays and lesbians — six in 10 — say faith is important in their lives, but heterosexuals generally state such commitments more often, according to a new survey by a Christian research firm.

"People who portray gay adults as godless, hedonistic, Christian bashers are not working with the facts," said George Barna, founder of the Barna Group, a Ventura, Calif.-based research company.

"A substantial majority of gays cite their faith as a central facet of their life, consider themselves to be Christian, and claim to have some type of meaningful personal commitment to Jesus Christ active in their life today."

Among the findings:

- 72 percent of heterosexual adults say faith is important in their lives, compared to 60 percent of homosexual adults.

- 85 percent of straight adults identify themselves as Christians, compared to 70 percent of gay adults.
- 75 percent of heterosexuals said their "personal commitment to Jesus Christ" is still important today, compared to 58 percent of gays and lesbians.

The survey is based on telephone interviews conducted between January 2007 and November 2008 of a total of 9,232 adults. **BT**

## Religious charities gain despite economic downturn

(RNS) — Religious organizations reported a 5.5 increase in donations last year, a marked contrast from the nationwide 2-percent decline in charitable giving, according to a study by Giving USA Foundation.

Religious congregations, which accounted for 35 percent of the total \$307 billion in charitable contributions, exceeded \$100 billion in donations for the second year in a row.

Though public-society benefit and international affairs organizations also cited increases in charitable contributions, two-thirds of public charities reported a decrease

for only the second time in the report's 54-year history.

The economic recession spurred this decline, Del Martin, the chairwoman of the foundation, said in a statement. "We definitely did see belt-tightening ... but it could have been a lot worse," Martin said.

Even with the cutbacks, the total still exceeded the \$300 billion mark for the second consecutive year.

The survey showed that 54 percent of human services charities

saw an increase in need for their services in 2008, and 60 percent were forced to cut expenses. Organizations serving youth development were hit the hardest, with 74 percent reporting funding shortages.

The majority of donations came from individual contributors, who gave more than \$229 billion. Gifts to religious organizations made up half of all individual contributors. Corporate donations totaled \$14 billion, a 4.5 percent decrease from the year before. **BT**



# Well suited for his work

Herrin remembered for role in civil rights struggle

By Deborah Van Broekhoven

**J**.C. Herrin gave American Baptists a significant presence during the civil rights struggle especially from 1959 to 1971, when he led a team of personnel in providing support to beleaguered colleges and churches in the South.

Herrin, retired assistant general secretary of what was formerly called the American Baptist Convention for Work in the South, died at age 94 on June 5 in New Smyrna Beach, Fla.

In response to the efforts of Herrin and his team — to identify with the struggle for freedom as well as efforts to share resources — many churches throughout the South joined the American Baptist Convention (now American Baptist Churches USA).

In 1959, as Herrin opened an office in Chapel Hill, N.C., the American Baptist Convention (previously known as the Northern Baptist Convention until 1950) reaffirmed the name “American” and explained that their new affirmation of welcome was “a friendly reassurance that we are ready to confer with any group of Christians of like faith and mind in the USA without regard to geographical location, or cultural, social, racial or national background.”

This affirmation opened the door for Herrin and others to respond to queries about cooperation.

Herrin was well suited to work as a civil rights missionary, having grown up in the South and graduated from Wake Forest College (now University) in North Carolina and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He voiced passionate and reasoned convictions about the importance of the church promoting racial equality and interracial cooperation, a practice cultivated through his years of association with the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen.



Former associates note the intensity of Herrin’s respect for student leaders. After working with students at the University of Missouri, Herrin returned to North Carolina in 1946 to lead the Baptist Student Union at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Appointed by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, he was fired in 1954 because his theology was judged liberal and his support for white and black students meeting together for study, worship and fellowship aroused anger and anxiety.

Herrin returned to the New York City area with his wife and three daughters to serve as associate minister at Scarsdale Baptist Community Church, where he nurtured more students and maintained close ties with southern friends.

In 1959 Herrin secured \$40,000 from the Field Foundation to support his return to the South as program associate for the American Baptist Board of Educational Ministries and the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Framing his work as a peace-making minister to civil rights activists on the verge of violent revolution, Herrin secured scholarships for student leaders of the civil rights movement, including John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael and Bernice Reagon.

Herrin traveled thousands of miles in support of activist pastors and congregations isolated by their stand for civil rights.

Martin Luther King Jr., who nominated many of the scholarship students, characterized this support for civil rights leaders as “one of the most forthright expressions of true Christian witness that I can point to in this period of transition.”

“No other denomination or convention has made such a significant step,” he said.

Herrin’s work included programs to strengthen black colleges and their capacity for financial and strategic planning.

Aidsand F. Wright-Riggins III, executive director of ABC National Ministries, remembers Herrin as “one of the unsung heroes in our denomination. He was a transformative figure who was a vanguard in leading our nation and the Baptist community through many challenging days. We are better because of his life and ministry among us.”

Between 1971 and 1974 Herrin worked with Baptist minister Carlyle Marney to raise funds for Interpreter’s House in Waynesville, N.C.

Herrin, whose local church ministry also included the First Baptist Church of Columbia, Mo., was a founder of the American Baptist Church of the Beatitudes in St. Petersburg, Fla. He moved to Florida in 1974 to be closer to family and lived there the rest of his life.

At the 2001 Biennial Convention of American Baptist Churches, Herrin was awarded the Richard Hoiland Award for his pioneer work in civil rights, including leadership in using “educational resources to address issues affecting the wider community.”

—*Deborah Van Broekhoven is executive director of the American Baptist Historical Society based in Atlanta.*

Martin Luther King Jr., who nominated many of the scholarship students, characterized this support for civil rights leaders as “one of the most forthright expressions of true Christian witness that I can point to in this period of transition.”



# Megachurches attract those under 45

By Adelle M. Banks

(RNS) — Megachurches are most attractive to younger adults, and almost all who arrive at their sanctuaries have darkened a church's door before, a new survey shows.

The study by Leadership Network and Hartford Institute for Religion Research, released June 9, found that almost two-thirds (62 percent) of adults who attend Protestant megachurches are younger than 45, compared to 35 percent of U.S. Protestant congregations overall.

Researchers found that just 6 percent of those attending a megachurch — defined as a congregation attended by 2,000 or more each week — had never attended a worship service before arriving at their current church. Almost half (44 percent) had come from another local church, 28 percent had transplanted from a distant congregation and 18 percent had not attended church for a while.

"It appears that megachurches draw persons who want a new experience of worship — contemporary, large-scale, professional, high-tech," said Scott Thumma, co-author of *Not Who You Think They Are: The Real Story of People Who Attend America's Megachurches*.

Thumma said he was surprised at how much megachurch attendees invite others to worship with them; just 13 percent said they had not invited anyone in the past year.

In comparison, a different survey by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research



Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif., teaches nearly 2,400 people during a membership training course. Photo by Mark Goddard.

found that 45 percent of attendees of mostly mainline Protestant churches had not invited anyone in that same time frame.

"That is radically different from anything I have experienced in other churches," said Thumma, a sociologist of religion at

Hartford Seminary, "and goes a long way to explain why these congregations are growing at such rapid rates."

The new study was based on responses to questionnaires by 24,900 attenders at 12 megachurches. **BT**

## Presbyterian denomination posts first-ever decline

(RNS) — The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) lost members last year for the first time in its 37-year history, according to a new report from the denomination.

The PCA, a conservative evangelical denomination that prioritizes church growth to save souls, saw membership decline from 345,582 in 2007 to 340,852 in 2008.

Newly elected moderator Brad Bradley delivered the news at the PCA's annual General Assembly in Lake Buena Vista, Fla., in June. He cited "extenuating circumstances," particularly a purging of membership rolls at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, but

Attendees at the PCA assembly said they weren't especially worried about last year's membership decline.

Attendees urged attendees to take the development seriously.

"This might be a wake-up call for us," said Bradley. He urged every PCA congregation to plant at least one new church by 2020 in a bid to grow the denomination's ranks.

The PCA wasn't alone in setting a regrettable record last year. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a more liberal mainline

denomination with 2.1 million members, reported a loss of 69,000 members in 2008 — the most since the denomination's founding in 1983.

Attendees at the PCA assembly said they weren't especially worried about last year's membership decline. Larry Ellenbaum of Beaver Falls, Penn., said the dip may have been an anomaly, adding that the PCA should nevertheless intensify its efforts to grow.

"This has always been a fast-growing denomination," Ellenbaum said. "Now it doesn't seem to be growing as fast, so we need to do more church planting." **BT**

## guest commentary

# Is Baptist church membership a joke?

By David Stratton

**M**embership was a joke at Brunswick Islands Baptist Church where I serve as pastor. We had not seen many of our members for years, and we didn't even know how to find a lot of them.

On any given Sunday our attendance, including visitors, represented less than half of our membership. The same membership joke is on many Baptist churches.

Two years ago a committee revising our bylaws addressed our membership problems by developing a process that is a variation of the pattern of a Mennonite church mentioned in a sermon by the late Alan Neely. The sermon, titled "Church Membership: What Does It Mean? What Can it Mean?" was published in *Proclaiming the Baptist Vision: The Church*, edited by Walter Shurden (Smyth & Helwys, 1996).

In our procedure, every three years, all members are notified in writing that, during a particular month, they will be given the opportunity to commit themselves as active members of the church by signing the statement of member responsibilities that has been in our bylaws for years.

This pledge is not a doctrinal statement. It is a 62-word sentence in which members are encouraged to "be diligent regarding their allegiance to Christ" and faithful in their "support of the work of the church."

Those signing the pledge thereby designate themselves as active members. Only active members are allowed to vote or hold church offices.

New members received in the period between the pledge signings are automatically deemed active members until the next active member qualification process. Furthermore, if circumstances prevent any members from signing the pledge during the time frame stipulated, exceptions allowing these members to sign at another time may be granted by the deacons.

Before this proposal was presented to

the church, the committee allowed me to submit the idea for review to about 16 pastors and a divinity school professor. All who examined the active member definition process returned positive feedback.

After giving the congregation three months to digest the proposal and offering drop-in listening sessions for member questions and concerns, it was adopted in January 2008 without a dissenting vote.

Less than a week after adoption, a letter was sent to all members announcing "Renewal Month" with "an emphasis in worship on church life and responsibilities" including an "opportunity to renew your commitment to active church membership by signing the statement of member responsibilities found in our bylaws."

In worship, during the invitation at each service of Renewal Month, the "Renewal Book" was in the sanctuary and members were invited to sign. At times there was a line of members waiting to sign during the invitation hymn.

After the second Sunday of Renewal Month the deacons met and reviewed a list of members who had not signed the active member pledge. Assignments were made for the deacons to make personal contact with these members.

Plans were also made for contacting shut-ins through the deacons' Homebound Ministry Team. The Renewal Book was taken to the shut-ins, who were affirmed as important members of the church family, and they were given an opportunity to sign.

In the end, with the exception of a handful of members, all regular attendees signed the active member pledge. Renewal Month became an opportunity for two couples and two individuals who had lapsed from church involvement to

enthusiastically re-engage.

In the case of the two individuals, one brought a boyfriend and the other a girlfriend to the church family. In addition, a retired couple who had been visiting the church for several years finally joined during Renewal Month.

Perhaps most impressive was a 23-year-old named Bryan who had not been in church since high school. He came back and signed the pledge. Bryan not only brought his girlfriend, but also over the next few months brought several other "20-some-things" to the church.

