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A shaping influence

Alan Culpepper has a hopeful perspective on theological education and the church

ATLANTA — Alan Culpepper, the first and only dean of Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology, has stepped down after nearly 20 years of leading the school from formation through expansion. After sabbatical, he will return this fall to teach in his specialty of New Testament studies.

A major summer project is to complete a commentary on the Gospel of Matthew — having written well-received commentaries on John, Luke and Mark already.

Culpepper is a graduate of Baylor University, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Duke University, where he earned a Ph.D. He is widely regarded for his scholarship at Emory’s Candler School of Theology, has been a shaping influence on theological education.

SEMINARY SHADOWS

“I have lived literally in the shadow of a Baptist seminary all my life,” said Culpepper in an interview with Baptists Today. “We went to Santiago, Chile, when I was nine months old and my dad taught in the Baptist seminary there.”

The only “hiatus,” he said, was serving on the religion faculty at Baylor University prior to coming to Atlanta in 1995. And during that time Baylor’s Truett Seminary began.

A missionary kid, Culpepper grew up in Chile and Argentina. His father, Hugo Culpepper, provided theological training in those settings and both studied, and later taught missions, at Southern Baptist Seminary. “It sort of all flows together,” said Culpepper of his long and varied experiences in and around theological education.

GROUND UP

Culpepper said there was “tremendous freedom, creativity and energy” in starting the new theology school at Mercer. Then-president Kirby Godsey charged Culpepper and the first four other faculty members to “come and start with a chalkboard and build a seminary.”

He recalled Godsey coming to Texas to share his vision for a new theology school with four other faculty members to “come and start — an acorn given to Culpepper by Daniel Vestal, former executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

“a single-fold brochure” and startup funds from Emory Baptist Church in Atlanta selling its property.

“So I had a million dollars, a brochure and the 10 founding principles that Kirby had written.”

Culpepper found “a groundswell of support” for the effort, especially from church leaders asking, “Where now are we going to get our ministers?”

“We started from scratch … but we had tremendous resources to work with.”

TAKING SHAPE

President Godsey assured the founding faculty of the freedom to do their work. They identified the “ingredients” that needed to be blended into the mix, rooted in the Baptist tradition.

These included: the centrality of the Bible and freedom of inquiry, wrapped in a “keen sense of the call of the church to mission — the Great Commission — and the vitality of the local church.”

With the Southern Baptist seminaries under fundamentalist control, Culpepper said there was concern about whether the Baptist heritage those schools had represented was going to survive. A goal of the new theology school was to “conserve, build on and extend that heritage.” The effort, however, was not to recreate these lost seminaries, he said.

“It’s a new day and a new context,” he said. “But how do we take those vital ingredients of theological education and give them form and structure that makes them viable and relevant into the next generation?”

“We don’t want to be educating students for the way the church was,” he added. “They need the tools, skills and spiritual resources to manage those changes and to lead the church.”

MAJOR SHIFTS

Culpepper identified five major shifts in theological education during his time as theology dean:

Baptist context

Transitions within the Southern Baptist Convention and state conventions and the early development of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship provided the Baptist environment in which McAfee and other moderate Baptist seminaries and theology schools were birthed.

McAfee faculty and students in the early years were overwhelmingly white, said Culpepper. In 2003, however, white student enrollment plateaued while African-American student enrollment — from a variety of Baptist groups and other denominations — continued to grow, leading to a more diverse student body and faculty. Today, McAfee’s student population is 50/50 in race and gender makeup, he said.

Therefore, the “larger context,” said Culpepper, is much more diverse than he experienced in other theological education settings.

Churches no longer central

Church attendance and the influence of the church on society have declined, he noted. And worship styles have changed.

“All of that has changed dramatically and churches now are much less central,” said Culpepper, noting that church leadership...
requires different perspectives and tools than for past generations when the churches were more homogenous and more culturally influential.

Curriculum has changed
Changes in cultural context led to changing the curriculum needed to train ministers, said Culpepper. “In a sense it is much broader than it was.”

In the past, he noted, a student went to a Baptist seminary to get a Master of Divinity degree heavily oriented around the classical areas such as biblical languages, church history, theology, and ministry studies such as evangelism and pastoral care. More attention is given now to worship leadership, spiritual formation, Christianity and culture, race and religion, and ethical issues of today.

Culpepper said there is also a trend — for economic reasons among others — toward reducing the number of credit hours required for the M.Div. degree. McAfee’s 90-hour degree is the traditional standard, he said.

However, 75-hour M.Div. degrees are now being accredited — as well as a combination (called “articulation agreements”) of undergraduate and graduate studies that can be completed in just six years, or even five years, from high school graduation to the awarding of the M.Div. degree. The traditional undergraduate degree followed by a seminary M.Div. takes a seven-year span.

Culpepper is concerned about this change. “I think education takes a process of maturation,” he said. “I don’t think a five-year time, even a six-year time, is adequate — and I think they need a foundation in the classical areas and then build on that.”

Fewer students come to seminary from broad liberal arts programs in colleges and universities now, he noted. And this combined degree approach would put students into a singular educational setting for both undergraduate studies and theological training.

Students from varied backgrounds
Traditionally, Baptist seminary students came from strong church backgrounds and with solid liberal arts training, Culpepper noted. That too has changed.

“Many of the students now don’t come from necessarily a Christian home, active in the church from childhood, through a Baptist college or university with a strong liberal arts background, then get to seminary with all of that formation,” he said.

Cost, he added, is a major factor that influences the ways schools are delivering theological education. And the competition for students is stiff from traditional programs and online degrees.

“I think theological education and the Association of Theological Schools are going to have to take a look at the viability of the Master of Divinity degree as a three-year program,” he said.

He suggests a two-year M.Div. degree “loaded up” with foundational courses. Then, for those going into congregational ministry, change the standards so students can immediately (rather than the current three-year wait) go into the Doctor of Ministry program. The D.Min. program, he said, would focus on the skills needed for congregational leadership.

Financial stresses
Overall student enrollment in ATS schools is declining, Culpepper noted. In response, seminaries/theology schools are struggling with recruitment, reducing degree requirements and offering less-expensive online courses.

At the same time, students are amassing more educational debt.

“Students are having to pay more to get their education and, therefore, some of them are leaving seminary with debt they will be wrestling with for years.”

Well-funded seminaries, he said, use those resources to attract students. He recalled one student, accepted at McAfee on academic probation, who left when offered a full scholarship elsewhere.

Theology schools tied to strong universities have organizational benefits such as campus facilities, maintenance and security. But financial challenges must continually be addressed, he said. Students also tend to want theological education closer to where they live, so they don’t have to relocate, and classes offered in a way that fits around their other commitments.

“We are doing theological education in swirls of change.”

Despite the changes and challenges, Culpepper is hopeful about the future of theological education and the church.

THE FUTURE
Theological education for the future, he said, could be informed by missions experiences where cultural sensitivities have allowed for an indigenous faith to grow. We missionaries, he noted, have lived in places where we’ve translated faith into culture.

“But we’re seeing a culture foreign to Christianity emerging in the Bible belt.”

Culpepper holds a deep conviction of the need to preach the gospel of Jesus and to call people into Christian discipleship within their context. Missionaries, he said, have often done this in cultures where the Christian faith was not dominant.

Not only does Culpepper hope theological education will prepare students for this cultural shifting at home, but also emphasize missions beyond familiar settings.

“I have a bias toward career mission service — people called to be missionaries,” he said, noting the benefits of living in a culture, learning the language, and cultivating leadership. “That is not something you can do on a short-term mission trip.”

Students shape the future of theological education as well, he noted. They have a “different sense of the church and ministry.”

Today’s students, he said, are more accustomed to living and ministering among diverse people — ethnically and religiously. And it’s been educational for the faculty to teach more diverse students.

“There are some wonderfully gifted and talented students coming along and the church has emerging young leadership,” said Culpepper. “We don’t need to worry about where we’re going to get our ministers in the future.”

Emerging theological education, he added, must address the issues that divide people locally and globally. The assignment of our era is: “How do we take our religious traditions and make them resources of civilization rather than liabilities to its progress?”

“On a local level, how do we maintain our Christian distinctive and witness in a community where we are not relating to just Methodists and Presbyterians but to Muslims and Jews?” he continued. “For that our students need to have [not only] a clear sense of our own Christian tradition of faith but [also] a receptivity to work with and learn from persons from other traditions.”

He urges theological educators to keep moving in this direction — with balance.

“So here’s the trick: You heard me unapologetically affirming Christian faith and missions and, at the same time, saying the task of our time is to develop interfaith collaboration.”

Those two ideas — articulating and advocating for the Christian faith while being sensitive to other faith traditions — are not in conflict, he said.

“If we come to the table of interfaith collaboration without Christian conviction, we have nothing to contribute. If we come unready to listen, we won’t learn anything.” BT
“Christians should stop trying to make the call of heaven or hell, in or out, dirty or clean, and instead model our humanity after Jesus’ humanity. If every Christian actually followed Jesus’ lead, the Christian movement would be the least judgmental but most influential movement the world has ever seen.”


“Jesus never saw ‘issues.’ He saw people … He looked through the political/theological controversy de jour, and saw (truly saw) the human being behind the issue.”

—Pastor Shaun King in his “pastoral observations” to Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., following the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage

“We can give gratitude for where we’ve come from, without perpetuating symbols of pretend superiority over others.”

—Russell Moore, a native Mississippian and president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, calling for discontinued use of the Confederate flag (russellmoore.com)

“Regardless of the causes of these fires, as brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to come alongside and offer whatever assistance we can.”

—Kevin Ezell, president of the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board, on creating a fund to assist African-American churches that burned following the Charleston church murders (Baptist Press)

“Choirs will continue to make their own decisions about what kind of marriage ceremonies they conduct. Ministers will not be forced to perform same-sex weddings. Harder questions, particularly about religiously affiliated institutions and individual religious objectors, will depend on new fact scenarios and the interplay of a variety of laws.”

—K. Hollyn Hollman, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, addressing legal ramifications of the U.S. Supreme Court decision allowing for same-sex marriage (bjconline.org)

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again here today just to make sure that we’re clear: At Thomas Road Baptist Church there will never be a same-sex marriage or any other form of marriage outside of between a man and a woman conducted at this church as long as I am your pastor.”

—Jonathan Falwell, who followed his late father Jerry Falwell as pastor of the Lynchburg, Va., church (Newsmax)

“Before our accountability to government is our accountability to God.”

—Pastor Ril Varriale of Elizabeth Baptist Church in Shelby, N.C., whose act of raising the Christian flag above the American flag at the church stirred social media (Baptist Press)

“I.grieve to imagine how many people reject Christianity because Calvinism is the first thing they come into contact with, and mistakenly believe the whole faith is built upon the premise that God is a third-grade dodge ball captain who only picks the cool kids.”

—Blogger Benjamin L. Corey (patheos.com)

“Can you name any of the specific rights that are guaranteed by the First Amendment?”

—The survey question from the Newseum Institute to which only 19 percent of respondents acknowledged freedom of religion (CNSNews.com)

“As the unholy creation of white Christian ministers, it is tragically appropriate that the ‘Religion of the Lost Cause’ should come to an end with a devoutee murdering black Christians in a church in the city where the Civil War began. On the 150th anniversary of the faith’s creation, let that be Dylann Roof’s legacy.”

—Mark Silk, contributing editor for Religion News Service

“Christians need to watch it when their faith gets intertwined with celebrity culture.”

—Lexington Herald-Leader columnist Rich Copley following revelations that reality TV star Josh Duggar had molested young girls including some of his sisters

“The soon-to-graduate women with whom I work have so many options. Not only are churches calling women to fill a variety of roles, churches are also providing internships and residencies that offer experience and intentional mentoring. Some women receive multiple job offers and have to make hard decisions. It is indeed a different world.”

—Pam Duro, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry (BNG)

“EFORE OUR ACCOUNTABILITY TO GOVERNMENT IS OUR ACCOUNTABILITY TO GOD.”
Words to live by

Several years ago I started collecting quotations from various news sources, magazine articles and books, as well as sermons or other presentations I would read or hear throughout the month. In doing so I realized that the essence — the central idea — of the entire story, presentation or analysis could be summed up in that one brief statement.

Some of the quotations strike me as humorous, even quirky. Others are bold and piercingly insightful. Some are surprisingly unexpected words from a particular source. Other quotations are simply fresh ways of expressing old truth.

During a redesign of this publication I decided to share some of these quotations each month on the page opposite this one. At the time I had no idea that Quotation Remarks would become the most popular feature in the news journal.

Sometimes, as a deadline approaches, I go looking for a good quote or two. More often they jump off the page — or fly out of the radio or TV and have me scrambling for pen and paper. (A lot of what is read in this publication starts out as scribbled words on a Panera napkin.)

It is intriguing how words can pass us — and how they can stick. There is certainly no shortage of words.

The invention of the printing press, telephone, radio and TV and the widespread use of the Internet all were hailed for the speed and volume at which words could be shared. Now we are so bombarded by them that we can be overwhelmed.

A couple of quotations that I read in my younger years have stuck with me through the decades, however, and shaped how I see the world and approach daily living.

One was on a poster in a school library. It read: “Not to decide is to decide.”

I pondered that idea long and hard — and eventually wrote a dissertation on the subject.

Another impactful statement from long ago was: “Rudeness is a weak [person’s] imitation of strength.” Credit for that good line, I learned much later, is granted to philosopher Eric Hoffer rather than “anonymous.”

That perspective has helped me to see that those who bully their way around in life and treat others disrespectfully are weak, not strong persons at all. Their rudeness is a weak substitute for confidence, security and strength.

Those of us who tend to speak rather directly sometimes border on this concern — and sometimes actually cross over it. Assertiveness, with its many positive attributes, rests closely to an aggressiveness or over-confidence that, honestly, can be considered as rude. It is helpful to remember that kindness rather than rudeness is a sign of strength.

The constant bombardment of words — hitting us from all sides — calls for discernment. Otherwise we can drown in them.

Some words we take too seriously — from pundits, politicians and, yes, some preachers. Other words, particularly the words of Jesus, are often not taken seriously enough.

Those words that many of us read repeatedly from the Gospels — in red lettering to show their significance — call us to disciplined lives that are counter to many of the other words we hear each day.

They can turn us from self-absorption and self-interest alone. They call us to riskier ways of living than most of us are comfortable.

They call us to forgiveness when we really prefer revenge. They call us to love and acceptance when condemnation and rejection seem more deserving from our perspectives.

Sorting through all the words we hear or read can be overwhelming. Yet discerning the ones to discard and the few to retain is an important part of being disciples. And the best words we can pull into our hearts most often come in red. BT
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Miss Addie lived by the adage, “If Moses had waited until everybody was ready, the children of Israel would still be in Egypt.” Young Cassie suggested that Moses should have had some grownups like Miss Addie to help him. Cassie was 15 when she confided in Miss Addie that God was calling her to preach. Then at 19, Cassie helps conduct her 101-year-old friend’s funeral and soon finds herself facing unexpected challenges as the new pastor of Peyton’s Chapel Baptist Church.

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Order now at nurturingfaith.net
Remembering James Dunn

Fresh out of seminary in the early ’80s, it didn’t take long for me to discover the highlight of attending the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. It was simply listed in the extensive program as the Report from the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs (now called the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty).

At the time, a shift was afoot to tie the denominational body to a political agenda that promoted government-sponsored prayer and other ill-advised practices diametrically opposed to historic Baptist and American contributions to religious liberty.

Roger Williams, John Leland and Obadiah Holmes weren’t around to speak up. Neither were James Madison and Thomas Jefferson.

But never fear! The impassioned Texan James M. Dunn would mount the stage and make a strong, well-reasoned case for the separation of church and state and unfettered religious freedom for all.

As he left the stage, messengers (delegates to the convention) would rush to microphones to make motions that SBC funds be cut from the religious liberty organization supported by more than a dozen varied Baptist bodies and that Dunn be silenced.

At the same time, I’d find my way to where Dunn was leaving the stage just to say thanks. He could not have been more gracious. His earlier experience in campus ministry (my vocation at the time) was a connecting point. And we began connecting every now and then.

Eventually, the SBC cut ties with the BJC and Dunn no longer had a spot on the program. Oh, but he was far from silenced!

There were classic moments. Like when Vice President Al Gore, a Baptist as well, tried to boost his presidential candidacy by suggesting he’d support federal funding of religious groups. Dunn fired off an open letter to his friend in high places, telling Gore: “...This time, as we say in Tennessee and Texas, you’ve ripped your britches.”

The Christian Index (the Georgia-based Baptist newspaper for which I worked in the 1990s) sponsored a tour of Washington, D.C., where Luther Rice had started the publication in 1822. Dunn was of great help, arranging for one session to be held in the Roosevelt Room of the White House.

But then, Dunn was always being helpful to others. And, likewise, friends helped him to fulfill his mission.

After SBC funding was cut from the BJC, supporters rallied to Dunn’s side. And now the Baptist voice for religious liberty in Washington, D.C., is as strong as ever.

In retirement, James and his wife, Marilyn, moved to Wake Forest University where he imparted his passion for a free faith to a new generation of ministers.

More than 15 years ago I was summoned to a conference room at Mercer University’s Atlanta campus to meet with the Board of Directors of Baptists Today. They asked me to invest myself in shaping the publication into a new, hopeful future. I was not sure about that.

But I looked around the table and saw several of my heroes — like Jimmy Allen, Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler and James Dunn. How could I say no?

Despite health challenges, James returned recently for yet another term on the Baptists Today Board. He was a constant source of encouragement and support (the important kind that comes in the form of a generous check).

He inspired many of us to keep pushing for the fullness of freedom for all rather than succumbing to fear. He helped us to believe that the Christian faith, if indeed the truth James knew it to be, didn’t need a helping hand from the government.

True faith simply needed an environment in which it could be freely expressed. Belief is never coerced. Never.

Like Thomas Jefferson, James Dunn died on the Fourth of July with justice in his heart and freedom on his lips.

It is important to remember James Dunn. It is more important to remember the fragile, cherished treasure of religious liberty FOR ALL — for which he stood so firm.

EVER QUOTABLE

Following James Dunn’s death July 4, his biographer Aaron Weaver shared some of Dunn’s memorable quotes via Twitter. Here are a few of the jewels:

“Baptists do not base our belief in church-state separation on some enlightenment theory. We root our soul freedom in the very person of God.”

“God is minimized in any marriage of religion and politics, because we make God the national mascot and that’s civil religion at its worst.”

“When anyone’s religious freedom is denied, everyone’s religious freedom is endangered.”

“Baptists believe the Bible. Unfortunately, when we fall into contests about who believes it most, everyone loses.”

“To walk past a sign that says ‘Baptist’ and not to proclaim liberty from the pulpit of a church so tagged constitutes false advertising.”

“People come to God freely or not really.”

“You can’t fool all of the people all of the time, but there’s good money in trying.”

“Theocracy is organized arrogance.”

“The best thing government can do for religion is to leave it alone.”

James Dunn speaks to a “Theology Done Here” gathering at a donkey farm in Lugoff, S.C., in 2007.
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— Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford

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*Faith in 4D* is a product of The Center for Teaching Churches of the McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia.
‘American exceptionalism’
National pride strong but tempered by concerns, poll shows

We're gung-ho for the idea that the U.S.A. has a special status with God, and we're almost always proud of our nation. But a new survey finds that American patriotism is also tempered by concerns that the nation isn't the moral leader it once was, that Christians face discrimination at home and that some folks aren't "truly American."

And although overall views shine bright red, white and blue, the level of our enthusiasm varies according to factors such as religion, age and race, according to the Public Religion Research Institute.

A PRRI survey released this summer finds that 2 out of 3 Americans (66 percent) say God has granted America an exceptional role in human history. Not surprisingly, since the question presupposes a God, only 39 percent of people who don't identify with any particular religion (the so-called "nones") agree with that statement.

Still, "American exceptionalism is a deep and abiding belief that's fundamental to the American DNA," said Daniel Cox, PRRI research director.

Indeed, pride waves from this data like a flag: 63 percent overall say there was never a time they weren't "proud to be an American."

However, that enthusiasm doesn't mean they're not troubled on some points.

For example, the country is split over whether Christians (72 percent of U.S. adults) are now facing as much discrimination as other groups.

About half of those surveyed — 49 percent, strongly led by white evangelicals at 70 percent — say yes. The other half — 47 percent (including 59 percent of "nones") say no.

"Christians feel like they are swimming against a cultural tide that's rising against them," said Cox.

He cited findings in other studies showing evangelical concerns over "everything from gay marriage to marijuana legalization, the rising numbers of 'nones' and the falling numbers of people who consider religion important."

Overall, a majority (53 percent) say the country today is not setting "a good moral example for the rest of the world."

They were not asked for examples, but Cox said each demographic, religious or political group "could point to things where they may think the U.S. has lost its way."

While 69 percent say they see "a typical American" when they look in their mirror, this is more true for whites (77 percent) than for blacks (61 percent) or Hispanics (48 percent).

This dovetails with a very narrow vision of who is "truly American." High on the list of very or somewhat important characteristics are people who:
- Speak English: 89 percent say this is very or somewhat important.
- Believe in God: 69 percent.
- Were born in the U.S.: 58 percent.
- Are Christian: 53 percent.

The survey found "profound generational differences" on the image of what constitutes a true American, said Cox.

Most seniors (66 percent) said that to be "truly American," it was important to be Christian — perhaps recalling a culture that is slipping away, he said. But only 35 percent of millennials agreed.

Among Americans who believe the U.S. was once a Christian nation but is not anymore, most "still wish we were," said Cox. This shift is a bad thing, said 61 percent. Only 29 percent favor this cultural change.

Cox said he is "continually shocked" by how divided America is by race and by how differently issues are perceived by non-Hispanic white Americans and by minorities.

The survey data — gathered before a white supremacist allegedly killed nine black people in a Charleston, S.C., church — may reflect earlier months of protests over criminal justice and police killings. It was conducted June 10-14, among 1,007 adults in English and in Spanish.

PRRI found that nearly 2 in 3 Americans overall (63 percent) say "protesting unfair government treatment is always a good thing for the country."

However, a lot of support "evaporates" when examined through the prism of race, Cox said.

According to the survey, 67 percent of white Americans agree that Americans protesting government mistreatment always leaves the country better off.

"But fewer than half (48 percent) of whites say the same when asked about black Americans speaking out against and protesting unfair treatment by the government," the report says.

Among racial and ethnic minorities, including blacks and Hispanics, 56 percent agree that such protests benefit the country.

Even more (65 percent) agreed that when black Americans protest unfair treatment it makes the country better.
Prime minister says British schools must root out extremists

By Trevor Grudy
Religion News Service

CANTERBURY, England — Headmasters and teachers at Britain’s privately owned and state-run schools have been ordered to be on the lookout for Muslim extremists attempting to “groom” youngsters to their cause.

The new legal requirement came after terrorists killed some 30 British tourists June 26 at Sousse, one of Tunisia’s best-known holiday resorts.

It was the worst terrorist attack against Britons since 2005, when 52 people were killed in a series of bomb attacks in London.

In a statement, the British government explained that no military action would be taken without the permission of Parliament.

But Prime Minister David Cameron said another kind of war is underway — one aimed at making the British public “more intolerant of intolerance.”

Cameron told MPs: “We will not give up our way of life or cower in the face of extremism. This is not the war between Islam and the West, which (ISIS) wants people to believe. It is a generational struggle between a minority of extremists, who want hatred to flourish, and the rest of us, who want freedom to prosper.”

The new guidelines require public bodies such as city councils, schools and prisons to take responsibility to prevent the spread of terrorism.

Employment checks will be devised to bar extremists from working with children.

To prevent a form of Shariah, or Islamic law, from taking root in parts of England, police chiefs will be ordered to ensure that Muslim communities do not operate parallel justice systems.

“We must take on the radical narrative that is poisoning young minds,” Cameron said. “The people who do these things do it in the name of a twisted and perverted ideology which hijacks the Islamic faith and holds that mass murder and terror are not only acceptable but necessary.”

Oklahoma Supreme Court rules Ten Commandments monument must go

By Greg Horton
Religion News Service

OKLAHOMA CITY — The Oklahoma Supreme Court ordered a Ten Commandments monument removed from the state Capitol grounds June 30, three years after its installation sparked a religious feud.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Oklahoma first filed a lawsuit challenging the monument’s constitutionality in 2013.

In a 7-2 ruling, the justices said the monument was in violation of Article 2, Section 5 of the Oklahoma Constitution. The article states that public money or property cannot be used or donated “… for the use, benefit, or support of any sect, church, denomination, or system of religion …”

The wording is critical because the monument was purchased with private donations but placed on public land.

Oklahoma Attorney General Scott Pruitt released a statement saying the justices got it wrong. Pruitt argued that the monument is nearly identical to a Texas monument that was found constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

He said he plans on petitioning for a rehearing. Gov. Mary Fallin also released a statement, in which she indicated that she would be talking to Pruitt’s office about legal options.

The monument was erected in 2012. Since then, several other religious groups have asked to place their own monuments on the state Capitol grounds.

The decision likely affects a proposed satanic monument that New York’s Satanic Temple applied for in 2013. After that application, as well as one from a Hindu group, the Oklahoma Capitol Preservation Commission put a hold on all new monuments.

Episcopal Church elects first black presiding bishop

By Robert Gehrke
Religion News Service

SALT LAKE CITY — Episcopal bishops have made history again.

On June 27, during a private meeting at St. Mark’s Cathedral in downtown Salt Lake City, they elected Bishop Michael Curry as the first African-American presiding bishop of the 2.5 million-member faith group.

Curry won in a landslide vote in a race against three other candidates. The vote came nearly a decade after the bishops chose their first female leader.

Leading up to his selection, Curry, who has served as bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina since 2000, said he envisioned a church committed to being part of the “Jesus movement.” He said he would focus on evangelism and acts of service, along with a “church-wide spiritual revival.”

While he must lead and tend to day-to-day functions as chief executive officer, Curry said his job is more than that.

“In this mission moment of the church’s life,” he said, “the primary role of the presiding bishop must be CEO in another sense: Chief Evangelism Officer, to encourage, inspire and support us all to claim the calling of the Jesus movement.”

Curry, 62, spent 12 years as rector of St. James Church in Baltimore before his election as bishop of the N.C. Diocese. He and his wife, Sharon, have two grown daughters, Rachel and Elizabeth. He will succeed Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, the faith’s first female presiding bishop, who completes her nine-year term Nov. 1.

The U.S. Episcopal Church is a branch of the 80 million-member Anglican Communion, with churches across the globe.
Pope Francis moves to hold bishops accountable in sex abuse crisis

By David Gibson
Religion News Service

Pope Francis has approved the first-ever system for judging, and possibly deposing, bishops who fail to protect children from abusive clerics, a major step in responding to Catholics who have been furious that guilty priests have been defrocked while bishops have largely escaped punishment.

The five-point plan on accountability for bishops originated with the special sex abuse commission that Francis set up to deal with the ongoing crisis.

“Very pleased the Pope has approved the Commission’s proposal on accountability,” tweeted Marie Collins of Ireland, one of two victims of sex abuse by clergy who sit on the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors.

Peter Saunders of England, the other victim on the commission, also called the new system “good news,” telling the Catholic news site Crux that “this is a positive step that clearly indicates that Pope Francis is listening to his commission.”

Saunders’ support is especially notable because he has said that if the pope did not institute a reliable system for holding bishops’ feet to the fire he would leave the panel.

Victims advocates in the U.S., who for years led efforts to break the clerical wall of silence on abuse, took a much more skeptical stance on the new moves.

“Accountability necessarily involves consequences for wrongdoers. Whether a new, untested, Vatican-rulled process will mean consequences for wrongdoers remains to be seen,” said David Clohessy, director of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

“This move will give hope to some,” Clohessy said. “But hope doesn’t safeguard kids. Punishing men who endanger kids safeguards kids. That should have happened decades ago. … That’s not happening now. And that must happen — strongly and soon — if the church is to be safer.”

The main feature of the new system will be a tribunal — effectively a church court — set up in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the powerful Vatican department that oversees orthodoxy and has also become the clearinghouse for judging priests accused of abuse.

The new tribunal will “judge bishops with regard to crimes of the abuse of office when connected to the abuse of minors.” The pope is expected to name a special prosecutor and a staff for the tribunal, perhaps before he arrives in late September for his first trip to the U.S., which has been ground zero in the clergy sex abuse crisis.

Several gray areas remain: For example, the new protocols do not say who is responsible for reporting bishops to the Vatican, and how such complaints will be filed and handled.

Still, Vatican observers say Francis has set up the new system quickly, given the glacial pace at which the Roman Curia usually operates. And he seems to want to go around many of the usual bureaucratic and canonical roadblocks to establish a relatively simple and independent tribunal.

Jury: gay-to-straight conversion group committed fraud

By Rachel Delia Benaim
Religion News Service

In June a New Jersey jury found a gay-to-straight conversion therapy organization guilty of consumer fraud in state Superior Court. Three gay men and two parents sued JONAH, or Jews Offering New Alternatives for Healing, saying that it made gross misrepresentations in the sale and advertisement of its program and that it constituted an unconscionable commercial practice.

After just two and a half hours of deliberations, the seven-person jury awarded the five plaintiffs $72,400 in damages for individual and group therapy sessions in which clients were asked to undress and touch themselves in their therapists’ presence and beat effigies of their mothers with a tennis racket.

The plaintiffs claimed that JONAH; its directors, Arthur Goldberg and Elaine Berk; and one of its counselors, Alan Downing, violated New Jersey consumer fraud law by misrepresenting JONAH as scientifically based.

“My clients needed help,” said James Bromley, a lawyer from the Southern Poverty Law Center, which represented the plaintiffs. “They went to JONAH. JONAH lied, and JONAH made it worse.”