He has built our college and career ministry into an active group. Bryan's girlfriend has now become his fiancé, and she along with her mother and father joined the church a few months ago.

This procedure addresses a serious problem in a non-judgmental way that affirms the priesthood of the believer. No individual or committee, in top-down fashion, removes inactive members from the roll. Each member makes his or her own choice on the matter as part of a church-wide emphasis on the responsibilities of membership.

Nonetheless, I report our Renewal Month process with embarrassment. Our step to address the joke that membership had become in our church is a move toward recovering the New Testament ideal of *koinonia*, but it is a tiny, lame step.

The church is a fellowship in which, in obedience to the example of Jesus, we are to lay down our lives for one another (1 John 3:16). Signing a basic statement of allegiance to the Lord and the church as a means of declaring one's commitment to be an active member of the body of Christ is an embarrassingly small step toward that ideal. **BT**

—David Stratton has served as pastor of Brunswick Islands Baptist Church in Supply, N.C., since 1995.



# 2009 Formations Commentary

Bible Study resources for the adult Formations lessons available from Smyth & Helwys Publishing ([www.helwys.com](http://www.helwys.com))

**LESSONS FOR:  
Sunday, Sept. 6-  
Oct. 4, 2009**

Written by Tim Cannon,  
pastor of First Baptist  
Church of High Point,  
N.C.



Sept. 6, 2009

## Baptists and their freedoms

Acts 5:27-32

How would you respond if the President of the United States — with unanimous support from Congress — decreed that you could no longer practice your faith freely in this country? What if the government also made it a crime against the state to speak the name of Jesus publicly? Now imagine your reaction if these mandates came from your denominational leadership, pastor or deacon board. How would you feel? What would you do?

If you think this scenario could never happen, then you're mistaken. History bears witness that religious freedom is provisional. It exists only where permitted by those in power, and not everyone in a position of power believes that John Q. Public should be allowed to practice his faith freely.

Take the high priest and his cohorts in the Sanhedrin, for instance. They represent the highest political and judicial magistracy in Israel. Comprised of 71 of the most influential men of the nobility and priesthood, the Sanhedrin is responsible for issuing final judgments in all religious and civil matters not claimed by Roman authority, and its decisions are considered to be inviolable.

Obviously when this much power and influence is wielded by one body, the potential for conflict is high. How much control, after all, will the ruling body exert on those they

govern? How will the masses, in turn, respond to the dictates of a few? Will they blindly follow, or will they challenge those in authority? The answers, of course, depend upon the level of control the leaders exert upon the people and the people's reaction to the restraints imposed upon their freedoms.

According to the Gospels, Jesus challenged the authority of the establishment, and the establishment didn't like it. So, its leadership decided to retaliate. When these measures failed to injure Jesus, those in power took a more aggressive approach. Eventually they charged Jesus with blasphemy and treason, both of which were capital offenses. Jesus was arrested and taken before the Sanhedrin, which tried and convicted Jesus of crimes against both God and the state. When judgment was rendered, he was sentenced to death. Since the Sanhedrin did not have jurisdiction to carry out capital punishment, it lobbied Rome to crucify Jesus, which it did on the Council's behalf.

Unfortunately, this is what happens all too often when those in authority attempt to limit the freedoms of those under their care. They become self-serving, overbearing and eventually destructive. Pope Gregory IX's Inquisition, Cromwell's Commonwealth of England, Jefferson Davis' Confederate States of America, Stalin's Soviet Union, Hitler's Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Fascist Italy, and Kim Il Sung's Democratic People's Republic of Korea are examples of regimes that have limited the freedoms of its citizens by politicizing everything spiritual and human. As history indicates, resistance to such efforts often results in imprisonment, torture and/or death to those who question or challenge the powers-that-be.

In today's text, Peter is not a historian, but he understands what is at stake. He and the apostles are preaching the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and performing miracles. As a result, people are putting their faith in the Lord and are being saved. The religious leaders are envious of their success. So they arrest the apostles and have them brought before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the

high priest. The charge is civil disobedience and inflaming public sentiment against the prevailing institutional authority.

Like Jesus' trial, this one is suspect. A few days earlier, the Council banned the apostles from speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18), but they ignored this edict and continued their proclamations. Angry at their blatant disregard for the Council's wishes, the high priest presses the issue and demands they cease and desist immediately or else. In response to this threat, Peter declares: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God ... We must obey God rather than men!"

The state's ability to enact laws, whether just or not, and one's decision to obey or resist those laws remind us of the fine line that exists between freedom and oppression. Obviously, when religious conviction and civil law do not contradict one another, obedience is a non-issue. The trouble comes, however, when the establishment tells us to do one thing and God tells us to do the opposite. Then what? As Theodore Ferris observes, "This is what happened in Peter's case. Men said, 'Keep still.' God said, 'Speak out.' Peter could not do both; he had to choose one or the other. He chose to do what God said, regardless of the circumstances" (*The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, 84).

Like Peter, our Baptist forebears asserted that conscience could not be compelled by either political or religious establishments. That responsibility, they argued, belonged to God who alone is capable of judging one's heart and mind. In the end, this commitment to uncoerced faith led our Baptist forebears to challenge all powers and principalities that demanded uniformity of thought and sought to limit freedom of religious expression. And so, the Baptist movement began with people of faith who dared to walk in the footsteps of the apostles and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ even when the state-church threatened them with exile, imprisonment and death.

Adhering to these same principles, Baptists today continue to speak the name of



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Jesus and to offer a dissenting voice in opposition to all who seek to silence the voice of conscience and conviction. This is who we have been for 400 years, and who we will be for as long as we believe in freedom.

*Discussion: What does freedom of conscience mean to you? Have you ever had your religious freedom limited or threatened? How did you respond? Is there a need for a dissenting voice in political and religious discourse today? Are you willing to be that voice?*

Sept. 13, 2009

## Bible freedom

Hebrews 1:1-2; 4:12-13

The Bible is the best book I've ever read, and its words still move me today. Like many people, I was introduced to this wonderful book by my parents. They had a large family Bible that adorned our coffee table, and from time to time they would gather my brothers and me in their laps and read us stories from it. Our favorites were the ones that told about Noah and the ark, Moses and the exodus from Egypt, David and Goliath, and of course, Daniel and the lion's den.

For the better part of my childhood, my understanding of God was shaped by these Old Testament classics. My parents told me bits and pieces about Jesus, but it wasn't until I attended Vacation Bible School when I was 10 years old that I was introduced to the fullness of the Gospels.

Wow! Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were fascinating characters, but they didn't hold a candle to Jesus. He changed water into wine, walked on water, calmed the storms, healed the sick, fed the hungry and raised the dead. To be sure, the prophets said and did some incredible things, but none of them covered the gamut of the miraculous like Jesus. After reading the Gospels, it became obvious to me that the great narratives of the Old Testament were building up to the greatest story ever told — the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The proclaimer to the Hebrews agrees. According to him, each of the men and women of the Old Testament played an important role in telling us something about God, but none of them told us everything there is to know. How could they? Their knowledge, after all, was limited to finite expressions that could not convey the fullness of God's infinite being. Does this mean we

should discount either the inspiration or validity of their truth claims? Of course not. There are limitations to what we can know about God. Such restrictions simply come with being human. As the apostle Paul said, "Now we know in part, but one day, we will know fully" (1 Cor. 13:12).

If this is true, then what is the role of the prophets? To use a baseball analogy, they are the starting and middle relief pitchers who are responsible for setting up the closer to win the game. Although the prophets did not know the identity of the closer at the time of their writing, the proclaimer states that he has been named, and we know him as Jesus. For those who ask, "Why him?" he responds, "Because in his nature and being, he is the full revelation of God."

For most Christians, the proclaimer's assertion that Jesus is the full revelation of God is a non-issue, but for the uninitiated, it is problematic. In fact, this concept is so far outside the box of normative thinking that few people accept it as reasonable. They simply cannot fathom God becoming flesh.

Throughout history, many apologists have attempted to answer the critiques of these naysayers. One of the best known is John. In his gospel, he uses the language of Word to describe both incarnation and the unique relationship between God and Jesus (1:1-18). In doing so, he chooses a term (*logos*) familiar to both Jews and Greeks, but he uses it in a new theological construct that progresses from the existence of the Word, to the relationship of the Word with God, to the identity of the Word as God. As Gail O'Day observes, "With [this progression of thought], John affirms that the Word is fully God, just as Paul affirms in Phil 2:6 that Jesus 'was in the form of God' and was equal to God ... The Word thus 'represents the self-expression of God'" (*The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. 9, 520).

Although Greek and Jewish philosophers have had difficulty in making these connections between God and the Word, Baptists have not. The primary reason is that Baptists through the centuries have held the belief that God has chosen to reveal himself to humanity not only through the written Word of the Bible, but also through the living Word of Jesus. As those who accept both mediums as authoritative, Baptists believe that neither stands alone. Like hand and glove, the two go together and compliment one another. Thus taken together, they serve as the keys to

knowing and understanding God.

Baptists, of course, are not unique in this regard; however, their insistence that each believer is competent to read and interpret the Word for him/herself without interference from a spiritual aristocracy or hierarchy is distinctive. This core conviction often is referred to as belief in the priesthood of all believers, and it asserts that God is accessible to every Christian, not just a select few.

This belief has far-reaching implications since there have always been people who believe they know the mind of God better than others. Historically, they have claimed that God favors them because they are the only ones who have understood the Word rightly. I find this train of thought to be dangerous. Good people, after all, have said and done some horrible things in the name of God, all because they either misinterpreted the Bible or misrepresented Jesus' teachings.

So, universal priesthood is a crucial freedom because it challenges all political and ecclesial systems that seek not only to monopolize God's Word, but also to dictate to others what to believe. For this reason, I am grateful for our Baptists forebears who liberated the Word from institutional captivity. Because of their efforts, you and I enjoy equal access to God through our personal study of the Bible and relationship with Jesus Christ. Such freedom is a gift and a sign of our calling, for "we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that we may declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

*Discussion: What is the relationship between the written Word and the living Word? What role does the Word play in developing our relationship with God? Should all people have the freedom to read and interpret the Word for themselves? Is there danger in this? If so, what is it? Is the alternative even more dangerous? What does this historic freedom mean to you? To your congregation? To your community?*

Sept. 20, 2009

## Soul freedom

Matthew 16:13-18

"Final answer?" That's the question Meredith Vieira is asking you. You're a contestant on the hit show, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* You're trying to decide whether the Nobel Peace Prize is awarded in Stockholm or Oslo. You're playing



for the grand prize and you're out of lifelines, but you know that Alfred Nobel was Swedish. So, you go with Stockholm.

"Final answer?" Meredith asks again. You're not sure, but you stick with your gut feeling. "Yes, the answer is C) Stockholm. Wrong answer! I'm sorry. The correct answer is Oslo. The Nobel prizes for physics, economics, chemistry, medicine and literature are, in fact, awarded in Stockholm, but not the Peace Prize. It's presented in Oslo.

In our Scripture lesson for today, Jesus asks a question of significant importance — a question that, if answered correctly, will yield a reward far greater than any game show prize. The question: Who do you say that I am? The reward: A life-changing, personal relationship with God. The choices: A) John the Baptist, B) Elijah, C) one of the Prophets, or D) the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Peter hears the question; he knows what's at stake. Now it's time for him to respond. Final answer? As time expires, Peter leans in toward Jesus and says confidently, the answer is D) You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Having heard this story before, we know that Peter gets the answer right, so there is no surprise ending. What happens next, however, should grab our attention. At first glance, Jesus appears to be pleased with Peter's assessment of him. Yet a more thorough examination of the text reveals that Jesus expects more from Peter than a right answer. It seems he also awaits a personal response.

When I was 15 years old, I began to attend church. My sudden interest in church had nothing to do with my concern for God but rather with my infatuation with a particular girl. She was active in the youth program, and I figured the best chance I had of dating her was to go to church. So I did.

At first, participating in church activities was fun, but after a while, I became discontented and restless. I thought I had everything in the world a teenager could want, yet I felt empty inside. So, I asked several of my church friends to tell me what it was that made them feel differently than I, and they told me about Jesus Christ and their relationship with him. I was astounded by their answers: Sacrificial love. Forgiveness of sins. Peace that passes understanding. Eternal life. Their words sounded too good to be true. Yet, I knew they weren't because everything my friends shared with me felt right and stirred me at the core of my being.

At that moment all I wanted to know was how I could have a relationship with Jesus like they did. In response to my inquiry, my friends told me I had to make a choice. "Jesus loves you," they said. "And as a result, he has done everything that is necessary for you to enjoy the benefits of a friendship with him. Now you have to decide whether or not you will accept his invitation to enter into a relationship with him." Over the next several weeks I did a lot of soul searching. During that time God and I found each other. Soon thereafter I made a conscious decision to accept Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord.

Since that day my Christian walk has been a series of responses to Jesus' call and claim upon my life. Most have been positive, but there have been occasions when I said, "no" or "not right now." Hearing a minister confess that he sometimes turns God down may be shocking for some, but it's not unusual. Like you, ministers respond to God in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. The good news is that God has given all of us the freedom to do so.

Baptists call this freedom "soul competency." This theological term means God has given everyone, not just a few, the ability to know and respond to his will personally. As such, soul freedom affirms that one's relationship with God is dependent upon individual choices — not the desires or dictates of others whether they be ministers, churches, denominations or governments. For the past 400 years, this biblical principle has distinguished Protestants in general from Catholic and Orthodox Christians, and it arguably has become the most distinctive feature of Baptists in particular.

When Jesus began his ministry, he went into Galilee proclaiming the message, "Repent and believe the good news!" As Jesus walked the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew fishing, and he said to them, "Come, follow me." Jesus did not coerce or force them to follow him nor was the decision made for them by a political party or ecclesiastical body, which mandated they adhere to specific creeds or doctrinal positions. On the contrary, the choice to stay in the boat or follow Jesus was theirs to make.

The same is true of us. As I discovered, the invitation to enter into a life-changing relationship with God through his son, Jesus, the Christ, is not reserved for a few select individuals but is offered to all people. Many

accept, but not all do. The good news is that God has given us the freedom to choose. Such freedom, of course, is risky because it can result in bad decisions, but this possibility is necessary if true love is to occur.

"Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. "Now come and follow me!"

Like Peter, we know who Jesus is, and we have heard the invitation to follow him. The outcome has not been predetermined. So we have options. Peter made his decision. Now we must make ours. Whatever it is, Jesus is waiting for our response.

*Discussion: Who do you say that Jesus is? What choices have you made in response to his invitation to follow him? Did you make your decisions freely, or were they coerced? How does your experience impact your views on evangelism and mission partnerships? Is soul competency a freedom you value? Are there times when one's freedom of choice should be limited or hindered? Why or why not?*

Sept. 27, 2009

## Church freedom

Romans 12:1-21

Many years ago my brothers and I began to neglect our responsibilities at home. We slacked off on doing our chores, we seldom ate together anymore, and we quietly excused ourselves from family functions. We didn't plan any of this; it just happened as we paid more attention to other activities such as driving (code for going to places where girls were), playing (code for doing things to impress the girls we met), dating (code for doing things with the girls that we impressed), and working (code for making enough money to pay for everything that comes with dating girls).

Our parents gave us plenty of room to grow, but when our absence became more prevalent than our presence, Mom and Dad called a meeting. When we gathered together, they gave us a warm and fuzzy speech about the importance of family and in keeping our commitments and how we would understand all of this when we had families of our own. Blah! Blah! Blah! Then they said something that wasn't Blah! In fact, it got our attention, and it has stuck with us ever since.

They began by asking, "Do you love us? (Uh-huh!) Do you love one another? (Uh-huh!) Do you like being part of this family? (Uh-huh!) Would you rather belong to



another family? (No!) So being part of the Cannon household is important to you? (Yes!) We agree. This is why we need to remind each other to always remember that we can never take for granted what God has given us, for if we do, then what we share as a family will one day come to an end. Each of us is different, so being family does not happen accidentally; it takes cooperation, intentionality and commitment. And as much as we might want to, we can't force you to be part of the family; belonging is a choice that all of us must make voluntarily."

As a husband and father, I have come to appreciate the lessons I learned that day. In the years since, I also have discovered that they are as true for being church as they are for being family. Paul makes this point in the 12th chapter of Romans.

In these verses, he compares the church to the human body. The body has many parts, and each part is unique in size, shape, position and function. Although each part is different, all parts are equal in value because the body needs each individual organ to work properly in order to maintain the overall health and viability of the collective whole. Continuing with this analogy, Paul observes that, like the different parts of the body, every Christian and congregation has a specific set of gifts that are dependent upon one's particular relationship to God. Accordingly, each one serves God in a distinct way; and yet, no one is less important than another because every contribution is valued. This is what a counter-cultural model of authentic equality should look like.

Being a "people of the Book," Baptists have long recognized the rich diversity and inclusive nature of the kingdom of God. In time, they have come to describe and model this interplay of particularity and interdependence in the language and practice of a form of governance known as church autonomy. In a nutshell, this phrase expresses the theological tenet that churches should be composed only of those who voluntarily choose to be part of them and also that churches are free to govern themselves without interference from any other political entity or ecclesiastical body.

As a result of this belief, Baptists have opposed the efforts of government agencies or religious authorities that have attempted to dictate to a church who qualifies for membership, what to believe, when and where to meet, and how to administer its affairs. Today

the existence of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship are evidence that there are those who adhere to the biblical mandate that a person's relationship with God and a church's obedience to both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission must be freely exercised in compliance to one's conscience rather than compelled by the decrees of religious personalities and principalities.

Following this train of thought, being Baptist is like being married in many ways. In marriage, two people join themselves in a shared life. In doing so, they freely bind themselves together to one another in steadfast love that "each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy" (*Book of Common Prayer*, 429). This is not as easy as it sounds. Therefore, each spouse must be intentional in fulfilling his or her vows to the other. Nothing, after all, is easier than making a commitment, and nothing is harder than keeping it. So, what is promised one day must be renewed the next.

Marriage is not based upon the desire to manipulate or dominate another person. On the contrary, it is rooted in a voluntary choice to give oneself completely and wholeheartedly to the other for the other. But marriage is not total absorption in each other; it is looking outward in the same direction — together. To do so freely and equally without coercion or control makes burdens lighter because the couple divides them. It makes joys more intense because the couple shares them. It makes the couple stronger because the partners become involved with life in ways they dared not risk alone.

Marriages that stand the test of time are founded upon the principles of freedom and equality. The same is true of churches and those who comprise them. This is why the freedom to order one's own life, under the leadership of Jesus Christ, is a non-negotiable core value of died-in-the-wool Baptists. If you have any doubts about this, then visit five different Baptist churches in any community and you will soon be convinced.

*Discussion: Although Baptists cherish autonomy, are there authorities to whom/which Baptists submit? Who or what might they be and why? In what ways does autonomy influence your relationship with your church and your church's relationship with other Baptist bodies? Is autonomy a freedom worth preserving*

*and strengthening? Explain. What challenges does autonomy pose for individuals, churches, denominations and religious institutions?*

Oct. 4, 2009

## Religious freedom

Matthew 22:15-22; Romans 13:1;  
Revelation 13:9-10

Commenting on the state of American affairs in 1789, Benjamin Franklin wrote, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." These words seem apropos for a country that has been fighting a war on terror for the past eight years and in the process has amassed a national debt in excess of 11 trillion dollars. With market volatility at an all-time high and consumer confidence at an all-time low, it seems that Franklin was right: in a world that is in flux, nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes.

Franklin's description was a statement about politics and money — two topics that ought to be avoided in polite conversation because they can raise the temperature in the room faster than a hot August afternoon. Add religion to the mix and you have the ingredients for a potentially explosive situation.

We witness this mix every time there is an election. The story is always the same. Political pundits bombard us with negative ads, biased media reporting, and ridiculous claims in an attempt to discredit candidates and sway our votes.

In today's lesson, Jesus understands such tactics all too well. For some time, the Pharisees and Herodians have been running a smear campaign against him. They are angry because Jesus has chosen not to endorse either of their parties. So they set a trap for him. The plan is simple. Ask him a question: Is it spiritually lawful for a devout Jew to pay taxes to a pagan emperor?

It seems like a straightforward question, but it is not. If Jesus says, "yes," he violates religious law and betrays his own people, but if he says, "no," he invites trouble with Rome. It's the ultimate lose-lose situation. Jesus is no fool. So rather than provide a direct answer, he responds with a trap of his own. "Show me the coin," he demands. "Whose picture is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they reply. "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

Money, politics and religion — the three



biggest elephants in the room all converge in that one statement. Talk about stirring up a hornet's nest! Not wanting to get stung, the competing parties concede defeat and sound retreat. Once again another round goes to Jesus.

There remains, however, a dilemma for would-be followers like us. Jesus doesn't give us a list of what belongs to whom. So, we are left to our own devices to sort things out. And as a result, the lines often get blurred. When this occurs, the effects can be devastating.

Our Baptist forebears understood such dangers because they experienced firsthand the consequences of being unclear about boundaries. As ardent protestors against the establishment of a state religion, Baptists often were arrested, jailed, publicly beaten, fined and not allowed to speak in their own defense. Those who occupied high-level government posts attempted to coerce Baptists to comply with their way of being church and state, but Baptists resisted because they recognized that coerced belief is no belief at all; it is tyranny.

And so, Baptists began a revolution of their own, firing a shot heard around the world, a shot that called for religious liberty for all and an official separation of church and state. In the beginning, the powers-that-be held firm to the status quo, but eventually, people began to give serious consideration to this proposal. As historian Jon Meacham observes, "By the time of the American founding, men like Jefferson and Madison saw the virtue in guaranteeing liberty of conscience, and one of the young republic's signal achievements was to create a context in which religion and politics mixed but church and state did not ("The End of Christian America," *Newsweek*,

April 13, 2009). In helping birth this country, Baptists had won a decisive victory, a victory recorded in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." Although Jesus doesn't give a clear and direct answer as to what this phrase means, Baptists believe there is a clear and direct lesson:

We owe loyalty to Caesar in the form of public service, obedience to the laws of the land, payment of taxes to support the government and a commitment to defend the country against all enemies, both foreign and domestic.

We owe everything to God, because everything belongs to him and everything we enjoy is a gift of God. Since everything belongs to God, including what is Caesar's, then if the two ever come into conflict, we owe our ultimate loyalty to God.