The defense argued that JONAH’s ideology and methods were both scientific and based on Jewish values.

JONAH lawyers used verses from the Bible to bolster their case. They also evoked their clients’ First Amendment rights to treat homosexuality as a spiritual disorder. The jury was just unconvincing.

Conservative Jews furious over scrapped bar mitzvah service

By Michele Chabin
Religion News Service

JERUSALEM — Conservative Jews in the U.S. and Israel have accused Israeli President Reuven Rivlin of canceling a bar mitzvah ceremony at the official President’s Residence because one of the rabbis scheduled to conduct the ceremony is non-Orthodox.

The ceremony, for four boys with autism, was scheduled after the ultra-Orthodox mayor of the city of Rehovot refused to allow the bar mitzvah, long planned by the Conservative movement, to be held at a Conservative synagogue. The Conservative movement has been running a bar/bat mitzvah program for Israeli children with disabilities for two decades.

The cancellation of both ceremonies hit a raw nerve with non-Orthodox Jews because non-Orthodox rabbis and institutions have no legal standing in Israel and, unlike the Orthodox establishment, receive virtually no government funding.

Conservative Jews, called Masorti Jews in Israel, said Rivlin’s decision amounts to a de-legitimization of non-Orthodox Jewry.
Learning to listen

Author’s ‘daily life guide’ grew out of farmland, lakeside solitude

Rocky Mount, N.C. — For about 30 years Carol Boseman Taylor put her prayer requests into journals. “Almost every day I’d have my prayer time and write down what I’d prayed for,” she recalled. “I’d look back to see how God had answered [my prayers].”

About 10 years ago, however, someone gave her a copy of Wally Paton’s book, How to Listen to God: Overcoming Addiction Through Practice of Two-Way Prayer (2000, Faith With Works Publishing). While these principles were directed toward those addressing addiction through Twelve Steps Programs, the disciplines were more broadly applicable, she found.

Carol said she realized that she had been doing too much of the talking. “I wondered if I could listen and have God tell me what to do,” said Carol. She decided to give it a try.

She and her husband Chuck had moved to the North Carolina coast where they lived by an inland lake. At the waterside she settled in with just a pen, journal and Bible.

After her Bible reading, Carol made no list of petitions this time. “I just sat there.” During that time of quiet reflection and attention to God’s leading, her pen began to flow again — this time in a different direction: sensing what God was offering to her rather than what she was requesting from God.

“It was a holy experience,” she said. So she took this new listening/journaling approach into daily practice. After eight years she had filled a notebook from which she pulled reflections for each day in a year.

At Christmas, she gave copies of these readings to Chuck and their three daughters. The notebooks were passed around to others. One woman even sent $200 to Carol, urging her to publish the reflections. The money was set aside.

Finally, her daughter Blythe took matters into her own hands: “I’ll be your agent because you won’t do this yourself!”

One publisher wanted to make too many changes, said Carol. “Nurturing Faith was the right place; they have tenderly cared for this book.”

While many would rightly call the book a collection of devotionals, Carol prefers the subtitle: “A Daily Life Guide.”

As an act of commitment, Carol had always concluded each daily writing with the affirmation, “I promise. Rejoice!” — which became the title of the book.

Carol hopes the book will encourage others to more actively listen to God — “It’s such a life-giving force.” She and her daughter Blythe Taylor are planning to lead retreats as well on “how to listen to God.”
Carol refers to herself as a simple believer who is called to pray. Yet she also calls others to STOP (telling) and START (listening). 

“Sit quietly and wait, and you will surely sense my presence with you,” she records in one daily entry. “Speaking aloud is unnecessary. Listening is essential. I await your attention — your full attention. When you rest in me, I can commune with you. I promise. Rejoice!” 

WINDY OAKS

“Home” for Carol Taylor and her family is a stately farmhouse on 600 acres in Rocky Mount, N.C. Her kin have farmed the land for more than a century.

Carol’s mother lived in the house, built as a Victorian in the 1890s and remolded in brick in 1926, for more than 72 years before moving into an assisted living facility earlier this year. The farm is called “Windy Oaks” though, ironically, strong winds took down the imposing oaks. Large magnolias now consume much of the front yard enjoyed from a wide porch.

Across the street where tobacco once grew is a 50-acre field with row-after-row of reflective solar panels. The Boseman Solar Farm produces five megawatts of renewable energy per hour according to a workman checking on the equipment.

The farm had been owned by Robert Henry Ricks, a Civil War veteran, successful businessman and a founder of North Carolina State University, and his wife Tempie. With no children, they took in William David Boseman, Carol’s grandfather, as a foster child.

He was educated at NCSU, and later inherited the farmhouse, land and a dairy. Tragically, Carol’s grandfather was killed in a tractor accident. The farm was passed on to her father, Robert Ricks Boseman, an innovative farmer and a quiet, spiritual man, she said.

“I grew up an Episcopalian, but make a pretty good Baptist,” said Carol.

A step toward modern technology and changing agrarian life occurred when her father negotiated the placement of two cell phone towers on the property — which provided more steady income than seasonal farming.

Her cousin now farms portions of the land not occupied by solar panels. Carol and her brother, she said, have no desire to sell the farm.

DEEP ROOTS

Windy Oaks is full of memories for Carol, who grew up on the farm that she has managed since 1998 when her father became too ill. As a young girl she would sit on a fence and pray while the cows made their way across the field to greet her.


Time does not constrain me. Time is not my enemy, and neither is it yours. So go forth not on time, but on me. I am blessing your moments and your days until time will be no more for you — until you will be with me and your loved ones for eternity. I promise. Rejoice! (Reading: Eccl. 3:11-15)
Randall Lolley’s gifts — and ours
Sponsor gifts sought for publication of book of sermons

Those blessed to know Randall Lolley as seminary president, pastor, visionary leader and/or friend are aware of his many gifts. One is his insightful and effective communication of the gospel.

Now the gift of Lolley’s preaching will become a larger gift to us all.

Randall and his wife, Lou, have given a collection of sermons — in which he preached through the Bible to the First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C. — to be published as a book by Nurturing Faith.

This generous gift from the Lolleys will benefit two good causes: Baptists Today and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina’s Lolley Fund for Theological Education.

“This preaching journey through the Bible was undertaken January 1995 through September 1996,” said Randall. “It was a ‘preach/teach’ series that climaxed my pastoral career as well as my seven years at the First Baptist Church of Greensboro, N.C.”

The purpose of these sermons, he said, was to “review the entire biblical landscape, and to discern once more the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of the Holy Scriptures.”

The book will be titled JOURNEY WITH ME: Redemptive threads woven through the Bible.

“Hopefully, the redemptive threads woven from Genesis to Revelation have come to light in these sermons,” said Randall. “Perhaps, also, Bible study teachers and other lay leaders will find them a ready reference through the years.”

Want to be a part of this project? Those making sponsoring gifts of $100 will have their names listed in the book (if received by Sept. 30) and receive a signed copy when the books first come off the press.

Randall Lolley, center, receives the 2011 Judson-Rice Award from Baptists Today Director Mike Queen, right, and editor John Pierce. Photo by Bruce Gourley.

Sponsorship gifts may be made by check to Baptists Today, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31208-6318, or online at baptiststoday/donate. Please indicate that the gift is for the Lolley book. BT

Nurturing Faith.net

New web site offers books, resources and experiences in one place

Rapid growth of the Nurturing Faith publishing venture has led to the launch of a new expanded web site.

NurturingFaith.net provides easy access for ordering Nurturing Faith books (digital or print), the new Nurturing Faith Bible Study Series by Tony Cartledge and other helpful resources.

The new site also provides information on the various Nurturing Faith Experiences planned throughout the year. Registration can be completed at the site.

A book proposal submission form is available for potential authors interested in exploring the author-friendly publishing approach of Nurturing Faith, a non-profit venture that uses the latest in publishing technology and in-house marketing.

A talented team of writers, copy editors, designers and marketers guides the Nurturing Faith publishing efforts in relationship with the authors.

Now the online teaching resources for the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies inside Baptists Today have moved to BaptistsToday.org. These resources — Tony Cartledge’s video overviews, Digging Deeper and Hardest Question, along with lesson plans by Rick Jordan and Jeremy Colliver — are all there.

These remain free for subscribers but now require a one-time login setup. Just follow the steps provided. If you have questions, email info@baptiststoday.org or call (478) 301-5655.

For those who aren’t currently subscribers, either digital or print subscriptions to Baptists Today are available online as well. Subscription revenue — especially from group subscriptions — allows for providing the excellent and abundant teaching resources at no additional charge.

So please check out BaptistsToday.org and create a login to access all the content the news journal offers and the teaching resources. Of course, there are exclusive daily posts including blogs by Baptists Today editors and friends along with religion news hand-selected by Bruce Gourley from sources around the world. BT
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Fervent Prayer
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Teaching resources at baptiststoday.org

The Bible Lessons that anchor the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies are written by Tony Cartledge in a scholarly, yet applicable, style from the wide range of Christian scriptures. A graduate of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div) and Duke University (Ph.D.), and with years of experience as a pastor, writer, and professor at Campbell University, he provides deep insight for Christian living without “dumbing down” the richness of the biblical texts for honest learners.

HOW TO USE THESE BIBLE STUDIES

1. Order a copy of Baptists Today news journal for EACH MEMBER of the class. The Bible Lessons are found only here.
2. Teachers can go to baptiststoday.org to access all of the free resources needed for presentation. Simply click on “Adult” or “Youth.”

Teaching the Lessons
After reading The Bible Lessons by Tony Cartledge starting on page 18, teachers can access helpful teaching resources (at no charge) at baptiststoday.org These include:

* Tony’s video overviews
* Adult teaching plans by Rick Jordan
* Youth teaching plans by Jeremy Collier
* Tony’s “Digging Deeper” notes and “The Hardest Question”
* Links to commentaries, multimedia resources and more

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* All online teaching resources are available at no charge and may be printed and used by teachers of the Nurturing Faith Bible Studies.

Adult teaching plans by Rick Jordan of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of North Carolina are available at nurturingfaith.net

Thanks, sponsors!
These Bible studies for adults and youth are sponsored through generous gifts from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (Bo Prosser, Coordinator of Organizational Relationships) and from the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation. Thank you!
Sept. 6, 2015

True Faith

Do you have any electrical appliances or tools that no longer work? If an electric screwdriver will no longer drive screws, can you still call it a screwdriver? If a remote control button stops opening the garage door, it may be remote, but is it still a control?

The man who wrote the book of James asked the same questions, but of people. He saw those who call themselves “Christians” acting in hurtful or selfish ways, and that bothered him. He sought to help them understand that true faith is demonstrated not by form, but by function—not by talking the talk, but by walking the walk.

Is it a steeple that makes a church? Or pews? Or hymn books? Is it the outer shape of a building, or the inner life of a congregation? If the church family functions more as a social club than a ministry organization, can you still call it church?

And what makes a Christian? Is it a stated belief in Christ? Is it membership in a church? If someone lives with little or no reference to Christ, is it still appropriate to use the name “Christian”?

In today’s text, James proposes a series of tests to help his readers determine whether they should continue to call themselves by labels such as “Christian” and “church.”

The problem with partiality (vv. 1-7)

James had observed well-dressed and jewelry-studded people getting a warm welcome when they came to worship, while poorly dressed or unkempt people were pushed to the rear. That didn’t strike him as being very Christian.

My college career happened to coincide with the “Age of Aquarius.” Somewhere along the way, I became acquainted with an unwashed young man who called himself “Link.” Day in and day out, he wore the same ragged jeans, dirty T-shirt, and stained sweatband in his long and unruly black hair.

Link professed to be a Christian, and one Sunday evening I persuaded him to attend church with me. As we strolled down the aisle, I could see some of the same people who had welcomed me as a clean-cut Baptist boy now looking at Link as if he were from Mars. But, as I settled into a pew beside my long-haired, bearded, sandal-clad friend, a little girl whispered excitedly on the row behind us. “Mommy,” she gurgled, “is that Jesus?”

My experience with Link reflected the same hypocrisy that was rife in the first century. Church members often pooled their resources to help one another. This made the church especially attractive to the needy, but it also put a real strain on the available resources.

Perhaps this made the members trip over themselves in welcoming wealthy guests. First-century society was very class-oriented. The privileged aristocracy ruled over the middle and lower classes. Widows, orphans, and slaves huddled at the bottom of the social ladder. Showing favoritism to the rich was only natural—but that did not make it right.

James dares to question whether the faith of those who showed favoritism was genuine. Pushing aside a poor sister who was rich in faith in order to show special attention to a wealthy patron was dishonorable and inconsistent for those who claimed faith in Christ. So he asks, “Do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ?” (v. 1). Genuine faith produces genuine care; ignoring the poor and downtrodden while catering to the rich calls the sincerity of one’s faith into question.

The poor people that James has in
mind were not just low wage earners, but people who were destitute and unable to provide for themselves due to age, infirmity, or societal position. If anyone deserves special care, it is the poor. Recall James’s earlier insistence that real religion is shown in acts of charity and personal purity (1:27).

The law of love (vv. 8-13)

James knew that the problem of partiality would not exist if believers seriously followed what he called the “royal law,” summed up in the command “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v. 8, citing Lev. 19:18). Jesus had defined “neighbor” as anyone with a need (Luke 10:27-37). Those who show partiality toward the rich at the expense of the poor are guilty of breaking the law by failing to love the neighbors who truly need them.

James resorted to an argument typical of the Jewish rabbis to illustrate the serious nature of partiality. Breaking one specific law makes a person guilty of transgressing the whole law in general, he argued (vv. 9-11, cf. Gal. 5:3). As far as James was concerned, those who favored the affluent while ignoring the indigent were no less law-breakers than someone who had committed murder or adultery.

But while Jews lived under the Mosaic law, Christians were called to live under the law of liberty that sets us free from the heavy weight of ritual demands and calls us to love others as ourselves. James stressed that even under this law, sin is serious, judgment is real, and those who withhold mercy from others can hardly expect to receive mercy from God (v. 13a). Creeds without deeds accomplish little, and those who profess faith without practicing faith betray lack of true love for Christ.

A test of common sense (vv. 14-19)

James’s appeal to common sense is undoubtedly the best-remembered section in his epistle. Here he draws a clear distinction between true faith seen in loving works, and false faith revealed in empty words. Note that James is not teaching that salvation results from works, but that those who are saved by faith will prove it by their actions.

What good is it to claim faith if one’s life does not show it? How can those who show no compassion claim to know the love of Christ? The poor are not aided by words, but by works; not by best wishes, but by best efforts. “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead,” James said (v. 17). Faith without action is not really faith.

This is common sense. James shouldn’t have to explain it, but he continues in the same vein, arguing that true faith is no faith if it serves only self. James had learned from Jesus that not everyone who called him “Lord” would enter the kingdom (Matt. 7:21; 25:31-46), and even Paul, that great proponent of grace through faith, taught that Christians saved by grace are called to do good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

Faith without works is dead because it is not true faith to begin with. A majority of Americans continue to tell pollsters that they believe in God, but they are practicing materialists: their primary allegiance is to their stuff.