Samuel Stillman, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Boston, Mass., and a champion of religious freedom, summarized these cherished principles in a sermon he preached to the Supreme Court of Massachusetts in 1779, saying:

[T]here are some things which Caesar, or the magistrate, cannot of right demand, nor the people yield. The address has its limits. To determine what these are, was never more necessary to the people of these United States than it is at present. We are engaged in a most important contest; not for power, but freedom.

We mean not to change our masters, but to secure to ourselves, and to generations yet unborn, the perpetual enjoyment of civil and religious liberty, in their fullest extent ... In this view of the matter, the line appears to me to be fairly drawn between *the things that belong to Caesar* and *the things that belong to God*. The magistrate is to govern the state, and Christ is to govern the church. The former will find business enough in the complex affairs of government to employ all his time and abilities. The latter is infinitely sufficient to manage his own kingdom without foreign aid." (Samuel Stillman. (1779). "Duty of Magistrates [On-line]. Available: [www.belcherfoundation.org/duty\\_of\\_magistrates.htm](http://www.belcherfoundation.org/duty_of_magistrates.htm))

For 400 years, religious liberty has been a core value for tried-and-true Baptists. Thankfully, Baptists today are committed to maintaining the separation of church and state because history suggests that trouble ensues when government and/or religion attempts to force its will on the other.

*Discussion: What kind of relationship should the church have with the state and vice-versa? Is there a qualitative difference between mixing religion and politics but not church and state? What dangers arise when boundaries are either blurred or not respected? What role do Baptists play in clarifying and maintaining church-state boundaries? BT*



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Morningside Baptist Church in Spartanburg, S.C., is seeking an **associate pastor to children**. Candidates must have the ability to coordinate a comprehensive children's program. Appropriate college and seminary degrees are required. Morningside is a congregation of 1800+ members and has a ministerial team of six other ministers. Morningside affirms women in ministry and worships in a traditional form. Send résumés to: [mikehensley@bellsouth.net](mailto:mikehensley@bellsouth.net) or Associate Pastor to Children Search Committee, c/o Mike Hensley, Morningside Baptist Church, 897 S. Pine St., Spartanburg, S.C. 29302.

Chestnut Grove Baptist Church ([www.chestnutgrovebaptist.org](http://www.chestnutgrovebaptist.org)), in Earlysville, Va., is seeking a full-time **associate pastor of children and families**. This candidate must love God as his or her highest priority and have a passion to serve the entire family through children's ministries. Chestnut Grove enjoys a rapidly growing young membership full of enthusiastic children and families joining our congregation. Primary responsibilities include, but are not limited to: leading a children's ministry that focuses on faith, formation and fruitfulness; collaborating with the pastoral staff in planning and implementing children's ministries and congregational events as well as assisting in crafting and leading weekly worship. Submit a letter of interest and resume to: [search@chestnutgrovebaptist.org](mailto:search@chestnutgrovebaptist.org) or Search Team, Chestnut Grove Baptist Church, 550 Buck Mountain Rd., Earlysville, VA 22936.

**Associate Pastor for Youth and Children:** First Baptist Church of Wallace, N.C., is seeking an associate pastor to lead our youth and children in a growing relationship with Christ. A seminary degree and experience working with youth and children are preferred. Wallace is located along I-40 between Wilmington and the Research Triangle. Our church is affiliated with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the Southern Baptist Convention and is seeking to build bridges between people and God both locally and globally. Please send resumes by August 15 to: [jebfbc@embarqmail.com](mailto:jebfbc@embarqmail.com) or First Baptist Church, 408 W. Main St., Wallace, NC 28466.

Starling Avenue Baptist Church ([www.starling-avenuebc.org](http://www.starling-avenuebc.org)) in Martinsville, Va., affiliated with the CBF, Alliance of Baptists, BWA, BGAV and Henry County Baptist Association, is seeking a full-time **minister of music** to serve on the ministerial leadership team. He/she should value church music as a means of worship, outreach and pastoral care. Responsibilities include the fully graded music program. A degree from an accredited university, music school or seminary with a concentration in church music is required; church experience or an internship is preferred. Send résumé and references to: Personnel Committee, Starling Avenue Baptist Church, 932 Starling Ave., Martinsville, VA 24112.

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# in the know

## *Keeping up with people, places, and events*

### PEOPLE

**Rothangliani R. Chhangte** is liaison for Burmese refugees through National Ministries of American Baptist Churches USA.

**Stanley Durham** died June 2 at age 87. He was a longtime pastor and church starter in California. He is survived by his wife of 64 years, Annice, and three children.

**Barrett Freeman** is minister to youth and children at College Avenue Baptist Church in Lenoir, N.C.

**Daniel Heath** is minister of youth at First Baptist Church of Wilson, N.C.

**Ryan Heritage** is minister of music at First Baptist Church of Clinton, Tenn., coming from Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, where he served as a music ministry resident.

**Frank Horton** died June 18 at age 80. He was a Baptist campus minister for 34 years including service at Mississippi College, Mississippi State University and Louisiana State University. A celebration of his life will be held in Baton Rouge, La., on Sept. 20, at University Baptist Church and on the LSU campus.

**Lilian Lim**, the first woman president of Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, a consortium of nine schools, died June 25 at the age of 50.

**Deborah Carlton Loftis**, visiting professor of church music at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, will be the next executive director of the Hymn Society in the United States and Canada. The society, which was founded as the Hymn Society of America in 1922 and changed its name in 1991, is open to individuals and institutions who believe congregational singing is an integral part of worship. The society promotes the writing and singing of new hymns and conducts research about congregational singing.

Retired Baptist World Alliance General Secretary **Denton Lotz** received the International Award for Religious Liberty June 18, presented by the Seventh-day Adventist Church and affiliated religious-liberty organizations for his contributions to furthering global religious freedom.

**James Martin** is minister of music at First Baptist Church of Statesville, N.C.

**Willie McPherson** received the Sid Smith Denominational Leadership Award from the Black Southern Baptist Denominational Servants Network June 21. Now retired, McPherson led SBC black church relations efforts in California and nationally through the Home Mission Board (now North American Mission Board.)

**Mark Moeller** is associate pastor of administration at First Baptist Church of Knoxville, Tenn. Previously he had served as minister of worship and finance at First Baptist Church of San Angelo, Texas.

**Ernest Mosley** died July 8 in Gastonia, N.C. His long career in Southern Baptist life included service with the Baptist Sunday School Board (now LifeWay), the Illinois Baptist Association and the SBC Executive Committee where he served as executive vice president from 1987 until his retirement in 1998.

Longtime Missouri Baptist leader **Tom Nelson** died June 9 at The Baptist Home in Ozark, Mo. He was 96. He retired in 1978 after 16 years as executive director of the Missouri Baptist Foundation.

**LeAnne Spruill** is minister of students and recreation at Yates Baptist Church in Durham, N.C.

**Candice Wilson** is minister of music at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C.

### EVENTS

Entries for the 400th anniversary Key Film Festival sponsored by the Center for Baptist Heritage & Studies are due Oct. 1. Entries must be original video productions (in high quality DVD format) created by individual Baptists and designed to share some aspect of the Baptist story. The works can reflect a local, state, national or world story related to Baptists and can focus on a principle, person, place or event. Entries may be submitted in three categories: youth (ages 12-18) or adult (both amateur and professional). For further information, visit [www.baptistheritage.org](http://www.baptistheritage.org). **BT**

## Schuller picks daughter to lead Crystal Cathedral

(RNS) — Robert H. Schuller, 82, founding pastor of the Crystal Cathedral in Southern California, announced June 7 that he has turned over the administrative duties of his ministry to his daughter, Sheila Schuller Coleman.

The transition comes after Schuller's son, Robert A. Schuller, resigned late last

year as senior pastor of the church. In October, his father said the two men differed over the "direction and the vision" of the megachurch and its related "Hour of Power" television program.

Coleman has been the director of family ministries at the church and the superintendent of its private school. **BT**



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# No longer Episcopalians, Anglicans launch own church

PLANO, Texas — Conservative Anglicans disenchanted with the liberal drift in their U.S. and Canadian churches say they are confident that a new church body launched this summer will one day gain a seat in the worldwide Anglican Communion.

The new Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) has been organized, its leaders say, as an alternative for Anglicans who disagree with the theology of the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada.

“This is the beginning of a recovery of confidence in Anglicanism as a biblical, missionary church,” said former Fort Worth Episcopal Bishop Jack Iker.

Iker and other former Episcopalians frequently criticized their former church’s embrace of female clergy and the 2003 election of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire. Iker seceded, with his diocese, late last year.

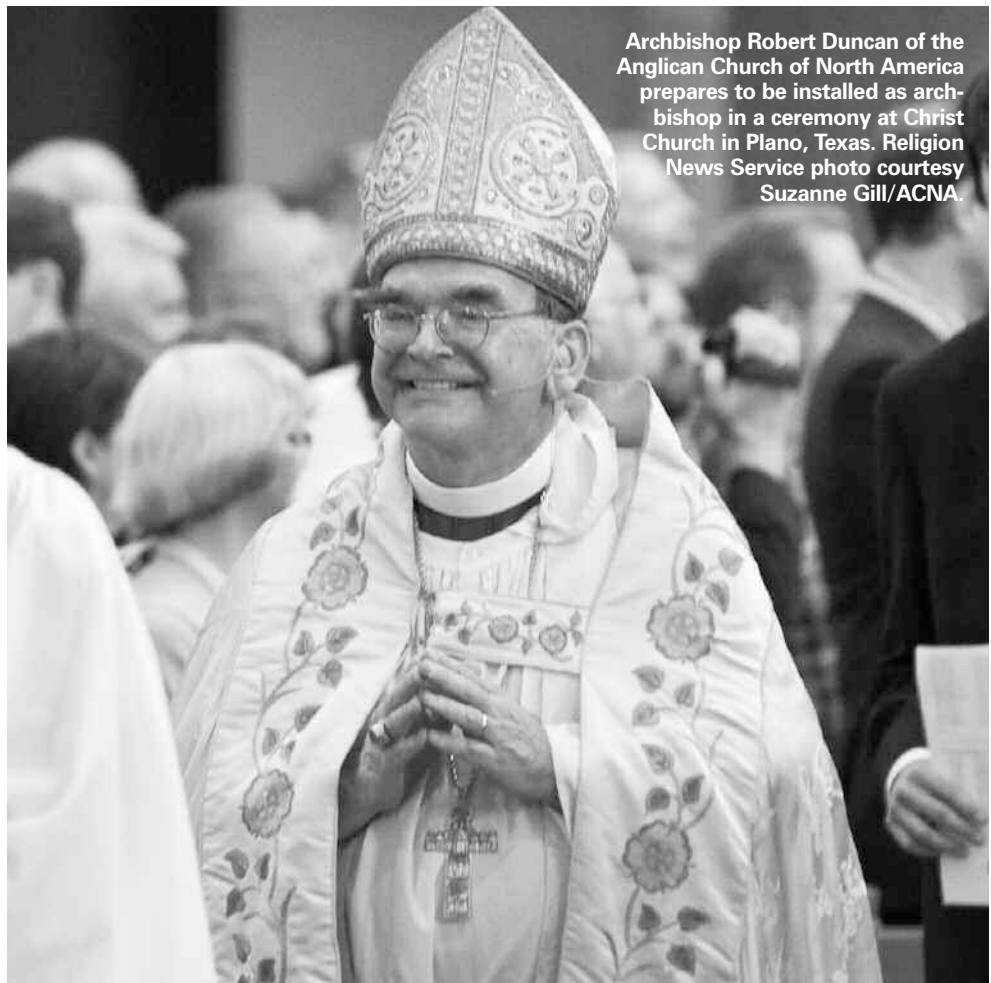
The ACNA, he added, will give “the mainstream of our clergy and laity a chance to recover confidence and enthusiasm about being an Anglican Christian.”

Delegates representing an estimated 69,000 active Anglicans from some 650 North American parishes met June 22-25 at St. Vincent’s Cathedral in Bedford, Texas, to ratify their church constitution and nine canons, or laws.

They also installed former Pittsburgh Episcopal Bishop Robert Duncan as archbishop in a ceremony June 24 at Christ Church, a Plano megachurch that cut its ties with the Episcopal Church three years ago.

Anglican Archbishop Benjamin Nzimbi of Kenya anointed Duncan, 60, as ACNA’s first archbishop; he will serve a five-year term. Duncan was removed from the Episcopal Church last year for leading his diocese to secede from the denomination.

In his sermon, Duncan urged those who align themselves with ACNA to focus on evangelism and mission by planting 1,000 new churches in the next five years, engaging Islam — “because there is only one way to the Father; it’s a matter of life



Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church of North America prepares to be installed as archbishop in a ceremony at Christ Church in Plano, Texas. Religion News Service photo courtesy Suzanne Gill/ACNA.

and death” — studying Scripture and practicing works of mercy.

“It’s not about the past. It’s not about what we’ve come out of,” Duncan said in his sermon. “We have been brought together for a noble work, and God has blessed this journey.”

Nine of the 37 provinces in the Anglican Communion sent official representatives to the inaugural Provincial Assembly, most of them from the rapidly growing “Global South” of Africa and Asia.

ACNA leaders say they have the momentum to eventually be recognized as an official province within the Anglican Communion, but they will need the approval of two-thirds of the world’s 38 Anglican primates, and a key international Anglican council, before they can be granted full membership.

Episcopal Church headquarters in New York kept a low profile during the ACNA launch, sticking to its long-held position that it is the only official branch of Anglicanism in the United States.

Duncan said he is in regular contact with Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, the head of the Anglican Communion, but had not received a formal acknowledgement of his election.

Church leaders will be working “relationally” to gain recognition from the larger Anglican Communion, said Bishop Martyn Minns, who leads the Convocation of Anglicans in North America, one of ACNA’s member bodies.

The Texas gathering also drew solid ecumenical support from groups such as Southern Baptists and the National Association of Evangelicals. **BT**

# Church engagement precedes deeper commitment, says Gallup consultant

HOUSTON — Church leaders don't need to develop new ways of doing church, Albert Winseman told participants in a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship-sponsored Leadership Institute July 1. Their challenge is in learning how to *be* the church.

Winseman, who consults with faith-based organizations for the Gallup Organization and is the author of *Growing an Engaged Church*, said churches tend to use easily measured yardsticks like attendance, membership and giving as indicators of success.

It's more difficult, but more relevant, to measure specific outcomes of spiritual health, he said. Such outcomes include one's life satisfaction, service to the community, interest in inviting others to church, and the percentage of income contributed.

Church leaders tend to focus on increasing spiritual commitment, Winseman said, following conventional wisdom that increased commitment will lead to increased engagement. Basing its judgment on responses to nine questions relative to spiritual behaviors and attitudes, Gallup found that just five percent of all Americans and 19 percent of church members are "fully spiritually committed."

Instead of promoting spiritual commitment in hopes of increasing engagement, churches should focus on engagement first, he said. "If you work on increasing engagement, spiritual commitment follows; belonging leads to believing."

Engagement is not the same thing as involvement, Winseman cautioned. Involvement measures what people do in their congregations, while engagement measures how they feel about it. Thus, it's possible to be very involved without really being engaged, or emotionally committed, to the church. It's also possible to be highly engaged without being constantly involved.

Winseman described four measures of member engagement.

"What do I get?" is not just a selfish question, he said, but a serious one. People have deep spiritual needs and look for a church where those needs are met.

"What do I give?" includes more than financial contributions, Winseman said. It concerns whether church members are given

regular opportunities to do what they do best, receive appropriate and timely recognition for their efforts, believe church leaders truly care about them, and receive encouragement to continue developing spiritually.

Church members also want a sense of belonging in church, Winseman said. They want to feel that they are part of a family, that their opinion counts, and that church members are mutually committed to each other's spiritual growth.



Albert Winseman

Having a "best friend" in church contributes to the sense of belonging, he said.

Engaged members want to grow, and engaging churches intentionally promote growth by talking about it, Winseman said. Engaged members believe they have opportunities to learn and grow within their congregation.

Winseman suggested three strategies by which churches can promote increased engagement: clarifying expectations, creating a culture of affirmation, and focusing on followers' deepest spiritual needs.

People like knowing what is expected of them, Winseman said, but many churches are unfocused in that area. If only 34 percent of a church's members say they know what's expected of them, he said, their congregation would be in the top 25 percent.

Expectations should be simple, memorable and specific, Winseman said, citing a church that promotes five expectations: "worship, grow, serve, give, connect." The expectations, along with a clarifying sentence for each, are listed in the weekly bulletin.

The struggles that nominating committees have in filling slots is familiar, but Winseman cited another church that emphasized the importance of each position by listing "job postings" and encouraging members to "apply" for up to three positions. In response, the church had more applicants than positions.

A culture of affirmation involves more than just periodic recognition of individuals from the pulpit, Winseman said. Effective

affirmation gives regular feedback to participants in a way that is meaningful to them, and that comes from all directions, not just top-down.

Over a three-year period, the Gallup Organization asked 10,000 people to name leaders who had influenced them, and to list three words that describe them. When the descriptive terms were compiled, the four words cited most often were trust, compassion, stability and hope.

Those words hit at the essence of what church members need from their leaders, Winseman said. People are willing to follow leaders whom they believe to be honest, who care about them, who foster a sense of security, and who give them hope for a brighter future.

Thus, Winseman concluded, church leaders who challenge themselves to grow in those areas will be more effective in building congregations of people who are not only involved, but also engaged and on the road to deeper spiritual commitment. **BT**

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## guest commentary

# The church still needs Baptists

By Steven R. Harmon

**D**uring the past several years, my work as a Baptist theologian has focused on ecumenical theology — theology that serves the quest for the visible unity of the church.

In connection with that I have given much attention to helping Baptists be critical enough of the shortcomings of our own tradition that we can appreciate and receive the gifts other churches have to offer. But during this year's quadricentennial celebration of Baptist life, I'm finding myself thinking more and more about why it's important to the rest of the church that there continue to be Baptists within it.

Now that I've written a book titled *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, I'm often asked why I remain a Baptist. That question became less hypothetical last year when I joined the faculty of an interdenominational divinity school, where for the first time in my career I was not contractually obligated to be a member of a Baptist church.

Yet in spite of the wide array of ecclesial options available to me, I remain Baptist by choice.

Why? A one-page guest commentary couldn't begin to do justice to what I cherish about the Baptist communities that have formed me in the faith.

Here I'll mention a reason for remaining Baptist that's become integral to my work as an ecumenical theologian: I'm convinced that the church cannot make progress toward the visible unity for which Jesus prayed (John 17:20-23) unless it receives the distinctive gifts the Baptist

tradition has to offer the rest of the church. For the sake of its unity, the church still needs Baptists.

Having served as a member of the Baptist World Alliance delegations to conversations with the Anglican and Roman Catholic communions, I believe one of the gifts that the rest of the church needs to receive from Baptists is our gut-level aversion to overly-realized eschatologies of the church. (That's theologian-speak for the refusal of Baptists to equate any expression of church life in this present age with the full realization of the kingdom of God.)

That applies to local congregations as well as to denominational structures and the institutions of the modern ecumenical movement. "Real Baptists" are relentlessly dissatisfied with the present state of the church in their pilgrim journey toward the community that will be fully under the reign of Christ.



For the earliest Baptists, that applied even to their own Baptist churches. Even though John Smyth and Roger Williams ended their earthly lives on the periphery of the Baptist churches they helped establish, there was something quintessentially Baptist about the journeys of Smyth among the English expatriates in the Netherlands and Williams in colonial America that led them to the conclusion that the church they sought was somewhere beyond the confines of their Baptist

communities.

Historically, Baptists have become dissenters whenever an ecclesial establishment, too sure that it already embodies the church as it ought to be, has wielded its power to suppress what Baptist churches discerned as the mind of Christ when they read the Bible together and heard the Spirit speak through the Scriptures and through one another.

Some of the distinctive gifts Baptists have to offer the rest of the church are the product of this sort of dissent. They include our zeal for guarding God-given consciences from coercion by civil or ecclesiastical powers, our insistence that each person must embrace the faith personally and that baptism should normally be accompanied by such a commitment, and our emphasis on the mutuality of covenant responsibilities for doing the work of ministry among the members of the church and its leaders.

As long as any part of the body of Christ falls short of these ideals for which some of our Baptist ancestors suffered and even died, the church still needs Baptists. But lest we be too proud of that, we should remember that all too often the church that still needs Baptists calls itself Baptist. **BT**

—Steven R. Harmon is associate professor of divinity at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala. His most recent book, *Ecumenism Means You, Too: Ordinary Christians and the Quest for Christian Unity*, will be available from Cascade Books later this year.

Historically, Baptists have become dissenters whenever an ecclesial establishment, too sure that it already embodies the church as it ought to be, has wielded its power to suppress what Baptist churches discerned as the mind of Christ when they read the Bible together and heard the Spirit speak through the Scriptures and through one another.

## guest commentary

# Going the second mile

By Olayee Collins

“Hey you, don’t move! I said stop, don’t move! If you take another step, I will shoot!”

The voice was unmistakable. It was one of them, the nation’s nightmare, a rebel, a child with a gun, a murderer. We turned to look. He yelled at us: “I said stop. If you move again, I will spray you with bullets!”

Victor and I stood still, not knowing what to do. What is he going to do with us? We were terrified.

We came to preach to the villagers. We had done nothing wrong.

“Step forward!” he barked. With trembling legs and knocking knees we turned to stare the “devil” in the eye. At least, that was what he seemed to us.

“Sir, you said we should not move,” I stuttered.

“I said come here!” he bellowed.

We took a few steps towards him. We felt like “dead men walking.”

He was dressed in a red T-shirt and blue jeans, looking filthy, as if he had never had a bath. His hair was unkempt, and redness like fire shot out of his eyes.

He was perhaps five feet tall and thin, with bones that could make him pass as a Cro-Magnon man. His English was as bad as his appearance. He looked like the devil he was.

Victor and I knew that we were in for a rough ride.

“Take my load to the next town,” he ordered.

It was not uncommon during this time for rebel soldiers to force ordinary people to carry their looted goods, but this felt unexpected. I thought it would never happen to me.

A flood of emotions rushed through my veins — anger, fear, confusion and helplessness. I wanted to resist, but I knew it would be foolish. I wanted to cry, but I knew it would be useless.

Too embarrassed to look at Victor, I took my share of the looted goods and placed the bags on my head. Painfully and shamefully, we walked through the town as the villagers

watched. A few hours ago we were the honored guests; now we were being led away in humiliation, as we bore stolen goods.