Those who think they are Christians simply because they believe in God are victims of a poor and shallow theology. The evidence of genuine faith is not found in the words of a creed, but in the works of a changed life.

Test cases (vv. 20-26)

James closes the chapter with two Old Testament illustrations of his point. The first is an obvious choice. Abraham was famous as a man of faith (Heb. 11:8-12), but his faith was demonstrated by obedience to God. He followed God on a most difficult path, and because of his faith-in-action, God “counted it to him for righteousness” (vv. 21-24).

James’s second example is a more unlikely character. The woman Rahab is generally thought of as a prostitute. Yet, when she came in contact with God through Israelite emissaries who had come to spy out the town, she was willing to risk her life to hide the men and to help them escape. Rahab was no theologian, but she understood that faith requires action (vv. 25-26).

Faithful Christians and faithful churches seek a balance in life: We believe in Christ and call on others to trust in Jesus for their eternal salvation. At the same time, we are aware that persons have physical and emotional needs, so we also share Christ’s love in tangible ways. We educate the mind, care for the soul, and feed the body. We demonstrate both faith and works.

When we examine our lives, what do we see? Do we find faith that only claims the name, or faith that truly plays the game? Does our faith work?

One of my favorite musicals is Les Misérables. The lead character, Jean Valjean, had been imprisoned for 19 years for a crime no greater than stealing bread to feed a starving nephew.

After his release from prison, a priest showed Valjean mercy and it changed his life. As an ex-convict, however, he was rejected on every hand until he violated his parole by changing his name and identity, no longer showing the card that identified his prison record.

He became a successful businessman and was even elected mayor of his town. On a fateful day, however, Valjean saw the police arrest another man, accusing him of being Jean Valjean and taking him to jail. Valjean knew the innocent man would suffer for no reason, and decided to risk his own life by stepping forward to confess his identity to save the other man. One of the most moving scenes in the play has him singing a song that asks the question: “Who am I?”

Who am I – really? Of many names that might apply to me, is “Christian” one of them? BT
Sept. 13, 2015

Pure Speech

William Archibald Spooner (1844-1930) was an Anglican priest and warden of New College, at Oxford, England. Spooner was known for an unfortunate tendency to reverse the initial letters of two or more words as he spoke.

In one address, he referred to a “crushing blow” as a “blushing crow.” Instead of “lighting a fire,” he once spoke of “fighting a liar,” and in trying to describe the joy of riding a “well-oiled bicycle,” he called it a “well-boiled icicle.” In a memorable sermon, Spooner declared: “the Lord is a shoving leopard” – not the “loving shepherd” image he intended to portray.

The late country comedian Archie Campbell took “Spoonerisms” to a new level, delighting audiences with the story of “Rindercella,” who went to a “bancy fall,” “lell in fove with a prand-some hince,” and “slopped her dripper.”

Do you ever trip over your tongue or put your foot in your mouth? Start your tongue before putting your brain in gear? Did you ever suffer, as a friend of mine used to put it, from chronic diarrhea of the mouth?

Our speech problems typically result less from Spoonerisms or Freudian slips than from speaking words that are careless, hurtful, or untrue.

The misuse of speech can lead to serious consequences. One can break a heart with a single word or lose a friend with an unkind remark. Thoughtless comments can wreak havoc with a child’s self-esteem – or with the social fabric of a church family. Getting our tongues under some semblance of control is serious business.

In the first two chapters of his letter, James encouraged believers to be people whose faith was demonstrated by their works, not just their words. He never intended to suggest, however, that words are not significant. Words have tremendous potential to bring good or evil. In that sense, the tongue may be the strongest muscle in our bodies.

The power to direct (vv. 1-5a)

James was aware of the immense power – and the two-edged nature – of the tongue. But why broach the subject here? James must have been addressing a situation in which certain persons had said things that caused harm to the church, perhaps through teaching shallow and twisted theology, or through speaking ill of brothers and sisters. James argued in the previous chapter that the legitimacy of our faith is revealed by our works. One of most important works we can do is to tame the tongue.

The tongue can be put to powerful use in teaching. Since teaching presumes authority and influences others, James argues that teachers “will be judged with greater strictness.” Thus, he does not encourage just anyone to wear the teacher’s robe. Not everyone is equipped to teach, and those who teach wrongly leave themselves open to judgment (v. 1).

This bit of advice, while true in a general sense, may have been directed toward persons who wanted to teach ideas that James considered to be incorrect at best, or heretical at worst. This chapter follows one in which James heatedly insisted that faith not evidenced by works is dead. He may have been targeting persons who taught that one’s actions were unimportant. James admits that no one is perfect. Many of us may be tempted to take James 3:2a as our life verse: “For all of us make many mistakes.” In social relationships, it is particularly difficult to direct our speaking in consistently positive ways. Anyone who can control
their tongue, James argues, is “able to keep the whole body in check” (v. 2b).

Two illustrations drive home the author’s point. A small bit in the mouth of a horse can direct a large and powerful animal (v. 3). A small rudder on the back of a ship can guide a huge sea-going vessel (v. 4). Both illustrations show it is not the tongue alone that causes problems, though it appears to be the fulcrum of action. The horse is guided by the will of the rider, and the ship is kept on course by the will of its pilot. The bit and the rudder are powerful tools used by the one who controls them.

So, when James speaks of the tongue boasting of its great exploits (v. 5), we know that he is speaking metaphorically. He knows very well that the tongue only does what the mind tells it to. We cannot avoid responsibility for harmful words by saying “Oops! My tongue slipped!” The tongue only gives outward expression to our inner thoughts. These verses reinforce James’s earlier assertion that an unbridled tongue and worthless religion go hand in hand (1:26).

**The power to destroy**

*(vv. 5b-8)*

One cold afternoon when I was a boy, an older cousin and I were playing in a small field overgrown with broom sedge that was dry and dormant in the winter chill. My cousin happened to have some matches in his pocket, and proposed that we build a fire. We thought we could pile up a little straw, play with the fire, and then put it out. We didn’t take into account the dryness of the field or the strength of the wind. Soon, the flames spread far beyond our intention, and our dancing efforts to stamp out the blaze were fruitless. Ultimately, my mother had to call the forest service for assistance.

I learned that once you set a fire in an open field, you can’t take it back. Every year we see news footage of fierce fires that race through millions of acres and destroy hundreds of homes. Sometimes it is the result of just one carelessly tossed cigarette. So it is in our relationships. The social world in which we live has no neat borders. Once we speak a word, there is no telling where it will end up or how large it will grow or how many people it will hurt. Try as we might, once we say something, we can’t take it back.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!” said James, “and the tongue is a fire” (vv. 5b-6a). The words we speak have the power to do incredible harm. If we teach distorted doctrine, for example, we could actually lead people farther away from Christ, rather than closer to him. If we make disparaging remarks about another, we not only hurt that person, but we also damage our own reputation and bring shame upon the name of Christ.

James used his own tongue unceasingly in describing the destructive power of speech. The tongue is a focal point of iniquity, a stain that pollutes the whole person, a fire that threatens the natural world and finds its source in hell (v. 6). The phrase “sets on fire the course of nature” speaks to the whole of human existence, from one’s family of origin onward (as in 1:23). In essence, James seems to be saying that the tongue has the power to wreck one’s entire life. It is an untamable thing, a restless evil, filled with deadly poison (vv. 7-8).

The forceful nature of this intense language is designed to underscore the serious nature of the matter. Humans appear capable of taming every other creature on earth, but cannot control something as small as their own tongues. This does not mean we are to stop trying, but to give extra care to our speech and seek always to bring our words under Christ’s control.

**The possibility of perversion**

*(vv. 9-12)*

The author goes on to give a specific example of how the gift of speech can be perverted. James describes a situation in which someone utters a prayer of blessing to God, and then — with the same tongue — pronounces words of cursing upon persons who are God’s children (vv. 9-10).

James is not talking about the use of “curse words” as we understand them, although he would undoubtedly oppose their use, as well. Ancient peoples were not hesitant to wish evil upon others while calling on their gods to enforce the curse. The modern phrase “God damn” still preserves some of the character of a curse: “May God damn you to hell” is what it means.

The essence of cursing comes in other forms, as well. Any words we speak that demean others or cause them to think less of themselves are in effect words of cursing: they invoke a diminished spirit. Parents in particular must be careful to speak words of encouragement to their children. Childhood egos are fragile, and constant criticism can shatter them. Words of support that build up our children’s self-esteem are truly blessings. Critical words that make them feel “not good enough” are nothing more than a curse.

Cursing others is contrary to the nature of a Christian. We don’t expect a fig tree to produce olives or a grapevine to produce figs. It is likewise contradictory for a Christian to speak words of both blessing and cursing. A good spring does not yield both good water and bad at the same time, nor can the ocean be both salty and fresh (vv. 11-12). For a Christian, to bless God and curse his neighbor is the height of hypocrisy.

I remember hearing a personal management guru speak of personal weaknesses as “potential areas for self-management.” James would have every Christian to put the careful use of speech high on their list of areas that need further growth. If not, our own internal inconsistency will be our downfall, and may bring others down with us.

That is not a desired outcome in anyone’s book. **BT**

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are available at [baptiststoday.org](http://baptiststoday.org)
Sept. 20, 2015
Highborn Wisdom

Envy. Jealousy. We don’t like to admit it, but all of us have been acquainted with what Shakespeare called the “green-eyed monster.” Whether we have envied someone else’s cool reputation, their car, their appearance, or their spouse, we know what it is like to long for more than we have. A touch of envy might spur us to work harder toward desired goals, but in larger doses, jealousy is poison – so dangerous that church tradition considers it one of the “seven deadly sins.”

Having pointed to the dangers inherent in undisciplined or intentionally hurtful speech (3:1-12), James challenges readers to adopt a godly wisdom. James was Jewish by birth, as were most of his readers. Unlike Paul, who was a trained rabbi but abandoned Jewish scruples except when it would cause offense to others, James belonged to a faction of the early church that retained more of its Jewish identity.

James’s readers, then, would be familiar with the most important of proverbs: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10, Ps. 111:10, see also Prov. 1:7 and 4:7). Wisdom that has its roots in a proper reverence for God results in a life of humility. Thus, James urges readers to “Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom” (3:13).

The opposite of gentle wisdom is found in bitter envy, selfish ambition, and boastful pride (3:14). These attitudes are not from God, but from a selfish spirit that is more demonic than godly (3:15). Bitterness and pride are potent weapons for getting one’s way, but that power comes at the price of disorder and discord (3:16).

In contrast, the “wisdom from above” engenders the kind of speech and life that bears witness to Christ’s love (3:17). Marked by an inner integrity, such speech is “peaceable” – it draws believers together rather than instigating division. Divine wisdom also produces a spirit that is “gentle,” from a word that can also be translated “gracious.” It suggests a willingness to accept another’s affront without retaliation, to respond with forbearance and patience rather than with anger.

Reverence for God produces a heart that is “willing to yield,” from a term that can mean “open to reason” or “willing to listen.” There is no outward show of partiality, no inner problem of hypocrisy. The wisdom that comes from God leads the believer to a gracious life marked by consistent love.

Persons who embody such gentle wisdom promote peace in their family, in their church, in their world. There is a reward for this. Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9). James adds “And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace” (3:18).

Harsh cravings
(4:1-4)

James had apparently learned of serious dissension among his readers, and now turns to address it. “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?” (4:1). Outer conflicts between people often result from the inner conflicts of individuals who are torn between the way of Christ and the way of the world.

James uses vivid military terms (literally, “wars” and “fightings”). The plural forms suggest that he was not...
addressing an isolated instance, but a persistent problem. Most of us know what it is like to face a chronic war within, prompted by our inner “cravings” (the Greek term is the root of our word “hedonism”). Selfish desires keep us at war with ourselves, and that inevitably leads to conflict with others.

How severe was the conflict? James talks as if his readers were murdering each other in the aisles (4:2a)! That could make church growth difficult. James’s language was intentionally shocking, but should probably be taken as hyperbole. He wanted his readers to understand the gravity and the consequences of their behavior. He was not the first: In Matt. 5:21-22, Jesus also suggested that hostile words were akin to murder.

Violence doesn’t necessarily require blood in the aisles. It is not difficult to murder someone’s reputation, to kill a friendship, or to shatter someone’s spirit. People who are ruled by selfish motives often leave broken hearts and wounded feelings in their wake.

What is it that the members want so badly that they are willing to “murder” their fellow Christians in order to get it? In ancient churches as well as modern ones, the most likely answer would be the same: power. Every church conflict has its roots in a struggle for control, whether doctrinal or decorative. Jesus had made it clear that while power struggles were in fact the way of the world, his followers were called instead to humble service (Luke 22:24-27).

James concludes the thought with a curious sentence: “You have not because you ask not.” People have often taken that verse out of context to support a gospel of prosperity, but James meant nothing of the sort. “You ask and do not receive,” he wrote, “because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures” (4:3). His readers were seeking what they wanted, not what they needed.

Effective prayer must be offered for the right reason and derive from a right relationship with God. James implies that many of his readers are far from God and do not have their prayers answered because they are living in spiritual adultery. Like Israel before them, they had become such friends of the world that they had become enemies of God (4:4).

As with the reference to murder, James probably speaks of “adultery” in a figurative sense, but that makes it no less serious. Earlier, he had used murder and adultery to illustrate the seriousness of partiality (2:11). Now, he charges that selfish living is just as harmful to one’s relationship with God as adultery is devastating to a marriage. There is a limit to how friendly a married man can be with another woman and still be true to his wife. And, there is a limit to how friendly we can be with the ways of the world and still be faithful to God.

This is not to suggest that we should isolate ourselves in a cloister. We cannot be the salt of the earth and the light of the world if we separate ourselves entirely. We can be in the world without being of the world (cf. Rom. 12:2, 1 John 2:15).

James charges his readers with spiritual adultery against God whenever they choose to devote greater love to the world than to God, a practice that creates both distance from God and division within the church.

Deep longings (vv. 5-10)

James’s words are harsh, but not hopeless. He thinks of his readers as being far from God, but he wants them to know that God desires to be near, and feels sorrow when we follow the way of the world. James emphasizes this point with what appears to be a familiar quotation: “Or do you suppose that it is for nothing that the scripture says, ‘God yearns jealously for the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?’” (4:5). Having demonstrated how far his readers have come from God, James offers advice for those who desire a closer relationship. His counsel takes the form of 10 imperative verbs. First, Christians are to submit themselves to God, and to resist the devil (4:7). Consciously, they are to draw near to God (4:8a) by recognizing the depth of their sin. “Cleanse your hands” and “purify your hearts” (4:8b) suggest repentance from both sins of action and sins of motive. Since Jews often prayed with upraised hands, the symbolism of “clean hands” was especially graphic.