I silently cursed the creature that walked behind us carrying a gun on his shoulders. I hated him. As we approached the next village, I breathed a sigh of relief. Our ordeal would soon be over.

Somehow, in that space, God seemed closer. I shut my eyes slightly to thank God for giving us the strength to make it to the end and counted this experience as a “suffering for righteousness.”

But God interrupted my prayer and reminded me of the words of his holy Son, Jesus Christ: “If a member of the occupation troops commands you to carry his load one mile, carry it two” (Matt. 5:41). I shook the thought from my head. It can’t be of God, I reasoned. But as we got closer, the voice became louder, and I knew it was God’s.

I yielded to the nagging voice within and spoke for the first time. “If you are going to Harper,” I said, “we can take your stuff for you. We are going that way.”

He did not respond. So I repeated, “We will be glad to take your load to Harper.”

He laughed rudely and cursed. I continued to walk as if I did not hear him.

Victor turned and looked at me for the first time since our ordeal began. He did not



say a word; he simply continued walking too.

The rebel was silent for a while, and then he spoke. This time, his voice was not so strong: “OK,” he said. “That’s good for me.”

As we walked through the village, it seemed as if God had joined our company. God transformed us. God turned the hate in us for that soldier into love. God turned the bitterness and anger into sweetness and peace, and our shame into pride.

We were being obedient to the one who said, “If a soldier compels you to carry his load a mile, carry it another.” The first mile was ours; the second mile was Christ’s.

I heard God say, “This rebel is also my child, and he is your brother.” My attitude changed, and it felt so good that a song erupted in my heart. The burden on my head became lighter. The guy behind us was our brother, on the other side, but still a brother.

We were silent for a while, and then the soldier spoke and asked for our names. We said our names and told him about our preaching tour.

He told us his story, how he became a rebel soldier, and how he wishes to return to normal life someday. For the rest of the journey, the three of us chatted as friends.

We invited him to church. He promised to come. We said friendly good-byes and prayed that God will save him. **BT**

—Olayee Collins is a recent graduate of Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology and pastor of Liberian Baptist Mission in Lawrenceville, Ga.

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# Bye, Bye Birdie

The final “Back-row Birdie” column appears on the opposite page. It is a bitter-sweet departure — at least for creator Keith Herron.

“**T**here really has become a tender feeling about the relationship,” said Herron, pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo., who pitched the column to *Baptists Today* in 2001.

Herron created the character — first named “Sophia” — for use in his congregation’s newsletter. Many readers suggested he find a larger audience.

One friend, Becky Matheny of Athens, Ga., who like Herron is a former campus minister, advised him to change the name. Herron had picked Sophia because the name suggests wisdom — a defining mark of the character.

But Matheny noted that the name was associated with goddess worship and open to the familiar guilt-by-association tactics of Baptist fundamentalists who emphasize male authority. So Herron renamed his back-row, keep-the-preacher-honest character “Birdie.”

“Having a fictional character gave me more latitude than I could just write as an op-ed piece,” said Herron. In other words, Birdie had the freedom to say things — at least more directly — that he could not.

Birdie is truly fictional, said Herron. She is not based on a particular church member he has known and, at most, has pieces of various personalities.

Gordon Atkinson of *reallivepreacher.com* calls her “Keith’s crusty but lovable alter ego.”

Herron, who got to know Atkinson while both were pastors in San Antonio,

Texas, doesn’t deny that possibility.

“She’s not a particular one person,” he said. “She could be a composite or could be a part of me.”

Through the years, the pastor and Birdie have dealt with all kind of life issues from love to loss to the minutia of doing and being church. Birdie’s keen eye has been on the larger Baptist family as well as her congregation.

“Churches need laypersons like Birdie,” said Herron. “Maybe she’s the voice of sanity that every pastor needs; she understands the context.”

Often the pastor would meet Birdie at a local diner to engage each other in honest dialogue over a plate of ribs. That setting, Herron said, was influenced by the late *San Antonio Express* sports columnist Dan Cook’s “Benjamin P. Broadhind” character.

Herron was granted a lot of freedom with his column and tackled even the most controversial topics — although Birdie “always got the good lines.”

Over the years, only one column has been rejected by the editor (me) because its condemnation of another named Baptist pastor was deemed personal. Herron pouted a bit but sent a replacement.

Then one April’s Fool Day he submitted a fake column to the *Baptists Today* office that intentionally went beyond good taste and guidelines — but brought a chuckle to the editorial staff.

However, dealing with relevant and controversial issues in constructive ways has been a central element of the Birdie columns. With Birdie, everything is on the table.

“This gave me a hopeful voice in the midst of cynicism,” said Herron. “That was a creative side (of me).”

Birdie is “intuitive, not overly educated,



but extremely wise,” he noted. She is “powerful but safe.” And, most importantly, she is the pastor’s trusted friend.

“It is the hopefulness that someone in your church can love you as their pastor,” said Herron.

Before writing his final column, Herron talked with four women in his church who would be Birdie’s peers. He discovered “an un-lived part” of their lives — that led him to send Birdie off on a big adventure rather than write her obituary.

In one sense, Birdie is “a conversation, an issue and 850 words,” said Herron. But over the years she has become more to him and to us. Bye, Birdie. Thanks for your insights. **BT**



## back-row birdie

# One last big adventure for God

By Keith D. Herron

**T**he church is a moving target. Like the spinning of the earth on its axis, nothing stays the same. It's in motion all the time. How could we not notice such a truth?

Five years ago, our church celebrated its 50th anniversary, and at the end of the worship service we gathered into one big huddle for a group picture. We then framed a jumbo-sized photograph and posted it in the main entrance to the church. You can imagine what's taken place ...

Little children stop by to laugh at themselves as they looked then, and they are beautiful! Members stop by regularly to sneak a quick peek. When Dr. Daniel Vestal (executive director of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship) visited a few years ago, this photograph immediately grabbed his attention and he walked up close to take a good look.

There is an obvious truth in the picture that the church never sits still for long. The new church members are missing as well as those who left or who have since died. It's just a flash in time because the church is always on the move.

So when Birdie called and made an appointment to see me, I was unsettled. Birdie came when she wanted, so the appointment flagged our conversation for serious matters. When the time arrived, I was a little jumpy about what the meeting meant. But Birdie arrived with all the giddiness of a young girl with a crush on the new boy in town. I could tell this would be a happy meeting until she blurted out: "Preacher, I have news to announce! I'm leaving the church ... Not only that, I'm leaving this town too. I'm packing my bags and likely won't be back for a long time." Naturally, I was stunned with this news.

"What's stirred me up is a sense of incompleteness ... a haunting question of trying to figure out whether I've done all I could do for God in this short life. What keeps me revved is the notion there may be one last thing I need to do as my contribution to the

cause. While I've been anxious over how little I've actually done up to this point, I'm jazzed thinking while I can, I should muster up one last big adventure for God."

While the notion of her leaving stung, I was also moved by what she was saying and loved her more and admired her sense of courage.

"Preacher, I knew I was barking up the right tree when my Bible study class looked at me in wide-eyed silence as I told them about it. Finally, the leader of our class blurted out, 'Have you lost your mind?' That one honest

put my house on the market and because she's in my Bible class, she cut her commission and will give her portion to a mission she's wanted to fund for a long time. Said it was the happiest she's felt in years. Isn't that a sign God wants me to step out in faith? Shouldn't faith be contagious?"

"I have been assigned to a little village in Kenya where the missionaries have established a community of women who use their skills to create their own self-made products that are then sold on the Internet. These are women who could never have done this alone and would never have the courage to think this up alone. This is God's work thinking up new possibilities! *Together* (Do you know how powerful that word is?)

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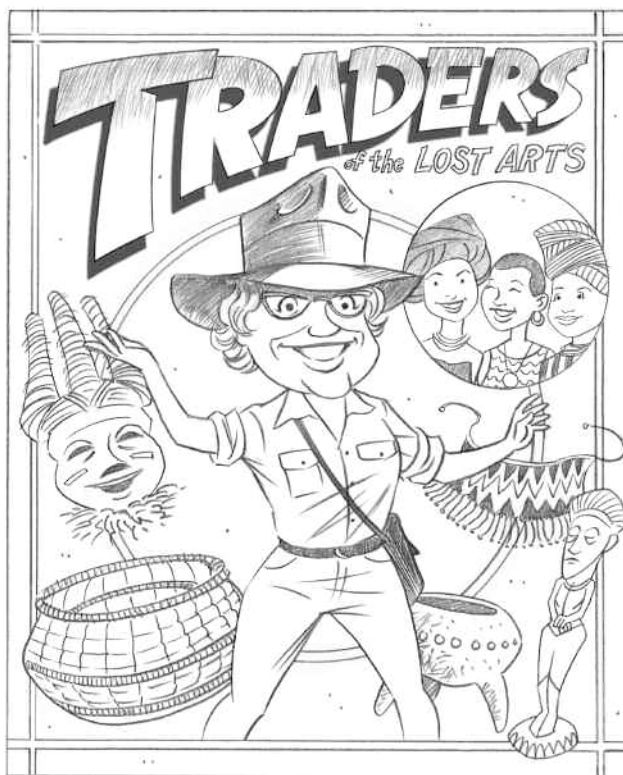
"*Together* they've created a community of support whereby they create native works of art or handwork that can be sold to small boutiques or shops all over the world. While they work they talk and share their lives. At noon they sit in a circle to study their Bibles and to pray. They are women who believe in prayer, and at least half their time is spent praying for one another and their families. This all started when I accepted I was ready to go on a big adventure for God. I can fund my project, and there was a need for someone to mentor these women. It sounded like something my grandmother-ing skills could handle, and they sound like women I want to be around!"

"Birdie, you've grandmothered this church enough. More importantly, how will we stay in touch? It's so far, it feels like it's on another planet."

"Good Lord, preacher, I'm not going anywhere. Kenya's just over the horizon. It's just a nanosecond away on the Internet. See you on Facebook!"

Bye, bye Birdie ... Godspeed as you follow God on this great adventure! **BT**

—Keith D. Herron is pastor of Holmeswood Baptist Church in Kansas City, Mo.



comment cemented it for me — I had to go. Isn't this what you preach week after week? Before, I worshiped security over adventure. I've got my health; I'm not tied down by anything, and can't figure out a way to deny myself this kind of holy adventure. I can't recall feeling so alive!"

"What about all your stuff?"

"Stuff? I sold most of the stuff I never liked all that much anyway in a garage sale, and the rest is going in storage. The realtor

# The remarkable life of Henry Langford

Courage, vision are trademarks of controversial Baptist preacher

**R**ICHMOND, Va. — Throughout his 90 years, Henry V. Langford has seldom taken the easy path. The self-described crusader likes conversations with room for debate.

His desire to consider the various sides of an issue can be attributed to his deeply planted Baptist roots.

“I firmly believe in freedom of religion and freedom of thought — to be an earnest seeker of the truth, whatever it is,” the retired minister said fervidly. “As Baptists, we should have both sides always presented.”

“We can’t forget our heritage,” cautioned Langford. “We have a great need for the continuation of our Baptist policies through the years. It would be tragic to let them die or to change them. The Baptist church is about as close to a true democracy as you can get. It is a church of the people, for the people and by the people.”

## Supporting the cause

To ensure that Baptists remember the foundational principles of freedom, Langford recently presented *Baptists Today’s* “The Voice to Sustain Baptists Tomorrow” capital campaign with a significant gift for the endowment.