“Lament and mourn and weep, let your laughter be turned into mourning” (4:9) exhorts the believers to a deep and heart-felt repentance. James is not talking about a half-hearted “I’m sorry.” Remember that he has accused his readers of murderous attitudes and spiritual adultery. When a spouse confesses to an adulterous relationship, a simple “I’m sorry” is not enough. Serious lamenting and mourning and weeping are appropriate to demonstrate one’s deep awareness of guilt, sorrow for sin, and commitment to future faithfulness. Nothing less will do.

The final imperative, “Humble yourselves before the Lord” (4:10), echoes the first command, “submit yourselves to the Lord.” James has been hitting on the issue of human pride throughout the letter. When people rebel against God, they choose to trust their own judgment instead of God’s commands. True repentance is impossible without the humility that makes one obedient to God’s teaching.

James’s instructions call for serious change. The good news is that three of his commands are combined with promises. These assure us that those who resist temptation can overcome it, those who draw near to God will find God drawing near to them, and those who humble themselves before God will be elevated by God (4:7, 8, 10).

Isn’t that what we want? To defeat temptation? To feel close to God, and to be drawn into closer fellowship with the Lord who is both perfect power and perfect love?

Which will we choose? Far, or near? BT
How often do you pray – really? We bow our heads in church while others pray, and may say a perfunctory blessing at the table. We may breathe a quick “God help me” before tackling some uncomfortable or daunting task, but how many of us spend extended time in prayer? Do we need to?

Fortunately, the benefits of prayer are not measured by the time we spend at it, but the attitude and spirit we bring to it. As James came to the end of his letter to Jewish Christians scattered throughout the world, he returned to a subject that began the letter (1:5-8) and focused his closing words on prayer.

Praying in sorrow and joy (v. 13)

James knew that everyone experiences ups and downs in life, and encouraged believers to be faithful in prayer through every season. But James also knew there are right and wrong ways to pray, prayers that are effective and prayers that are mere noise.

Has your prayer life changed through the years? The innocent, trusting prayers of our childhood often give way to more manipulative and self-focused prayers as we grow older. When we don’t get what we ask for, the disappointment may lead us to stop praying altogether, or to reduce our prayers to an empty formality. Perhaps there were persons in James’s audience who had given up on prayer.

James’s first bit of prayer advice speaks to those who are facing difficulties: “Are any among you suffering? They should pray” (v. 13a). What options do we have in times of trial? We can be stoic or in denial. We can cry. We can complain. We can call attention to ourselves with a big pity party. Or, we can pray.

Note that James offers no instruction as to what to pray for. He does not tell us to pray that the suffering will be over, or for acceptance in the midst of suffering, or for those who have caused the suffering. Any of those prayers might be appropriate, and James apparently trusts the reader to know. The important thing is not what we pray, but that we pray. In times of suffering, the presence of God is especially needful.

Suffering is real, but so is joy, and that is also a time for prayer. “Are any cheerful?” James asked: “They should sing songs of praise” (v. 13b). And we should, too. But how often do we mark happy days by spending extra time in prayer? Sorrow often drives us to our knees with empty hearts or darkened spirits, but joy can leave us so full of good feelings that prayer may be the last thing that comes to mind.

Praying in sickness (vv. 14-15a)

James’s readers lived in a time when good medicine was virtually non-existent. Poor people had no access to such physicians as there were. They were left to rely on magical charms, medicinal oils, or visits to a shrine of Asclepius in search of healing. James urges his readers to put their trust in God rather than in superstition.

How are we to understand this text, which seems to offer a blanket promise that God will heal those who call on the elders of the church to anoint them with oil and to pray for them? Some believers have taken James’s words so literally that they limit their medical care to the realm of prayer. Christian bookstores often carry small bottles of olive oil from Israel for use in anointing the sick as they follow James’s advice. Nevertheless, we know that people often remain sick, suffer, and die.

Additional background information online where you see the “Digging Deeper” icon
confess your sins to one another, and James appears to be speaking of corpo-
prayers of one person can save another.
the scriptures do not teach that the called for the elders is praying, too:
saved, that they will be raised up, and
most potent healing of all.
bring balm to the sick. Salvation is the
A prayerful visit from the elders would
prayer leads to the forgiveness of sin.
this statement with a promise that such
God’
life for those who give themselves into
ing a guarantee of physical healing
broken souls of those who seek him.
spirits. God may not always heal our
leading up to today’s text (5:7-11).
It may be that James is not promis-
ing a guarantee of physical healing
after all, but the assurance of eternal
resurrection at the last day – which
James had discussed in the verses
with Elijah (cf. 1 Kg. 18:1).
inspiration regarding the power of
prayer. Elijah once prayed that it would
not rain, and there was no rain for three
and a half years – until Elijah changed
his prayer and asked for the drought
to be broken (cf. 1 Kings 17-18). The
reader should remember, however, that,
as a prophet, Elijah acted on God’s
instructions rather than his own initia-
tive, and the vocal prayer was designed
as a public affirmation that God was
with Elijah (cf. 1 Kg. 18:1).
Prayers of the truly faithful are
always offered in the context of God’s
will (cf. 4:15), not our own. James
closes the section by calling on the
prophet Elijah as both illustration and
inspiration regarding the power of
prayer. Elijah once prayed that it would
not rain, and there was no rain for three
and a half years – until Elijah changed
his prayer and asked for the drought
to be broken (cf. 1 Kings 17-18). The
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as a prophet, Elijah acted on God’s
instructions rather than his own initia-
tive, and the vocal prayer was designed
as a public affirmation that God was
with Elijah (cf. 1 Kg. 18:1).
James has warned against presump-
tion throughout his letter, and he
certainly would not have Christians
assume that they can tell God what to
do or whom to heal. If we cannot make
assumptions about our own life (4:13-
15), we can hardly presume to know
God’s will for others. Still, it is always
appropriate to pray for one another.
In doing so, we assist each other in
our spiritual growth and sense of
“connectedness” with God, so that we
experience forgiveness. In the mutual
confession of sins and in the shared
prayers of the church, there is great
power indeed.

Praying in sin
(vv. 15b-18)
When James speaks of praying for
the sick, he promises that they will be
saved, that they will be raised up, and
that their sins will be forgiven. This
implies that the sick person who has
called for the elders is praying, too: the scriptures do not teach that the
prayers of one person can save another.
James appears to be speaking of corpo-
rate prayer when he says: “Therefore
confess your sins to one another, and
pray for one another, so that you may be
healed” (v. 16a).
The greatest healing we can experience is the healing of our wounded
spirits. God may not always heal our broken bodies, but will always heal the broken souls of those who seek him. As
the author of 1 John reminds us: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse
us from all unrighteousness” (1:9).
The prayers of the righteous make a difference, James insists: they are “powerful and effective.” However, those who think prayer is about getting
what we want must not overlook the word “righteous.” The prayers of the righteous are powerful and effective.
In this context, being righteous is not defined by pure living alone, but by
devotion to the will of God. Earlier, James had noted that the elders should
anoint persons “in the name of the
Lord” (v. 14).

Praying together
(vv. 19-20)
James closes this section by reminding
believers that we should not only be patient in our own attitudes and faithful
in our prayer life, but that we should also look out for others. James seems
particularly concerned about those who grow tired of waiting for Christ’s return
and leave the church. He urges believers to care enough about their wandering
brothers and sisters to go after them:
“My brothers and sisters, if anyone
among you wanders from the truth and
is brought back by another, you should
know that whoever brings back a sinner
from wandering will save the sinner’s
soul from death and will cover a multi-
tude of sins” (vv. 19-20).

Could it be true that “the church
that prays together stays together”? James believes that the conscientious
church will not just stand by when one
of its members wanders from God.
Rather, members will take notice when
fellow believers are missing. They will
pray for them. And, they will go after
them and try to bring them back into the
supportive fellowship of the church.

We must be careful not to wrongly interpret v. 20 as a promise that the
one who reclaims a wandering brother
obtains bonus forgiveness points, like
a bounty paid to cowboys who retrieve
lost cattle. It is the errant brother or
sister who finds renewed forgiveness
and thus is saved from spiritual death.
In a sense, this is what James is attempting to do with his entire letter. He sees
the churches wandering away from
their faithfulness to God, and seeks by
his loving advice to lead them toward repentance and restoration, to forgive-
ness and faith.

As the plainspoken apostle comes
to the end of his letter, he leaves believ-
ers with a call to get serious about their
faith, because following Jesus is serious
business. If James had spoken our
modern vernacular, he might have said
“Put up or shut up.”

Well? BT
Baptist Seminary of Kentucky has been accredited by the Association of Theological Schools for its Master of Divinity degree. The seminary, started in 2002, is housed on the campus of Georgetown University in Georgetown, Ky. Greg Earwood is president.

Rhonda Abbott Blevins is the new coordinator for the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, having previously served as the group’s associate coordinator for missions. She comes from Tellico Village Community Church in London, Tenn., where she has been associate pastor for congregational leadership.

John Bunn, pastor emeritus of the First Baptist Church of Sylva, N.C., died on June 25.

Laura Edgar, a 2015 graduate of the Baptist Seminary of Kentucky, is associate pastor for youth, college and young adults at Auburn (Ala.) First Baptist Church.

James Mitchell Harrison is regional executive minister for American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts, USA.

Haggray to lead American Baptist home missions

The Board of Directors of American Baptist Home Mission Societies (ABHMS) unanimously voted June 24 to call Jeffrey Haggray as the new executive director. He succeeds Aidsand E. Wright-Riggins III who will retire in October.

Haggray, former executive director of the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and former pastor of First Baptist Church in the City of Washington, now serves as interim pastor of Zion Missionary Baptist Church in the Atlanta suburb of Roswell, Ga.

According to an ABHMS release, search committee chair Clifford Johnson said Haggray’s vitality, knowledge and experience will enable “a bright future” for domestic missions.

American Baptist Churches, USA general secretary Roy Medley also commended Haggray for his leadership skills in reaching across racial/ethnic lines as well as the theological spectrum.

“He has a passion for the life of the church as it faces the challenges of ministry in North America and the capacity to lead ABHMS in its response,” said Medley.

A native of Savannah, Ga., Haggray holds degrees from the University of Virginia, Yale Divinity School and Wesley Theological Seminary.

Minister of Children and Families:

First Baptist Church, Jefferson, Ga., located between Athens and Gainesville off Hwy. 129 and three miles off I-85, is seeking a minister of children and families. FBC is dually aligned with the CBF and the SBC and adheres to the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message. Our church has both traditional and contemporary services of worship. The ideal candidate will be a seminary graduate or have a degree related to the Christian education of children and families, and have some ministry experience. This candidate should be called to ministry as a Christian vocation, to children’s and family ministry as a primary calling, and be able to affirm FBC’s mission, vision and values. A job description is posted at fbcjefferson.org. Submit résumés to Fred Gurley, Personnel Committee Chairman, First Baptist Church, 81 Institute St., Jefferson, GA 30549.

Classifieds

Senior Pastor: Kirkwood Baptist Church (KBC), founded in 1870 in St. Louis County, Mo., is seeking a senior pastor. KBC has been a leader in moderate Baptist life since 1990 and has been actively affiliated with the national CBF and CBF Heartland since their founding. We worship in a warm, traditional/liturgical style. Christian education is based on biblical authority and a respect for open inquiry with the goal of understanding and applying the radical claims of the gospel to all areas of life. KBC has a long commitment to cooperative and hands-on missions. The senior pastor we seek will possess strong preaching skills, be involved in moderate Baptist life, be committed to Baptist distinctives, and have the desire and ability to lead the congregation spiritually and administratively. Interested candidates are encouraged to visit our website, kirkwoodbaptist.org, to get to know us better. Send résumés to Pastor Search Committee, Kirkwood Baptist Church, 211 N. Woodlawn Ave., Kirkwood, MO 63122, or to pastorsearch@kirkwoodbaptist.org.

In the Know

This 224-page narrative includes more than 160 photos and illustrations, presents selected accounts of the lives and work of well-known and lesser-known Baptist men and women, and gives attention to groups generally overlooked within Baptist circles: women, ethnic minorities, and small Baptist denominations.

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The Bible in just six words

Hemingway’s “For sale: baby shoes, never worn” is the most famous six-word story, but others have also tried to tell an entire story in just six words:

“Hmm, that’s new,” the doctor said.
Python eats porcupine. Regrets it later.
Convicted hacker escapes using hidden file.
Only child, but never the favorite.
“Don’t marry her,” warned future me.
My headstone was a participation trophy.

What if we tried to tell the stories in the Bible with only six words?

God makes good stuff really fast. (Genesis 1)
Sly snake. Sneaky woman. Stupid man. (Genesis 2-3)
Should have created more brotherly love. (Genesis 4)
Rain. Boat. Animals. Noah gets drunk. (Genesis 6-8)
Tall tower falls. No United Nations. (Genesis 11)
Abraham leaves for God knows where. (Genesis 12)
Isaac starts to hate Father’s Day. (Genesis 22)
Mommma’s boy tricks slow big brother. (Genesis 27)
Climbing Jacob’s ladder makes great song. (Genesis 28)
Jacob is, surprisingly, a big-time wrestler. (Genesis 32)
Joseph dreams, tells brothers. Road trip. (Genesis 37)
Potiphar’s wife acts like a desperate housewife. (Genesis 39)
Pharaoh’s dream gets Joseph early parole. (Genesis 41)
Baby in boat. Questionable parenting decision. (Exodus 2)
Blood. Frogs. Gnats. Flies. Six more. (Exodus 7-12)
Charlton Heston parts the Red Sea. (Exodus 14)
Ten things you should not do. (Exodus 20)
Aaron learns to make golden calf. (Exodus 32)
Ikea-style instructions for a tabernacle. (Exodus 35-40)
Ten cowardly spies. Two James Bonds. (Numbers 13-14)
Poisonous serpents. Bronze pole. Confused commentators. (Numbers 21)
Talking donkey smarter than the preacher. (Numbers 22-24)
How’d they know where Rahab lived? (Joshua 2)
Jericho’s thin walls can’t handle trumpets. (Joshua 6)
Sun stands still. Explain that, Copernicus. (Joshua 10)
Samson becomes argument for long hair. (Judges 13-16)
Cute foreigner seduces rich old farmer. (Ruth)
King Saul is candidate for recall. (1 Samuel 16)
David doesn’t need a 10-foot pole. (1 Samuel 17)
David and Jonathan. Batman and Robin. (1 Samuel 18)
King David dances in his skivvies. (2 Samuel 6)
Absalom’s hair gets him hung up. (2 Samuel 18)
Solomon passes on cash, chooses wisdom. (1 Kings 3)
Solomon says, “Cut the baby!” “No!” (1 Kings 3)
Solomon has more wives than wisdom. (1 Kings 11)
Ahab marries Jezebel; should’ve dated more. (1 Kings 16-22)
Elijah sets off big fireworks display. (1 Kings 18)
Dogs lick up Ahab’s blood. Yuck. (1 Kings 22)
Elijah takes fast and furious chariot. (2 Kings 2)
Naaman bathes in muddy river, spotless! (2 Kings 5)
Beauty pageant winner takes down anti-Semite. (Esther)
Job’s wife gets raw deal, too. (Job)
Daniel refuses meat. Lions refuse Daniel. (Daniel 1-6)
Whale eats upsetting prophet, throws up. (Jonah)
Christmas: only cold day in Bible. (Luke 2)
Wise Men too dumb to stay. (Matthew 2)
King Herod has no Christmas spirit. (Matthew 2)
Simeon stops looking for blue blankets. (Luke 2)
Twelve-year-old Jesus gets lost at church. (Luke 2)
John the Baptist, Willie Nelson’s haircut. (Matthew 3)
Jesus gets baptized. Father attends ceremony. (Matthew 3)
Satan tempts Jesus with temple bungee-jump. (Matthew 4)
Jesus calls. Zebedee loses free labor. (Matthew 4)
Jesus heals mother-in-law; son-in-law mostly relieved. (Matthew 4)
Nazarite congregation unhappy with the preacher. (Luke 4)
Blessed are the who? For sure? (Matthew 5)
Jesus suggests fasting: church potlucks nonetheless. (Matthew 6)
Jesus tells storm to shut up. (Mark 4)
Jesus brings Sauvignon Blanc to party. (John 2)
Nic at Night, prominent minister flummoxed. (John 3)
Jesus takes a little boy’s lunch. (John 6)
Adulterous woman caught. Where’s the man? (John 8)
Jesus walks on water. Don’t try. (Matthew 14)
Good Samaritan makes priest look bad. (Luke 10)
Rich fool’s sons inherit big barns. (Luke 12)
Fatted calf wishes prodigal stayed away. (Luke 15)
Lazarus waves at wealthy weenie in hell. (Luke 16)
Leper comes back, provides Thanksgiving text. (Luke 17)
Rich guy’s name not in Bible. (Luke 18)
Sycamore tree in Jericho becomes famous. (Luke 19)
Jesus misses Lazarus’ funeral, makes amends. (John 11)
Jesus rides donkey, but crowds cheer. (Luke 19)
Jesus curses defenseless fig tree. Huh? (Mark 11)
Jesus ruins stewardship day at temple. (Matthew 21)
Widow’s two pennies, stewardship day saved. (Matthew 23)
Jesus washes feet, doesn’t catch on. (John 13)
Peter promises to be brave; fails. (Matthew 26)
Jesus promises the cross, then delivers. (Matthew 27)
Men hide, women go to tomb. (Luke 24)
Christ is risen, is risen indeed! (Luke 24)
Spirit interrupts first church business meeting. (Acts 2)
Stephen should have rotated off diaconate. (Acts 6-7)
Fire-breathing Saul knocked off high horse. (Acts 9)
Paul in prison: favorite hymn night. (Acts 16)
Old Jerusalem done, New Jerusalem upgrade. (Revelation 21-22)

What if we try to sum up the whole Bible in six words?
We mess up. God loves anyway. BT
Keys to a healthy approach to change

By Michael S. Lea

Earlier this year our congregation voted to adopt new guiding documents that will replace our existing constitution and bylaws. The process that led to this vote was both exciting and challenging.

Here are some keys to what made this process and the acceptance of this change a healthy journey for our congregation:

**There was clarity about the purpose for change.**

The decision to change to our existing constitution and bylaws was grounded in our church's commitment to live into our vision, mission and core values. Several years ago, our church completed an envisioning process through which we identified the church's core values and prayerfully developed the vision and mission we believe God has given our church.

Within the first two years after this process, leaders evaluated our constitution and bylaws to determine whether it was consistent with the newly revealed values, vision and mission. They eventually determined that it was necessary to rewrite these documents that helped guide our church's life together.

The words of Jesus in Matt. 9:17 provided inspiration, for the majority of leadership agreed that simply editing the existing constitution and bylaws to fit our values, vision and mission would be like putting new wine into old wineskins.

**We followed our congregational process.**

Every congregation has a process by which it makes decisions. For us, it was very important to clarify the process for going about such change and to follow that process.

We looked both to our existing constitution and bylaws and to recent experience as guides. In the end, the process was one led by key leadership, including the Constitution and Bylaws Committee, and involved congregational meetings that consisted of guided conversations that included all members.

Even if everyone didn't fully agree with the outcome, they confirmed the process by which we went about this significant change.

**Key lay leaders had ownership and buy-in.**

As the pastor, this change was not my own personal pet project for the church. I certainly have had influence in helping lead the church through this process, but the actual movement toward making a shift occurred because a significant number of key lay leaders had ownership and buy-in.

A majority in the church wanted to make a change, and they were clear about why change was needed. Yet, they struggled with how to go about such a change.

My role as pastor has become an enabler and coach who has empowered the congregation, particularly key lay leaders, to take steps toward following what they believe is God's direction for the church.

**We communicated often, openly and clearly.**

Staff and lay leaders communicated as often as possible through the various outlets of the church's communication system to keep the congregation informed and to solicit their involvement. Church newsletters, social media, our church's website, congregational meetings, sermons, worship, Bible studies and prayer meetings have all been conduits of communicating and framing this process.

We also have been intentionally transparent about the work, making leadership available for private conversations with church members and addressing questions and concerns that have been raised during the process.

My role as pastor has become an enabler and coach who has empowered the congregation.

**We didn’t make unanimity our goal.**

Those leading this process knew that not everyone would agree with the change. As one church member confessed in the process, “I simply don’t like change.”

So, we didn’t make unanimity a goal in the process. Instead, the church welcomed disagreement through mutual love and respect in open conversation.

This environment allowed for healthy dialogue that was difficult, at times, but ultimately ensured that everyone was heard. This approach also gave a broader perspective to and influenced the development of the new guiding documents.

**We exercised patience and persistence.**

The approval of the new guiding documents was about a four- to five-year process. For some churches that may sound like an eternity, while for others it may sound like a rushed decision.

As a congregation, we genuinely moved at the pace that worked for us. We simply were not ready to make this shift immediately after our envisioning process.

However, if we would have waited much longer, the energy for such a change might have diminished and the failure to make a decision, one way or another, could have left the church in perpetual identity limbo. We were both patient and persistent in following God’s leadership in this move.

**We built in time for transition(s).**

Even though the church approved the new guiding documents in the spring of this year, the new documents and the new structure and ministry paradigm that the documents create will not go into effect until January 2016.

This gives adequate time for the church to do the necessary work that will hopefully lead to a healthy transition in the implementation of this new way of life together. BT

Michael S. Lea is pastor of First Baptist Church of West Jefferson, N.C.
This two-day experience offers a closer look at Baptist involvement in and reaction to the Civil War — as well as how the war’s legacy continues to impact American society a century and a half later.

The setting, rich in Civil War history, will enhance the learning experience.

**THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR @150**

**OCTOBER 22-23**

Chattanooga, Tenn.

Leaders: Bruce Gourley, Bobby Lovett, John Pierce

Sponsored by *Baptists Today*, Baptist History and Heritage Society, First Baptist Church of Chattanooga, and Tennessee Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22**

First Baptist Church
401 Gateway Ave.
Chattanooga, Tenn.

5:30 p.m. – Registration and Reception
6:00 p.m. – Dinner / Presentations
   Panel Discussions

“Who Is on the Lord’s Side? How Baptists North and South, White and Black, Claimed Divine Favor”
   —Bruce T. Gourley, Ph.D., Executive Director, Baptist History and Heritage Society

“Legacy and Loss: How the Civil War Still Impacts American Society”
   —Bobby Lovett, Ph.D., Retired Senior Professor, Tennessee State University

Dialogue — Facilitated by John D. Pierce, Executive Editor of *Baptists Today*

Fellowship/Book Signings

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 23**

Tour of Civil War Sites

Chickamauga & Chattanooga National Military Park is the oldest and largest Civil War park. Historians will share perspectives on the war during visits to Lookout Mountain (site of the “Battle Above the Clouds” and Point Park) and the Chickamauga Battlefield.

**REGISTRATION FEE** of $45 per person includes all programming, dinner and tours. Register online at nurturingfaith.net or send a check payable to *Baptists Today*, P.O. Box 6318, Macon, GA 31210. Deadline to register is Oct. 12. After that date, call (478) 301-5655 to check on availability. Questions? Call (478) 719-1033.

**HOUSING**

Rooms at the discounted rate of $139 (plus tax and parking) are available at the Courtyard by Marriott, 200 Chestnut St., near the beautiful riverfront in downtown Chattanooga. To reserve a single king or double queen room at this price, call (423) 755-0871 (ask for *Baptists Today* group) by Sept. 10.
HERO AND ANTICHRIST. Champion of true faith and enemy of God. Architect of a glorious new era in human history and tyrant of an unparalleled dark age.

Contemporary opinions about Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), principle author of the Declaration of Independence and the nation’s third president, tended to the extremes. Baptists en masse adored the man, while many other Christians despised him.

In the 1820s the first Christian Right movement coalesced and, in opposition to Jefferson’s freedom ideals, sought to turn a secular America into a Christian nation. Until the 1830s the Philadelphia public library, reflecting widespread public views of Jefferson as anti-christ, refused to carry any book concerning the life and writings of the former president.

And yet, among scholars and the public alike to this day, Thomas Jefferson’s freedom legacy, anchored in the ideals of human equality and justice, reflects America’s identity more than any other president in the nation’s history.

The story of Thomas Jefferson is the story of America, an America ever complex in matters civil and religious.

A slave-owning but abolitionist-spousing Virginian, Jefferson was raised an Anglican, his colony’s mandated state religion. As a young man of the gentry he was elected to an Anglican vestry, a governing board of civil and religious elites.

While attending college at William and Mary in Williamsburg, his studies of the Enlightenment pointed him toward rejection of Christian doctrines. Later, in a letter to a nephew in 1787, Jefferson advised the young man to pursue rationalism and question “even the existence of god; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.”

Essentially deistic, Jefferson envisioned a benevolent God who had little, if any, interest in humanity’s affairs. With Enlightenment thinking as his basis for truth, he seemingly walked a fine if commonplace line between private disdain of religious orthodoxy contrasted with judicial utilization of religious symbols as social devices. In each of the communities Jefferson lived (Charlottesville, Philadelphia and Washington), he customarily gave financial donations to all the churches in town, although infrequently attending services.

In short, Jefferson reflected a time in which few Americans attended church but almost everyone believed in God in some fashion or another.

To the disappointment of traditional Christians, Jefferson shared with religious dissenters the conviction that state churches should be abolished.

Allied with Virginia’s dissenters in the early 1780s, Jefferson advocated for religious liberty for all and church-state separation, foundational Baptist principles since the sect’s beginnings in the pre-Enlightenment, early 17th century. Bolstered by thousands of dissenters’ religious liberty petitions, Jefferson penned and state legislators enacted the 1786 Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom.

Marrying traditional Baptist principles with Jefferson’s Enlightenment worldview, the statute became the basis for the religious clauses of the 1791 U.S. First Amendment separating church from state: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

In the years following Jefferson’s governorship, he ascended the ladder of political leadership in the newly-minted United States: minister to France, secretary of state, vice president and, finally, president.

By the time of the 1800 presidential election pitting Jefferson against John Adams, the religious divide in America was stark. On one side stood traditional religious leaders, adherents of theocratic ideology modeled in many of the former colonies; on the other, secularists and dissenters — especially Baptists. Adams, despite his unorthodox religiosity and opposition to theocracy, as a churched candidate garnered the support of the former, while Jefferson enjoyed the enthusiastic accolades of the latter.

Many traditionalists labeled Jefferson an atheist and “arch-infidel” intent on burning Bibles in America. Baptists, other dissenters and secularists championed Jefferson as one of their own. Jefferson won the bitter contest, as well as the 1804 presidential election. During his eight presidential years, however, the national schisms remained.

During his presidency many Baptist groups North and South wrote Jefferson, praising his commitment to church-state separation. Frequently, Jefferson responded to such letters, offering words of appreciation for Baptists’ support and their commitment to mutually shared religious principles.

One of Jefferson’s letters, composed in 1802, epitomized the tone of his presidency regarding religious matters. Responding to Danbury Baptists of Connecticut, Jefferson appropriated, intentionally or not, early Baptist language to describe church-state separation.

The First Amendment established a “wall of separation between church and state,” Jefferson noted, echoing a metaphor first used by American Baptist founder Roger Williams in 1640 to describe the appropriate division between religious faith and earthly governance. Writing in 1808 to Baltimore Baptists, the president referred to “this happy separation” between church and state.

Yet during Jefferson’s presidency the “wall of separation” faced challenges in Washington, D.C., the nation’s newly-constructed, but not yet complete, capitol. For a number of years the only large buildings in town were government facilities.

Meanwhile legislators, acknowledging the place of religion in American culture, selected local ministers to serve as chaplains, tasked with
opening services in prayer and presiding at funeral and memorial services. In 1800, prior to the construction of local houses of worship, the chaplains asked for and received permission to use the “Chamber” of the House of Representatives for community non-sectarian services.

In reality, the community weekly service became a platform for wide-ranging religious discussions, social events with no religious emphasis, and thinly-veiled politicized discourse. Jefferson sometimes attended these weekly gatherings, which lasted through his tenure and beyond. It was here in January 1802 that the Baptist evangelist and religious liberty hero John Leland presented Jefferson with the famous mammoth cheese, replete with a discourse praising the president’s commitment to the principles of liberty.

Although seeming as harmless the eclectic, chaplain-sponsored Sunday gatherings of Washington’s elite families that bisected the religious, social and political dynamics of the city, President Jefferson refused to follow his predecessors Washington and Adams in proclaiming national days of fasting and prayer.

In private correspondence, however, Jefferson expressed religion frankly. “I am a Christian,” he acknowledged in an 1803 letter, opposed to “the corruptions of Christianity” but open to “the genuine precepts of Jesus himself.”

In 1816 he reiterated that “I am a real Christian,” and “the Platonists, who call me infidel, and themselves Christians and preachers of the gospel” are not. Often condemnatory of Christian ministers, in an 1821 letter to John Adams he called preachers “the greatest enemies to the doctrines of Jesus.”

Deistic and Unitarian — anti-Trinitarian — principles infused his correspondence.

From 1804 to about 1820, Jefferson assembled together the fragments of the Gospels to which he subscribed. Now known as the “Jefferson Bible,” these efforts he described as his attempt to “abstract” Jesus’ true identity and teachings from the rubbish in which it is buried. He viewed his work as separating “the diamond from the dung hill.”

Dismissing the supernatural elements of the New Testament, Jefferson posited Jesus as “a man, of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, (and an) enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions of divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition by being gibbeted according to the Roman law.”

In 1819 Jefferson declared, “I am a sect by myself.” Religion, Jefferson noted several times in correspondence, is a private matter between the individual “and his maker.”

What, exactly, was true Christianity in Jefferson’s mind? Perhaps an 1801 letter provides the president’s most succinct answer.