“*Baptists Today* lets us know there are two sides to every big issue,” Langford said on a warm June day in Richmond, Va.

Recalling the changes experienced in the denomination over the past quarter century, he expressed concern that historic Baptist principles could become lost. His gift was given with the expectation that the publication will “perpetuate, extend and glorify the Baptist principles — and will keep them before the people.”

“Henry Langford’s prophetic voice and dogged persistence make him a living exam-



ple of why Baptists cherish freedom,” said John Pierce, executive editor of *Baptists Today*. “And his generosity helps ensure that future Baptists will benefit from a news journal that honors such a tradition of openness.”

## A man of conviction

Langford knows the importance of having the freedom to speak out on issues facing society and the church.

“I have laid down my life for my beliefs,” said Langford, who wrote a newspaper column on social and economic injustices and other moral issues from 1951

to 1960 for the *Star-Tribune* in Chatham, Va. “I stayed in trouble for the 10 years I wrote that column.”

In 1954, when the Supreme Court handed down its decision that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional, Langford supported the ruling in his column. His congregation, however, did not embrace his viewpoint.

He lost his pulpit and discovered, due to the controversy, that no other church would call him. But Langford did not allow the incident to destroy his Baptist allegiance.

“By remaining active in a Baptist



church, I could still have a say in its future,” he explained.

More than 50 years passed before the pastor’s courage to speak out against segregation was publicly acknowledged. In 2007, the Commonwealth of Virginia General Assembly issued a joint resolution recognizing Langford for his longtime service to the cause of justice and equality for all citizens.

### Service to people and the land

After Langford’s dismissal from the church, his ministry took a new path. He served the Alcohol and Drug Education Council of Virginia Churches for 21 years, eight as associate director and 13 as executive director.

He spoke to hundreds of school, church and community groups across the state about the signs and dangers of substance abuse, a rapidly growing problem during the ’60s and ’70s. During his presentations, he also took the opportunity to share his avocation: conservancy.

Long before the first Earth Day was organized and “green” became the code word for responsible use of natural resources, Langford was committed to transforming marginal, cutover land into acres of rich timberland. It was a goal he set as a teenager growing up in north Florida.

“It took 25 years on a minister’s salary to save up enough to buy that first tract,” he recalled with a smile.

In 1960, the family bought 138 acres in Halifax County at \$20 per acre. He and his wife, Florence, and their three sons worked

the land, planting thousands of trees.

“I really wasn’t growing trees; I was growing boys,” he chuckled. “They would rather have been playing ball, but they did the work.”

After purchasing their first tract, they decided to add another, then another. Eighteen years later, the Langfords had 11 tracts, located across eight counties, totaling 889 acres.

They had planted more than a quarter million trees. In 1978, President Jimmy Carter recognized the Langfords as the nation’s top tree farmers.

### Where credit is due

Langford repeatedly credits his late wife for the successes in his life. After serving as a chaplain in the United States Army during WWII, he was called to a church in Fairhope, Ala. There a member of his congregation introduced him to her sister, Florence Carroll Pfenninger, visiting from Indiana.

“She was known for her beauty, but that was the least of her virtues,” he said of his wife of almost 60 years who passed away in May 2007. “She had a personality that drew people like a magnet, and she was one of the world’s best managers. I didn’t make much money in the ministry because most

Baptist preachers don’t, but we lived like kings.”

Pulling her photograph from his wallet, he admitted, “Not everybody liked me in the ministry, but everybody loved her. She was my saving grace many times.”

### The Four C’s

Langford has championed justice and equality through his words and actions, the conservation of natural resources through the planting of a quarter-million seedlings, and the perpetuation of Baptist

principles and policies through a gift to *Baptists Today*.

“I have had a great life,” said the nonagenarian, who takes a morning exercise class and walks up to a half-mile daily at the Hermitage United Methodist Home, where he lives. “I did the best with what I was given. What I did have on my side was determination and a wholesome spirit and attitude. It goes to show what can be done.”

Someone once told Langford that his life could be summed up in four C’s: Conflict, Controversy, Compassion and Courage. But perhaps a few more should be added — like Commitment, Conservation, Character, Conscience and Contributor. **BT**



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# BWA is a communion table for world Baptist family, says Callam

By Marv Knox  
*Baptist Standard*

HOUSTON (ABP) — The communion table provides a metaphor for how the Baptist World Alliance can unite Baptists in a “true spirit of hospitality,” Neville Callam insisted.

Callam, general secretary of the worldwide umbrella group for Baptists, addressed the challenge of bringing Baptists together during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, held July 1-3 in Houston.

“In 400 years, numerous Baptist groups have come into being,” said Callam, who noted the BWA involves 214 Baptist conventions or unions in 119 countries.

“But many Baptists have become strangers to one another,” he lamented. “We have a lot in common, yet in some cases, we don’t know each other well enough ... to be in communion with one another.”

Callam acknowledged he is concerned about Baptists’ lack of hospitality for each other, because estrangement inhibits community and unity.

When they compare the BWA to the Lord’s Supper table, it becomes the place where Baptists “meet to share communion with the One who calls us to his table,” he said.

“The table does not belong to the people. It is the Lord’s table,” he said, calling it “a place of memory, experience and hope” — qualities that Baptists share and which bind them together.

“The table is an image that works in all cultures,” he added. “The meal serves a community purpose” for celebration and solidarity — providing community-sharing and community-building functions.

“A shared meal transforms a community into oneness,” he said. “One truly belongs to all of God’s people who gather there.”

The BWA is “a table around which all Baptists are welcome to sit,” Callam stressed. “All who come to the table are equals, no matter where they come from or what they bring.”



Neville Callam

Baptists demonstrate their oneness as they gather together to confess their sins, reflect on issues, affirm their faith and counsel with one another, he said.

When they gather together, Baptists testify to the unifying power of Christ, he observed.

Baptists around the world have a wonderful opportunity to model hospitality by demonstrating they regard each other as friends and family rather than strangers, he said. And they need to demonstrate their oneness as a shared relationship marked by love and a willingness to work together.

Callam acknowledged some Baptists “lay down conditions” for having fellowship and working together — an apparent reference to the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC split from the BWA several years ago, criticizing the worldwide group for allowing membership of some Baptist groups it considers “liberal.”

“We desire to show we are strangers no longer, but neighbors ... who gather with each other at one table of Christ,” Callam said. “I hope all of us will find the capacity in our hearts and minds to receive one another and reach out to a world devastated by division and strife.” **BT**

# In B.C. comic strip, artist Hart had a heart for God

**W**hen cartoonist Johnny Hart died more than two years ago, many feared that his strips of spiritually-probing prehistoric cavemen and talking animals would become extinct.

But this May, the Hart family bound his religion-themed “B.C.” comics into a new collection, bringing Johnny’s stone-age pals back to life.

And they’re still causing controversy.

The book, *I Did It His Way*, collects some of Hart’s best-known religious cartoons, tries to explain one of his most controversial comic strips and pays tribute to the man who was both loved and loathed by his 100 million readers. The book is packed with Christian crosses, theological debates and Hart’s unique wit.

“He wanted people to know that God had a sense of humor,” said his daughter, Perri Hart, who produced the book with Johnny’s widow, Bobby.

“He really always felt that this was what he was called to do,” she said.

Throughout his 51-year career, Hart spread his gospel of God-inspired cavemen in more than 1,300 newspapers. These “holy” sketches were scattered among the secular gags throughout the year, but Hart was not always welcome on the funny pages.

Perri Hart purposefully did not include a cartoon that enraged Islamic groups in 2003, saying that the comic was not intended to be religious and certainly not meant to insult Muslims.

“A number of his cartoons seemed to poke what he would consider to be fun, but Muslims took offense,” said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). “When it crosses

## I DID IT HIS WAY



A collection of **B.C.** Religious comic strips  
by Johnny Hart

**Johnny Hart's family has collected his religion-themed “B.C.” comic strips in a new book called *I Did It His Way*. Religion News Service photo courtesy of Thomas Nelson.**

the line into bigotry and intolerance, that’s when we have to speak up.”

CAIR chastised Hart for drawing a crescent moon, an Islamic symbol, on an out-house in a cartoon where a stone-age man said: “Is it just me, or does it stink in here?” The cartoon was published during the holy month of Ramadan.

“(My father) said, ‘I am not smart enough to think of that,’” said his daughter, Patti Hart.

Michael Peters, creator of the popular comic strip “Mother Goose & Grimm,” and a close friend of the Harts, praised Johnny for preaching with his puns. “He stuck to his guns, God love him,” he said. “John was getting persecuted for printing in those papers.”

The Hart family did include what they called “one of the most controversial ‘B.C.’ strips that Johnny ever produced,” in the collection. The Easter Sunday cartoon from April, 2001, depicts a Jewish menorah

transforming into a crucifix. The seven candles of the menorah are extinguished by the seven last utterances of Jesus Christ and fade into a cross and an empty tomb.

The book includes a disclaimer explaining that Hart intended to honor both faiths by showing that Christianity is rooted in Judaism.

Yet Abraham Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League, said the Hart family should have left out cartoons that offend Jews — especially those that might infer Christianity replaces Judaism.

“If you want to be sensitive, don’t repeat. Don’t give it further life,” he said.

Hart would animate the Three Wise Men on the blackboard of the local Sunday school class he taught. He even sent a simple tracing of his hand to Dik Browne, creator of “Hagar the Horrible,” when his fellow cartoonist was diagnosed with cancer. Hart told Brown to place his hand on the paper so that they could pray together.


His cartoons offer insight into the life he led and the life he urged his readers to follow, his family said.

For the past two years, Hart’s grandsons and daughters have taken over the production of “B.C.”

“It was strange seeing the first cartoon in the paper with my name on it and not his,” said Mason Mastroianni, Hart’s grandson who took over the drawing of B.C. “It was just kind of a quiet day.”

They adopted Johnny’s menagerie of insightful cavemen, turtles and ants with less controversy, but also with less religion.


Their most prominent religion-themed comic featured a caveman “signing-up” for Jesus since he has “everlasting” health-care. **BT**




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# Patriot's Bible: Setting record straight or mixing messages?

By Steve Rabey  
*Religion News Service*

More than two years in the making, *The American Patriot's Bible* (Thomas Nelson) is the latest entry in a line of niche and specialty Bibles that have been targeted at specific audiences.

"This Bible is designed for the decent, hardworking core of America, the ordinary man or woman who loves this nation and believes it springs from godly roots," says Richard Lee, founding pastor of the 4,000-member First Redeemer Church in Cumming, Ga., a Southern Baptist congregation north of Atlanta, who served as general editor.

In his introduction, Lee writes that "America stands without equal as a beacon of hope and freedom in a hurting world." *The Patriot's Bible*, he says, speaks to Americans who feel their conservative theology, politics and morals are under assault.

"We are at our lowest ebb at this particular time," he said in an interview.



Richard Lee

"Judeo-Christian principles are being beaten down. They're actually under attack. This has never happened before."

Lee, who organized an Independence Day-themed "Restoring America" conference featuring David Limbaugh and Oliver

North, said he's "disappointed" when politicians "use the word of God for the purpose of vote getting."

His goal was to create a "non-partisan" Bible, but he quotes Republican Ronald Reagan more times than Democrats Jimmy Carter, Bill

Clinton, Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy combined.

In an interview, Lee said he doesn't even know if Carter, a fellow Georgian and longtime Baptist Sunday school teacher, is a Christian.