True “Christian religion,” Jefferson declared, “is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expansion of the human mind.” Nonetheless, Jefferson’s commitment to human liberty did not lead him to release the bulk of his slaves.

On July 4, 1826 Jefferson passed away, dying on the same day as did John Adams. Whether he believed in heaven and hell is questionable, but there was no doubting that he took to his grave a conviction that Christianity had little to do with the bulk of the Bible or the clergy at large. The third president’s legacy was that of atheism in the minds of many Christians, yet Baptists and other religious dissenters of old were enormously grateful for his role in separating church and state, first in Virginia, then in America.

Amid the controversies, Jefferson’s religious contributions were among his most cherished accomplishments. As explicitly instructed by Jefferson himself, the marker over his grave reads:

HERE WAS BURIED
THOMAS JEFFERSON
AUTHOR OF THE
DECLARATION
OF
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE
OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
AND FATHER OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

A new release

The 150th anniversary of the American Civil War provides a grand opportunity to consider precisely what Baptists — North and South — were saying from their pulpits, in the press, and through official resolutions from that time. Bruce Gourley brings such perspectives to life by making good use of careful and significant research, creatively taking a chronological approach using primary sources.

He highlights the role of various kinds of Baptists, for example: Robert Smalls, Thomas Hill Watts, Basil Manly Sr., Gov. Joseph Brown, Gov. Sam Houston, Isaac Taylor Tichenor, Crawford H. Toy, and Frank and Jesse James — most of whom went on to great prominence in politics, religion or education.

Gourley’s firsthand accounts of how Baptists on both sides sought and claimed divine favor and righteousness provide lessons as plentiful as the statues and markers that dot the many battlefields where the devastation has given way to peaceful fields and quiet woodlands.
ACHISH, Israel — I didn’t go digging in Israel to search for God, but found one anyway.

This one, however, was not the God I first learned about in Sunday school, but the image of a deity worshipped by the Canaanites more than 3,200 years ago.

The bronze figurine follows the typical pattern of what archaeologists call a “smiting god,” and is probably a representation of Baal, the weather god who was so popular among the Canaanites and a constant temptation to ancient Hebrews.

LUCKY DAY

It was my lucky day, a happy highlight of three weeks of digging.

“Smiting god” images have been found at several sites in the Levant, and are typically portrayed in a threatening pose, striding forward with the right hand brandishing a club — as if to smite those who do not worship them rightly. In Canaanite iconography, the tall, pointed hat is a divine crown.

So, how does one go about exhuming Bronze Age gods from the Judean hills?

After deciding that we wanted to experience an archaeological dig with significance to the Old Testament, my wife Susan and I joined the Fourth Expedition to Lachish, now in its third year.

The dig was directed by Yosef Garfinkel of Hebrew University, who invited us to join the expedition, and co-directed by Michael Hasel and Martin Klingbeil of Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tenn.

Lachish is about 30 miles southwest of Jerusalem, in the rolling hills of southern Judah. Occupied since the Pottery Neolithic period (6,000-4,500 BCE), Lachish became a powerful Canaanite city-state during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages, though it was largely subservient to Egypt.

The city was destroyed in the 12th century. The book of Joshua (10:31-34, 12:11) says the Israelites did it, though David Ussishkin, who excavated Lachish from 1973-1994, believes the Philistines may have been responsible.

In either case, the site remained largely unoccupied until an unknown king of Israel or Judah ordered that the city be rebuilt and fortified, probably as a defense against the powerful Philistines.
Lachish remained a strategic city in Judah throughout the period of the kings. When the Assyrian monarch Sennacherib conquered the city in 701 BCE, he was so proud of the feat that he decorated part of his palace with large reliefs depicting the siege. Lachish rebounded, fell victim to king Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE, and just prior to the Babylonian exile.

DIGGING LIFE

Archaeological digs do not happen by chance. They begin with the vision of an accomplished archaeologist who can persuade the Israel Antiquities Authority to grant permission for the excavation.

Garfinkel, Hasel and Klingbeil, in a seven-year dig at Khirbet Qeiyafa (the biblical Shaaraim), uncovered a one-period fortress city exhibiting clear urban planning. Radiocarbon dating placed it in the 10th century BCE, the days of the early monarchy. Garfinkel has argued convincingly that it was populated by Israelites from Judah.

The hope is that a five-year dig at Lachish — another day’s journey from Jerusalem — might find similar remains dating to the early monarchical period and shed light on Israel’s emergence as a political entity.

With permission granted, organizers must raise money from both institutional and individual sources; find a suitable place to house and feed participants; deal with logistical issues from equipment to transportation; handle administrative matters; and develop a strategic plan for the dig itself.

Previous digs have focused mainly on the southwestern and central portions of the tel (a mound composed of ruined cities superimposed on one another). A four-chambered city gate was found on the southwest side, where the Assyrian siege ramp and a defensive counter-ramp were built.

The central part of the tel was home to a huge palace or fortress complex. The gate complex and palace-fort contain the most massive architecture of the period yet found in Israel.

Garfinkel had a hunch that the city might have had a second gate, on the northeast side, near the city’s well. So he, along with Hasel and Klingbeil, decided to focus on three locations in that area, carefully laying out five-meter squares, with one-meter baulks between them.

After surveying, the squares are outlined with sand bags and the digging begins. Once the topsoil is removed, remains begin to appear from these periods:

(Level 1) Hellenistic and Persian
(Level 2) the late Israelite period that ended in 587 BCE
(Level 3) the Judean or Israeliite city that Sennacherib conquered in 701 BCE
(Level 4) an earlier fortified city that may have been damaged by an earthquake
(Level 5) the earliest Israeliite habitation
(Level 6) the Late Bronze Age Canaanite city
(Level 7) the Middle Bronze Age city

The current work is in search of Level 5, which is proving elusive.

REGIMENS

Life on an archaeological expedition feels like a cross between boot camp and summer camp, with a regimented schedule to organize the day. In Israel, the weekend is Friday and Saturday. The workweek starts on Sunday, as did the dig.

Volunteers arrived at Kedma Youth Village (a boarding school for at-risk youth during the school year) by late morning, had an early lunch, and left by 12:30 p.m. to dig until 8 p.m. Upon return, after a shower and a late dinner, we collapsed into bed.

Monday through Thursday, we arose early enough to get our gear ready, load the bus, and leave promptly at 4:40 a.m. Latecomers were left behind.

A 20-minute ride brought us to the foot of Lachish, where we’d climb the tel in the dim light of earliest dawn. Reaching the top, we could barely see the shipping container filled with work tools.

On arrival there was a mad rush as the supervisors of each square started filling wheelbarrows with big and small picks, heavy hoes, square and pointed trowels, dust pans, hard and soft brushes, lots of black buckets for dirt and fewer color buckets for finds, along with surveying equipment, a tool chest, and sifters made from wood and wire mesh.

After erecting the poles and screens that shade the workspace, the square supervisors gave instructions. We would dig in the early light, either quickly or more carefully, depending on the circumstances, until the camp staff shouted “Coffee break!”

We would stop briefly at 7 a.m. for coffee or tea, and the makings for peanut (or hazelnut) butter and jelly sandwiches. Fifteen minutes later we were digging again, with the sun climbing and our backs beginning to feel the pain.

Workers in some squares would dig and dump their soil in a waste pile, sometimes using a bucket chain if far below the surface. Other squares, such as ours, sifted every bucket in search of smaller finds that were missed in the initial digging: that’s how we uncovered a variety of beautiful beads — and the “smiting god.”

Diggings continued until 9 a.m., when breakfast, with an unchanging menu, was offered: tomatoes and cucumbers, tahini sauce, canned tuna, boiled eggs, soft cheese or yogurt, and some sort of corn flakes for those who prefer cereal. Tuna never tasted so good.

Thus fortified, we trudged back to the square for another two hours of digging, brushing, sifting, removing finds, and whatever else needed to be done. By this time it was really hot and we were covered with layers of dirt. The square supervisor constantly reminded us to drink water.

At 11 a.m. we paused briefly for a watermelon break, where an Israeli hybrid cantaloupe shaped like a football was usually available as well. Sometimes we’d have a few peaches, apples or lychees too.

A welcomed breeze usually picked up in late morning. With the breeze and the shade, the heat was more tolerable than the dust. We continued digging until 12:15 p.m. or so and then stopped to clean the site, finish the sifting, and gather the tools.

Soon we’d take down the tarp and roll the wheelbarrow back to the container where all the tools were sorted and stored. The finds of the day, carefully marked and collected in colored buckets, were whisked away in a truck while we tramped back down the dusty road to the bus.

MYSTERY

Lunch at Kedma is the only meal of the day that contains meat. The camp keeps kosher, so we used different plates and silverware for lunch and other meals, lest meat and dairy products should mingle (a rabbinic rule, not a biblical one).

After lunch we would take showers and a much-needed break until 4:30 p.m., when all hands were expected to wash the newly found pottery sherds.

Pottery washing continued until 6:30 — followed by a field school lecture from one of the professors or a visiting archaeologist before a late dinner.

Little time was left for trying to find a Wi-Fi signal and getting in touch with family or friends back home. Soon we were headed to bed with the knowledge that the alarm would go off again at 4 a.m., and that the following day would be very much like the previous one.

Yet, one great mystery remained: what we might find beneath the next layer of dirt. And that made it all worthwhile.
The first woman to serve as a chaplain in the U.S. Armed Forces was commissioned by the Navy in 1973. Lt. Col. Leah Botona Boling, a chaplain with the 154th Wing of the Hawaii Air National Guard, is carrying on that ministry tradition.

“I was probably around 6 years old when I first heard the word ‘chaplain,’” she said in an interview with Baptists Today.

Born and raised in a Southern Baptist family in the Southern Philippines in what was then called Mati, Davao Oriental, Leah recalled playing on the grounds of the Mati Baptist Hospital.

“One day while we were playing, I noticed an old lady, who was a member of our church, going into the emergency room,” she said. “I followed her and noticed that she was visiting patients and their families.”

Curious, Leah asked her mother why Lola (Filipino for “grandma”) Pada was going to the hospital. Her mother explained that Pada was a volunteer chaplain — and what that entailed.

CALLING

Years later, in 1985, Leah graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Customs Administration (BSCA) from the Holy Cross of Davao College. While doing an internship at the Bureau of Customs in Cagayan De Oro City, she was involved with Masterlife Discipleship Training.

“It was through this group that my calling into the ministry solidified,” said Leah. After much prayer, she decided to pursue theological education.

At the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary, Leah focused her studies on pastoral care and counseling. For an internship, she was immersed in three months of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) at a hospital.

Graduating from the seminary in 1990, she spent the following year in CPE residency at Makati Medical Center in Manila. She learned that several CPE centers in the U.S. were hiring for their residency programs. She applied and was accepted at Interfaith Ministries of Hawaii (now Pacific Health Ministries) in 1991.

While in Hawaii, Leah met and married her husband, Jeff, who was in the Air Force at that time. He introduced her to military chaplaincy.

‘FULFILLING TIMES’

Chaplain Leah Boling provides ministry among service members in Hawaii Air National Guard
INFLUENCES
Born and raised in what is now called Mati City, Leah attended school from kindergarten through high school. After college and seminary in the Philippines, she went to the College of William and Mary in Virginia for an Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) in Professional Counseling, finishing in 1996. While in Virginia, she was licensed in both marriage and family therapy (LMFT) and in professional counseling (LPC).

Beyond her academic training, Leah is quick to note the other significant shaping factors in her life and calling to ministry. “My mother is number one on my list of major influences,” she said. “She was very active in the church life from WMU to choir to teaching Sunday school. Even at a young age, she modeled for me what a woman can do in and for the church.”

“The next person is my oldest sister, Eva,” added Leah. “She fulfilled her role as the eldest sibling by helping my parents financially as well as my sister and me through college. In the Philippines, it is common practice for the eldest sibling to take on major responsibilities as a ‘second’ parent. My sister Eva did that and more!”

She acknowledged Kenny Mills, a Southern Baptist missionary in Mindanao at the time, as a third major influence. He led her discipleship training and his wife, Jenny, helped her as she struggled to respond to God’s call to the ministry.

MILITARY LIFE
While military chaplaincy was not on Leah’s radar when affirming a call to ministry, it fits her unique gifts.

“Just like church pastors, we get involved with the service members’ lives from birth to death,” she said. “However, one of the unique things about military chaplaincy is our ability to work in a pluralistic environment.”

“Even though I’m expected and mandated to perform according to my denominational endorser (Cooperative Baptist Fellowship), I am still able to work with other chaplains and service members of different faiths to ensure everyone’s freedom of religion,” she continued.

“We are not allowed to proselytize. However, if a service member broaches the topic about religion or their beliefs or faith, then we can definitely engage them and we can share our own beliefs and faith.”

REWARDS
In her 13 years of military chaplaincy, Leah has had many meaningful ministry experiences.

“I’ve performed weddings and burials for our service members. I have also helped intervene with someone who is suicidal. I have followed them up with visits to the mental health hospital to make sure they are receiving the appropriate care and support.”

She has found gratification in helping a couple that struggled through marital issues and came out of counseling in a much better place. She has shared in the grief of a couple through the death of their baby. And she has supported a service member who was sexually assaulted.

Hospital visits, she said, is a common and meaningful part of military chaplaincy. But there are challenges also.

“Having to work on a weekend or being deployed somewhere away from family when something important is going on in your home is challenging,” she said. “Missing major milestones in your child’s life because you have to be sent somewhere is another hardship.”

And unlike most ministers, military chaplains face fitness standards that require “having to maintain physical fitness through running, push-ups and sit-ups — whether you like it or not!”

“We are tested yearly, and we have to reach at least the minimum numbers to pass,” said Leah. “On the upside, it motivates me to stay active and healthy.”

Another challenge, she added, is that chaplains juggle family life and ministry while completing all the necessary Professional Military Education in order to get promoted. But it’s worth it all, she said.

“Being able to minister to the service members and their families in all aspects of their lives is rewarding,” said Leah. “It is a great privilege to be involved in our service members’ lives, knowing that they put their trust in you completely.”

Unlike some denominational and church settings, Leah has found military chaplaincy to be affirming of her as a female minister.

“I am so fortunate that at the 154th Wing of the Hawaii Air National Guard where I serve, everyone seems to embrace me,” she said. “I do not feel any sense of being discriminated against or being disrespected because I am a woman!”

U.S. Air National Guard photo by Jon Alderman/Released

Another unique component of military chaplaincy, she added, is the chaplain’s role in advising commanders with regard to moral, morale, spiritual and ethical issues. Then there is the unique combat setting.

“We also have the opportunity to be with our ‘parishioners’ in a combat environment and offer our ministry in the trenches,” she said.

“One of the most fulfilling times I’ve had was when I was deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom, Philippines, through the Joint Special Operations Task Force.”

In addition to her ministry with U.S. service members, Leah also ministered to the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ service members. She also served in the local communities through the orphanages and the center for street kids and human trafficking.

While leading worship is associated with ministry broadly, military chaplains have a different context: being able to provide worship services even in the midst of combat or conflict.