As for President Obama? "I haven't seen any patriotism from him yet."

Lee sprinkles his Bible with some 300

articles about "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the right to keep and bear arms, the war in Iraq and religious broadcasting.

While some have praised the *Patriot's Bible* — former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called it "fascinating" — others have condemned it as something akin to theological and political heresy.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," wrote "Crunchy Con" blogger Rod Dreher on Beliefnet. "To the extent that this Bible's publishers conflate serving Christ

with patriotism ... they are corrupt, and corrupters."

Evangelical author and Baptist pastor Greg Boyd's lengthy critique, posted on *Christianity Today's* Web site, calls Lee's Bible "idolatrous," saying, "There's not a single commentary in this Bible that even attempts to shed light

on what the biblical text actually means."

Lee says such criticisms misunderstand the purpose of the *Patriot's Bible*, which is already in its second printing.

"Another study Bible is not needed," he said. "The purpose of this Bible is to go deeper in people's understanding of the nation in which we live, from whence it came, and where it is going unless we return to the Scriptures."

Lee isn't alone in seeking to repackage the Bible for a particular ideological audience. Some recent Bibles have targeted more liberal Christians, including *The Poverty and Justice Bible* produced by the American Bible Society and the eco-friendly *Green Bible* from HarperOne.

Today, both red and blue state Christians crave God's endorsement, said Larry Eskridge of Wheaton College's Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals.

"The problem for those who read *The American Patriot's Bible* is that their contemporary Christian peers on the left cite the same source to justify their view that America has much to repent for in its economic, cultural and military relationships to the rest of the world," Eskridge said.

"Maybe, just maybe, the unadorned text of the Bible has something to say to both sides of the equation." **BT**



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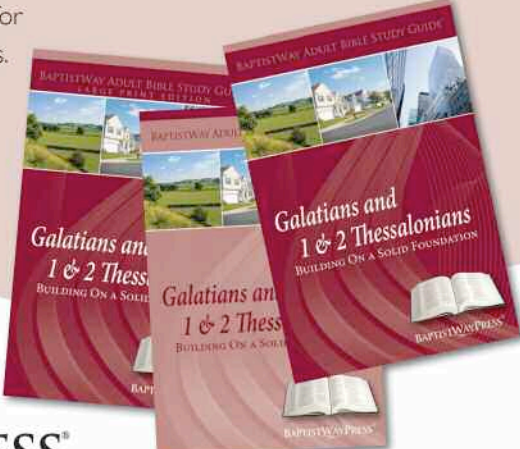
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## What does 'M Night' mean to you?

By John Pierce  
posted June 30, 2009  
[www.bteditor.blogspot.com](http://www.bteditor.blogspot.com)

Suppose you have made it to "Final Jeopardy" and the answer is "M Night." What would you scribble down as your question?

Alex Trebek would nod approvingly if you offered: "Who is the Indian-American writer and director of such films as *The Sixth Sense*?" (That would be M. Night Shyamalan.)

But "M Night" means "Mirth, Music, Mondays and Merrymaking" (see photo) to those who gather at the Yellow Deli in Chattanooga for weekly Israeli folk dancing. (If you're not into Israeli folk dancing, just show up anytime for a great sandwich and papaya juice, and to gaze at the '60s-'70s inspired decor.)

But for those of us bred in the deepest traditions of Southern Baptist life, "M Night" — no matter how widely used today — means only one thing.

Associations of Southern Baptist churches would host an annual event called "M (Mobilization) Night" that brought out the competitive nature of neighboring congregations unlike anything other than church-league softball.



Tied to Sunday evening educational programs (known as Training Union and then Discipleship Training, with roots in BYPU), congregations rallied to be well represented at the annual event — and, ultimately, to bring home the M Night banner that would be proudly displayed on a church wall until the next M Night when they would have to defend the crown.

For example, the Oct. 29, 1971 edition of the *Rome News-Tribune* reported that the Floyd County Baptist Association drew nearly 1,000 persons to the First

Baptist Church of Rome, Ga., for the annual M Night.

Park Avenue Baptist Church took home the banner with 80 members in attendance. And Mount Vernon Baptist Church was recognized for having 33 percent of its Church Training members present.

Oh, it was a different time and place. But for those of us who grew up in such environments, the mark never leaves us.

With apologies to Jeff Foxworthy, you were probably raised Southern Baptist if "M Night" means going to an annual association meeting.

Or if Saturday nights involved polishing shoes and studying Sunday school lessons.

Or if you made ashtrays in Vacation Bible School that lasted for two weeks each summer.

Or if you measured your faithfulness in terms of the little boxes you could check on your offering envelope each Sunday.

Or if you've heard hundreds of different persons pray that God would "lead, guide and direct us."

Or if as a young person you "rededicated your life" occasionally on Sunday morning for something you did (or thought about doing) on Saturday night. **BT**

## Harvest and hope

By Tony W. Cartledge  
posted June 29, 2009  
[www.tonycartledge.com](http://www.tonycartledge.com)

There is something about the soil and some seeds and some water. Something that makes things spring from the ground and grow. Something that has its roots in divinity, far beyond my poor efforts to understand.

That is one of the reasons I find myself more interested in gardening as years go by. Aside from the nicety of having fresh vegetables to eat and the satisfaction of honest labor that contributes to their presence on the table, there is also a spiritual element to seeing things grow.

I am no farmer: my "garden" could fit inside the average breakfast nook and includes only tomatoes in an old raised

bed, squash in a new one I built this year, and peppers in what was a flower bed last summer.

An old sweet potato I planted behind the tomatoes to see what would happen is growing. And I transplanted something that sprouted in my mulch pile, just to see what it turns out to be.

I have an assortment of pots that contain late tomatoes from volunteer plants that spring up in strange places (I think birds have something to do with that), and a couple that I sprouted from suckers. I plan to have tomatoes right up until the first hard frost. My fig tree behind the squash is loaded.

Despite the small size of my agricultural endeavors, I am reminded daily of the crying need for water if the plants are to grow, and the constant threat of creeping things that can kill a squash plant as

quickly as Jonah lost the shade from his qiqayon vine.

A handy garden hose allows me to provide my few plants with sufficient water even in drought, but it also leads me to think about so many people around the world whose livelihoods depend entirely on whether it rains or not.

No wonder ancient peoples around the world imagined weather gods like Marduk and Baal and Zeus; Indra and Illapa and Lono; Thor and Fryer and Gucumatz. From time beyond memory, prayers, sacrifices and intricate fertility rites have been practiced to ensure the seasonal rains.

As long as I have a garden hose and a well, praying for rain is not an issue. If feeding my family depended entirely on timely rains, however, I suspect my knees would be getting as dirty as my hands. **BT**



Roger Nix, director of missions for the Raleigh Baptist Association, attempts his first chip shot in 13 years with the encouragement of David Daly and other ministers in his North Carolina-based support group that has been together for two decades. Photo by Steve Bolton.

## Wise and caring 'Dead Preachers'

Ministers — at least those worthy of their calling — live in a crucible that is liable to heat up at any time.

**S**ometimes the heat is self-imposed; at other times it comes from an external source. At all times, it can burn.

Whether the scorched servant needs to be confronted or consoled, an intentional network of friends-in-ministry can often save a minister — or a ministry.

With assistance from the Lilly Foundation, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) has been actively promoting the creation of "Peer Learning Groups" designed to create an environment of learning and support as members pursue excellence in their particular ministry field. There are currently 98 groups, according to program director Steve Graham, with more in the formative stages.

Excellence is an admirable goal, but a more primary goal is survival. One cannot achieve excellence in ministry if he or she does not have the skills, preparation or personality to stay in ministry. Participation in a community of peers who are also friends promotes both goals.

My own life and ministry have been deeply enriched by participation in a support group that recently celebrated 20 years of friendship and encouragement. The group was the brainchild of Roger Nix, who at the time was pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Raleigh.

In late 1988, Nix invited several minister-friends to consider joining a support group and to recommend others who might want to participate. About two dozen interested persons gathered for a meal during the North Carolina Baptist State Convention meeting, and most attended an organizational meeting a few months later.

After discussing mutual expectations

and drawing up a covenant, 13 mostly young pastors and one minister of education committed to the group. We christened ourselves the "Dead Preachers' Society" (playing off the popular "Dead Poets Society" theme) — thinking of our meetings as a rare opportunity to kill off the "preacher persona" endemic to our profession, and to be truly human with each other for a brief respite when we gathered for overnight meetings each quarter.

The group proved to be a lifesaver for many of us. Even in "good" churches, issues and pressures mount up. Although I had been a pastor for more than 15 years when we began, I often found myself longing for the next support group meeting so I could "air" whatever was weighing me down.

I didn't always find solutions, but I always found relief for the moment and encouragement for the future. The meetings took me away from my church for several days each year, but they made me a

better minister on all the other days of the year.

That's not to say that our group has been perfect: we've made mistakes along the way, said and done things that were either hurtful or less than helpful.

Sometimes we've offered good advice that wasn't followed. But, we learned and grew from those experiences, too.

Over 20 years, many changes have taken place. Only seven of our original participants remain, as some have moved out of state and others dropped out for personal reasons. We were geographically close when we began, but now are scattered across the state.

None is in the same position as when we began. Only four of the seven current members remain as pastors, yet all of us remain in some form of ministry.

Nix has served effectively as Director of Missions for the Raleigh Baptist Association for the past 15 years. David Daly is now national director of baseball ministries for the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. I teach at Campbell University Divinity School and write for *Baptists Today*.

Steve Bolton, who's been pastor of

Oxford Baptist Church for the past 19 years, has the longest tenure among us. Mark Hollar has been pastor of Abbott's Creek Freewill Baptist Church for eight years, while Roger Hensley has served First Baptist Church of Jonesville for seven years. Former missionary Lee Ray Greene, who remains active in mission work, recently became pastor of Gladly Branch Baptist Church in Brevard.

We have faced some trying times together. In 1990, Mark Hollar and his family were struck by an out-of-control vehicle on a rainy freeway. Four-year-old daughter Laura wound up in a full body cast, and Mark suffered a broken pelvis, nose and ribs, a severed foot, and other injuries.

He underwent multiple surgeries and much physical therapy. In various ways, the group sought to be present with him.

While on a mission trip to South Africa in 1996, Roger Nix suffered a spinal abscess sparked by a strep infection. He was left with partial paralysis and constant, burning pain.

Through a long process of difficult rehabilitation he was able to return to work and now functions at a high level despite

daily challenges. While our group has sought to support and encourage Roger, I have more often found myself inspired by him.

In 1994, my daughter Bethany and I were struck by a drunk driver while driving through South Carolina. Bethany was killed instantly and I suffered multiple injuries sufficient to keep me in intensive care while Bethany's funeral was held. But one of the "Dead Preachers" came to sit with me while others attended the funeral.

More importantly, in the months and years that followed, group members heard my pain and helped me process the grief, loss and theological questions raised by Bethany's untimely death.

Several in our circle have had parents to die during the past 20 years. Most of us have faced at least one period of crisis in our ministries. All of us have found needed support from colleagues who have become friends as well as peers.

I have made many mistakes in ministry, but choosing to be part of an ongoing support group is one thing I did right.

To learn more about CBF-encouraged peer learning groups, contact Steve Graham at [sgraham@thefellowship.info](mailto:sgraham@thefellowship.info). **BT**

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