“What better way to be the representative of the Holy in the midst of deployment?” Leah asked rhetorically.

Chaplains need good training in counseling as well, she acknowledged.

“With the rise of issues such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), suicidality, depression, etc., it is crucial that a chaplain can quickly triage and make referrals when necessary,” she said.

“It is not enough that we are solid in our theological stance. We also need to be skilled in dealing with real human emotions.”

Relating to a wide range of persons is also critical, she added.

“A chaplain must have the ability to engage with everyone from the lowest ranking to the highest ranking member of the Command,” she said. “Someone has probably coined this term, but I call this ‘the ability to gab.’”
Israeli home renovation leads to significant discovery

JERUSALEM — An Israeli family experienced the surprise of a lifetime when, during a home renovation, workers discovered a 2,000-year-old Jewish ritual bath, called a mikvah.

The discovery lends weight to what some archaeologists have long suspected: that a Jewish community existed in Jerusalem’s Ein Kerem neighborhood during the time when Jesus lived.

Christians believe John the Baptist was born in Ein Kerem, a popular pilgrimage site and home to several monasteries and churches.

In July, the Israel Antiquities Authority briefly showed the ritual bath to journalists and awarded the owners, Oriah Shimshoni and her husband, Tal, a certificate of appreciation for reporting the discovery, which “contributed to the study of the Land of Israel,” the IAA said.

Reporting an archaeological find on one’s property — something that happens quite frequently in Israel — can be a disruptive process when the state’s archaeologists feel it necessary to excavate the site.

The 11.5-foot-by-8-foot bath was discovered complete.

“It is rock-hewn and meticulously plastered according to the Jewish laws of purity,” the IAA said. A stone staircase leads to the bottom of the immersion pool.

Pottery vessels dating to the first century and traces of fire that might constitute evidence of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple around the years 66-70 were discovered inside the bath.

In addition, fragments of stone vessels were found that were common during the period.

A mikvah is a pool of water — some of it from a natural source — in which observant married Jewish women are required to dip once a month, seven days after the end of their menstrual cycle.

Amit Re’em, an archaeologist, said the discovery was important because until now, the archaeological remains in Ein Kerem were “few and fragmented.”

The discovery of the ritual bath reinforces the hypothesis that there was a Jewish settlement in Ein Kerem. The area is also important to Christians, he said, because it is where John the Baptist was born and where his pregnant mother, Elizabeth, met with Mary, mother of Jesus.

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By John Pierce

Beloved professor Bill Hoyt chaired the Religion and Philosophy Department at Berry College in the 1970s, when I was one of the few students on the world’s largest campus who chose such a major. It was a wonderful opportunity to benefit from a serious academic approach to such subjects at the hands of thoughtful, Christian scholars.

For my first research paper in my first church history class I wrote on the formation of my then-beloved Southern Baptist Convention. Accurately, I pulled information (time, place, etc.) about the 1845 gathering in Augusta, Ga. that brought about a new convention.

However, I ignored the overwhelming reality that the SBC had been birthed in defense of slavery. I presented the cause as being more noble — a commitment to missions.

Sort of telling the truth is not being truthful. The dividing issue between Baptists, North and South, was whether slaveholders could be appointed as missionaries.

In a gracious act, my gentle Presbyterian professor acknowledged the accuracy of much of my writing and gave a better grade than I deserved. Then he added this wise note: “One can be loyal and critical at the same time.”

It was a needed lesson, and one I have never forgotten. In fact, it is a lesson that can be expanded a bit as well.

In light of recent events involving symbols, racism, murder and forgiveness, I would add that it is possible to be nostalgic and critical at the same time as well.

Admitting a history of racism — and repenting of our own attitudes that have contributed to such pain — does not require abandoning appreciation for one’s own roots. It does require abandoning defensiveness.

Mississippian Kate Campbell’s moving song, “Look Away,” reminds me of the potential to be both nostalgic about my roots while being critical (honestly analytical) about a history less than kind to all of God’s children.

“It’s a long and slow surrender,” Kate reminds us, “retreating from the past.”

For me, it is possible, even helpful and hopeful, to relish in the warm sunshine, to enjoy pinto beans (with chow-chow) and cornbread, to speak in a Southern drawl, while confessing sins of exclusion, past and present, and seeking to make amends for injustice.

To look back; to look ahead; to look away. BT

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DALLAS, Texas — On Nov. 22, 2013, when Dallas marked the 50th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, church bells throughout the city tolled followed by a moment of silence. It was 12:30 p.m., the same moment that the president had been murdered and a city fell into a state of anguish and shame.

Helen Fratena, a member of Dallas’ Wilshire Baptist Church, is a certified tour guide who specializes in the Kennedy assassination. In June, she led a group of participants in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly on a walk down to Dealey Plaza where the tragic event occurred.

She sought to separate fact from falsehoods and speculation — and to give particular attention to the role of faith communities following the assassination.

DIVERTING ATTENTION

Shame swept across the city following the presidential assassination, said Fratena. That’s why there is no significant memorial to JFK at the site frequented by visitors.

City leaders sought to “draw attention away” from the event that had stunned a nation and labeled Dallas as a “city of hate.”

Dealey Plaza, honoring a late journalist, was already in place at the site, she noted. A boxy memorial to Kennedy was erected on the other side of Old Red, the former Dallas County Courthouse that is now a museum. Visitors don’t typically see it en route to the assassination site.

The nearby seven-story brick building, where schoolbooks were stored, became a snip-er’s perch for employee Lee Harvey Oswald on Nov. 22, 1963. Later the books were removed and the building boarded up, said Fratena. “Still, people came,” she said. City leaders could not erase such a large scar.

‘GHOST TOWN’

On that fateful day in 1963, an estimated crowd of 250,000 people gathered to see the presidential motorcade, said Fratena. That represented about one-fourth of the city’s population — a particularly large number, she noted, since Kennedy was a Democrat and Dallas was heavily Republican.

The president, she said, had asked that the top of the car be removed so he could be “more accessible” to the people. “He was far more vulnerable than we allow our presidents to be today.”
Following the assassination, however, people fled the city, she noted. “The heaviness was too much.”

Downtown businesses began relocating and fewer events were hosted. “It became a ghost town,” she said.

The one exception, Fratena noted, was that the city’s places of worship became sanctuaries for those traumatized by the shooting and shame that followed. She recalled reading about one congregant who marveled at how packed the synagogue became the night of the shooting. But another responded: “Where else would they go?”

SUNDAY AFTER

Two days after the assassination the churches of Dallas filled as well, she noted. Some heard the healing words they sought while others were resistant to appeals for change.

“Dallas was called the ‘City of Hate,’” she noted. “Some ministers, two days later, said we’re a city of fear.”

A full-page ad in the local newspaper on the day of the assassination, had accused Kennedy of being soft on communism. Dallas had earned a reputation for harboring extremism, and some pastors took it head-on.

Writing in November 2013, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the assassination, Sam Hodges of United Methodist News Service recalled how one young Methodist pastor in Dallas needed police protection following his post-assassination sermon in 1963.

“While he didn’t blame Dallas for the crime itself, [William] Holmes unflinchingly described the city as an incubator for political extremism and incivility, the kind of place where many worried an assassination might occur,” reported Hodges.

After his bold sermon, “One Thing Worse Than This,” Holmes, pastor of Northhaven Methodist Church, began receiving death threats.

According to Hodges, Holmes “argued that Dallas couldn’t wash its hands, Pontius Pilate-like, of the tragedy that had occurred in its midst. Good people of Dallas had for too long, he said, stood by silently, giving free reign to political extremists.”

Not everyone was ready to confess and atone for such sins.

At the conclusion of his sermon, Holmes, like other Dallas preachers that day, was handed a note that assassin Lee Harvey Oswald had just been gunned down by Jack Ruby.

In the days following, Baptist leader Jimmy Allen, then leading the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, stated:

“The demands of these days will be great. Hatred’s bonds will not evaporate. They must be cut through one step at a time with the intensity of the torch of Christian love. Hate must be rooted out on each form in which it has fixed itself upon our nation. Extremism must be rejected not just in a great declaration but in a constant dedication.”

THEORIES

“Theories of the [JFK] assassination are like recipes for potato salad,” said the tour guide. “Everybody has one, and some are better than others.”

Fratena said she doesn’t have enough evidence to use the three-shot theory of some conspiracists.

She noted that the Zapruder film, though not the only recording of the assassination, was the most detailed. And that same film was used by both the Warren Commission and those who reached different conclusions about the assassination.

In her final analysis, she noted: “I don’t know how many [shots] there were.”

Other tour guides, with a bent toward a particular conspiracy, are readily available for those who want to explore such speculation. More historically accurate information is available in the Sixth Floor Museum that opened in 1989 in the old book depository that had become city offices.

“Dallas didn’t really come back to life until the Sixth Floor Museum opened,” said Fratena. “It was a hard sell to get businesses back downtown.”

MOVING ON

President Lyndon Johnson was eager to move on from the assassination that had paralyzed the nation. So, by many accounts, he pushed for the investigating Warren Commission to work quickly.

Bob Browning, now pastor of First Baptist Church of Frankfort, Ky., had a close friendship with U.S. Sen. John Sherman Cooper who served on the Warren Commission. He was an active member of First Baptist Church of Somerset, Ky., when Browning was pastor.

Browning said Cooper shared with him that President Johnson told the Commission to have a report on his desk in six months, adding “We’ve got to move on.”

“He said, ‘We did the best we could in the time frame we had with the resources available…’,” recalled Browning.

Cooper, he said, added that the evidence was strong enough to point the guilty finger at Oswald — whether others were involved or not. Browning said he put a lot of trust in Cooper, whose funeral he spoke at in 1991.

“He truly was a compassionate conservative long before it was ever coined,” said Browning, who at the funeral noted that Cooper “made power a healthy word.”

Although in opposite political parties, Cooper and Kennedy, who had been Senate colleagues, shared a close working relationship as well as personal friendship.

AFTERMATH

“I’d dare say the only two things you know about Dallas are J.R. [Ewing from the old TV series Dallas] and JFK,” said Fratena to a gathering tour group.

At the end of the tour, however, visitors know more: that a city can come back from shame — and that faith communities have an important role in social transformation.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy, she said, provided Dallas with an “unwelcomed source of soul-searching.”

While painful at the time, such introspection and action were helpful in the long run, she noted. Such is true for every person — in every city, town or community.

The former schoolbook depository that became a sniper’s perch for Lee Harvey Oswald now houses city offices and the Sixth Floor Museum.
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Dylann Roof’s radicalization resembles U.S. recruits to Islamic State, says Attorney General

The social forces that have assisted in the Islamic State’s radicalization of dozens of Americans are very similar to what drove Dylann Roof to embrace an extreme racist ideology before he launched an attack that left nine people dead inside an iconic African-American church, Attorney General Loretta Lynch said.

Lynch, in an interview with USA Today, said the themes of social disconnection and an attraction to radical thought expressed online are common in the recent stream of cases involving recruitment of U.S. citizens by the Islamic State and other homegrown violent extremists.

“(It’s) very similar to Roof,” Lynch said. “People disaffected, people being radicalized online. Roof picked this racial hatred theme, and that’s what fueled him. Others picked the ISIL theme, and that’s what fuels them.”

The similarities, the attorney general said, also are contributing to a public debate over whether the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., should be characterized as “terrorism.”

ISIL theme, and that’s what fuels them.”

The similarities, the attorney general said, are contributing to a public debate over whether the shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., should be characterized as “terrorism.”

The federal government and state authorities are conducting investigations into the murders. Federal authorities are pursuing possible hate crime offenses, though Lynch said that all charging options would be considered, including domestic terrorism.

While the attorney general declined to comment on what, if any, charges would be filed, she has suggested that crimes prompted by hate reflect the earliest definitions of domestic terrorism in the U.S.

“Hate crimes are the original domestic terrorism,” Lynch said, referring to the early hate-inspired criminal campaigns waged by the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups. South Carolina officials said they expect state prosecutors to pursue the death penalty against Roof. But Lynch said no decisions have been made in the ongoing federal inquiry.

Meanwhile, the comparisons drawn between Roof’s apparent radicalization and ISIL’s recruitment in the U.S. represent a convergence of law enforcement’s most serious concerns.

The written document, which authorities believe is consistent with Roof’s views, indicates that he had “no choice” but to target African Americans whom he derides as “stupid and violent.”

Roof, authorities allege, carried those views along with a .45-caliber handgun into Charleston’s Emanuel AME Church, where he uttered racial epithets as he opened fire on a group engaged in Bible study.

Different approaches to forgiveness discussed in aftermath of evil

By Lauren Markoe
Religion News Service

Three days after Dylann Roof allegedly gunned down Sharianda Coleman-Singleton at Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, her son forgave him:

“We already forgive him for what he’s done, and there’s nothing but love from our side of the family,” said Chris Singleton.

Many other relatives and friends of the nine church members slain on June 17 also offered Roof forgiving words.

Three religious leaders offered their thoughts on forgiveness:

FORGOING VENGEANCE
J.C. Austin, vice president of Christian leadership formation at Auburn Theological Seminary, New York:

“Distinguish between forgiveness and excusing behavior. Forgiveness doesn’t mean giving up moral judgment. It means giving up on enacting vengeance. From what I saw from the South Carolina families, it was the desire to speak a different word when faced with hate, and not to return hate with hate.

“In Christianity we would talk of forgiveness being a moral necessity. That doesn’t mean it comes cheap and it doesn’t mean it can be wrested out of our hands. It’s something we have to offer. We do not do it to let the perpetrators off the hook. We do it to preserve our own humanity.”

ALTERNATIVE TO VIOLENCE
Sayyid Syeed, national director of the Islamic Society of North America:

“Yes, the Bible and the Quran speak of ‘an eye for an eye.’ But the Quran also suggests an alternative to answering violence with violence: forgiveness. Were everyone to follow ‘an eye for an eye,’ you would have “a huge number of people who would be eyeless.”

Forgiveness, Syeed said, “ultimately helps us to create a society where we are concerned about the children of other people, and when we see that they are going the wrong way, it becomes a collective responsibility to put them on the right path.”

AN OBLIGATION
Rabbi Edythe Mencher, Union for Reform Judaism:

“God can forgive us for sins we have committed against God, but only other human beings can forgive us if the sins are ones directed against them. When we have made these efforts we can hope to be forgiven and to have our relationships restored. We are absolutely obligated to forgive those who have offered apology, sincerely repenting and tried to repair the damage their actions may have caused and who have refrained from repeating the original offense.”

BY KEVIN JOHNSON, USA Today

August 2015
The issue of immigration is an old one. Often as not, the church has remained silent on dealing with groups that the larger society has attempted to exclude or place in some controlled category. In writing about this matter, Chris Harbin does not deal with the politics of immigration but rather focuses on the relevance of the biblical text to the issue from a personal perspective. He poses questions to the church on what the Bible has to say about our interactions, attitudes, and reactions to immigration and immigrants.

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